

A White Torta made with Ricotta
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WHAT, WHERE and WHEN:

- White torta, a cheesecake-like dish, made with homemade ricotta cheese, taken from Platina's *De Honesta Voluptate et Valitudine (On Right Pleasure and Good Health)*.
- The recipe is Italian in origin, though hard to say exactly where. Platina was born in Piacenza, near Mantua, and died in Rome. He lived for a while in Florence, but moved around quite a bit. His sources for *De Honesta Voluptate* are varied as well.
- *De Honesta Voluptate* was written between 1463 and 1465.

RECIPE:

Prepare a pound and a half of best fresh cheese, chopped especially fine. Add twelve or fifteen egg whites, half a pound of sugar, half an ounce of white ginger, half a pound of pork liquamen [pork fat, i.e., lard] and as much fresh butter. Blend in as much milk as you need. When you have blended this, put it into a pastry crust rolled thin and put it all in a pan and set it to bake on the hearth with a gentle flame. Then, to give it color, put coals on the lid. When it is cooked and taken from the pan, sprinkle ground sugar over it, with rosewater.

REDACTION:

1 lb fresh cheese: ricotta
8 egg whites
2/3 c sugar
1/3 oz fresh ginger
1/4 lb lard
1/4 lb butter
1/2 c milk
10" pastry shell
~2 t sugar
1 t rosewater

Beat egg whites to soft peaks. Soften butter and lard together at room temperature. Fold together cheese and egg whites, then add sugar, minced ginger, lard and butter. Mix until fairly uniform. Add milk, fill shell. Bake at 325deg. for 40 minutes. When oil separates, it is done. Put under broiler to brown top lightly. Sprinkle sugar and rosewater, spread on with spoon bottom. Cool until set.

SOURCES:

- Carroll, Ricki and Robert Carroll. *Cheesemaking Made Easy*. Vermont: Storey Books, 1996
- Ciletti, Barbara. *Making Great Cheese*. Asheville, NC: Lark Books, 1999.

- Friedman, David and Elizabeth Cook. *Cariadoc's Miscellany*. <http://www.pbm.com/~lindahl/cariadoc/miscellany.html> Copyright 1992.
- Matterer, James. *A Boke of Gode Cookery: Modern Recipes for Beginners*. <http://www.godecookery.com/begrec/begrec05.htm> Copyright 2002.
- Milham, Mary Ella. *Platina's On Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Critical Abridgement and Translation of De Honesta Voluptate et Valitudine*. Pegasus Press, Asheville, NC: 1999

I chose this particular recipe because it is sweet and it includes cheese, which is one of my gastronomic weaknesses. I have been interested in cheesemaking for a while now, and I had not tried my hand at making ricotta before. So I chose a recipe which included ricotta, a simple cheese that is quintessentially Italian.

Platina has this to say about ricotta:

When the cheese is taken from the bronze kettle, we heat the whey for some time on a slow fire until the fat which is the residue of the cheese rises to the top. Farmers call this ricotta because it is gathered from the milk in a second heating. It is white and not unpleasant to taste. Less healthful than fresh or medium-aged cheese, it is considered better than aged or over-salty. It can be called either cocta [cooked] or recocta [recooked]. Cooks mix it into many vegetable ragouts.

I did a trial run of the recipe, using store-bought ricotta and a commercially prepared pie crust, since I was running out of time to get everything together and did not want to spend too much time on the trial. I used Duke Cariadoc's redaction of the recipe, altering it a little according to what ingredients I had available to me and to my personal preferences. (He had reduced the amount of lard and butter called for, an adjustment I agreed with. This dish is not kind to the arteries to begin with.) I had jumbo eggs on hand rather than regular large eggs, so I used only 6 egg whites (which was plenty).

A couple of things went differently than expected, but nothing blew up or burned. It turned out that the recipe made enough filling for two tortas, though I'd been expecting enough for only one. Good thing I had two pie crusts. I also found that 40 minutes wasn't quite long enough to really bake the torta thoroughly so I put it back in the oven for about twenty more minutes. In period this would have been cooked in a fireplace; most kitchens in large houses would be equipped with at least one, possible two. Platina says to place it in a gentle flame. I'm not accustomed to cooking in the fireplace (though I have one) so I relied on my oven instead. Baking the torta a little longer helped firm up the texture and brown the crust a little more. I also omitted the rosewater, since I didn't have any on hand just then and I'm not wild about the flavor anyway.

I made the torta for the competition the night before, though I made the ricotta myself a couple of days before, when I had time. I used a modern recipe for the ricotta, but it is so simple that I feel it is plausibly period. The recipe came from Barbara Ciletti's *Making Great Cheese*, but I have seen several others. I first made a double batch of queso blanco, a white soft cheese that uses cider vinegar as the curdling agent. I used whole unhomogenized milk, which is as close as I could get to period milk and still be safe. Milk in period would have

been raw whole milk, as the pasteurization process had not been discovered yet. Raw milk is hard to come by unless one lives near a dairy farm, but it can harbor harmful bacteria. As I had no desire to make myself or anyone else sick, I used pasteurized milk. Unhomogenized means that the milk hasn't had its fat molecules broken up, and that the cream in it will rise to the top.

I needed to make a double batch of the queso blanco so that I would have enough whey. Ricotta uses twice as much whey as milk needed to make one batch of the queso blanco. So I used the whey that was left over from those batches to make the ricotta (hence the twice-cooked reference). I had recipes for two varieties of ricotta, one of which calls for heavy cream to be added to the whey. I decided to use the other recipe, which simply calls for vinegar, though the cream variety would have been, well, creamier. I have not seen any references in period literature or cooking manuals that would indicate the use of cream in making ricotta.

Once I had my ricotta, it was simply a matter of gathering the rest of the ingredients and assembling the torta. I made a simple pastry crust of flour, shortening, butter and water and pressed it into a ceramic baking dish. Lard would probably have been used in making such a pastry in period, but there is already a good bit of lard in the torta itself and my arteries were crying out for relief. I used large eggs instead of jumbo, and the eight whites called for in Duke Cariadoc's redaction were just the right amount. The eggs used were from free range, vegetarian-fed chickens. The fresh ginger gives the dish a little bit of zip and keeps it from being too bland. I used unsalted butter, which I felt would be closer to a period flavor. I purchased a small container of whole milk, since I normally drink skim milk, but that would make the filling for the torta too runny (this was confirmed during the trial run). I considered using the same whole unhomogenized milk that I used for the cheese, but this was not cost effective as I only needed a small amount and it is not available in small containers.

I did have to bake the torta a little longer than 40 minutes, but not as long as I needed to in the trial run. I put it under the broiler for a few minutes, which browned the top a little and dried up the excess oil from the lard and butter. I sprinkled the top with a little sugar and a very small bit of rosewater, which I felt I should add in order to be true to Platina's intentions. In small quantities, it does add a period flavor to the dish and gives it a bit of depth.