

Richmond Maids of Honour



Maids of Honour tarts – Richmond's greatest contribution to the culinary arts – are believed to have originated in the Royal kitchens at Hampton Court. Legend has it that the recipe was locked away in an iron chest until it was rediscovered by Henry VIII who presented it to Anne Boleyn, lady-in-waiting to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. She is believed to have made the tarts for Henry who, in turn, named them 'Maids of Honour' after her. Another story has it that Henry came across Anne and other attendants eating the cakes from a silver dish and, after tasting them, was so delighted that the recipe was kept secret and locked in an iron box in Richmond Palace. Yet a third version claims that, in order to protect the secret, the unfortunate 'maid' who invented the tarts was imprisoned within the Palace grounds and ordered to produce the pastries solely for Henry and the Royal Household.

Whichever tale is correct, the recipe appeared in the second edition (1665) of **The Accomplisht Cook** by R. May. The commercial production of Maids of Honour in Richmond began in 1750 in Hill Street when Thomas Burdekin took a small shop next to the White Hart Inn. Within 20 years he was able to expand into the next-door premises - now no. 3 Hill Street. Burdekin went on to become a vestryman in 1785 and in 1790 he sold the business to William Hester. Hester was succeeded by John Lea and then, in 1830, by John Thomas Billett.

The Billett family became synonymous with Maids of Honour tarts and the famous shop front proclaimed that it was 'the original shop of the Maids of Honour'. Grandfather, father and son in turn welcomed visitors to Richmond who made the mandatory pilgrimage to the shop. On one famous day at the turn of the 20th century no less than 8000 cakes were baked and sold. In 1908 big business seems to have taken over when the Richmond (Original) Maids of Honour Limited under the chairmanship of Mr Colnbrook – whose sister had married John Thomas Billett junior - came into being. In 1921 it was again taken over by Hygienic Bakeries Ltd who already had several shops in the area. The shop closed in 1957.

Robert Newens served his apprenticeship at the Hill Street bakery and in 1850 he opened a shop in King Street, later moving to no. 3 George Street where he continued the tradition of making and selling the Maids of Honour. Robert's son, Alfred, opened a new establishment at 288-290 Kew Road, Kew in 1887 where he also made Maids of Honour from the recipe passed on by his father. Alfred died in 1927 leaving the business to be carried on by his son John and daughter Kathleen. The bakery suffered serious bomb damage during the Second World War. After the war, John's son, Peter set to work to repair the damage and get the business back on its feet. The bakehouse was rebuilt and new gas ovens installed as well as the shop front being remodelled. The shop, still owned and run by the Newens family, is a bakery as well as a restaurant and tea room where the Maids of Honour are served – made to a closely kept family secret recipe.



Maids of Honour Shop

The Recipe

The favourite tarts in Tudor times were, however, fruit and it was not until the 17th century that almond tarts began to appear in the cookery books and attain great popularity. These tarts either took the form of cheese cakes or were filled with ground almonds scented with rose water or later with orange flower water.

The following recipe appeared in **The Encyclopaedia of Practical Cookery** (1892), edited by T.F. Garrett.

'Beat the yolks of six eggs in a basin, mix in 10oz of powdered sugar, 1oz of bitter and 2oz of sweet almonds, blanched and pounded, the finely-grated rinds of four lemons, the strained ice of two, and two large potatoes, boiled and mashed. Put ½ gall. of milk into a basin with a piece of rennet, and let it remain until it curds; place the curds in a sieve to dry, crumble up, pass them through a sieve into a basin, and mix in 9oz of warmed butter. Work well until the mixture is quite smooth, then add the sugar preparation and 4 tablespoons of brandy. Put the mixture into tartlet-pans lined with rich puff paste, and bake in a quick oven until of a good colour; take them out, turn the cheese-cakes out of the pans, and serve either hot or cold.'

A modern version of the above recipe is:-

- 1 pint of fresh milk
- 1 teaspoon rennet
- 1oz butter
- 1 standard egg
- 1oz ground almonds
- ½ level teaspoon finely grated lemon rind
- 1oz castor sugar

1 small (7oz) packet of frozen puff pastry, just thawed
½ oz currants

Make junket, using milk and rennet, but omitting sugar, as directed on bottle of rennet; leave in a warm place to set (if it does not set, move to a warmer place). Pour into a large plastic sieve placed over a basin; cover and leave in a cool place for at least 4 hours or overnight. This should make ¼ pint curds; discard whey.

Prepare a hot oven (425 deg. F, Gas Mark 7). Press curds through sieve into a bowl; melt butter.

Beat egg and add to curds, together with ground almonds, lemon rind, sugar and butter. Mix well.

Roll out pastry thinly on a lightly floured board. Using a cutter ½ in larger than top measurement of tartlet tins, cut pastry into 12 to 15 rounds. Place rounds centrally over tartlet tins and ease into tins; press pastry well into base of tins, but avoid stretching pastry or tarts will become oval on cooking.

Place a teaspoonful of filling into each pastry case; sprinkle a few currants on top of each.

Bake just above centre of oven for 20 to 25 minutes, until pale golden brown.

Leave in tins for a few minutes, then lift out and leave to cool on a wire rack. Serve cold.

A much simpler recipe was given by Joyce Poulson in her book **Thames Valley Recipes** (1977):-

4 oz castor sugar
two egg yolks
2 oz ground almonds
orange flower water
puff pastry
two tablespoons cream
one dessertspoon of flour

Alternatively for a richer mixture use

4 oz ground almonds to
2 oz castor sugar

Mix carefully together the flour, sugar and almonds. Blend in the egg yolks and cream, then flavour to taste with orange flower water.

Have prepared small patty tins, lined with puff pastry, and into these put in a spoonful of the mixture.

Bake in a moderately hot oven until firm and golden brown.