



Sekanjabin, Shruòs, and Switchel

Refreshing drinks for the summer

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It is getting close to summer, and as we all know, staying hydrated is very important. You absolutely can drink water or soda or your favorite sports drink, but there are a lot of period (and period-adjacent) tasty and hydrating beverages to try at SCA events. I'll be focusing on what were referred to at my college as "Alt Bevs", meaning non-alcoholic drinks.

Disclaimer:

This is not an exhaustive treatise on drink in medieval times. This is a quick introduction to some period-ish refreshing drinks you can add to your repertoire to make your space slightly more medieval.

Food research is not my forte. I have dipped into researching foodstuffs, focusing mainly on my (eventual) persona (Early Medieval English/Anglo-Saxon) would be cooking. I'm sure that some of my information will be less correct than it could be.

What did they drink in period?

Before getting into making things, it helps to have a bit of information about what was available in period. Of course, as with most things, "It depends." What part of the world are you in? What is your social class? What season is it? What century is it?

Water

Yes. People drank water. It wasn't the same purified, bottled spring water, or chlorinated tap water that we're used to, but people drank it. Drinking water is boring, so you rarely write about it. Even today, we don't really talk about drinking water, other than whether or not you logged your 8 glasses a day. And even then, is it actually "water" we're logging, or something flavored, seltzer, or other?

Various people have written about how drinking water was important, and should be done for certain things, and should be avoided for other things. People would comment on how 'clear' or 'fresh' water is better. We still look in awe at the Roman aqueducts built to bring water into Rome. You can always drink water.

Ale and Beer

I know that I'm focusing on non-alcoholic beverages. However, in period, folks drank ale and beer, so I would be remiss to refrain from mentioning them.

Ale and beer was different than what we think of as ale and beer, however. It was rarely fizzy with a foaming head (based on my extremely limited experience of brewing ale once). It probably wasn't hoppy, and possibly full of other flavorful herbs (called a Gruit). It also probably wasn't 5% alcohol, but much, much less. (My guess is 1.5%-3%) The daily drink was a "small ale" or "small beer". It was fermented, it was made basically the same way as regular beer...but often from the leftovers from the first batch. It gives flavor, it gives calories, but is barely intoxicating.

Wine

As with beer, folks drank a fair amount of it, if you lived in an area with grapes. Good wine was the province of the higher classes, but cheap wine was available to more folks. Again, what most people drank was less alcoholic, and probably closer to vinegar more of the time.

Also, folks would water down the wine.

I have made hippocras (mulled wine), and it makes a lovely refreshing drink when watered down. Pour yourself a shot of wine and then fill your glass with water. It tastes more like spiced grape juice than wine. Also, the alcohol content will be greatly reduced as well. (An ounce of 12% alcohol wine diluted to 8 oz is now just ~1.5%)

Mead

I'm not sure it's legal to discuss beverages in the SCA and not mention mead. It's definitely something that was drunk, but it was a special treat. In general, it was more common for feasts and special occasions. I'm not sure if it was watered down regularly, since it was more festive.

Dairy

In general, milk (from whatever was your dairy animal, cow, goat, sheep, yak, etc.) wasn't drunk as milk unless you were young, old, or sick.

Animals at the time had several hundred fewer years of breeding for milk production. We have bred dairy cows to produce about three times the amount of milk as in period. The herds were smaller, as well, and making sure you had more animals for next year was also important. Dairy animals tend not to produce milk at some point in time when pregnant. Also, when food is scarce, dairy animals stop producing milk. Milk wasn't available year round.

That said, by products of other dairy items, mainly buttermilk and whey, were drunk. Whey tastes like the most skim of skim milk. (Note: The buttermilk you can buy in a store today is not the same as the leftovers from making butter. Modern, store bought buttermilk is a cultured product.)

Vikings also drank Skyr, a yogurt-like drink. There are other funky, fermented dairy product drinks from other cultures that I'm not familiar with.

Cider and other Fruit Juices

Without refrigeration or other preservation methods (i.e. fermentation), fruit juice does not last long. I'm sure folks may have had a treat of a bit of fresh juice when prepping it for fermentation, but it wasn't a common drink.

Remember, fruits have been bred to be sweeter and juicier over the centuries. Apples and pears were smaller, watermelon was more rind than fruit, and strawberries were much smaller. It was harder to get juice from them.

If you want to have period drinks, I would stay away from giant glasses of juice. Fermented juice, such as cider or perry (cider made from pear juice), is entirely appropriate.

I have not found any documentation for fruit waters, meaning water that you squeeze or drop fruit into. It may have been so common, no one bothered to write it down. However, all the pieces were available, so there's nothing proving that they didn't do it.

NB: My rudimentary research is focused on Europe. Sweet oranges were available in Asia, and I have zero knowledge of what people drank in the tropics. But my gut says fruit juice wasn't common. (Having hand crushed grapes and apples to make wine and cider, it is a lot of work for a small quantity of juice.)

Tea

Official tea, meaning a drink made of *Camellia sinensis*, has been available in Asia for millennia. Tea or Cha didn't make it to Europe until late period.

There may have been many different versions of tea that are not related to what we think of as tea. For example, Japanese tea ceremony tea (matcha) is very different than green tea from a tea bag. Early tea was often stored as a tea brick, which has different preparation (and therefore flavor) methods.

Coffee

Peoples of Africa have been drinking some variant of coffee for centuries.

It's first documented by Arabs in late period. I've seen listings for someone's class on coffee in period. I bow to their expertise.

If you need coffee in the morning, by all means drink it. Lack of caffeine headaches will not make your event better. No matter how period I am attempting to make my camp, there will always be hot water for coffee and tea in the morning. I'm crazy, but not *that* crazy.

Tisanes

A tisane is the fancy word for herb tea. Mint, chamomile, ginger, hyssop, rosehips, sage, linden, the list is endless.

Again, I have not found documentation for everyday drinks of various herbs stewed in warm water.

There are many medicinal recipes, but they're listed as cures for whatever, not "enjoy a refreshing glass of mint tea". Then again, when my stomach is queasy, I reach for mint or ginger (or both) tea, but I also enjoy it hot or cold as a regular drink.

So, again, I have not found any documentation on people drinking herbal teas as a thing to drink. However, it may have been so common, no one wrote it down. There's nothing saying people didn't drink them, even when not recommended by a leech.

Summer drinks to make

Here are few recommendations of drinks you can make.

I say recommendations, not recipes. One of the most important aspects of these drinks is "to taste". I enjoy vinegar, so I drink vinegar drinks at a high concentration. My friends may water down what I consider weak. Someone else may think something I enjoy is too sweet.

I'm going to present you with suggestions. You can mix them, glass by glass if necessary, to your taste.

A note about In period, the most available sweetener was honey. Honey has additional flavor beyond the sweet. That flavor is entirely influenced by whatever the bees are eating.

sweeteners: Today, most of our sweet comes from sugar, which has a different flavor profile. Many people prefer sugar sweet to honey sweet because that's what our taste buds are used to. Whenever possible, stick to sugar or honey. Other sweeteners—especially artificial ones—will behave differently. Any fermentation processes may not work properly with artificial sweeteners.

Barley water

Documentable

Period

You don't have to ferment barley, you can just make barley water. This has been made for millennia, documentable for Egypt.

This is still popular in England, Mexico, and other countries. It's usually flavored with some citrus, such as lemon or orange.

1. Use any barley that you'd use in a soup, such as pearl barley.
2. Wash and rinse a small quantity of barley, about ¼ cup.
3. Let soak overnight.
4. Drain, and put into a pot. Cover with about a quart of water.
5. Simmer until the barley is really, really soft.

The liquid is barley water. You can sweeten to taste with sugar or honey, or just drink it plain. You can also season with orange or lemon juice. You can also eat the barley.

I have zero idea if it's in period or not, but if you have access to an Asian grocery store, look for toasted barley tea (Mugicha, in Japanese). You can buy giant bags to make it by the pitcher. It is really, really refreshing served cold.

Posca

Documentable

Period

This is a Roman drink. Again, make to taste. You can also add in herbs or spices of your choice.

- Red wine vinegar
- Honey
- Water

Whenever possible, heat your water a bit when mixing in honey to make it easier to mix.

Official recipes were more vinegar (2 tbsp) than honey (1 tbsp), but I was happier with more honey than vinegar.

Also, experiment with different vinegars. There is a very big difference between red wine vinegar aged in oak barrels made from Pinot Noir vs the store brand.

Sekanjabin

Documentable

Period

I was introduced to this at my first Pennsic. Every SCA cookbook I come across mentions this beverage. Originally Persian, and documentable in period, it can be super refreshing, if you like vinegar.

There are many different recipes out there, and to be period, you should be using honey, but I prefer the taste of sugar.

Overly simplified: Make simple syrup. Toss in a bunch of mint. Let cool. Add vinegar to taste.

Slightly more verbose:

1. Mix 2 cups water with 2 cups of sugar in a saucepan.
 2. Simmer, stirring until the sugar dissolves.
 3. Add ½ cup of vinegar (white or apple cider)
 4. Simmer until it thickens slightly.
 5. Toss in a bunch of torn mint leaves.
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6. Take off the heat and let cool.
7. Strain out the mint and bottle.

To serve: Dilute with water to taste.

In Persia, the drink may be served with sliced or grated cucumber in the glass.

You don't have to season with mint. You could just make a honey and vinegar mix, similar to Posca, but a different vinegar. I've also had strawberry sekanjabin, but that could just be a shrub.

Jallab

Not Documentable

Unknown

I'm not sure if this is period or not, but since we're in Persia, this is surprisingly refreshing. I haven't delved deeply into Middle Eastern history, but as it is a date product, I'm relatively confident something similar existed in period.

I was introduced to something similar at Shwama King near Coolidge Corner. The signs I remember call it a raisin-rosewater drink, but most recipes I've found start with dates.

1. Take a quantity of dried dates and raisins and soak.
Pit the dates if necessary. You could also do just dates or just raisins.
You can do a quick soak by pouring boiling water over them and letting them rest for an hour or two. You can also cover with water and leave overnight.
2. Simmer the fruit in the soaking water for 20-30 minutes. Let cool.
3. Puree the fruit.
4. Strain.
5. Season to taste with honey or sugar.
You probably won't need much as dates and raisins have lots of sugar. You will be diluting to serve.
6. (Optional) Add rosewater to taste.

If you live near a Middle Eastern grocery, you can probably find Jallab syrup.

To serve, dilute to taste with water, ice if you have it.

Traditionally it is garnished with pine nuts and raisins.

Fruit syrups

Not Documentable

Unknown

Unfortunately, these are not overly documentable as period. These are very sweet, and procuring enough sweetener in period was difficult. However, these are super tasty and refreshing. Dilute any of these (or maybe a combination) with your choice of water or sparkling water (imitation Italian soda). They are also fabulous mixers if you are enjoying adult beverages.

Soft fruit syrups

Soft fruits include any berry and most stone fruits. I wouldn't recommend this for apples or pears. I haven't tried melons, but it might work. Blackberry syrup with a sage leaf crushed in it is fantastic. Add some lime juice to some raspberry syrup and you have the makings of a raspberry lime rickey.

1. If working with fresh fruit, chop or squish slightly. If using a bag of frozen, just dump in a pot.
Proportions are for roughly 1 qt of fruit
2. Cover with ~2 cups of sugar. Let macerate.
If it's warm out, put into the fridge for overnight. Otherwise you might accidentally make a shrub.

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3. Add ~2 cups of water and simmer for 20-30 minutes. Let cool.
 4. Strain. You can mush the fruit for extra flavor/juice.

Citrus syrups

You can use any combination of citrus fruits, or just a single type. Lemonade, limeade, a lemon-lime (sour) mix, not quite an endless combination, but quite versatile. A favorite of mine is orange with a bit of lemon, which is the basis of Orange Squash.

1. Zest and juice the fruit.
Proportions are for the equivalent of 6 average sized lemons.
2. Mix the zest and juice with ~2 cups of sugar and ~2 cups of water.
Depending upon the amount of citrus juice you have, you can use less water. You'll want less than 3 cups of liquid.
3. Simmer for 20-30 minutes. Let cool.
4. Strain.

Shruòs

Documentable

Not Period

Unfortunately, shrubs are documented as post-period. Official shrub recipes start appearing in the colonial period (18th century) (Although, for all intents and purposes, Sekanjabin could be considered a shrub, especially fruit sekanjabin.)

There are many different ways to make shrubs. Some recipes start with macerating fruit with sugar until it starts to ferment. Others have you soaking the fruit in vinegar for a week or three. And still others have you making a fruit syrup and then adding vinegar.

Personally, I prefer the macerated and mildly fermented or fruit syrup and vinegar types.

Shrubs are excellent things to make with fruit that is just on this side of rotting.

Again, experiment with vinegars. You might have better luck with the organic 'live' vinegars continuing to ferment.

You can also cheat and procure some Korean Hong Cho, a fruity vinegar drink. I get mine from H-mart in Burlington.

Fermented

1. Macerate your fruit in sugar. (You can also add herbs or spices)
2. Leave on your counter for a day or three.
3. Strain out the fruit.
4. Mix with vinegar to taste.

Vinegar Soak

1. Chop and/or smoosh your fruit (and herbs).
 2. Cover with vinegar.
 3. Leave on your counter for about a week.
 4. If you used herbs, remove them.
 5. Mix and squish your fruit in the vinegar.
 6. Leave in your fridge for about another week.
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7. Strain out fruit.
8. Sweeten to taste.

Syrup based

Make a fruit syrup, then add vinegar to taste. You can simmer to reduce the syrup further.

Suitchel

Documentable

Not Period

Again, this is documented as post-period, but if you like vinegar drinks and gingerbread, this can be very refreshing.

1. Mix together 2 parts molasses, 1 part cider vinegar, and a quantity of ginger. Originally, this was probably made with powdered ginger, but you can use fresh, candied, or dried. The quantity depends on what type of ginger you're using and how much you like ginger.
2. Let sit for a few hours.
3. Dilute with water to taste.

Storing syrups

If you want to actually store syrups for a period of time, go to your favorite canning book or website and find (and follow) recipes with proven sugar to fruit to acid proportions. Proper, shelf-stable food preservation requires a specific sugar, acid, and food proportions. Go follow a specific recipe to avoid botulism.

For shorter term storage (i.e. an event or two), you have more options.

You absolutely can use any well-sealing jar or bottle you have on hand. Personally, I prefer glass over plastic. If you make highly acidic drinks, I'm not sure what all the acids might do to the plastic, especially over time. I have a giant collection of mason jars and swing top bottles.

I've used cork for short term, but while period...I've definitely found some interesting growths on corks. This is the same reason I prefer glass bottles I can see through, to confirm I've removed all the extra flora and fauna.

Wash with the hottest water you can stand and/or run them through the dish washer. When I'm working with bottles that have been stored for too long in my garage, or if they had something interesting grow in them, I use some sort of sanitizing product. That can be as simple as a quantity of bleach mixed with the water and soap, or any sanitizing product available for brewing supply stores. When I use bleach, I let the bottle air dry after to make sure the bleach smell dissipates.

Shortly before filling the bottles with a syrup, either fill the bottle with boiling water and then dump it right before filling or invert the bottle in a steamer.

Sugar/honey-only syrups should survive a weekend without some sort of refrigeration, but not always. Sugar syrups are a perfect medium for bacteria. They don't usually make it through Pennsic. However, a fruit syrup generally lasts for months in the refrigerator. Syrups that also contain vinegar can last a lot longer. If you get the proportions correct, a vinegar syrup can be shelf stable.

Non-period tip: If you like sugar in your iced tea or iced coffee, mix up a batch of simple syrup (1:1 sugar and water, heat until dissolved) and keep it in your fridge. Simple syrup mixes into your cold drinks much better.

Avoid wiping up drips around the lip of the bottle or jar with your finger, as that can start the contamination process.

Sources

This is absolutely not an exhaustive list, but a smattering of the sources I've peeked at.

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And of course, uncounted random internet searches and conversations with various folks at feasts.



Left to right: Lemon Syrup with Rose Water, Lemon Syrup, Strawberry Syrup, Sekanjabin, Spiced Red Wine, Spiced White Wine, Orange Syrup, Sour Mix



Syrups in Progress