

# FOOD OF THE ANCIENT GREEKS

By 500BCE the population of the Greek homelands stood at about 2,000,000 and the Greek appetite for food had altered and broadened from the earlier, hunting-dependant, meat based diet.

All sorts of changes had taken place, particularly in the growing & improvement of vegetables & fruit. Meat became a much less important part of the diet and a whole range of vegetables, salads, fruits, nuts, dried fruit and sweet cakes became available.

With such a climate and rich soil as Greece had, almost anything would grow as long as water could be found at the right time.

The early rains were of first importance, but when they ended, irrigation and the use of storage systems supplemented the natural springs & fountains.

Crops of wheat & barley grew well, as did vine & fig trees.

## Bread

Bread in the form of barley-cakes was served with meals or eaten separately. Bread made from wheat was also eaten, and flour was sold in the markets of Athens and elsewhere. Grain from the Greek colonies in southern Italy was shipped to Athens through the port of Piraeus and ground into particularly soft white flour.

## Fish

The Greek mainland & the Greek islands all have long coastline and the sea provided plenty for everyone, both cheap small fish and expensive treats for those able to pay the price. The types of fish brought ashore everywhere were extraordinarily varied and Greeks enjoyed their lightness & delicacy. The fish markets were well-supplied and a bell was sounded in the markets at opening times.

Flat fish such as plaice were caught in the shallow waters and "winged" flat fish such as ray & skate were caught. The "wings" were cooked with wine, vinegar, olive oil & capers.

Mullet, sea bream, flying fish, sardines, tunny & turbot were all caught in large quantities. Shell-fish of all kinds, such as mussels, cockles, limpets, periwinkles, scallops were eaten as were conches, oysters, barnacles and sea-urchins. Shrimps, squid & octopus were also firm favourites.

## Meat

Meat was generally thought best when boiled or baked, although grilled cuts, chops & sausages were common with the poorer citizens. Cooked sausages were sold in the markets of Athens and other cities.

Pork was the most popular type of meat. The wild pig was leaner and tastier, but pigs were farmed throughout Greece. Lamb & beef were also eaten, although beef much less so. Various fowl were kept and often eaten.

## **Vegetables**

Vegetables were very important in Greek diets, to the point where the people were almost vegetarians by choice.

The green vegetable, *horta* (dandelion), was gathered, boiled and eaten hot or cold. Asparagus, fennel, celery, cucumbers, gourds, pumpkins, cabbage, chick-peas, onions, raddish & lettuce were also very popular. Stinging nettles, picked young, made an excellent nutritious food.

Various bulbs were regarded as edible, as were the roots of the wild Iris and artichoke. Mushrooms and truffles were wildly available.

## **Honey**

Of all the foods of the ancient world, honey was one of the most magical and important. Zeus, king of the Gods, was believed to have been fed as a child, on goat's milk & honey. Bee-hives were kept at most farmsteads and bees were much admired and well-cared for. Honey was used for all types of sweetening, much like modern sugar, as well as flavouring for biscuits, cakes, breads and sauces. It was also used in medicines and for dressing wounds or stemming blood-loss. Honeycomb was eaten in its natural form.

## **Fruit & Nuts**

Both fresh & dried fruits were enjoyed by the Greeks. Trees of pears, mulberries, cherries and apples grew wild. There were plums, and their cousins, the damsons, so called because they first came from Damascus. Bullaces, a type of wild plum, were eaten and blackberries and other wild berries grew in profusion. Figs, both fresh & dried were common and so were raisins and dates.

Pomegranates were imported from Cyprus and many other Greek islands and varieties of grapes came from all over Greece.

The beautiful Arbutus – the strawberry tree – had red berries that were delicious when they were ripe.

Peaches were very popular as were all types of melons. Quinces were wildly available and the best were said to come from the island of Cos.

Walnuts – called the Royal Nut by ancient Greeks – were widely grown in both Greece and their colonies & islands. Beech nuts were also eaten as were chestnuts, pine-kernels and almonds.

## **Olives**

The olive should have a special mention. It was the main contribution in Greek cookery. Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, Protector of Cities, was believed to have given the olive tree to Athens, from where it spread to all of Greece. Apart from serving as a foodstuff, olives were also crushed for their oil. This oil was the only fuel available for the lamps of clay or metal – it gives a soft clear flame.

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