Main dishes

Medieval Blancmange

A dish from the great household cookbooks of the late Middle Ages — finely shredded chicken simmered until it falls into threads, then bound with rice and sweet almond milk into a pale, fragrant pottage. Neither quite savoury nor quite a pudding, it sits at the medieval table between the two, gently sweetened with sugar and crowned with fried almonds. The 'white food' that gives it its name was a mark of refinement, served to the sick and the noble alike.

Time 135 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 100 parts Chicken (whole capon or breasts, on the bone)
- ☐ 120 parts Almond milk (rich, from blanched almonds)
- ☐ 18 parts White rice (short-grain, ground to a coarse meal)
- ☐ 10 parts Sugar (white, finely pounded)
- ☐ 1 parts Salt
- ☐ 40 parts Chicken cooking broth (the poaching liquor, strained)
- ☐ 1 parts Rosewater (a few drops, optional period perfume)
- ☐ 6 parts Whole almonds, blanched and fried in a little fat

Let's make it.

01 Lay the chicken in a deep pot, cover with cold water, add a pinch of salt, and bring slowly to a bare simmer. Skim the grey foam as it rises. Poach gently, never boiling hard, for about 45 minutes for breasts or up to 75 minutes for a whole bird, until the meat is cooked through and tender. Lift the chicken out and reserve, and strain and keep the poaching broth — it is needed later.

02 When the chicken is cool enough to handle, strip away skin and bones and pull the breast meat into the finest threads you can — medieval cooks would draw it out with the point of a knife or pound it small. The texture of true blancmange depends on this: long, hair-fine fibres rather than chunks. Reserve the shredded meat.

03 Pour the rich almond milk and the reserved chicken broth into a heavy pot and bring to a gentle simmer. Rain in the ground rice, whisking to prevent lumps. Cook low and slow, stirring often so it does not catch, for 20–30 minutes until the rice has swollen and the mixture thickens to a soft, spoonable pottage that just holds its shape.

04 Fold the shredded chicken into the rice pottage so the threads disappear into the white. Sweeten with the pounded sugar and season with a little salt, tasting as you go — it should be gently sweet, faintly savoury, and clean-tasting. Stir in a few drops of rosewater (or a pinch of mace) for perfume. Warm through gently without boiling.

05 Spoon the warm blancmange into shallow bowls and smooth the surface. Scatter over the blanched almonds that have been fried golden in a little fat, in the manner of the medieval cooks who 'planted' the dish with almonds. Serve warm as a refined dish of the second course.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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