

# Basic Cordials

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**What is a cordial or liqueur?** According to the Webster's New International dictionary (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, unabridged, 1953) it is "a spirituous liquor flavoured with various aromatic substances, usually sweetened, and often brandy-based. Liqueurs are usually made by steeping the flavouring material in the spirit." Knowing that they are often brandy-based, it is useful to know that brandy is distilled from wine. As identified, cordials and liqueurs are usually made by adding some flavour to alcohol, via an infusion. So now, the question becomes whether or not distillation is period, and whether or not it is a period practice to steep or soak fruit and spices in alcohol.

The short answer is "yes". The second section of Hugh Platt's *Delightes for Ladies* (London, 1609) is titled "Secrets in Distillation"; and its first recipe is called "*How to make true spirit of wine.*" Most of the rest of the recipes, though, are how to make things like rosewater, or heavily herbed and spiced things, not what one would think of as either modern liqueurs or cordials. Sir Kenelm Digbie (1615), the primary (and largest) source for near-period brewing information, contains no recipes that call for distillation, or for using its product (i.e. you don't add spirit of wine).

In the fifth collection in *Curve on Inglysch*, is a section called "*Goud Kokery*", with a 14th century recipe for distilling "aqua vite" from the lees of strong wine, which seems to produce something that would appear to be a heavily spiced (and probably rather weak, given the methods described) brandy. So some form of such distilling is unmistakably period.

*Fille thi viol ful of lyes of strong wyyn, & putte therto these poudris: poudir of canel, of clowes, of gyngyuer, of notemugges, of galyngale, of quibibis, of greyn de parys, of longe peper, of blake peper: alle these in powdir. Careawey, cirmunteyn, comyn, fenel, smallage, persile, sauge, myntis, ruwe, calamynte, origanum: and a half unce or moore or lasse, as thee likith. Pownd hem a litil, for it will be the betir, & put hem to these poudris, Thanne sette thi glas on the fier, sett on the houel, & kepe it wel that the hete come not o it; & sette thervndir a viol, & kepe the watir.*

It is not clear whether anyone ever drank this stuff, i.e. used the result as a beverage. The closest I have to an indication of such a use is that it is used sparingly as an ingredient in some recipes for making spiced wines or ales (amazingly enough, these recipes tend to indicate amounts).

In most of Europe, distilling alcohol for the purpose of drinking is a late period practice, with the main example being brandy (distilled wine), c. 1400-1500. Whiskey was apparently distilled much earlier, but in fringe areas, so to speak (i.e. Ireland and Scotland). So I don't think you get liqueurs until near the end of our period, and brandy is the most likely liquid for them to be based on. Of course, distillation was known much earlier, but from an (al)chemical, not culinary, standpoint.

## References to AQUA VITAE:

Originally whiskey was very different to the refined spirits we have today. It had almost a soupy consistency with a strong smoky flavour from the peat used in the fires to dry the malt. Early stories go back to the sixth century AD, but the earliest documented record (surviving legal reference) of distilling in Scotland occurs in 1494, when an entry in the Exchequer Rolls of James IV of Scotland (1473-1513) which note that the King had his aqua vitae distilled from barley by a friar. The rolls listed "*Eight bolls of malt to Friar John Cor wherewith to make aqua vitae*" (water of life). A boll was an old Scottish measure of not more than six bushels. (One bushel is equivalent to 25.4 kg) This was sufficient to produce almost 1500 bottles. (*The Scots Cellar* by F. Marian MacNeill, Edinburgh, MacDonald Printers, 1956).

As for the Arabic distillation of spirits, look for references to Jabir ibn Hayyan, (around 800 C.E) who improved distillation techniques in the 9th Century. I think this was the simple retort with a simple external condenser.

The chilled condenser, which is needed in producing high potency alcohol, is a European design from about the 13th Century. Apocryphally, brandy was first distilled about 1300 at the Montpellier medical school by medical professor (and alchemist) Arnoldus Villanovanus AKA Arnaldus de Villa Nova AKA Arnaud de Villeneuve. Arnold wrote of aqua vitae and its restorative properties and also of the medicinal properties of various flavoured alcohols. Legal documents dating to 1411 mention the distillation of wine into brandy in the Armagnac region of France.

*Das Buch zu Destilliern* by Hieronymus Braunsweig was printed in 1519. This book, as its title explains, is a book on distillation.

In his *Herball or General Historie of Plants* (London, 1597), John Gerard says

*"There is drawne out of Wine a liquor, which the Latines commonly call Aqua vitae, or water of life, and also Aqua ardens, or burning water, which as distilled waters are drawne out of herbes and other things, is after the same manner distilled out of strong wine, that is to say, by certaine instruments made for this purpose, which are commonly called Lembickes."*

Henry VIII was the first monarch to officially require that the product come only from licensed distilleries. However it was not until 1661 that the first direct tax (4d. a gallon) was imposed. (An Encyclopedia of Drinks & Drinking, by Frederick Martin, Toronto, Coles Press, 1980)

**SPIRIT OF HONEY** - (from Delights for Ladies, by Sir Hugh Plat, 1609.)

*Put one part of Honey to 5 parts of water: when the water boyleth, dissolue your Honey therein, skimme it, and hauing sodden an houre or two, put it into a woodden vessell, and when it is but bloudwarne, set it on worke with yeast after the vsuall manner of Beere and Ale: runne it, and when it hath lyen some time, it wil yeeld his Spirit by distillation, as Wine, Beere and Ale will doe.*

**TO MAKE DOCTOR STEVEN'S WATER** (from The English Housewife by Gervase Markham, 1615)

*To make that sovereign water which was first invented by Doctor Stevens, in the same form as he delivered the receipt to the Archbishop of Canterbury, a little before the death of the said doctor: take a gallon of good Gascon wine, then take ginger, galingale, cinnamon, nutmegs, grains, cloves bruised, fennel seeds, caraway seeds, origanum, of every of them a like quantity, that is to say a dram; then take sage, wild marjoram, pennyroyal, mints, red roses, thyme, pellitory, rosemary, wild thyme, camomile, lavender, of each of them a handful, then bray the spices small, and bruise the herbs and put all into the wine, and let it stand so twelve hours, only stir it divers times; then distil it by a limbeck, and keep the first water by itself, for that is the best, then keep the second water for that is good, and for the last neglect it not, for it is very wholesome though the worst of the three.*

Duke Cariadoc of the Bow has included a recipe for lemon syrup in his Miscellany (<http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/cariadoc/drinks.html#5>) from an Andalusian book. There is further evidence of the use of fruit flavored syrups in the AlQanun Fi AlTibb (The Law of Medicine) by Abu Ali al-Hussain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina (ce 937-1037). This book contains a large number of prescriptions for various ills, among which are a number of what we would call cordials.

## BASIC LIQUEUR (CORDIAL) RECIPE

The basic process involves using fruit to provide the basic flavour, and adding a distilled spirit and sugar. The fruit was usually pressed by hand (or feet) and mixed with sugar (though sometimes allowed to stand alone.) The spirit was added and allowed to mellow while picking up the characteristic of that particular fruit. Exotic essences were added when making special cordials. This basic recipe is designed as a very simple ("I have no clue, and can't find a recipe") recipe from which to start all cordials. It is very similar to ones in the CA Guide to Brewing. I have found that using a good quality vodka (not Popov, -- use Absolut, Smirnoff, or Finlandia) makes a big difference.

2 lbs fresh fruit

2 cups 100 proof vodka

1 cup sugar

Throw it all in a blender, and puree it well. Pour it into a bottle and let it sit for 2 to 3 weeks. Strain out the pulp, and then filter through a coffee filter. Some liqueurs may need to age some more, but most will be ready to drink. A great number of recipes call for either a pinch of cinnamon or 1 vanilla bean. If you think this might add to the taste or enhance the fruit taste, by all means try it.

One method I use to extract more flavour from the fruit is to freeze it. Because water expands when it freezes, freezing will rupture the cell walls in the fruit, thereby releasing more of the essence of the fruit.

## ADDITIONAL TECHNIQUES

Sugar syrup is used for many recipes. The ratio is 1 part water to 2 parts sugar. Boil together for about 5 minutes, making sure the sugar dissolves. -The syrup must be cool before adding to the alcohol mixture, as heat evaporates alcohol.

1/2 cup water + 1 cup white sugar yields 1 cup syrup. One cup syrup plus three cups 80 proof vodka equals 60 proof liqueur. Two cups syrup plus three cups 80 proof vodka equals 48 proof liqueur. If using grain alcohol (190 proof, use twice as much syrup, with an extra 1/4 cup of water per cup of syrup.

### LEMON LIQUEUR

2 Lemons                      3 cups Vodka                      1 cup sugar

Peel lemons with parer so that peel is one continuous strip. Place peel and vodka in jar with tight-fitting lid for 1 week, occasionally shaking. Remove peel and add sugar. Let stand another week before drinking.  
(CA Guide to Brewing)

**LIMONCELLO**, makes 3 quarts (from a native of Sorrento, Italy)

15 lemons    6 cups sugar  
2 bottles 100 proof vodka (750 ml each)                      4 cups water

Scrub lemons, using warm water and a brush, to remove any wax or pesticide residue. Remove zest from lemons using a vegetable peeler. Avoid including the white pith, as this adds bitterness. Add the zest to half of the vodka. Wait 40 days and then add second half of the vodka and sugar syrup. Sugar syrup is made by combining the sugar and water in a saucepan, bring to boil and cook about 5 minutes. Wait another 40 days then strain out zest and bottle. Can be stored at room temperature, but keep a bottle in the freezer for serving.

**A note of caution:** I have judged a lemon cordial that included the peel along with the juice in the recipe and it had a very bitter taste. We concluded that the pith left on the lemon peel was the cause of the bitterness.

### IRISH CREAM LIQUEUR

3 eggs    2 tsp coconut extract  
3 TBS chocolate syrup                      1 TBS vanilla  
2 cups Irish whiskey                      1 14-oz can sweetened condensed milk

Combine all ingredients in blender for 3 minutes. Refrigerate until thick, approximately 3-4 weeks. This recipe is amazingly similar to commercial brands.

(Making Liqueurs for Gifts)

**A CORDIAL WATER** - c. 1550 to 1625 (From Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery, ed. by Karen Hess.)

*Take burrage & buglos flowers, as many as will [gap in MS] a still, & put thereto as much sack & clare[t] as will wet them well. & to every pinte of [cordial] water, you must put 2 ounces of white sugar candie & one grayne of ambergreece, finely beaten. ye sugar candy must be put into ye glass bottles & let ye water distill upon it very gently.*

**TO MAKE CINNAMON WATER** - c. 1550 to 1625 (From Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery, ed. by Karen Hess.)

*Take a gallon of muskadine, malmsey, or sack & put it in A vessill yt may be close covered, & put to it into ye vessell a pound of bruised cinnamon. let it stand 3 dayes, & every day stir 2 or 3 times. then put it in a limbeck of glass, stoped fast. set it in a brass pot full of water, 1 & put hay in ye bottome & about ye sydes. then make ye pot seeth, & let it distill in to a glass kept as close as may be. shift ye glass every houre after ye first time, for ye first will be ye strongest, & ye last will be very weak.*

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