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# Maulana and sekanjabin (oxymel): a ceremonial relationship with gastronomic and health perspectives

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## Abstract

*Sekanjabin*, also known as *Oxymel*, is an ancient beverage including honey, fermented vinegar, water, and various fruits and herbs. Great physicians Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna recommended treating gastrointestinal disorders, pain, asthma, thoracic, cough, sore throat, foul, and breath. Furthermore, Maulana, a symbol of tolerance that is humanism-flexible and non-violent, frequently mentions this beverage in his great masterpieces "*Divan-ı Kebir*" and "*Masnavi*." Therefore, it can be evaluated as an intangible cultural heritage of Western and near Asian civilizations and has a significant and ceremonial role in Maulana and Maulawi Culture. From a gastronomic and health perspective, this study explored the ceremonial relationship between Maulana and sekanjabin.

**Keywords:** Sekanjabin, Oxymel, Maulana, Gastronomic culture, Health

## Introduction

Gastronomic culture is transferred from generation to generation, community to community. Differences in sensorial characteristics and types of foods and beverages are considered gastronomic values, and there exist near or far connections between the gastronomic values of each community [1].

For centuries, living together in ethnocultural and religious diversity has created similar or diverse eating and drinking habits, choices, and folklore traditions [2]. The most critical factors in eating and drinking choices are sensory appeal, nutrition, health, natural content, traditions, cultures, and complex societal and environmental factors [3]. People consider traditional eating and drinking habits healthy [4]. Therefore, traditional eating and drinking habits add a new dimension to the preferences by bringing forth challenges from gastronomic and health perspectives.

The traditional beverages are considered gastronomic value, and many health and medicinal properties, including antioxidant, antibacterial, anticancerous, antinociceptive, antihyperlipidemic, and immunomodulatory effects, have been attributed to them since ancient times [5]. One of the ancient beverages is the sekanjabin, also known as "oxymel" in the western civilizations. It is prepared by mixing honey, vinegar, and water with various fruits and herbs. Some great physicians, Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna, recommend treating gastrointestinal disorders, pain, asthma, thoracic, cough, sore throat, and foul breath. Similarly, Maulana (AD 1207–1273), a well-known poet, jurist, muhaddist, commentator, mystic, and philosopher worldwide, frequently mentions sekanjabin in his great works *Divan-ı Kebir* and *Masnavi*. Thus, the sekanjabin has become a ceremonial tradition in the Maulawi Culture due to Maulana's influence.

Based on these facts, the sekanjabin can be evaluated as an intangible cultural heritage of Western and near Asian civilizations and has a significant and ceremonial role in Maulana and Maulawi Culture. Therefore, ultimately focusing on this drink would provide better insights into

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understanding and knowledge of traditional beverages by illuminating Maulana's passion for sekanjabin and his influence across nations and ethnic divisions as the symbol of tolerance, humanism-flexible and non-violent. From a gastronomic and health perspective, this study explores the ceremonial relationship between Maulana and sekanjabin.

### **Sekanjabin and major ingredients**

The sekanjabin is considered initially a medicinal drink produced with fermented vinegar and honey from ancient times to the current era [6]. There are almost 1200 types of sekanjabin described in the Persian pharmaceutical manuscripts, such as Qanoon-fel-teb (The Canon) by Ebn-e-Sina, also known as Avicenna (AD 980–1037), *Ketab-al-Hawi* (Continents) by Ra'zi's (AD 860–940), and *Zakhireh Kharazmshahi* by Esmail Jorjani (AD 1042–1136) [7]. Famous physicians Hippocrates (460–370 BC), Dioscorides (last century AD), Galen (second century AD), Soranus (first-second century AD), and Paulus Aegineta (seventh century AD), other than Persian physicians, also suggested it for treating epilepsy, fever, ease obstructions in the stomach, oral contraceptive formulation, and asthma [8].

Sekanjabin is prepared in traditional Iranian folk medicine by boiling equal amounts of honey and vinegar on low heat for 15 min [8]. According to the British Pharmacopoeia (1898), German Pharmacopoeia (1872), and French Codex (1898), it is the mixture of “concentrating and clarifying one-part white wine vinegar with four-part honey” [9]. Honey is a naturally occurring food with superb health effects among its ingredients. It has been used as a therapeutic antioxidant for centuries against cough, fever, asthma, wound healing, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, antifungal, antiviral, and antidiabetic substances, and several functions of becoming immunomodulatory, estrogenic regulatory, antimutagenic, and anticancer [10, 11]. Dating back to 3,000 BC, the first recorded mention of vinegar was in the Babylonians. Its residues were found in the urns of Egypt and some texts dating from 1200 BC in China and ancient Greece and Rome in 400 BC [12]. Furthermore, vinegar has been preferred as remedies in many cultures due to its bioactive components such as phenolics, flavonoids, carotenoids, phytosterols, amino acids, and vitamins E and C [13], that determine its antimicrobial, antidiabetic, cholesterol-lowering responses, antioxidative, antiobesity, antitumor, and antihypertensive effects [6, 14]. Herbs are frequently associated with health claims, beneficial properties, and flavoring foods and beverages [15].

Therapeutics has been central to the medical enterprise and in all places [16]. For instance, German physician Georg Wolfgang (1645–1721) was influenced by

the iatrochemical doctrine of Paracelsus and improved digestion using oxymel. In Ibn-i Serif's medical book dating from the fifteenth century in Turkey, dodder, fennel, celery and endive, aniseed, squill, pomegranate, raisins, quince, elecampane, mustard, lemon juice, laxative herbs, roots of radish, and aftimun are included in the recipes of Sekanjabin [17–19].

### **Theoretical background**

Since ancient times, sekanjabin has been used with medicinal plants and herbs to treat some diseases [20]. In Persian medicine, with squill to treat asthma [21], *Caparis spinosa* to adjust blood glucose and triglycerides in diabetic patients [22], thyme to treat obesity-induced metabolic disorders [6], and quince to increase appetite, cleanse the liver, and remove fever [23]. Other famous physicians Aegina (AC 625–690), Ibn al-Baytār (AD 1197–1248), al-Razi (AD 865–925), Hâkim Barakat (AD thirteenth century), Sheik (AD 1373–1431), Rhazes, and Haly Abbas suggest it for breastfeeding mothers [24], remedying hypersplenism [25], treatment of stroke [26], foul breath, liver, stomach, and spleen disorders [27], stomach pain, malaria, quenching one's thirst [28], and treatment of asthma [21]. Furthermore, Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, recommended cider vinegar mixed with honey to treat coughs and colds [12], whereas Avicenna suggested Sikanjabin al-buzuri (seed oxymel) for opium fiends in his great work entitled “al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb [29].

### **Maulana and Sekanjabin**

Maulana (AD 1207–1273) was a poet, jurist, muhad-dist, commentator, mystic, and philosopher, who caused deep sorrow for people from many different cultures in the east and the west after his death. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared 1973 as the “Maulana Year” on its 700th anniversary of death and the year 2007 as its 800th anniversary of birth [30].

The basis of the Maulana philosophy is the concept of “love.” Love is a universal phenomenon from the window of Maulana, and it encompasses the whole of humanity regardless of religion, language, or race. He is also an absolute master in logic, philosophy, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and medicine, although he is regarded as one of the greatest Sufi spiritual masters [31].

Maulana's masterpieces *Divan-ı Kebir* and *Masnavi* describe the sekanjabin as a thirst quench and medicinal beverage. Maulana attaches great importance to the sekanjabin [32]. For instance, he explains the skin color with those words: “the redness of face is due to increase in blood, yellowness due to swelling of bile, the white face from sputum, and brownish face due to

*falling in love.*” Therefore, jaundice on Maulana’s face in his advanced ages might be due to “swelling of bile,” and he points to the sekanjabin to remove excess bile [23].

In Mevleviyeh, the followers of Maulana, the sekanjabin has been the most consumed drink because Maulana loves it. They also believe that it increases appetite if drunk before eating and improves digestion if consumed after a meal. Accordingly, Mevleviyeh culture takes culinary responsibilities very seriously [33], and some of the foods mentioned in Maulana’s masterpiece “*Masnavi*” still exist in the Cuisine of Konya, where Maulana lived and died [1].

The *Masnavi*, also written as *Masnavi-ye-Ma’navi*, *Mathnawi*, or *Mathnavi*, is a series of six books of poetry in Persian that contains 25,000 verses or 50,000 lines. Maulana began dictating the first book around 54-year-old and continued composing poems until he died in 1273. The sixth and final book would remain incomplete. According to Whinfield’s translation from Persian to English in 2017 [34], in Book 1, Maulana talks about sekanjabin in different ways:

*Book I, prologue, 23–24*  
*Hail to thee, then, O LOVE sweet madness!*  
*Thou who heals all infirmities!*  
*Who art the physician of our pride and self-conceit!*  
*Who art our Plato and our Galen!*  
*Book I, Story XII, 3210*  
*How could the excellence of the leech’s art be seen?*  
*If vile base copper were not mingled,*  
*How could the alchemist Show his skill?*  
*Defects are the mirrors of the attributes of beauty,*  
*The base is the mirror of the High and Glorious One,*  
*Because one contrary Show foth its contrary,*  
*As vinegar’s sourness shows honey’s sweetness.*  
*Book I, Story XII, 3211*  
*Because one contrary shows forth its opposite,*  
*As vinegar’s sourness shows honey’s sweetness.*  
*Book I, Story XV, 3663–3664*  
*I have, as it were, mixed honey with vinegar,*  
*To aid the sickness of your hearts,*  
*When you are cured of your sickness, O invalid,*  
*Then leave out the vinegar and eat pure honey.*

## Research methodology

Maulana touches on the medical uses of sekanjabin in his works, and in some of his philosophical couplets, he also makes metaphorical approaches through honey, vinegar, and sekanjabin. After his death, it and its consumption have become a traditional symbol among his followers.

This study is a retrospective investigation of the causes of the ceremonial relationship between Maulana and sekanjabin from gastronomic and health perspectives.

Therefore, our research methodology is based on two guiding questions behind Maulana’s consumption choice of the sekanjabin—the first that he consumed it for “*health reasons*” and the second that he drank it for “*cultural reasons*.”

To explain the guiding questions, we followed up on the fate of sekanjabin from ancient times to Maulana’s works surveying the literature and getting the opinion of two academics from gastroenterology and Seljuk Cuisine backgrounds, respectively.

## Results

Sekanjabin is an intangible cultural heritage of Western and near Asian civilizations and has a significant and ceremonial role in Maulana and Maulawi Culture. From a gastronomic and health perspective, this study explored the ceremonial relationship between Maulana and sekanjabin. Overall, we think that Both gastronomic culture and health care might cause Maulana’s passion for sekanjabin; it is tough to say for sure.

Understanding people’s behaviors and the evolution of food systems are needed to assess the connections and interdependence of people and organizations across a food system [35]. Traditional foods or beverages nourished our ancestors throughout humans’ evolutionary history and have been serving diverse purposes, including nutrition, medication, and socio-economic benefits [36]. Rocillo-Aquino et al. [37] describe the world as “*traditional*,” i.e., that which follows the ideas, norms, or past customs within the scope of four significant dimensions “*time, place, know-how, and cultural meaning*.” In other words, the term “*traditional*” characterizes the transmission of knowledge and raw materials between generations, but with different perceptions and meanings for each person in terms of eating and drinking habits, socio-demographic profile, and experiences [37]. The novelty of this work is that it has not been discussed from Maulana’s point of view on gastronomic and health perspective, although there exists knowledge of some characteristics of the Sekanjabin such as culture, history, regions, celebration, and ancient categories.

The traditional foods and beverages vary from one region and are generally transmitted and sustained through informal practice [38]. In the case of the Sekanjabin, we see that it has been formally available in the medicinal books since ancient times. This means that its medicinal potential has been assessed and adopted culturally. Health starts with eating and drinking choices, usually considered the same thing [39]. The information about Maulana’s health situation is minimal. According to Mevleviyeh sources and Maulana’s son, he was generally healthy, although he had blood pressure symptoms and *Jaundice*, i.e., yellow color of the skin. Jaundice can

be a symptom of a few health issues with the liver, gall-bladder, or pancreas [40]. In his works, Maulana connects Jaundice to the increase of bile and claims the sekanjabin removes excess bile. In the literature, the works report that antioxidant and anti-inflammatory activities of honey diminish oxidative stress and apoptosis through the bile duct in jaundice [41], and vinegar decrease liver damage [42]. Considering this fact, our work indicates that Maulana's philosophy of eating and drinking is aware of the fine line between culture and health and considered the same thing, depending on the circumstances.

Traditional drinks also influence social life and preserve cultural heritage, not only bringing health benefits [43]. Maulana possibly preferred consuming it due to cultural reasons in the Balkh geography, where Maulana was born and spent a part of his childhood. Similarly, *Balkh pilaf* is one of the most popular dishes in Mevleviyeh Cuisine, undoubtedly indicating the influence of cultural origin on Maulana's passion for sekanjabin. Additionally, Maulana has a naive personality, not only a Sufi but also a mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher. He grew up in an intellectual environment. Maulana says, "*sekanjabin is not good if honey and vinegar are not equal in the composition of sekanjabin.*" We understand that he thinks of its sensorial characteristics based on his words. In Mevleviyeh, eating and drinking cannot be separated from other realities to reach God. Our work provides an insight into the cultural place of the Sekanjabin from Maulana's perspective, which has not been sufficiently examined yet.

## Conclusion

This study is based on two guiding questions behind Maulana's passion for the sekanjabin. From our point of view, Maulana consumed it due to both gastronomic and health reasons; it is tough to say for sure. Interestingly, the sekanjabin started migrating from Persia to Greek and Roman civilizations and built a gastro-medical bridge between different cultures. Its ancient inheritance and knowledge for hundreds of years over broad geographies finally met in one place, Maulana, a symbol of science and culture, not only of tolerance, which is humanism-flexible and non-violent. Overall, we conclude that society should be aware of the traditional drinks and respect what they deserve in life.

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## Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the creation of the present article. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Availability of data and materials

All the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Declarations

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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