

Sabuniyya

Egyptian nougat candy

5.2.0 Sweets
Entrant #001

Introduction

Sabuniyya is a sesame and rosewater flavored nougat candy. One of the most popular Egyptian sweets. This sweet was so well loved in fact, that it was served with much fanfare and carried through the hall after a feast on a large serving platter after being cut into triangles or squares (Salloum et al., 2013, 173). There were some who took this sweet with them to the grave. Sabuniyya translates directly to “soap-like”, referring to it’s waxy texture (Ibn al-Karīm, 2005, #).

It appears in three cookbooks, *Kitāb Al-ṭabīkh* (A Baghdad Cookery Book: The Book of Dishes); hereafter *al-Baghdadi*, *Kitab Wasf al-At’imah al-Mu’tada* (Book of the Description of Familiar Foods); hereafter *Familiar Foods* and *Kanz al-Fawa’id fi Tanwi’ al-Mawa’id* (The Treasure of Useful Lessons in the Varieties of the Dining Table); hereafter *Kanz*.

Two copies of Familiar Foods are held at the Topkapi museum. This book features 160 recipes and has a date of completion of 1373. The appearance of this recipe in Familiar Foods is based on the *Kitāb Al-ṭabīkh*, or Book of Dishes, compiled by al-Baghdadi in 1226 (Arberry, 2001, #275; Ibn al-Karīm, 2005, 99). Scribes compiled these recipe books, and copied and recopied these recipes several times. *Kanz* is undated, but likely was written in the 14th c. It is from Mamluk era Egypt. Given the similarity of the recipes, they are likely both based on al-Baghdadi.

There are minor differences between the recipes. *Kanz* adds the sesame oil in a later step than Familiar Foods. *Kanz* also calls for dissolving the rice starch, presumably in water, before adding it to the pot. Lastly, Familiar Foods calls only for almonds, but *Kanz* also calls for pistachios. Familiar Foods mentions covering it with “pounded” (powdered) sugar, while *Kanz* does not specify the type of sugar. Both of these recipes are clearly based on the al-Baghdadi version, though that version is simpler and does not call for rosewater.

I decided for the recreation to use both almonds and pistachios, as in *Kanz*, and I processed these by hand in a mortar. I also reduced the amount of rosewater slightly, to account for differences in rosewater strength between modern purchased rosewater and homemade rosewater done in period. I adjusted the amount of rosewater to taste. Additionally, I used a candy thermometer for consistent results, however you can also use the “glass of water” method of testing candy doneness. I have presented it here with tongs for serving for sanitary reasons, however typically this would have been eaten with bare hands.

Original Recipes

The way to make it is to dissolve sugar, then take it from the and put it into a vessel. Then throw sesame oil (into the dist), and when it boils, throw some of the syrup on itm with an ounce and a half of honey to every pound of sugar. Stir it, and when it is nearly thickened, dissolve starch, throw it in, and stir it. Then keep moistening it with the rest of the syrup until it thickens, then throw finely pounded peeled almonds on it. When it is completely done, ladle it into a plate, spread it out and sprinkle finely pounded sugar on it.

-Kitāb Al-ṭabīkh (A Baghdad Cookery Book: The Book of Dishes)
al-Baghdadi, 13th c. Translated by Charles Perry. (Ibn al-Karīm, 2005, 99)

Dissolve sugar, then take half of it up from the cauldron and put it in another cauldron or vessel. Then throw sesame oil into the cauldron, and when it boils, take some good starch, as much as needed, a sixth as much. If it is rice starch, better. Then stir it uninterruptedly, and when it is nearly thickened, throw the [other] half of the syrup in bit by bit, stirring continuously. Then take two ounces of honey for every pound of sugar [and throw it in]. Then throw in some pounded peeled almonds, two ounces for every pound, add a quarter ounce of rose water, and moisten it with sesame oil, and stir it continuously. When it is entirely done, spread it out and sprinkle it with pounded sugar.

-Kitab Wasf al-At'imah al-Mu'tada (Book of the Description of Familiar Foods)
Author unknown, 1373, Translated by Charles Perry. (Arberry, 2001, 417)

Dissolve the sugar, then remove half of what is in the pot. Dissolve starch and throw what remains in the pot. It should be one-sixth. If it is rice starch, it is better. Then stir, bringing it all together. When it is almost thickened, gradually add the rest of the syrup, and it should be stirred with the sesame oil. Then throw one-sixth bee's honey on it. When it is done, remove it and put with every *ratl* two *uqiyas* of crushed almonds and pistachios and two *uqiyas* of rose water. Then spread it out and sprinkle sugar on it. Indeed it is extraordinary.

-Kanz al-Fawa'id fi Tanwi' al-Mawa'id (The Treasure of Useful Lessons in the Varieties of the Dining Table)
Author unknown, date unknown but likely 13th or 14th c. Translated by Muna Salloum and Leila Salloum Elias. (Salloum et al., 2013, 115)

Redacted Recipe

Ingredients

406 grams Sugar
¾ cup Water, plus additional water to dissolve starch
68 grams Rice Starch
2 tablespoons Sesame oil
68 grams Honey
68 grams ground Almonds and Pistachios
20 grams Rosewater
Powdered sugar

Instructions

Combine sugar and water in a saucepan and heat until it forms a syrup. Remove half of the syrup into a different container. Bring the remaining syrup to a boil. Mix the rice starch with enough water to make a liquid, and then add to the boiling syrup slowly. Stir until thickened and then add the sesame oil. Slowly add the rest of the syrup back into the pan, stirring constantly. Cook for 5 minutes. Next, add the honey, almonds, pistachios, and rosewater. Cook, stirring constantly and scraping the sides of the pot. Heat until the soft ball stage is measured on a candy thermometer. Remove from heat and let cool in the pan for a few minutes, then spread the mixture out on a large serving platter that has been oiled with sesame oil. Let cool completely, and then sprinkle with powdered sugar and cut into pieces.

Notes on Measurements

The original recipes call for a *uquiya*. According to Perry (Arberry, 2001, #287) this measurement is approximately 33.85 grams.

A *ratl* is a pound, but in the Arab world, a pound is 12 ounces, not 16. Therefore a *ratl* is approximately 406.25 grams.

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