

Alfajores de Medina

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What is it?

Alfajores 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 cornstarch mixture, traditionally filled with syrup or *dulce de leche*.

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*, or honeycomb, or *al-hasu*, meaning stuffed or filled.¹

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 basis:

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

¹ Afajor – Etymology

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

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.

Milis, 1551 (1ª 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")

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.

Search for a period Recipe:

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*.⁷

³ F.G. Ortin, *Un capitulo de lexicologia gastronomica. Precisiones diatopicas sobre la voces aljador/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] 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 Dr. Thebussem, Jose de Castro y Serrano, *La Mesa Moderna, cartas sobre el comedor y la cocina*, Madrid, 1888, 279-280.

I was not able to find an actual 16th century or earlier recipe. 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.”⁸

ingredients:

- 2 liters of white honey.
- 700 gr of hazelnuts.
- 50 grams of cinnamon powder.
- 50 grams of anise.
- 6 cloves.
- 450 grams of sesame.
- 1 sprig of cilantro.
- 3.5 kg of bread crumbs.
- 250 grams of sugar.
- Icing sugar mixed with a little starch to absorb alfajores and remain white.

Preparation:

- Make a syrup with sugar and a little water to thin strand point.
- Remove from heat and add the honey and remaining ingredients, mixing everything well.
- With the mix still hot, form a ball-shaped cakes (slightly larger) and flatten slightly.
- roll alfajores on icing sugar mixed with starch and let rest a few days before serving.

I believe the one sprig of cilantro is supposed to be coriander, and is a victim of bad translation.

As the whole quote preceding the recipe looks remarkably like a truncated Google translation of the Spanish Wikipedia page on *Alfajores*, I tried to dig further.⁹

⁸ The Former Paradise;

<http://mylittlehistorybloginenglish.blogspot.com/2013/01/spanish-alfajor.html>, January 30, 2013 .

⁹ “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

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ It did contain a recipe for *Lauzinaj*, where a paste of sugar and almonds is rolled with a layer of very thin bread.¹² It is similar to the *alaju* version of the *alfajores*, where the paste of sugar, 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.

This is the recipe I finally decided to use. It is copyrighted to Lisa and Tony Sierra, and is from *about.com*. However, there are several almost identical versions on several Spanish food websites and blogs, including *la Vista de Paladar*, from 2008.¹³

Ingredients

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.

¹⁰ Anonymous Andalusian Cookbook, http://italophiles.com/andalusian_cookbook.pdf, 197-198.

¹¹ Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Karīm and Charles Perry, *A Baghdad Cookery Book : The Book of Dishes (KitāB Al-ṬAbīKh)* (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2005).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹³ L Vista de Paladar, February 13, 2010, <http://www.delavistaalpaladar.com/2008/12/alfajores-de-medina.html>

- 1 1/3 cup (120 gr) granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup (120 gr) water
- 3 3/4 cups (400 gr) bread crumbs
- 1 1/2 cups (200 gr) raw, unsalted whole hazelnuts
- 200 cups (300 gr) whole, blanched, peeled almonds*
- 3 Tbsp (20 gr) whole anise seeds
- 2/3 cup (75 gr) sesame seeds
- (1 gr) ground cilantro seeds (optional)
- 3.5 tsp (10 gr) ground cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp (1 gr) ground clove
- 11 oz (450 gr) honey
-
- **Syrup for Coating:**
- 7 fl oz (200 gr) water
- 1 cup (200 gr) granulated sugar
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- **Sugar for Coating:**
- 1 cup powdered sugar

Preparation

Make a simple syrup. Pour water and sugar into a small saucepan.

Heat on medium high heat. Stir until the sugar is completely dissolved. Bring to a rolling boil and reduce to a slow boil. Cook until mixture is thickened to a syrup. Remove from heat and allow to cool.

While the syrup is boiling, toast almonds and hazelnuts under broiler on both sides. Process the nuts, anise, sesame and cilantro seeds in a food processor until nuts are finely ground. Place in a medium size mixing bowl.

Add cinnamon and clove to the ingredients in mixing bowl and mix with a wooden spoon.

Measure honey into an oven proof measuring cup and heat in microwave (or in a water bath on stove) until almost boiling.

Pour syrup into dry ingredients and mix thoroughly. Gradually pour warm honey into bowl while mixing. Mix ingredients thoroughly.

While mixture is still warm, form into little "logs" with your hands. Mixture will be sticky and can be difficult to work with. So, it may be necessary to press hard to form the "logs." Place on waxed paper or parchment to cool.

Make simple syrup in saucepan.

Remove from heat and cool for 5-10 minutes. Roll the *alfajores* in syrup, then roll in powdered sugar. Cool on waxed paper.

When the *alfajores* are cool, wrap in food grade tissue paper.

Note: *Alfajores* are very sweet, even without the syrup coating, so we usually skip the syrup coating, and roll them in powdered sugar.

The breadcrumbs are not mentioned in preparation, but in other versions they are mixed with dry ingredients prior to addition of syrup and honey.

I decided to:

-Toast the sesame seeds (personal preference)

-Use the wildflower honey. I also had buckwheat honey, but I know nothing about buckwheat in medieval Spain, so wildflower honey seemed ubiquitous enough, and had a nice flavor.

-I looked up bread section in the *Anonymous Andalusian cookbook*, and it seems that a lot of breads were made with a sourdough starter. Therefore, I bought a loaf of Tuscan sourdough bread from Trader Joe's, dried in the oven (30 minutes at 300 degrees Fahrenheit), and made into crumbs in a food processor. It came to about 400 grams, so that's what I used.

I followed the recipe. The note about the mixture being hard to work with is an understatement, as it was sticky, crumbly, and clumpy at the same time, just like wet sand. However, if I took a handful of the mixture and squeezed it, the excess honey would squeeze out, leaving a lumpy log, which I could roll in powdered sugar making it into a cylinder. This is exactly what the *Andalusian cookbook* recommended as a technique for making the *Hadidat*, or *polvorones* cookies, so at least the technique seemed period.¹⁴

I got about 35 *alfajores*. As they dry, they get darker because the layer of powdered sugar absorbs the moisture. I rolled them in powdered sugar again before serving to make them look nicer.

Hypoallergenic version:

¹⁴ The Andalusian Cookbook gives similar technique for making Hadidat, or polvorones cookies, http://italophiles.com/andalusian_cookbook.pdf, 180.

As I have an almond allergy, I could not taste my own cookies and had to rely on friends and family to describe their taste. Therefore, as I actually would like to know what is it I am making, and given a high number of people with various food allergies and sensitivities, I decided to make a hypoallergenic version, eliminating the nuts and gluten.

What people seemed to like the most about the original cookies was the combination of spices and texture, so I kept exactly the same spices. I replaced ground nuts with one pound of ground roasted sunflower seeds providing a similar texture. They were sold in a one pound bag, and it was convenient enough. As gluten free Cheerios are readily available and cheap, I used 400g of them to replace the breadcrumbs. A food processor was used to turn the Cheerios into coarse crumbs.

I used buckwheat honey for this version because I hoped the strong flavor of the buckwheat would overpower that of the Cheerios. Also, I am partial to buckwheat honey.

The rest of the recipe was exactly the same.

This version was even harder to work with, as the Cheerios absorbed the syrup and honey much more than the breadcrumbs. The finished cookies were more prone to cracking and falling apart.

What would they do differently in period:

I would assume they would follow a period recipe, which I didn't have (see above). However, as the ingredients and the general techniques (grind nuts and spices, heat honey, make sugar syrup, mix, make into shapes) in the above recipe are remarkably similar to the multiple recipes in two period cookbooks, including squeezing the dough to shape it, which was strangely specific and actually necessary), I think that the actual recipe is probably similar to the version I found.

What would I do differently next time:

Research more period bread making techniques in *Al-Andalus*, to get more period bread crumbs

Try to find more versions of the *Kitab al Tabikh* to see if it contains the actual recipe. Contact the modern Spanish *alfajores* makers, to see if they have any historical information they can share.

Conclusion:

Alfajores de Medina is a period plausible honey based cookie recipe, for a documentable period sweet, the techniques and ingredients of which can be traced to 12th century Islamic Spain. It can also be easily made in period or a camp kitchen, keeps well, and

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does not need refrigeration, making it a good dessert for a Pennsic or other camping event feast.

References:

Ibn al-Kari'm, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, and Charles Perry. *A Baghdad Cookery Book : The Book of Dishes (KitāB Al-ṬAbīKh)*. Totnes: Prospect Books, 2005.

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

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