

Soap for the Hands

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Original recipe:

Jabón para las manos Tomad una libra de jabón valenciano rallado y atadla en un paño grueso. Y ponedlo en una caldera de agua hirviendo, y cueza allí hasta tanto que se pare azul. Y desque cocido, tomad una escudilla de ello, y otra de miel, y otra de hiel de vaca, y media de zumo de lirio, y una escudilla de vinagre. Y ponedlo todo junto en una olla a cocer, y cueza hasta tanto que esté espeso, trayéndolo siempre a una mano. Y si quisiéredes hacerlo peloticas lo dejaréis cocer hasta que se pare duro.¹

Translation:

Soap for the hands Take a pound of grated Valencian soap and bind in a cloth. And put it in a pot of boiling water, and cook it there until it's turned blue. And while it is cooking, take an escudilla of it, and another of honey, and another of cow's bile, and half the juice of a lily, and an escudilla of vinegar. And put it all together in a cook-pot, and cook it until it is thick, always stirring it. And if you want to make them into little balls, let it cook until it is hard.

First redaction:

1 lb grated Castile soap (see recipe in appendix)
16 oz. honey
16 oz. cow bile
16 oz. vinegar
2 oz. lily oil

Tie the grated soap into a cloth and boil it in water until completely melted (the water will develop a bluish cast, like milk, rather than “turning blue”). Add the other ingredients and stir until the mixture thickens, then pour into a mold or shape into balls. Let dry for 1 week.

Notes:

Unfortunately, my attempts to recreate the recipe as translated from the original source did not produce a usable soap. My first attempt resulted in a sticky mass that had to be pried out of the pot; I threw this batch away. For my second attempt, I reduced the additives by half. This mixture seemed more promising; however, the addition of the vinegar caused the mixture to rice. Ricing occurs when the fat solids separate from the

¹ Manual de mujeres, #36.

oils and liquids in the soap and create a lightweight waxy mass. All attempts to rebatch this attempt failed.

Finally, I turned to a soapmaking reference book and developed the following method that I believe comes close to replicating the intended product.

Second Redaction:

1 lb. grated Castile soap
8 oz. honey
2 oz. cow bile
8 oz. vinegar
2 tsp. bitter orange oil

Melt the soap in a double boiler over medium heat. Just before pouring into molds, add other ingredients and stir well to blend.

After molding, let set for 24 hours. Scoop the soft soap from the mold and roll into balls. Allow to dry for 3-5 days.

Appendix

Castile soap

12 oz lye
36 oz water
36 oz non-virgin olive oil

Pour water into a dedicated pitcher with a tightly-sealing lid. Measuring carefully and working slowly in a room with adequate ventilation, pour the lye crystals into the water. Stir with a wooden spoon until the lye is dissolved. Let the lye cool to between 100 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

While the lye is cooling, add the olive oil to a stainless steel cookpan and heat to 120 degrees. Balance the cooling lye and the heating oil until both are between 100F and 120F.

Slowly pour the lye into the oil, stirring constantly. Once the two are combined, either stir the mixture for 20 minutes to one hour by hand, or use a stick blender set on low. The mixture should be stirred until a spoon drawn across the surface leaves visible trails.

Pour the mixture into a mold, cover, wrap in a towel, and set aside in a warm spot for 48 hours. After the soap is set, turn it out of the mold and cut it into bars. Set the bars out to air for 2-3 weeks.

Valencian soap:

Valencian soap probably refers to Castile soap, a hard white olive oil soap widely manufactured in the kingdom of Castile and exported through Europe. In 1423, the city of Seville was granted a royal license for a monopoly on the production of soap; while Seville and Castile were not the only locations of soap factories, it is likely that the soap produced by other royal factories was the same.²

Cow bile:

² Carmona and Donoso, 3.

Bile acts to some extent as a detergent, helping to emulsify fats (increasing surface area to help enzyme action), and thus aids in their absorption in the small intestine. In the intestines, bile salts combine with phospholipids to break down fat globules in the process of emulsification by associating its hydrophobic side with lipids and the hydrophilic side with water. Emulsified droplets then are organized into many micelles which increases absorption. Since bile increases the absorption of fats, it is an important part of the absorption of the fat-soluble vitamins D, E, K and A.

Taurocholic acid, known also as **cholaic acid**, **cholytaurine**, or **acidum cholatauricum**, is a deliquescent yellowish crystalline bile acid involved in the emulsification of fats. It occurs as a sodium salt in the bile of mammals. It is a conjugate of cholic acid with taurine. In medical use, it is administered as a cholagogue and choleric. Hydrolysis of taurocholic acid yields taurine, a nonessential amino acid. For commercial use, taurocholic acid is manufactured from cattle bile, a byproduct of the meat-processing industry.

Deoxycholic acid, also known as **deoxycholate**, **cholanoic acid**, and **3 α ,12 α -dihydroxy-5 β -cholanate**, is a bile acid. Deoxycholic acid is one of the secondary bile acids, which are metabolic byproducts of intestinal bacteria. The two primary bile acids secreted by the liver are cholic acid and chenodeoxycholic acid. Bacteria metabolize chenodeoxycholic acid into the secondary bile acid lithocholic acid, and they metabolize cholic acid into deoxycholic acid. There are additional secondary bile acids, such as ursodeoxycholic acid. Deoxycholic acid is soluble in alcohol and acetic acid. When pure, it comes in a white to off-white crystalline powder form. In the human body deoxycholic acid is used in the emulsification of fats for the absorption in the intestine.

Bile from slaughtered animals can be mixed with soap. This mixture, called bile soap, can be applied to textiles a few hours before washing and is a traditional and rather effective method for removing various kinds of tough stains.³

Bitter orange oil:

I substituted bitter orange oil-- also called Seville orange-- for the lily oil due to cost and allergy considerations. Neroli oil is produced from the blossom of the bitter orange tree (*Citrus aurantium*); it is similar in scent to bergamot. Neroli oil is often used in aromatherapy to relieve tension and anxiety, and to increase circulation.⁴ Orange blossom oil/water is mentioned in several recipes in the *Libre del Coch* and the *Manual de Mujeres*, and therefore is an acceptable period substitution for lily oil.

Weights and Measures:

Escudilla: (a small hemispherical cup) "Escudilla, "Dish" is used in three ways in the text. First, it refers to a bowl. Second, it is used as a synonym for "a serving". Many of

³ Olsen interview.

⁴ "Bitter orange," 2.

the recipes say, "and this will make x number of *escudillas*". Lastly, it is a measurement of volume, much like 19th century recipes call for a "wineglass" or a "teacup" of a certain ingredient. A recipe for preserved dates in Granado calls for "three pounds of water, or three *escudillas*" (Granado, 395) which seems to indicate that the *escudillas* of that time held about 16 fl. oz. Studies of 15th and 16th century Iberian pottery found at archeological sites show that *escudillas* varied in size, with rim diameters ranging from 8 cm. to 15 cm. (about 3-3/8 to 6 inches), but 13-14 cm. (about 5-1/4 to 6 inches) seems to have been the most common. A modern bowl in my kitchen, whose shape and proportions are similar to illustrations of medieval *escudillas* has a rim diameter of 13-1/2 cm. and a capacity of 600 ml. (about 20 fl. oz.)."⁵

⁵ Nola, *Libre del Coch.*

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