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MAZARINES, STRAINERS, FISH PLATES AND PLATE WARMERS

by Peter Hayward

After fish had been stewed or boiled, it was usually drained by placing it on a perforated plate - like the one in Figure 6. - which would rest inside a slightly larger dish. These perforated plates are found in silver, pewter and other metals. Ask silver collectors what they are called and they will reply without hesitation *'mazarine'* (eg see Penzer, 1955 or Newman, 1987). Ask pewter collectors and they are more likely to say *'strainer plate'* or *'strainer dish'* (eg see Cotterell, 1929, p128 or Hornsby 1983, p136).

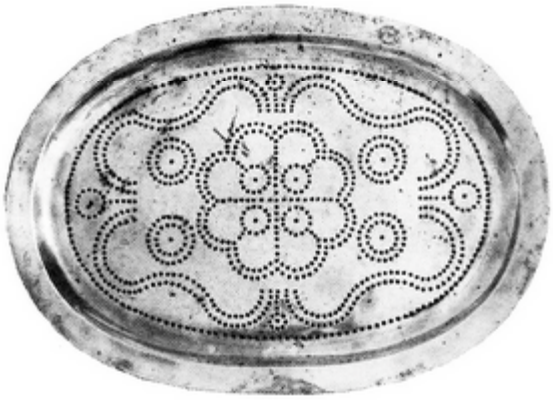

Figure 6. 18⅜" oval fish plate by Stynt Duncumb of Bewdley (1745-67). Whilst generally in excellent condition, splits are developing along the line of the outer ring of holes, an obvious line of weakness.

That prompts a question: what were they called in the 17th and 18th centuries? The author turned to cookery books of the period and found three that give the answer. The first is a manuscript recipe book of 1681 (Price, 1974, 68), which in explaining how to boil '*all sorts of ffish*' instructs:

> '*lay them one by one upon a fish plate and put it into your kettle of boyling water . . . then take the kettle off ye fire, and lift out ye plate of ffish and set it cross ye kettle covering it with a tin cover that the fish may drayne*'

The second is Hannah Glasse's book of 1747 (pp 87, 88). The following quotation comes from her recipe '*To Boil a Cod's Head*', but there is a similar passage in her recipe '*To Boil a Turbot*':

> '*Set a Fish-Kettle on the Fire with Water enough to boil it . . . and when you are sure it is enough [ie cooked enough], lift up the Fish-plate with the Fish on it, set it a-cross the Kettle to drain, then lay it in your Dish . . .*'

The third is Elizabeth Raffald's book of c1771 (pp10-11). In a section entitled '*Observations on dressing fish*' she says:

> '*boil all kinds of fish very slowly, . . . when you take them up, set your fish-plate over a pan of hot water to drain, and cover it with a cloth or close cover, to prevent it from turning their colour; set your fish-plate in the inside of your dish, and send it up' [ie to the dining room].*

The third reference is particularly important because it tells us that the fish plate was used not only in the fish kettle but also at table for serving the fish. The strainers in copper fish kettles of the 19th century tend to have large upstanding handles so they can be lifted out easily, but that cannot have been the case with Elizabeth Raffald's fish plate if it was going to be used at table as well. These quotations therefore suggest that the correct contemporary term for the perforated plates is *'fish plate'*.

There is confirmation of this in two sources, which show that this was a term used by the pewterers themselves. Firstly, the 1772 Table of Assays issued by the Worshipful Company of Pewterers[1] includes '*fish plates*' in the list of wares to be made of fine or plate metal. Secondly, an invoice for pewter supplied in 1775 by Joseph Spackman to the Clothworkers' Company (Homer, 1977) includes oval and round '*fish plates*' at prices ranging from 10/6 to 5/6 each. It is noteworthy that the pattern books of Sheffield plate manufacturers also invariably referred to these items as *'fish plates'* (Hughes, 1968 and Newman, 1987).

The fact that they were used at table explains why they are found in silver as well as base metals and why they always have a very ornamental pattern of holes. It also means that the low survival rate of pewter examples cannot, as has been suggested (Neish, 1993), be because they were mere kitchen ware. It is more likely to be due to their inherent structural weakness - rows of holes create a perfect line along which the pewter will easily fracture. Further, relatively few would have been made, since whereas the average household would have had

many dishes, it would only need one or two fish plates, especially as they were expensive items, as the Joseph Spackman invoice shows.

So where does that leave the term '*mazarine*'? It was certainly used by pewterers in the late 17th and 18th century because both the 1772 Table of Assays and Joseph Spackman's 1775 invoice list '*mazarines*'. Equally, the fact that they both list '*fish plates*' as well clearly implies the two were not the same. What, then, was a mazarine?

This question has exercised a number of previous commentators, but there is little consistency in their conclusions:

- The editors of the OED simply defined a mazarine as '*a deep plate, usually of metal*' with not even a passing reference to the modern silver usage of the term for a fish plate.
- Penzer (1955), who went into the issue in some depth, suggested that it originally meant a small deep dish or cup, then was extended to refer to a part fitted inside such a dish to create a table 'bain marie', and then finally developed to mean a fish plate.
- Hughes (1968) argued that the term was introduced for a 17th century innovation - a dish filled with hot water and covered by a perforated plate so that individual dishes of food placed on the perforated plate could be kept hot - and that it then developed from this to mean a fish plate, in which the perforated plate is for draining.
- Clayton (1971) accepted that the modern silver usage must be a development of some earlier meaning, but could not get further than this.
- Homer (1994) suggested that a mazarine was a very small dish, several of which could be placed on one larger dish.
- Fothringham (2001) speculated that the word might, like mazer and measles, derive from the old German word masa for spot (the holes giving a spotted appearance) or alternatively have originally meant something like a venison dish, with runnels for the gravy.

This wide range of suggestions, each of which was based on the way the term was used in contemporary documents, shows how elusive the meaning of an obsolete term can be. Moreover, the author has now uncovered many further references – e.g. in 18th century cookery books - which previous commentators were not aware of and which *prima facie* are not consistent with any of the meanings they proposed. A review of all the evidence now available therefore seems worthwhile.

The first point to note is that there is one English reference which explicitly supports the OED interpretation of the term as a deep plate: the 1687 edition of the London Gazette mentions the theft of '*18 plates, 4 deep ones or mazarines*'. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the term is apparently used in west and south west France for deep plates in which soup is served (Penzer, 1955).

In contrast to this, though, there are a number of references in which mazarines are specifically associated with dishes:

An inventory of 1688 (Silver Society Newsletter 23) includes:

> '*8 dishes for first Course*
> *5 Mazereenes for same dishes*
> *7 second course dishes*
> *5 Mazareenes for them*
> *2 Mazareenes for standing in middle*'

Another of 1698 (Penzer, 1955) had:

> '*6 large Massareens*
> *1 larger Mazereen*
> *6 Middle sized dishes with Mazereens belonging to them*'

whilst a 1694 pewterer's invoice (Homer, 1994) included:

> '*4 dishes of 7 lb & mazns*
> *8 ditto of 5 lb & mazns*'

and the 1706 edition of a contemporary dictionary (Phillips) defined a mazarine as:

> '*a kind of little Dishes to be set in the middle of a larger dish for the setting out of Ragoos, or Fricassies*'.

Finally, in a list of pewter items in an inventory of 1740 (Price, 1974, 349), along with 37 dishes and 79 plates, are '*a mazarine and waiters*', and whilst this does not associate the mazarine with a dish, it certainly associates it with something.

Homer (1994) interpreted the Phillips' reference as meaning there were several small dishes fitting in one larger dish, pointing out that since a conventional 5 lb dish would have a well diameter of

only 13-14 inches, that would make the *'little dishes'* very small indeed. The Price reference seems consistent with this, save that it seems to be suggesting that the mazarine was the big dish, not the little dishes. The difficulty with this interpretation, though, is that mazarines came in a range of sizes, large and small. The 1698 inventory quoted above is not the only source to tell us this. The 1674 edition of the London Gazette mentions the theft of *'7 mazarine plates, one mazarine plate of smaller size'* and the archives of Badminton House record the presence of *'12 Large Mazarines, 8 Lesser Mazarines and 8 Little Mazarines'* in both 1705 and 1715 (Sale, 1995). Indeed, from entries dating 1682 and 1686 in the same archives we find weights for silver mazarines ranging from 44 to 14½ troy ounces (3 lb to 1 lb avoirdupois).

Penzer interpreted the Phillips' reference more loosely and assumed it meant there was one little dish in each larger dish, which is how he arrived at the suggestion of a table *'bain marie'*. However, there are a number of references in contemporary cookery books, which do not seem compatible with this:

> Bailey's dictionary (1736): In a recipe for *'French cutlets'*, having described how to prepare the cutlets, stuffed and wrapped individually in paper, he continues *'This done put them on a mazarine and bake them'*.
>
> Hannah Glasse (1747, pp104, 51, 83): In a recipe for a *'Water Tansey'*, having explained how to prepare a mixture that uses 12 eggs she instructs *'When that is done, set it into a Massereau, and throw Sugar all over, and garnish with Orange'*. (Later editions corrected the spelling to *'Massereen'*.) In another recipe, for *'Rabbits Surprise'*, a pair of stuffed *'half grown'* rabbits are placed on a buttered *'Mazarine, or Pan'* and then baked for ½ hour. In yet another recipe, 12 large apples, cut in halves, are placed on a *'thin Patty-pan, or Mazareen'* before being baked in a quick oven.
>
> Patrick Lamb's *Royal Cookery* (Lamb, 1726, p61; the recipe also appears in Nott, 1733): In a recipe for *'Fry'd Cream'* which uses 8 egg yolks and 1½ pints of cream/milk, having explained how to prepare the mixture he says *'Flower a Mazarine and pour it out upon it . . . cut it out with a Knife in Squares or Diamonds, three Inches long; flower it as you cut it, fry it in Hogs Lard . . .'*.
>
> John Nott's dictionary (1733): In a recipe for *'Oyster loaves'* he explains how to stuff *'several French Rolls'* with an oyster mix and then says *'put them into a Mazarene-dish'* which is then placed in a moderately hot oven. In a recipe for *'Oyster pie'* using a quart of oysters, the pastry is to be laid *'in a Mazarene Dish or Pasty-pan'* before being filled and cooked. In yet another recipe, for *'Spinage Toasts'*, having instructed the cook to spread *'handsome Toasts about half an Inch thick, four Inches long, and two broad'* with spinage, he goes on *'butter the Bottom of a Mazarine dish, or Patty-pan; lay your Toasts in, and bake them'*.

These are all consistent with the idea of a mazarine being a dish, but they are certainly not consistent with the thought that it might have been some sort of *'bain marie'*, double dish, or dish with a strainer. Moreover, in each case it is clear either from the items being put in the mazarine or the quantity of ingredients involved that it must have been a relatively large dish, not a small one. There is no suggestion in any of these recipes that the mazarine should be of pewter, though the fact that they were used in cooking doesn't rule this out (Hayward, 2001).

At this stage it is worth considering the possible linguistic origins of the word. Whilst Penzer relied on Phillips as the inspiration for his *'bain marie'* suggestion, he went back much earlier and argued *'mazarine'* was a diminutive of mazer. He based this on 13th and 14th century occurrences of the word in both French and English in contexts which clearly imply it meant a drinking vessel. For example, Chaucer (Sir Thopas) has the lines:

> *'They sette him first the swete wyn,*
> *And mede eek in a mazelyn'*

whilst the pre-1290 poem St Eustas (Bodleian MS) says:

> *'Men beden hem sitten and drinken vin*
> *Wit coupe and eke with maselin'*

Penzer argued that since mazers could have been used for semi-liquid foods as well as drinks, the term could easily have come to mean a small deep dish. However, as Penzer himself cautions, the term as used in these quotations may be no more than poetic licence in rhyming. Moreover, the earliest recorded post-14th century use of the term is in 1673 (in the sentence *'What ragousts had here been for you to have furnished the mazarines on your table'* -

Marvell, 1673), and in the absence of any evidence of continuity in usage, it would be unwise to attribute the 17th and 18th century usage of the term to medieval origins. Of course the term mazer was still in use in the 17th century, but to suggest the term could have started off at that time meaning a small mazer does not fit well with any of the contemporary uses of the term quoted above.

If '*mazarine*' is not a variation of '*mazer*', where does the term come from? Fotheringham's suggestion that it derives from the old German word for spot relies on the term signifying a perforated plate, and the weight of evidence seems against that. A more likely explanation is that it derives from the Duchess of Mazarin, niece of the French Prime Minister Cardinal Mazarin, who died in Chelsea in 1699. She was renowned for her food (Penzer, 1955), and it seems quite plausible that a culinary innovation could have been named after her. It is this explanation that Hughes favoured because the hot water dish warmer was introduced by Charles Margustel de St Denis, Lord of St Evremond, and the Duchess of Mazarin was a devoted friend of his.

There is persuasive evidence that the Duchess did give her name to culinary innovations from another source. In Massiolat's two-part book (1702), the term mazarine is used not for a utensil but to identify two quite distinct methods of preparing food. The first part defines *'mazarine'* in its glossary as:

> '*Mazarine*, or '*la Mazarine*', a particular Way of dressing several sorts of Fowl; more especially Pigeons and Chickens'

and has a recipe (p83) for *'chickens á la mazarine'* in which the chickens are cut up into pieces, broiled on coals with herbs and breaded, and served either as a separate dish or as a garnish for other dishes. The glossary in the second part defines '*mazarine*' as:

> *'Mazarines a sort of small tarts fill'd with Sweet-meats'*

and the corresponding recipe (p117) is for small puff paste tarts '*the breadth of a man's hand*' filled with sweetmeats, and '*used either to garnish some larger pie or for use as a Desert*'. Bearing in mind that this is a French book, it seems highly likely that these two recipes use the term *'mazarine'* because they were both invented by the Duchess of Mazarin[2]. If she gave her name to these two culinary innovations, it is quite plausible she could have given her name to a third culinary innovation of different character - some sort of utensil.

In both recipes the end result can be used as a garnish for a larger dish. That may be coincidence, but it is just possible this is what *'a kind of little Dishes to be set in the middle of a larger dish'* meant in the Phillips' dictionary definition (1706), especially as the dictionary goes on to give two further definitions of *'mazarine'* that correspond to (and were probably cribbed from) Massiolat's recipes - '*a sort of small Tarts filled with Sweet-Meats*' and (in the expression á la Mazarine) '*a particular manner of dressing several sorts of Fowl, especially Pigeons and Chickens*'. However, that does not explain all the other references that associate a mazarine with a '*dish*' in the sense of a utensil, and it seems more likely that the first Phillips' definition also refers to a utensil.

Taken together, all these contemporary references seem to present a very confused picture. We have large mazarines and small. We have them used for cooking and also used at the table. We have them in both silver and pewter. We have them described as equivalent to a deep dish and also as a substitute for a patty pan. We have them used on their own and used in conjunction with a dish - we may even have them associated with a set of one big dish and several little dishes. How can all this be reconciled?

The meaning could have changed with time, but no obvious chronology of meanings jumps out from the references. Another possibility is that '*mazarine*' (as a utensil) is one of those words, which had different meanings in different contexts, but one would still expect to see a common origin from which the different meanings diverged. We may never know for certain what a mazarine was, but there is one explanation that seems to fit all the references: that a mazarine was a generally-flat plate or dish with an upstanding rim rather than a horizontal one.

This explanation seems consistent with the theory that the term was first coined for the dish warmer introduced by Charles Margustel. The author is unaware of any examples of Margustel's original innovation, but Figure 7. shows a later variant that has just come to light[3]. Here the flat pewter top plate is permanently attached to the base rather than just being placed on it, an opening being provided to allow hot water to be poured in. Moreover, the top plate is solid, not perforated. This does not affect the function, but highlights one key point: there need be nothing special about the top plate. Surely, then, the main element to Margustel's innovation was not so much the top plate but the water container that could be placed beneath it, and this is essentially a plate or dish with

Figure 7. 11⅝ plate warmer by either John or Stynt Dancumb of Bewdley (1702-67). Unlike later hot water plates, this is merely a heated stand, which could be used for any plate.

an upstanding rim. If the new term *'mazarine'* primarily denoted the water container, it would not be surprising if it was then extended to any utensil of this shape.

As an aside, Margustel's innovation eventually developed beyond the variant illustrated into the hot water plates that became so popular in the second half of the 18th and the 19th centuries, where the plate to be kept warm is part of the warmer. Indeed, the innovation completed a full circle in the 19th century when some makers introducing pewter hot water plates in which the top is a conventional plate which one simply lifts off when filling the lower part with water.

If a mazarine was indeed essentially just a generally-flat plate or dish with an upstanding rim, that makes sense of the cookery book references, because articles of this shape would have been very suitable for these recipes. It also explains how a mazarine could be seen as a substitute for a *'patty pan'*, since a *'patty pan'* would presumably also have had this type of rim but been rectangular rather than round[4]. The suggested interpretation is also consistent with the fact that mazarines came in a range of sizes and with the 1687 London Gazette description of them as deep plates. Moreover, if its origin lies in Margustel's innovation, Penzer's interpretation as a table *'bain marie'* fits in as well.

Even Phillips dictionary's first definition makes sense in the light of the illustrations of table settings in another cookery book, Carter (1730). The illustrations are diagrammatic, but they do nevertheless show the rims of dishes. A number of the settings include a tiered arrangement in which a circle of six small dishes stand in the well of one large dish, with a seventh small dish standing centrally on the six others. In the drawings of these arrangements the large dish is clearly shown with a conventional rim but the small dishes are shown without one, their perimeters being depicted by two closely-spaced lines which are consistent with a simple upstanding rim. This type of arrangement could also explain the reference to *'a mazarine and waiters'*, the large dish being replaced by a large mazarine and the small dishes then getting the nickname '*waiters*'.

All the other references also fall into place. Mazarines can correctly be described as being *'for'* dishes or *'belonging to'* dishes, as in the 1688 and 1698 inventories, but they went under the dish, not on top of it! Marvell's reference to ragouts as furnishing the mazarines on the table fits in well; and the mazarine '*for standing in the middle*' in the 1688 inventory could simply be part of a large centrepiece. The only references that do not fit are the medieval ones, but for the reasons given earlier they probably ought to be discounted.

It is also easy to see how the term could in time - and possibly only in certain contexts (eg in the context of table rather than kitchen ware, or in the context of silver ware rather than pewter) - have been extended beyond Margustel's original dish warmer to the somewhat similar arrangement of a fish plate on a dish, before finally becoming associated in the silver world with the fish plate alone. Quite when this final step occurred is not clear. Penzer refers to a royal inventory of 1721, which mentions '*51 mazareens*' in the '*skullery*' and says that these same items were then described as '*fish plates*' in an 1832 inventory, but the 1721 inventory might, of course, have been referring to

the hot water containers rather than the fish plate. Certainly Joseph Spackman's 1775 invoice and the 1772 Table of Assays show that, at least in the world of pewter, even in the 1770s 'mazarine' had not acquired the meaning of *'fish plate'*.

Interestingly, the Table of Assays lists *'plate warmers'* as well as *'mazarines'*. A plate warmer' was not a hot water plate since these are also listed, so it probably referred to the development of Margustel's innovation illustrated in Figure 7.

Finally, it is worth recording that the earliest recorded references specifically to pewter mazarines are in 1685 in the City of Lincoln's records (Merritt, 2001) and in the Worshipful Company's second London search of 1689 (Homer, 2001). The latest is Joseph Spackman's 1775 invoice, which suggests that whatever the silversmiths may have done, pewterers never used the term for a fish plate.

I am grateful to Vanessa Brett for drawing my attention to some of the references quoted, to Colin Redfern for drawing my attention to the plate warmer in Figure 7., and to Ron Homer for many helpful comments. The author is aware of further contemporary references to a mazarine as a utensil rather than a foodstuff, but they are not in a context, which gives any further clues as to what it might have been.

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The quotations from the Bodleian MS, Marvell and London Gazette are taken from Penzer and the OED - the author has not checked the original sources himself. Also, plagiarism was rife amongst the writers of cookery books (see, for example, the comment in the text on Patrick Lamb's recipe), so some of the recipes quoted may have come from slightly earlier publications.

NOTES

(1) Reproduced in *J. Pewter Soc.* Spring 1984 at p98 and also in Ricketts, Carl, 2001, *Pewterers of London*, The Pewter Society, at p23.
(2) Even in 1909, Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* included the term 'mazarine' in her Glossary of Culinary Terms (p1664 of the 1909 edition), defining it as 'Turbans. Forcemeat ornaments of fish, poultry or game. Entrées consisting of combined fillets of meat and forcemeat'.
(3) According to the 2nd edition (London, 1758) of *The Compleat Appraiser* (sold as *The Plate-Glass-Book . . . to which is added The Compleat Appraiser*), pewter patty pans - or 'pasty pans'as this book calls them - were fairly heavy items, between 11½" and 20½" long and with a *'brim'* rather than a *'rim'*.
(4) A similar, but even later, flat-topped plate warmer in a German museum is illustrated in Nadolski, D., 1987 Old Household, Pewterware, plate 55.