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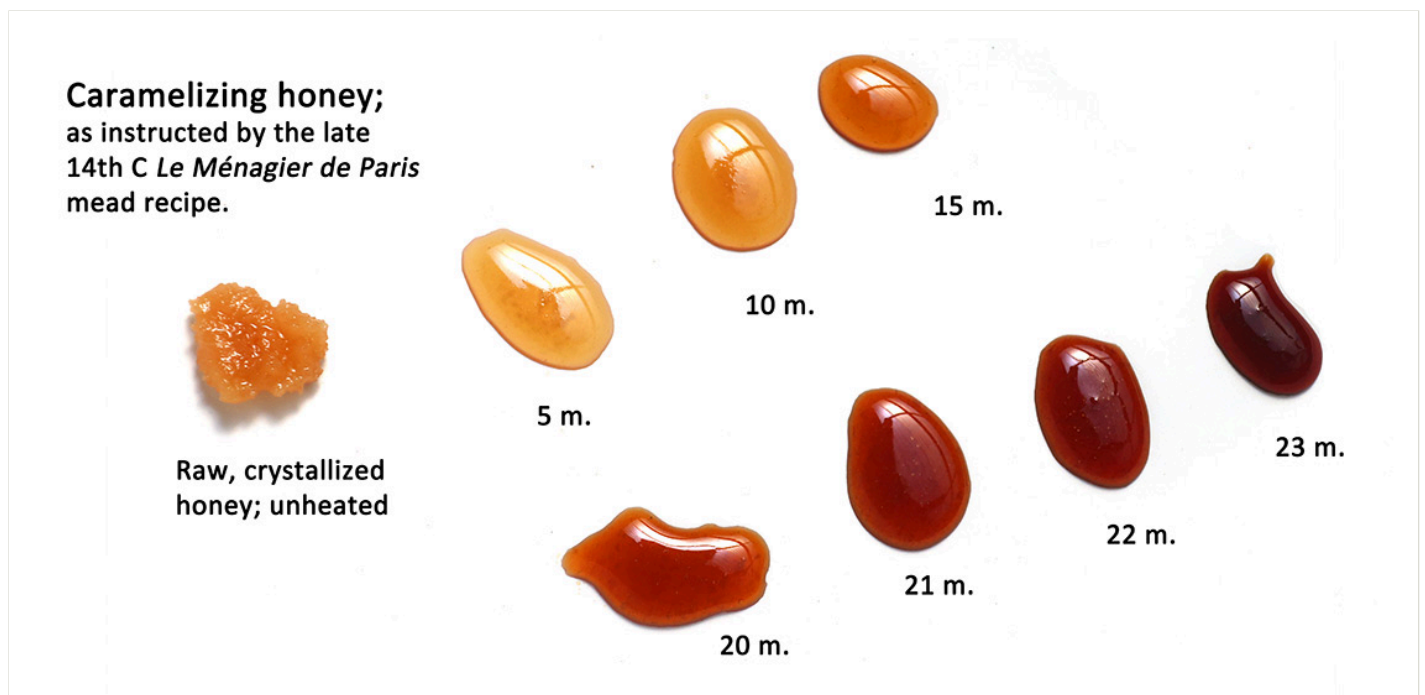
An Analysis of Contemporary Sources to Uncover the Medieval Identity of the Drink Bochet

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When *Le Ménagier de Paris* (1393), a medieval household manual detailing a woman's proper behavior in marriage and running a household, was newly translated and republished as *The Good Wife's Guide: a Medieval Household Book* by the Cornell University Press in 2009, its collection of recipes – including one for *bochet* – became easily available to the general public. As the word *bochet* is not connected to a modern definition, the original French name for a recipe using caramelized honey was retained, and the word *bochet* began to signify the product of this one recipe: a mead made with caramelized honey. The homebrewing community embraced this bochet, and the resulting burnt-honey mead style has gathered enthusiastic followers. The renewed interest by the general public in the medieval period – whether truly medieval or not – is reflected in a practice whereby commercial craft brewers use neomedieval symbolism to brand their products and increase their potential value.



The modern definition of bochet as a mead flavored with caramelized honey still remains and seems to place considerable weight on a singular source. The defining factors of historic bochet seem less rigid.

Introduction

The homebrewing community seems to have discovered bochet, a medieval French beverage, only in the past two decades or so, and the resulting burnt-honey mead style has gathered quite a few enthusiasts. This enthusiasm is due in part, to the unique and challenging method of process, as the modern interpretation of bochet is a mead made from caramelized honey, with additional spices as optional. Surprisingly, the modern mead variety is based on one historic recipe from 14th century Paris, France. When *Le Ménagier de Paris* (1393), a manual detailing a woman's proper behavior in marriage and running a household, was newly translated by Greco and Rose and republished as *The Good Wife's Guide: a Medieval Household Book* by the Cornell

University Press in 2009 (Greco and Rose, 2009), its collection of recipes – including one for bochet – became easily available to the general

public. As the word bochet is not connected to a modern definition, the original French name of the recipe using caramelized honey was retained, and use of the word bochet came to signify the product of this single recipe: a mead made with caramelized honey. This article examines the historic sources more deeply to determine the authenticity of the modern definition.

A Closer Look at Historic Bochet

There are few historic sources mentioning the product bochet, while *Le Ménagier* might be the most elaborate source, it is not the only source. Interestingly, other sources collectively point at a different definition for what kind of beverage constitutes a bochet. The word itself is not currently in use in modern French, the government's *Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales* site defining bochet as a drink made with water, sugar, honey, and various spices, especially cinnamon. (CNRTL 2012). On-line searches find bochet as well as boschet in active use as surnames. Eighteenth century French sources use both words as a diminutive of *Bois* (forest): *boschet* (small bush) (Körting 1891, p.148); thicket (Anon., 141)) and *bochet* (*Le bois / la garenne / le bochet*; the second decoction of sudorific woods (Richelet et al. 1751, p.227)). The connection between *bochet* and *sudorificus*, from Latin *sudor* 'sweat,' is intriguing, the 'sweat' of forests could be interpreted as honeydew, a sticky sweet sap exuded by certain trees during specific weather conditions and resembled to honey in medieval times. (Verberg, 2017–2020, p.26). Along this same line of thinking, the bouchet pear, plausibly linked to bochet due to its sweet juice. (La Quintinie, 1683, p.111)

The earliest variants of bochet as a beverage are: *bochetus* (1292); *bocheto* (1301); *boschier* (1330); *bochet vero* [true bochet], *boischet*, *boschet* & *bouchet* (1348); *bochet* (1385), and *boschet* (1404). (Carpentier 1766, p.569).

The earliest literary mention of bochet does not yield much information about the beverage itself.

1301 CE: "*Item pro uno Bocheto, sito in loco ubi dicitur en Bruier. Boschet, ibid.*" (Carpentier, 1766, p.569). Also in place of a Bocheto, in this location called Bruier. As well as Boschet.

Followed closely by:

1330 CE: "*Cujus potionis venditor, vel qui eam conficit, Boschier nuncupatur.*" (Carpentier, 1766, p.569). This drink I sell, or those who make it, its/they're called Boschier.

Another source, contemporary to *Le Ménagier* by nearly a decade, also confirms bochet as a beverage, and indicates this beverage is (served) hot.

1385 CE: "*Ledit Alain comme tout esbahi, bout a arriere de li ledit Gieffroy, & en c'est boutement a çopa ledit Gieffroy, s'il qu'il che en une cuvée de Bochet, qui mise y estoit pour reffroidier.*" (Carpentier, 1766, p.569). Said Alain all appalled / amazed, at the back of said Gieffroy, & in this raising of his cup by said Gieffroy, in that he cheers with a vessel of Bochet, which is put there to cool down.

The most interesting source for this article is the inspirational recipe from *Le Ménagier de Paris*, "the Parisian Household Book" from 1393. *Le Ménagier* includes two detailed recipes for bochet, as well as detailed instructions on how to caramelize honey for bochet.

Bochet. To make 6 septiers of bochet, take 6 quarts of fine, mild honey and put it in a cauldron on the fire to boil. Keep stirring until it stops swelling and it has bubbles like small blisters that burst, giving off a little blackish steam. Then add 7 septiers of water and boil until it all reduces to 6 septiers, stirring constantly. Put it in a tub to cool to lukewarm, and strain through a cloth. Decant into a keg and add one pint of brewer's yeast, for that is what makes it piquant - although if you use bread leaven, the flavor is just as good, but the color will be paler. Cover well and warmly so that it ferments. And for an even better version, add an ounce of ginger, long pepper, grains of paradise, and cloves in equal amounts, except for the cloves of which there should be less; put them in a linen bag and toss into the keg. Two or three days later, when the bochet smells spicy and is tangy enough, remove the spice sachet, wring it out, and put it in another barrel you have underway. Thus you can reuse these spices up to 3 or 4 times (Greco and Rose, 2009, p.325).

Item, another bochet which keeps for four years, and you can make a whole queue [barrel or cask, also a unit of measure] or more or less at one time if you wish. Combine three parts water and a fourth part honey, boil and skim until reduced by a tenth, and then pour into a container. Refill the cauldron and do the same again, until you have the amount you want. Let it cool and then fill a queue. The bochet will then give off something like a must that will ferment. Keep the container full so that it keeps fermenting. After six weeks or seven months [?], you must draw out all the bochet, up to the lees, and put it in a vat or other vessel. Then break apart the first container and remove the lees. Scald it, wash it, reassemble it, and fill with the liquid you set aside, and store it. It does not matter if it is tapped. Crush four and a half ounces of clove and one grain of paradise, put in a linen bag, and hang inside the keg by a cord from the bung. Nota For each pot of foam skimmed off, add twelve pots of water and boil together: this will make a nice bochet for the household staff. Item, using other honey rather than the skim, make it the same proportions (Greco and Rose 2009, p.325-6).

The next two quotes are interesting in a different way that might, or might not, have bearing on this quest for the historic identity of bochet. In both locations bochet is mentioned next to beer and it is not always clear if bochet is meant as a different beverage, like wine, or as a variant of beer. The logical assumption is it would be a beverage separate from beer were it not for the two intriguing entries associated with bochet. The *Origine des Familles Canadiennes-Française* (1914) defines bochet as a type of mead, as well as a beer in Bourbonnais (and mentions that

in lower Breton, bochet means chubby) (Dionne 1914, p.58). The medicinal *The happy deliery of women* (1612) seems to explain *Beere* as “A kinde of drinke which they vse in France which they call Bouchet.”

1404 CE: “Après vespres dictes, ilz alerent par compaignie boire du Boischet,..... & depuis encore alerent boire de la cervoise..... Tant de vin comme de Boschet (sic) & de cervoife, &c.” (Carpentier 1766, p.569). After your dictates, they went by company to drink Boischet, & since then went to drink cervoise [beer] So much wine like Boschet (sic) & cervoise, &c.

1428 CE: “Le suppliant feust boire en une taverne en la ville de Coustances en l'ostel d'une femme, qui lors vendoit Boschet & servoise” (Carpentier 1766, p.510). The humble petitioner should drink in a tavern in the town of Coustances in the hostel of a woman, who then sold Boschet & cervoise [beer].

Surprisingly, the recipes from *Le Ménagier du Paris* are not the only historic recipes available detailing the making of bochet. Jean Longis included a recipe in his 1556 book “The great owner of all things, very useful and profitable for keeping the human body healthy [as instructed by 13th century] Bartholomaeus Anglicus”. This recipe could, or possibly could not, confirm that bochet used caramelized honey – this description is not quite detailed enough, and the translation ambiguous. The word in question is *cuyte* (*cuit*) which derives from *cuisine* (cooking) and most likely translates as the verb cooking. It could also translate to burnt (*brûlé, incendié, cuit, carbonisé*) which could indicate the caramelization process explained in the *Le Ménagier* recipe. This recipe does not indicate any fermentation, and also includes the use of herbs “to keep it longer & to give it a scent.”

“CHAPITRE. LVII. Du Bochet.

Bochet est en latin appellé Medo & est eaue cuyte avec miel pour boire, quand le Bochet est peu cuyt & le miel n'est pas bien escumé il enfle fort le ventre & engendre les trenchoisons & fait le chief douloir: mais quand il est bien cuyt & escumé il est delectable au goust. Et esclarcist la voix & nettoye la gorge & les conduitz du polmon & conforte le cueur & luy donne lysesse. Et nourrist le corps: mais il n'est pas bon à ceulx qui ont mal an foye & en la ratte & qui ont la pierre & la grauelle, car il restraint les conduitz & les estoupe. On met au Bochet des herbes aromatiques pour le garder plus longuement & pour luy donner odeur, & en Bretagne on y met de l'aluyne qui est vne herbe tres amere pour ce qu'elle enfie” (Longis, 1556).

CHAPTER. LVII. Du Bochet.

Bochet is in Latin called Medo & is water and honey to drink, when the Bochet is undercooked & the honey is not well cooked [burnt?], it bites the belly hard & generates the diarrhea & makes great suffering: but when it is well cooked & scented it is delectable to the taste. And smoothens the voice & clears the throat & the pipes of the lungs & comforts the heart & gives it jubilation. And nourish the body: but it is not good for those who have badly burning spleen and who have the [kidney] stone and the gravel, because it restrains their conduits and to the humors. We put aromatic herbs in the Bochet to keep it longer & to give it a scent, & in Bretagne we put in absinthe that is a very bitter herb for that to trust.

Another recipe detailing the herbs and spices needed as well as some cursory instruction on how to make bochet comes from *Le Thresor de santé* by Jean Huguetau (1607). This recipe is interesting, as the process described again connects bochet with heating, but then connects this heating process with the making of hippocras, a type of mulled wine that is spiced and can be sweetened with honey or sugar.

“De l'Hypocras de l'eau qu'on appelle Bouchet. On prend, Eau bouillie rafaichie, ... vn pot. Canelle concallee, ... demie once. Succre, ... demie liure. Le tout se passe par la chauffe, à la mode de l'hypocras. On peut changer les doles, en pregnant Succre fin en pouldre, ... quatre onces. Canelle, autant que dessus. D'eau bouillante, ... quatre liures. Le tout mellé ensemble se refroidit en vn ballin d'eftain ou de terre bien couuert. Ce fait, on le coule au trauers d'un drap blanc pour en vfer. Il est bon pour les goutteux.” (Huguetau 1607, 110)

We take, freshly boiled water, ... a pot. Crushed cinnamon,... half ounce. Sugar,... half pound. The whole thing happens by heat, in the fashion of hippocras. You can change the amounts, taking: Fine sugar in powder,... four ounces. Cinnamon, as much as above. - - - Boiling water,... four pounds. The whole mixed together cools down into a well-covered bowl of pewter or earthenware. In fact, we pour it through a white sheet to use it. It is good for gouty people.

This connection with hippocras also surfaces in *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611) by Randle Cotgrave.

“Bouchet: m. A kind of broth for a sicke bodie; also, the sweet drinke, Hydromel; or, a drinke made of water sweetned with sugar and cinnamon; or as; Eau de Bouchet. A certaine compound water, which with that of Corianders, makes a kind of Hipocras” (Cotgrave, 1611, p.127).

By the 17th century the “Diet-drink bochet” as a health beverage had made its way over to the United Kingdom (Thomson 1675, pp.94–95) and surfaces in a handful of 17th century medicinal texts in the collection of Early English Books Online (EEBO). The ingredients listed in the recipes tends to be fairly consistent with each other, although not with the traditional hippocras-type spices used for flavor and scent, and once again the herb and spice additions are boiled in water, infused and strained. It is possible this type of bochet is an early form of root beer.

Several examples from *Dr. Willis's practice of physick* (Willis, 1684):

The Results

Honey & Sugar

Modern bochet is defined as a type of mead, a honey wine, flavored by caramelizing (a portion of) the honey. Historic bochet seems to be more diverse, and indicates bochet could be made from either honey or sugar. This choice could be connected to the decline of honey production (and the availability of mead) in the later Middle Ages due to changes in climate, changes in Church demand and the increasing availability of sugar during the Renaissance (Verberg, 2017-20, p.10).

Fermentation

There are indications Middle Age bochet was fermented but that later bochet is not. It is unclear from the later recipes if fermentation or the addition of yeast was not mentioned because fermentation was not part of the process, or because fermentation was an obvious method that did not need repeating. Usually this omission of process is more likely in earlier recipes than in those more recent, putting this interpretation into question. It is also a possibility the product bochet changed over time, from an alcoholic infusion akin to hippocras, to a non-alcoholic infusion, akin to modern sodas, teas and tisanes.

Process

The use of heat – boiling the (sweetened) water – is consistently mentioned, as is the technique of infusing the added spices into this hot liquid. The resulting infusion, a type of tisane or infusion by heat, was consumed at room temperature as the recipes indicate the sweet tisane is cooled down slowly (“well-covered”) and filtered before consumption.

Spices

The addition of spices is mentioned consistently as well, indicating another characteristic of bochet. The changing use of different spices used over the decennia could be indicative of the change in flavor preferences from medieval times to Early Modern times; transitioning from obscure medieval cooking spices to the more typical modern baking spices.

Conclusion

The modern definition of bochet as a mead flavored with caramelized honey still remains and seems to place considerable weight on a singular source. The defining factors of historic bochet seem less rigid. In its method and usage, historic bochet was similar to hippocras: they both are sweetened with honey/sugar, spiced, and steeped (mulled). In contrast, the base of hippocras is wine, not water, and while it might be heated for consumption, it is less likely to be boiled as part of the mulling process as that would drive off the alcoholic content. Bochet also can be observed as similar to mead or hydromel (the French word for mead); both use honey as a source of (fermentable) sugar. Perhaps fermented bochet could be possibly the French word for metheglin, a spiced or medicated variety of mead associated with Wales (meth-e-glen translates to mead of the valley). The differences between bochet and metheglin could involve how the spices are added: with bochet the spices are boiled as part of the whole, and with most metheglin recipes the spices are added in a small spice pouch and dry-hopped during primary fermentation. What can be said about bochet specifically and with more certainty here is what characterizes an historic bochet is not that it is made of (caramelized) honey or sugar, nor is it fermented or not fermented. What characterizes a bochet is the method of process. The defining features of an historic bochet are it is made by boiling sweetened water with spices and letting the concoction slowly cool down, infusing into a wonderful tasty beverage. And as mentioned previously, it is likely the beverage evolved throughout the ages from an alcoholic spiced honey drink to a non-alcoholic sweetened and spiced tisane.

This change of function is not unusual for the world of historic brewing and illustrates the importance of historical awareness, the authenticity of traditional beverages, for the experimental archaeologist and reenacting brewer alike. With the ever-growing interest, and growing commercial market in traditional historic beverages, it is easy to make plausible assumptions, and allowing these assumptions to shape our modern perception of historic products. For instance, neither modern braggot, a mead variety using less than 50% malt in its production, and modern gruit ale, a non-hopped ale using any variety of herbs, existed in this form in history. Historic braggot is actually honeyed ale and gruit beer used only a few regionally identical ingredients, possibly including hops. The incorrect use of labels can have restrictive consequences when licensing for commercial production. For instance, when archaeologist Patrick E. McGovern teamed up with master brewer Sam Calagione of Dogfish Head Brewery they experienced similar difficulties when developing ancient brews for the mass-market (McGovern 2018). This renewed interest by the general public in all things medieval underlines the effective use of neomedievalism in the modern craft beer industry – whether truly medieval or not provable (Phillips 2019). The modern recreation of historic beverages often seems influenced more by popular assumption than by historic scholarship. As in the case with bochet, where what characterizes an historic bochet is not so much that it was made of (caramelized) honey or sugar, nor if it is fermented, or not – what characterizes a bochet is how it is made. As a brewer interested in recreating historic beverages, I find historic context to be quite important in deciding how to approach a practical recreation. And I found, once again, that the interpretation of a historic product was not quite as straight forward as modern perception might have made it seem.

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📖 Country France

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| Gallery Image



FIG 1. MINIATURE FROM MÉNAGIER DE PARIS, 15TH CENTURY. LE MÉNAGIER, OR "THE PARISIAN HOUSEHOLD BOOK," IS WRITTEN IN THE (FICTIONAL) VOICE OF AN ELDERLY HUSBAND INSTRUCTING HIS YOUNGER WIFE, AND DESCRIBES IN DETAIL A WOMAN'S PROPER BEHAVIOUR IN RUNNING A HOUSEHOLD, AND IN MARRIAGE. IMAGE: BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

Caramelizing honey;
as instructed by the late
14th C *Le Ménagier de Paris*
mead recipe.

**Raw, crystallized
honey; unheated**



5 m.



10 m.



15 m.



20 m.



21 m.



22 m.



23 m.

FIG 2. THE CHANGE IN COLOUR FROM HONEY COLOURED TO A DEEP CARAMEL HUE, ALL WITHIN 23 MINUTES.



FIG 3. BOILING HONEY WITHOUT WATER WILL RESULT IN A LARGE INCREASE IN VOLUME DUE TO CAPTURED AIR BUBBLES. WHEN IT STARTS TO CARBONIZE (BURN) AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PAN, THIS BUBBLY MASS WILL "PUFF" LITTLE STREAMS OF SMOKE LIKE TINY ACTIVE VOLCANOS. AT THAT TIME, THE ENTIRE POT IS TEMPERED WITH WATER - AN IMPRESSIVELY VIOLENT REACTION, BUT ONE THAT IMMEDIATELY HALTS THE BURNING PROCESS. BREWING THE LE MÉNAGIER BOCHET MEAD IS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART.