

Alfajores or Alaju Traditional Spanish Sweets

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What it is

Alfajores or *Alaju* are traditional Spanish sweets. Currently, the name refers to two very different sweets – the more well known *alfajores* of South America are the sandwich cookies made from wheat flour or flour and cornstarch mixture, traditionally filled with syrup or *dulce de leche*.

Alfajor is a staple of Spanish cuisine, and even now they are a traditional Christmas sweet. In the town of Medina Sidonia they are available year round, and it's probably the world capital of *alfajores* – the “Alfajor de Medina Sidonia” was given protected geographical indication in 2004.

Historical background

The *alfajores de Medina* descend from Arabic cuisine, and were brought to Spain with the Arabic conquest and formation of Al-Andalus in the eighth century. It is a confection made from ground nuts, spices, breadcrumbs, honey and sugar. *Alfajor* or *alaju* probably derives from the Arabic *alfahua*, meaning honeycomb, or *al-hasu*, meaning stuffed or filled.¹ An alternative derivation is from Arabic *fasur*, which means nectar, was offered by Ramon Marti in 12th c., in the *Vocabulista*, but I was not able to find a copy to verify that. Likely, both *alfajor* and *alaju* have the same etymology, and the difference reflects the different path taken by the word.

¹ Afajor – Etymology

<http://www.liquisearch.com/alfajor/etymology>, accessed 3/31/2016.

One of the earliest mentions of *alfajor*, as “alfaxor o alaju” is in the Spanish-Latin Dictionary by Elio Antonio de Nebrija, published in 1492 or 1495, Salamanca, Spain.²

The earliest definition of *alfajor* I could find was from 1499:

“*Pigmentum. Una confection de vino y miel y otras diversas especias suaves y olorosas, como canela y clavos, que en vulgar llaman clarea, o si es menos perfecto llamanlo alfaxor, que es nombre morisco*” (Vocabularium Ecclesiasticum. Methinae del Campo. Apud Guillermmum de Milis, 1551 (1^a ed. 1499).³ (“*Pigmentum. A confection of wine and honey and other various soft and fragrant spices, such as cinnamon and cloves, which is commonly called clarea, or if less perfect, called alfaxor, which is Moorish name*”) This definition refers to pigmentum/ piment or clarea/ clarea, which is a sweet spiced wine, known in Europe for centuries. This would give some credence to the derivation of *alfajor* from the word for nectar, as here it refers to a drink.

In his book *La Mesa Moderna*, Dr. Thebussem gives several examples of *alaju* or *alfajor* mentioned in the texts of the late 15th and 16th centuries, including a letter from Enrique the Guzman, Duke of Medina, dated July 2, 1487.⁴

And the hero of the picaresque novel *Vida y hechos del Picaro Guzman de Alfarache*, first published in 1599, talks about “alfajor o aljur”.⁵

I was able to find the facsimile edition of Nebrija’s dictionary online, and thus my earliest primary source dates to 1492-1495.⁶ I was not able to trace the other references to the original documents, as they are not easily available, and will have to rely on them as secondary sources.

² Vocabulario Espanol-Latino por Elio Antonio de Nebrija, Reproducción digital de la edición de Salamanca, 1495?. Otra ed.: Ed. facsimilar de Madrid, Real Academia Española, 1951.

http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/vocabulario-espanollatino--0/html/003fb036-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_20.htm.

This is the digital edition of the 1495 Salamanca, Spain, edition, made available by Miguel Cervantes Virtual Library.

³ F.G. Ortin, *Un capitulo de lexicologia gastronomica. Precisiones diatopicas sobre la voces aljahor/alaju.*, Revista Electronico de Estudios Filologicos, vol.18, December 2009.,

<https://www.um.es/tonosdigital/znum18/secciones/estudio-12-alaju.htm>

⁴ Ibid, 281-282.

⁵ Figueras Pacheco, Francisco, *Historia del turrón y prioridad de los de Jijona y Alicante*, Turrónes La Fama, Jijona, 1971, p.46.

⁶ Vocabulario Espanol-Latino por Elio Antonio de Nebrija, Reproducción digital de la edición de Salamanca, 1495?. Otra ed.: Ed. facsimilar de Madrid, Real Academia Española, 1951., fol [Xr]

The Recipe

I wanted to find an old, Al-Andalus version of this sweet, but couldn't find any, although I was able to find several similar recipes. (You can see how I tried to find it in the end of this paper, under 'Search for Al-Andalus alfajores'.)

There is a recipe in a later Spanish book, the 15th c. *Manual de las mugeres*, which is a collection of recipes for savory dishes, sweets, and household and cosmetics concoctions.

This is a translation of this recipe from *Larsdatter Linkspages*.

Recipe for making a conserve of *alajú* (a delicacy of Arabic origin, basically a paste made of almonds, walnuts, or pine nuts, toasted breadcrumbs, spices, and honey):

*Knead together well-sifted flour with oil and water. And leave the dough somewhat hard and knead it well. And make thin cakes and cook them well, so they can be ground; and grind them and sift them. And then take a [celemin](#) of ground cleaned walnuts, and two pounds of ground toasted almonds. And while you crush the walnuts and almonds, mix them. Put a well-measured [azumbre](#) of honey to the fire, and the best that you can find, skim it and return it to the fire. And when the honey rises, add the walnuts and almonds in it. And cook it until the honey is cooked. And when it is, remove it from the fire and put with it a half a [celemin](#) of the grated flour cakes, and mix it well. And then add a half ounce of cloves and another half (ounce) of cinnamon, and two nutmegs, all ground-up. And then repeat the stirring a lot. And then make it into cakes or put it in boxes, whichever you desire more.*⁷

This is the original version, from online Cervantes library:

Receta para hacer Conservas the alaju:

http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/vocabulario-espanollatino--0/html/003fb036-82b2-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_20.htm.

This is the digital edition of the 1495 Salamanca, Spain, edition, made available by Miguel Cervantes Virtual Library.

⁷ <http://www.larsdatter.com/manual.htm>, accessed 3/24/2017.

Amasar harina muy cernida y con aceite y agua. Y dejar la masa algo dura y sobarla mucho. Y hecha tortas delgadas cocerlas mucho, que se puedan moler; y molerlas y cernerlas. Y luego tomar un celemín de nueces mondadas y muy limpias, y dos libras de almendras mondadas y tostadas. Y entremajadas las nueces y almendras, juntarlas. Poner un azumbre de miel al fuego bien medida, y la mejor que halláredes, espumarla y tornarla al fuego. Y cuando suba la miel, echar las nueces y almendras dentro. Y cuezan hasta que esté la miel cocida. Y como lo esté, quitarlo del fuego y poner con ello medio celemín raído de aquella harina de las tortas, y menearlo mucho. Y luego échenle media onza de clavos y otra media de canela, y dos nueces de especias, molido todo. Y tórnenlo a mecer mucho. Y luego háganlo tortas o pónganlo en caxas, como quisieren más.⁸

The measures used in the recipe are as follows:

Celemín –an old measure of volume, equal to 4.6 liters⁹

Azumbre – liquid measure, about 2.16 liters.¹⁰

Libra – pound, the values of pound varied greatly regionally, but on average, is similar to the modern pound, so that’s what I am using.

Onza – ounce, 28g., was used for chocolate.¹¹

Recipe Modifications

First, I decided to scale down the recipe.

I decided to quarter everything, leaving me with manageable quantities of ingredients. I am, unfortunately, allergic to almonds, so decided to substitute hazelnuts instead. I am not allergic to them, they were known in period, and a later, 18th. Version of *Alfajores* recipe uses them.¹²

⁸Miguel de Cervantes Biblioteca Virtual, Manual de mujeres, en el cual se contienen muchas y diversas recetas muy buenas
<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/servlet/SirveObras/01371074322363763092257/p0000001.htm>, accessed 3/24/2017.

⁹ Online Spanish Dictionary <http://www.spanishdict.com/translate/celem%C3%ADn>

¹⁰ Online Spanish Dictionary <http://www.spanishdict.com/translate/azubmre>)

¹¹ Online Spanish Dictionary, <http://www.spanishdict.com/translate/>, accessed 3/24/2017

I don't have whole nutmeg, just powder. So I looked up the average weight of a nutmeg, which is about 5-10g. I used average weight as 8g. So, the weight of half a nutmeg will be about 4g.

The proportions of oil and water for the dough are not given, and neither are the baking instructions for the cakes, making me think that it was something commonplace, therefore not requiring a lot of explanation.

The translation above translates *tortas* as *cakes*, but it also means flatbread. There is a period dish, called *torta de aceite*, or *olive oil flatbread* which is also mentioned in *Guzman de Alfarache*.

It is still a popular snack in the south of Spain. Many recipes abound, but modern versions all use sugar and yeast. I did not find a period *torta de aceite* recipe. But, I searched for *olive oil flatbread*, and found this on the Tablespoon.com website:

Olive oil Flatbread¹³

2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/2 cup water
Sea salt for sprinkling (optional)

- Preheat oven to 500°F.
- Combine flour and salt in food processor. Combine olive oil and water in small bowl, whisking them together well.
- While running the food processor, add olive oil and water mixture to the flour mixture slowly. Pulse the food processor until all ingredients combine into a firm dough ball.
- Remove dough from food processor and knead slightly into a ball. Cut ball in half, then in smaller pieces, until you have 12 small pieces of dough. Roll each piece into a ball.
- Flatten each piece on a floured surface into a 3-4 inch round. Roll out with rolling pin into a 6-8 inch circle. Make sure it is very, very thin (you should be able to see your fingers on the other side when looking through the dough with light behind it).

¹² Dr. Thebussem, Jose de Castro y Serrano, *La Mesa Moderna, cartas sobre el comedor y la cocina*, Madrid, 1888, 279-280

¹³ From Mark Bittman's "[The Minimalist](http://www.tablespoon.com/recipes/olive-oil-flatbread/fda73da6-5cdb-4e05-895a-ad304e52044b)" column. (<http://www.tablespoon.com/recipes/olive-oil-flatbread/fda73da6-5cdb-4e05-895a-ad304e52044b>)

- Place thin circles on ungreased cookie sheets and sprinkle with sea salt, if desired. Bake circles for 4-5 minutes on one side and 2-3 minute on the other (just keep a very close watch on the dough until it is close to burning, then remove from the oven). Remove from oven and allow to cool completely.

It seemed reasonable, and is supposed to yield thin, crispy flatbread, which should produce nice crumbs. I doubled the recipe, just to make sure I have enough breadcrumbs. I also omitted salt, as it was not called for in the *alaju* recipe, and a food processor, as I don't own one.

The flatbread was really easy to make, and produced very thin, crispy flatbreads, which I ground into crumbs. I had enough crumbs for the *alaju* recipe, with about 150 cc left over.

Therefore, my final ingredients were:

1.15L breadcrumbs (made with 4 cups of flour, 1 cup of water, 2/3 cup olive oil)
 0.504 L honey
 1.15 L ground walnuts
 0.5 lb ground hazelnuts.
 0.125 oz. (4g, which equals 1.5 tsp) cloves
 0.125 oz. (4g, which equals 1.5 tsp) cinnamon
 4 g. nutmeg, which equals 1.5 tsp¹⁴

I used wildflower honey, assuming it to be closer to honey available in period than the supermarket variety.

I followed the direction in the recipe. It produced a sticky pliable mass, which was easily shapeable. I decided that I want to make it into round cookies (small cakes), as I do not know what boxes of sweets were like in period.

To do so, while still warm, I rolled it into logs, like you would do with icebox cookies, and cut it into rounds. They did need some slight reshaping, as they did crumble a bit, but looked pretty good.

¹⁴ I used the conversion table for ground spices from DeeJaysSmokePit.net, according to which all of the above spices area bout 2.6g. per teaspoon
http://www.deejayssmokepit.net/SausageDownloads_files/SpiceWeights.pdf

What I would like to do next time

It would be interesting to find out what kind of flour they would have used in Spain in period, and find a period recipe for *tortas de aceite*, to see if there is a significant difference between the period breadcrumbs and the breadcrumbs I made. I also would like to learn about packaging and presentation of sweets in period, as I was intrigued by the mention of “boxes”.

References

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<http://www.larsdatter.com/manual.htm>

Searching for Al-Andalus Alfajores

I searched for *alfajores de Medina* online, and found numerous recipes, most of which seems to be a variation on the *Alfajores de Medina* published in 1888 *La Mesa Moderna* book by Dr. Thebussem (pen name of Mariano Pardo de Figueroa). In it, he gives a recipe claimed to be from an anonymous 1789 booklet *Recetario practico de guisados and dulces*.¹⁵

¹⁵ Dr. Thebussem, Jose de Castro y Serrano, *La Mesa Moderna, cartas sobre el comedor y la cocina*, Madrid, 1888, 279-280.

I found an *alfajores* recipe online which is supposed to be in *Kitab al Tabikh Maghreb*, from the 13th century Al-Andalus: “The Hispanic cookbook *Kitab al Tabikh Maghreb* (author unknown) mentions a similar preparation of a sweet in the Maghreb is called *alajú*. The presence of this sweet is evident in southern Spain during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Is being developed in Andalusia since the days of Al-Andalus until today.”¹⁶

As the above quote preceding the recipe looks remarkably like a truncated Google translation of the Spanish Wikipedia page on *Alfajores*, I was dubious about the 13th c. dating of this recipe and decided to dig further.¹⁷

I found *Kitab al tabikh fi-l-Maghrib wa-l-Andalus, or the anonymous Andalusian cookbook, from 12th and 13th centuries*, which was translated by several authors and is available at http://italophiles.com/andalusian_cookbook.pdf

This may be a different *Kitab al tabikh* of Maghreb, as there is no *Alfajores* recipe in this book, although there were several recipes for similar sweets, *Faludhaj* and *Sukkariyya* made with nuts, honey and sugar.¹⁸

I tried another *Kitab al tabikh*, this time by Muhammad al Hasan al Baghdadi, also from 13th century, translated by Charles Perry as *A Baghdad Cookery Book*, but it didn't contain a recipe for *alfajores*, either.¹⁹ It did contain a recipe for *Lauzinaj*, where a paste of sugar and almonds is rolled with a layer of very thin bread.²⁰ It is similar to the modern *alaju*, where the paste of sugar,

¹⁶ The Former Paradise; <http://mylittlehistorybloginenglish.blogspot.com/2013/01/spanish-alfajor.html>, January 30, 2013 .

¹⁷ “El libro de cocina hispano-magrebí *Kitāb al tabīj* (de autor anónimo) menciona una preparación que por similitud hoy en día se denomina *alajú* (una especie de *turrón*).² El gramático español *Nebrija* lo nombra por primera vez en su *Diccionario latino-español de Nebrija* (1492) como: 'alfaxor' o 'alaxur' (donde ya los considera sinónimos).¹ Ya en el *siglo XII* el autor Raimundo Martín describe en su obra 'vocabulista' otra etimología posible, del hispano-árabe 'fasur' que significa 'néctar'. La presencia de este dulce se hace patente en la zona del *sur de España* durante los siglos XII y XIII,³ Se viene elaborando en Andalucía desde los tiempos de *Al-Ándalus* hasta nuestros días. En la España del siglo X”, Wikipedia, Alfajor, https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfajor_%28Espa%C3%B1a%29, accessed 3/29/2016.

¹⁸ Anonymous Andalusian Cookbook, http://italophiles.com/andalusian_cookbook.pdf, 197-198.

¹⁹ Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Karīm and Charles Perry, *A Baghdad Cookery Book : The Book of Dishes (Kitāb Al-ṬabīKh)* (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2005).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

almonds and spices is sandwiched between two very thin wafers. Interestingly, this is probably the precursor of the South American *alfajores*, which are basically sandwich cookies.

I did an EndNote search of the Library of Congress on *Kitab al tabikh*, which mostly listed various editions of the Baghdad cookery book, and several compilations. The only other *Kitab al tabikh* book was *Annals of the caliphs' kitchens : Ibn Sayya'r al-Warra'q's tenth-century Baghdadi cookbook*. I was not able to get a copy to see if it contained an *alfajores* recipe.

Therefore, I abandoned my search for an actual 12th or 13th century Al-Andaluz recipe, and looked at more recent sources.