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Still Rooms and Still Room Books

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THE herb grower of this year of grace may raise herbs because they make such a fragrant addition to the garden or she may have a utilitarian purpose.

Perhaps she will grow Horehound for teas to be taken for a sore throat, or Southernwood, Lavender and other herbs to be put into little bags and laid away among the winter clothes to discourage moths, or Marjoram to be placed on roasting meats. But our modern lady may simply call a doctor or send to a grocery or drug store for medicinal or culinary preparations.

In early days when there were no groceries, drug stores or even local doctors, the mistress of the castle, manor or cottage was the one to whom everyone turned for miles about for help. Depending on the size of her domain was the size of the place where the necessary preparations were concocted, from a special room to a one-room detached house somewhere on the grounds.

What the housewife then had to supply in the way of medicinal preparations, cosmetics or seasonings, she, her daughters and her maids concocted in that room. There was no special location for this *still room* but simply some convenient place in the house or on the grounds. In the days

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when hot and cold running water, gas and electricity were lacking, when even meals were brought from one building to another, even the matter of convenience did not enter into the picture much. In William Lawson's *New House and Garden, 1638*, a diagram of a house and grounds shows a river flowing in front of the house. At either side is an entrance to the garden with a still house at each entrance. These were the places where the stills were located for distilling the various liquids.

To the *still room*, the farm hands brought the harvest of herbs at various seasons of the year. Some herbs, such as Coltsfoot, were harvested in spring, others, like Basil, in midsummer. As many as possible of the herbs were dried on racks out of doors during the day but brought into the house at night to avoid the ill effects of the dew. Several projects would be afoot in the *still room*. The housewife supervised them all in the role of surgeon, doctor, chef, beauty expert and druggist and she taught her daughters and maids to assist her.

All sorts of medicinal preparations with strange names were made, besides simple teas, liniments and poultices. Sirups, jalops, confections, treacles, tinctures and eclegms were concocted to be taken internally while amulets, oils, ointments, plasters and cataplasms were put on the affected spot. Sacculi (which were little bags of flowers, seeds, and herbs), posies and pomanders were made to be smelled of, like the camphor

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bags of our *great, greats*. A cap of Lavender flowers was made to wear on the head for headache and sprays of Mints were bound on the forehead for the same affliction. Pennyroyal was said to *quicken the brain by smelling of it!*

There was space to prepare these and many other products in the *still room*. Individual wood fires were placed at intervals about the room with holes in the roof directly over them through which the smoke could go, but rarely did. So even the task of steeping many herbs separately must have been a slow process. Shelves were put up on which to lay the herbs as occasion called, cupboards to store products and leafy stalks hung from racks and rafters. These were the furnishings of the *still rooms*.

Some beauty preparations took many days or weeks to achieve because usually even the simplest ingredient had to be made at home. *Lady Allen's water*, a skin lotion, contained thirty-three different herbs that had to be steeped in white wine or brandy and then distilled. Each process was a project in itself since the various herbs took different lengths of time to come to completion.

The household book for the many recipes and rules was the *still room book* which contained the best in every family and was handed down through many generations much as our grandmothers cherished old cook books with recipes marked "good". In the *still room books* the favorite recipes were marked "*probatum X*".

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One would always find in the *still room book* the secret method for making the pot-pourri that was kept in huge covered jars in the main hall and uncovered when the smoke grew too dense. These rules had been handed down through generations of the family, perhaps added to or subtracted from as newer mistresses married into the home.

When the young bride came from her own home to her new abode, if she were at all squeamish, she soon got over it for she not only was Lady Bountiful to her husband's retainers, which comprised the surrounding village, but she was usually veterinarian, surgeon, apothecary and general practitioner to every man, woman and child of the village. Her guide and help was her precious *still room book*. It was unorganized and unclassified, without benefit of index or table of contents, containing a miscellany of culinary recipes, medicinal cures, details of laundering, care of clothes for the winter, poultry raising, preservation of meat after slaughtering, care of broken bones in man or beast, midwifery, making of cloth from shearing of the sheep to the finishing of the woolen cloth, all perhaps within a few pages of each other. Here is a rule from one of these books:

For ye bleeding of ye nose:
Probatum X. Take a Toade and drie it in

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marche put ye same into some silke or sattere bag and hange it about ye neck of ye party next the skinne and by gods grace it will stanch presently.

Handwriting varied because of individual style and that of the century, while recipes and even notes on how many eggs were gathered in a day, were jotted down on the margins. Modern cooks would be baffled by the wording of the recipes. The reader was casually instructed to take "somewhat" of this or "as much as is agreeable" of that and then cook for an "Ave Maria time". The bulk of the ingredients sometimes gives us pictures of those spacious days with houses of forty guest rooms, of months of visiting, of days of feasting, as we read directions for bushels of rose petals for jam, quarts of heavy cream, pounds of butter, dozens of eggs.

The husband could not, in those days, bring home a box of candy as a treat but the housewife and helpers made their own. Perhaps next to directions for setting a broken bone would be a recipe for candying flower petals, Borage, Gillyflowers, Primroses, Violets, Roses. Do you remember those little Violet and Rose petals that graced the top layer of a box of Huyler's or Lowney's with the little candy tongs? What delicious memories of our youth!

Rarely seen now-a-days, except in a remembered store kept by Greek friends in New York City, was rose honey. A recipe for it in one of



A Still Room
from Evelyn: *French Gardiner* 1675.

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the *still room books* demands one pound of damask rose petals to be put into a stone jar, a pint of boiling water poured over them and let them stand for 12 hours. Then the mixture was strained and to the liquid was added five pounds of honey and the whole boiled to a syrup.

A much liked dessert was called *Rosemary Snow*. One quart of cream, five whites of eggs, a saucer of sugar and rosewater, all beaten to a froth and spread with a spoon on the sprays of Rosemary, which were set aside to dry.

In my search for old books, I came upon a facsimile edition of a *still room book* with M.C. on the cover and from internal evidence written in the early 1600's. The book was originally kept by one Margaret Cholmeley and passed on to her daughter Mary when she married the Reverend Henry Fairfax in 1626. He was much interested in medicinal recipes and collected, not only from his sisters and his aunts and his cousins, but from his brothers and his uncles and his nephews, as seen by the various handwritings and signatures. It is interesting to see what an unorganized miscellany the book grew to be. On one page is a note about Mistress Barbara's lesson on the *Virginalle* while on the same page is a list of contents of the poultry yard. On a nearby page is a record of lost linen including *handkerchaes*.

Sometime, if you begin to brood over the good old days and their simplicity, just to cheer yourself, prepare a Bath for Melancholy as found

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in the Cholmeley book:

To make a bath for Melancholy
Take Mallows (and) pellitory of the wall
of each three handfulls Camomell flowers,
Mellelot flowers, of each one handful,
hollyhocks two handfulls, Isop (hyssop) one
greate handfull: fenecrick seede of eit
seede, of either one ounce, and boil them
in nine gallons of Water, untill they come
to three, then put in a quart of new milke,
and go into it blood Warne, or something
Warmer.

This will surely have to be a home brew since
it will never be found in any drug store nor in
any doctor's file of prescriptions.



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