

## Two Oils for Aches

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*Oil #652 (left) and Oil #1032 (right)*

The Leechbook used for these recipes is Manuscript 136, a small English volume of 98 folios on vellum and is dated to the reign of Henry VI, most probably before the start of the Wars of the Roses. It is a collection of recipes for various injuries, ailments and affections, interspersed with the properties of various herbs (Dawson 3). For both recipes, I have included the original text of the manuscript as well as Dawson's translation.

I chose these two recipes for two reasons. I'm always interested in historical remedies for common daily ailments such as joint pain, particularly as I've now reached the age of "if I sleep wrong, my neck will hurt for three days". I also found these two recipes interesting because they have a very similar ingredient list but different preparations and I was curious how the differences in methodology would affect the final product.

Recipe 1:

*652 A precious oyle for ach is made of lorer levys and sauge and lauandre white wyne an nw oyle or the best oyle of ech a pound and halue a pond of aqua vite and grynd thyme erbys togedyre and put hem in an erthen pott togedir to the wyne and oyle and a lyttel chaufe it and lat it stand a day or ij fast stoppid and then streyne it thorow a cloth and lat hym sytt agayn the fyre and enoynt hym with ther the sore is.*

652: A precious oil for aches is made of laurel leaves, and sage, and lavender, white wine, equal parts, and new oil. Or [take] the best oil of each a pound, and half a pound of aqua vitæ; and grind thy herbs together, and put them in an earthen pot, together with the wine and oil, and chafe it a little, and let it stand a day or two fast stopped; and then strain it through a cloth. And let him (the patient) sit by the fireside and anoint him therewith where the sore is (Dawson #) (Dawson 205-6)



### Ingredients:

**Laurel Leaves (*Laurus nobilis*):** Laurel, or Sweet Bay, is a small tree, growing in Britain to a height of about 25 feet but in warmer climates reaching as tall as 60 feet. It was well known in a medieval kitchen as a garnish or to enhance washing water to cleanse hands before eating (Freeman 4). Oil of bay leaf has been used externally for sprains and bruising because the leaves contain lauric acid (Grieve and Grieve 465).

**Sage (*Salvia officinalis*):** Sage was grown in medieval gardens for potage, for salads, for poultry stuffings and meat pies. It was also considered good for general health, as “Why should a man die whilst sage grows in his garden” was an oft-quoted medieval saying (Freeman 13). It is listed among the useful ingredients for embrocations for rheumatism and relieves pains in the joints (Grieve and Grieve 704).

**Lavender (*Lavandula officinalis*):** Lavender was often used in the middle ages to perfume clothing and protect against insects (Freeman 40). While the flowers are less potent than the distilled oil, they are useful for nervous exhaustion, headaches, colic and indigestion (Ody 75). *A Modern Herbal* recommends oil of lavender to relieve sprains and rheumatism (Grieve and Grieve 471).

**White Wine:** It is uncertain what the wine added to this recipe, particularly given that it is applied topically and the heat during the chafing process would likely have destroyed any preservative effects of the alcohol. Regardless, I chose to use a readily available dry white wine for this recipe.

**New Oil:** The Leechbook lists olive oil as an ingredient in other recipes throughout the book. I have chosen to use extra-virgin olive oil as the carrier oil in this recipe.

**Aqua Vitæ:** The medieval Latin term stands for “water of life”. It was used historically to denote an impure alcohol that had only been distilled once. It was traditionally made from wine and wine lees, or from ale specially made for the purpose. As these became more expensive, Flemish immigrants in London began to distill cheaper spirits of poor quality from any material, such as the dregs from brewing that had previously been only used to feed livestock. In response, the government attempted to regulate the trade and gave Richard Drake a patent of



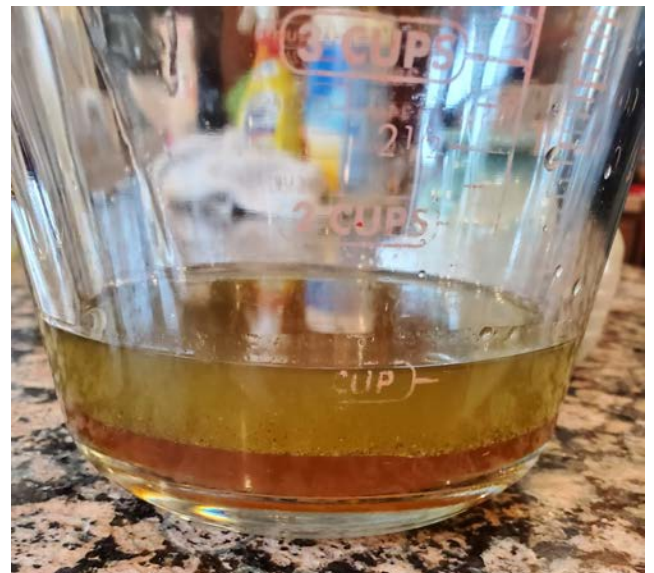


monopoly for making aqua vitae from ale. This did not improve standards and was very unpopular, and was abolished in 1601 (“Aqua naphae - Aquatint”). In *A Sip Through Time*, John Gerard of *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plants* is quoted as saying, “There is drawne out of wine a liquor, which the Latines commonly call *Aqua vitae*, or water of life, and also *Aqua ardens*, or burning water, which as distilled waters are drawne out of herbes and other things, is after the same manner distilled out of strong wine, that is to say, by certaine instruments made for this purpose, which are commonly called Lembickes.” (Renfrow 205). *A Sip Through Time* also noted that the original is far superior to the later editions of Gerard’s Herball, and thus is prohibitively expensive. I found that a more modern translation of his book did not include this quote, and only listed the plant descriptions, but as I was unable to obtain a copy of the original, I will trust Renfrow’s inclusion of the quote.

While I do have a clay alembic that I made while learning pottery, I do not entirely trust it to distill alcohol in my kitchen. For safety purposes, I have chosen to use a brandy for this project.

#### Method:

As I did not want to make a large quantity of this oil, I cut the quantity of ingredients all in half. In a mortar and pestle, I ground a handful each of the lavender, sage, and bay leaves, which was then placed with four ounces of the wine and four ounces of the brandy (aqua vitae) and eight ounces of olive oil. This was gently simmered for a half an hour before being poured into a mason jar and left to stand for two days. It was then strained through a linen cloth into a storage jar.



**Recipe 2:**

1032 for ach of bones a gude oyntement Take southern-wod wormwood lauandre floures reede rose flours camamyll sauge riall that will not sede of ech a handful grynd heme small in a mortare as vert sawce and put hem in a pot full of oyle de olyfe and put to a pynt of aqua vite and let hem stand for iij days and boyle it wele vp space of almost of an vnce and streyne it.

1032: For ache of bones, a good ointment. Take southern-wood, wormwood, lavender flowers, red rose flowers, camomile, sage, [penny]royal that will not seed, of each a handful. Grind them small in a mortar as vertsauce, and put them in a pot full of oil of olive and put thereto a pint of aqua vitae. And let them stand three days and boil it well up the space of almost an hour and strain it (Dawson 315).





### Ingredients:

Southern-wood (*Artemisia abrotanum*):

Southernwood is the southern Wormwood, found indigenous in Spain and Italy and having been introduced to Britain in 1548. Culpepper lists among its uses "The oil thereof anointed on the backbone before the fits of agues come, preventeth them" (Grieve and Grieve 755).

Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*):

Wormwood was reputedly planted along roadsides by the Romans, who put springs in their sandals to prevent aching feet during long journeys. Compresses of wormwood are used for bruising (Ody 39). Wormwood was known in Anglo-Saxon herbal manuscripts as being useful for removing bruises or other sores from the body (Van Arsdall 195). However, *A Modern Herbal* does not list topical application among its list of uses (Grieve and Grieve 860).

Lavender (*Lavandula officinalis*): Lavender was often used in the middle ages to perfume clothing and protect against insects (Freeman 40). While the flowers are less potent than the distilled oil, they are useful for nervous exhaustion, headaches, colic and indigestion (Ody 75). *A Modern Herbal* recommends oil of lavender to relieve sprains and rheumatism (Grieve and Grieve 471).

Red rose flowers (*Rosa gallica*). Red rose petals were listed in the British Pharmacopeia until the 1930's and were often used to flavor other medicines (Ody 91). However, other than adding a pleasant scent to the recipe, it is unknown what topical benefit the rose petals would have added.

Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*): *Bancke's Herbal* states of chamomile that it is "good for the aching of a man's head and for the megrim [migraine] (Freeman 22). Chamomile poultices are used for external swelling and inflammatory pain (Grieve 187). Ointments containing chamomile are useful for insect bites, wounds and eczema (Ody 47)

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*): Sage was grown in medieval gardens for potage, for salads, for poultry stuffings and meat pies. It was also considered good for general health, as "Why should a man die whilst sage grows in his garden" was an oft-quoted medieval saying (Freeman 13). It is listed among the useful ingredients for salves for rheumatism (Grieve and Grieve 704)



Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*): Culpepper says of Pennyroyal “The green herb bruised and put into vinegar...takes away the marks of bruises.” (Grieve and Grieve 626). A modern use is to control muscle spasms (“Pennyroyal: Health Benefits, Side Effects, Uses, Dose & Precautions”).

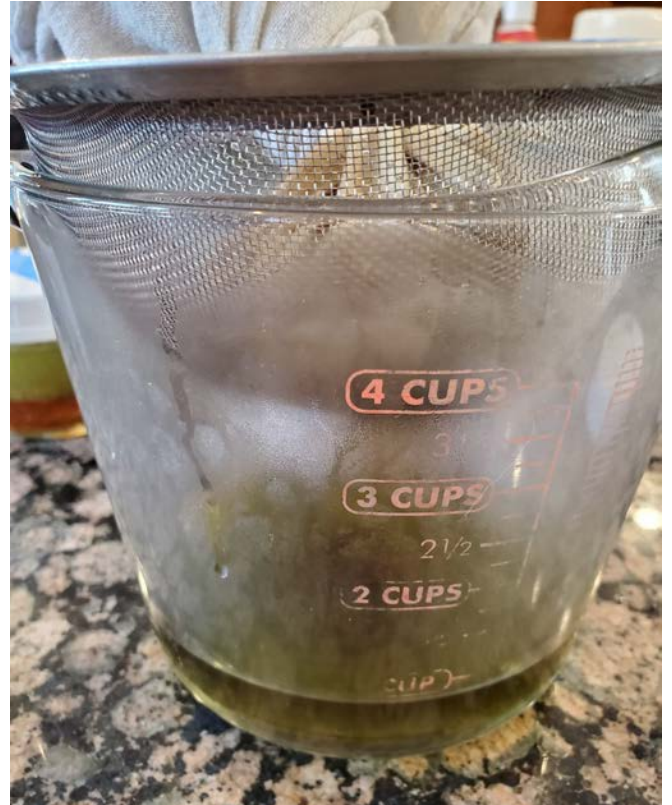
Olive Oil: For this project, I chose to use extra-virgin olive oil as the carrier oil.

Aqua Vitæ: The medieval Latin term stands for “water of life”. It was used historically to denote an impure alcohol that had only been distilled once. It was traditionally made from wine and wine lees, or from ale specially made for the purpose. As these became more expensive, Flemish immigrants in London began to distill cheaper spirits of poor quality from any material, such as the dregs from brewing that had previously been only used to feed livestock. In response, the government attempted to regulate the trade and gave Richard Drake a patent of monopoly for making aqua vitae from ale. This did not improve standards and was very unpopular, and was abolished in 1601 (“Aqua naphae - Aquatint”). In *A Sip Through Time*, John Gerard of *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plants* is quoted as saying, “There is drawne out of wine a liquor, which the Latines commonly call *Aqua vitae*, or water of life, and also *Aqua ardens*, or burning water, which as distilled waters are drawne out of herbes and other things, is after the same manner distilled out of strong wine, that is to say, by certaine instruments made for this purpose, which are commonly called Lembickes.” (Renfrow 205). *A Sip Through Time* also noted that the original is far superior to the later editions of Gerard’s Herball, and thus is prohibitively expensive. I found that a more modern translation of his book did not include this quote, and only listed the plant descriptions, but as I was unable to obtain a copy of the original, I will trust Renfrow’s inclusion of the quote.

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Method:

Again, as I did not want to make a tremendous quantity of this oil, I halved the ingredients. I first ground a half-handful of each of the herbs in a mortar and pestle. As it is late winter, my herbs were dry instead of fresh, so I added a bit of water to create the necessary verjuice consistency. The ground herbs were then put into a mason jar with 8 ounces of olive oil and 8 ounces of brandy (aqua vitae) and left to stand for three days. The mixture was then poured into a pot, placed on the stove, and allowed to boil gently for one hour before being strained through a linen cloth into the storage pot.



### Observations and Notes

After the initial mixing and pouring into jars, it was interesting to note that #652 had a clear separation of oil, then herbs, then brandy and wine. Whereas while oil #1032 also had the same separation of oil and brandy, the herbs seemed to occupy more of the oil layer. It was also interesting to me that herbal infused oils and herbal infused alcohols are both very much used in modern treatments, but this was the first time I had seen the two combined.

While straining oil #652, I noticed a distinct separation of oil and brandy, and made the decision to whisk the two ingredients together before pouring into the storage jar. However, separation started again within the hour, so I'm uncertain if the separation of oil and aqua vitæ/wine was the desired effect- and if so, why add such a valuable ingredient at all, as it would provide no preservation, or if it was simply understood that the user would have known to shake the jar to combine before applying.

Oil #1032 was considerably thicker after boiling and it appeared that much of the brandy had been boiled off. The end oil was a much darker green and without the separation of oil #652.

All in all, this was a really interesting project and I look forward to using both oils.



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