

May 2007

HISTORIC COMFITS USING MODERN EQUIPMENT

Elise Fleming/Alys Katharine

alysk (at) ix (dot) netcom (dot) com

To see some examples of comfits, look at this page of Ivan Day's web site: <http://www.historicfood.com/Comfits.htm>

The instructions on this paper are based on workshops given by Ivan Day. Coating the seeds with gum Arabic does not seem to appear in recipes in the SCA time period but do appear in the 1700s. The purpose of the gum Arabic is to seal in the oils of the seeds so that they are more flavorful at the end of the whole process.

Make a solution of gum Arabic (similar to a gilding solution) using 3 tablespoons boiling water and 1 teaspoon of gum Arabic. Stir it in as best as possible. (It will be clumpy.) Let it sit for 24 hours until completely dissolved. Ivan said it gets "ropy" but I have not seen that.

Place a wok over very low heat. Use a "wok ring" to keep the bottom of the pan off the direct heat. Pour in the seeds you wish to coat. (You can use a whole container of seeds – the containers that are about .75 or .85 ounce.) Warm up the seeds in the wok. Pile them up into one mass. I use a soup spoon/table spoon for adding the gum Arabic. Use about or spoonful and drop it onto the seeds. Immediately begin stirring the seeds around with your hand until the solution has coated all the seeds. Continue stirring until the seeds are fully dried and there are no clumps. Repeat adding the solution until you have added 3-8 coats (charges), being sure to fully dry the seeds each time. I did not heat up the solution. If the pan is too hot for your hand, your heat is too high. Continue to dry the seeds for a day. You could use an hors d'oeuvres warming tray or a warm spot near the oven. In period the seeds would have been placed near the warmth of the cook fire. **WARNING!** After you start adding the sugar solution, **DO NOT** put the seeds in an oven to dry unless you find that (with a gas stove) the pilot light gives a gentle enough heat. **DO NOT** use an electric oven! Clean out the wok before the next step.

On the second day make a sugar solution using approximately 2 cups sugar with cup water. Stir the mixture thoroughly to dissolve all the sugar before letting the solution begin to boil. The solution will become clear-ish. Before it begins to boil, stop stirring. Stirring when the syrup boils encourages crystallization. If crystals begin to form on the side of the pan you can wipe them down with some hot water on a pastry brush. Warm up your seeds in the wok as you are preparing the syrup. Don't get the wok so hot that you can't hold your hand on the bottom of the pan. When the seeds are warmed and the syrup is at temperature (below), mound them up to receive the first charge (coat) of syrup.

PERSONAL OPINION: I think that smooth comfits are more difficult to make and also look prettier than ragged comfits. Because ragged comfits are easier to make – the sugar syrup is at a higher temperature – these instructions are for smooth comfits. If you get the syrup too hot you will automatically get ragged comfits.

Bring the sugar solution up to the sleeked/lissé/small thread stage. Ivan Day gives this temperature as 180°-200° F. I have used the syrup as early as 170° F. Some methods of testing are to place a drop of the syrup on a plate and dip your forefinger into it. Then, press the finger and thumb together. When you pull them apart there should be a slight thread between them which quickly breaks. The syrup also will tend to stream off the spoon like turpentine, according to Sir Hugh Plat (1609). **WARNING!** If you let the syrup get too hot, your comfit coats will be "ragged" rather than smooth. Once you get the syrup to the proper temperature you can remove the pan from the heat.

NOTE: Syrup that has come to around 220° F or higher will tend to crystallize fairly quickly in the pan while you are busy coating the seeds. The syrup at the lower temperature does not easily crystallize. It may develop a thin crust which can be pushed aside or perhaps re-incorporated into the syrup. If you add some of the "crust" you will have sugar chunks that develop among your seeds. Avoid this.

Using your table spoon (for me it is the next size up from the regular spoon), take a spoonful of the syrup and pour it onto the mounded seeds. Immediately begin to stir the seeds, spreading the syrup throughout the batch of seeds. Period sources say to use the left hand since the right hand will be administering the syrup. I've managed to use my dominant hand for both. Move the seeds quickly enough so that all become coated before they start to dry. Once they start to dry you do not need to move them in great haste, but keep them moving over the bottom and sides of the pan. As they dry the clumps will break apart. Keep moving the seeds until they are thoroughly dry and white. If they are gray, they aren't dry enough. The longer they dry over the gentle heat in the wok, the whiter they become. When in doubt, let the seeds dry longer. Don't rush the process!

TROUBLESHOOTING: If the clumps don't separate, you've added too much syrup. Nor should there be little grains of sugar coagulating in the bottom of the pan, either. If it does, you've added too much syrup. Err on the side of too little syrup; you can always add more with the next charge. If it is too hot to stir with your hand then either your

May 2007

hand is very sensitive (use a wooden spoon or spatula), the wok is too hot, the syrup is too hot, or you've added too much syrup which will also burn your fingers. Once you've taken the syrup off the heat the temperature will gradually go down making it easier to mix in the syrup and seeds. If you find grains of sugar beginning to form, sieve the mixture to separate the seeds and sugar granules, wash and dry the wok, replace the seeds and continue adding sugar, but use less this time!

If your sugar has crystallized you can pour the syrup through a strainer into another pan and re-heat it to the proper temperature. If you need to add additional water, do so. Check with your fingers to see that it has gotten back up to the sleeked stage.

If you find that the syrup is cooling off too much, place it back on gentle heat. Once the seeds are dry, add another spoonful of syrup and repeat the process. If you are adding small amounts, the seeds may take 10-15 charges before you begin to see the coating begin to cover the seeds. Put on 12-15 charges and stop for the day, letting the seeds dry thoroughly overnight. Wash and dry your wok.

The next day, make up a fresh batch of syrup and repeat the process for another 12-15 charges. Again, if sugar is beginning to build up in the bottom of the wok you are probably adding too much. Cut back. Don't rush the drying process between coats, either. White comfits are what is desired, not gray ones. Add as many charges to achieve the size comfits that you want. At some point you will want to divide the comfits into anywhere from 2-4 batches as they grow larger. Adding syrup to the whole mass becomes more difficult, less easy to spread around, and takes much longer to dry. Smaller batches will keep the comfits workable. As the comfits grow in size you can increase the amount of syrup that you add by about a teaspoon. It doesn't hurt to repeat that if sugar begins to accumulate on the bottom of the pan, you have probably added too much. Cut back. Take your time with the drying process. Making comfits is not for hasty folk!

According to Ivan Day's web site "Sanders, mulberry juice and cochineal were used for red, indigo stone for blue, the juice of spinach for green and saffron or gum gambodge for yellow. Early comfitmakers were unaware that gambodge is actually a toxic substance and acts as an emetic." Color the water that you use for the syrup. Don't put saffron threads or pieces of sanders in the syrup itself. I do not know how much flavor spinach (or parsley) would add to the comfit. I am aware that, according to an early 1900 cookery book, if too much heat is applied to spinach it will take on a yellow cast.

Sir Hugh Plat, *Delightes for Ladies*, 1609, gives the following coloring instructions for comfits:

"To make red comfits, seeth three or four ounces of brazel with a little water: take of this red water 4 spoonfuls; of sugar, one ounce, and boile it to his decoction: then giue 6 coats and it will bee of a good colour; or else you may turne so much water with one dramme of turnsole, doing as before.

"To make greene comfits, seeth sugar with the iuce of beets."

He mentions that the following seeds can be made into comfits: anise, caraway, fennel, coriander; also cinnamon cut into small, dry sticks; orange rinds, ginger, cloves, almonds. He comments, "The smaller that Annis-seed comfits be, the fairer, the harder, and so in all other." He also mentions cinnamon powder and musk as flavorings. I have not included his recipe since it is long, convoluted and contradictory in parts, but other than using a preparatory gum Arabic solution, my instructions follow his basic procedure. Ivan Day is sure that Plat never made comfits!

SILLINESS: "The British Museum Cookbook", 1987, gives this "recipe" with no source cited: "If you have the patience to make them, melt 2 tablespoons of sugar in 1 tablespoon of water. Keep the syrup warm enough to remain liquid without allowing it to caramelize. Dip each seed in the sugar, then remove it with tongs and allow it to dry thoroughly before repeating the process, again and again and again until you have built up a thick layer of sugar all over the seed. It will certainly take you all of one day and may well be spread over several if you want a really thick layer of sugar."