

Food and Diet in Greece from Ancient to Present Times

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The following article is an historical commentary on the food, diet and nutrition of Greece from the ancient and classical times to the present day cuisine. It presents and briefly discusses some relations between the Greek people and their land, their food and culture, cuisine and mythology, diet and religion, nutrition and processing, technology and knowledge. Philosophically it looks for lessons to overcome hunger and disease, improve nutrition and health, weave food into a bigger part of our social activities, and make it the basis of a healthy civilization.



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Hellas: Land, People, Mythology and History

The Greeks call their motherland *Hellas*, and everything Greek is Hellenic. In Greek mythology, it all started with the land. Before mighty Zeus himself, before even his father Cronus and his father's father Uranus, there was the great mother earth, Gaia. The love for their land was so great, that the Greeks considered Gaia to be the sole source of all things, even the gods themselves. So powerful, controlling, pervasive and all encompassing are the land and climate of Greece that to live in the country for any significant period of time, one must unavoidably become Greek (Gage 1987).

Greece is a small sea-faring country with numerous islands, rugged but charming mountain ranges, and small fertile plains. The Greek landscape is beautiful but austere. After experiencing it, Laurence Durrell in the *Spirit of Place* suggested: "You should see the landscape of Greece. It would break your heart." The land's dazzling variety of colors, textures, temperatures, sounds and smells, constantly surprises the eye, the ear, the nose and the heart. But Greece has no harsh extremes. There are no hot deserts or frozen tundra here, no great plains or soaring mountains, no grand canyons or giant volcanoes. Everything seems to be made in a smaller, more human scale. The bright sunlight caresses every surface to expose the deepest blue of the sea, the startling white of stones and houses, the brilliant green of pine forests, wheat fields and olive groves, the richest red and yellow of flowers. The ubiquitous smell of the sea blends smoothly with the pungent smell of mountain oregano, thyme or pine; it mixes well with the sweet scent of jasmine, lavender, basil or bay, and brings out the best aromas from vineyards, wineries, orange groves or freshly baked bread.

In an effort to connect the land to its people and their history, Nicholas Gage in the *Portrait of Greece* wrote: "The red unpromising soil was sown with stones, but it brought forth the gods, the heroes, and the philosophers, the literature, the architecture, and the art... Yet when you walk among the stones of Greece and experience that combination of light and water and earth that is the Greek landscape, it all becomes inevitable. No other land could have produced such a people, and this land could have produced nothing else."

These people (Hellenes) created one of the brightest, longest lasting, and most sophisticated civilizations in human history. Thousands of years ago, the Greek cities/states, each separately and all together, gave us brilliant examples of the heights that the human spirit can attain. From the disciplined way of life of the Spartans that taught us the value of sacrificing one's life for the common good, to the ingenious and remarkable achievements of the Minoan civilization in Crete, to the Golden Age of Athens, and the powerful Alexander the Great of Macedonia, they introduced us to mathematics, science, technology and agriculture, they brought us philosophy, logic, literature, art and architecture, they taught us ethics, law, politics and democracy.

The ancient Greeks battled countless times among themselves, but they always put their differences aside for a "higher" cause: to honor their gods, to fight the Trojan war, to compete in the Olympics, to defend the motherland from Persian invasions, to support Alexander the Great in his noble conquest with the purpose of transferring Greek thought, ideals and knowledge to the rest of the world. Shortly after Rome successfully invaded and occupied Greece, the Greek spirit and ideas triumphed over Roman muscle and might, and soon the Roman Empire was transformed into Byzantium. The Byzantine Empire retained much of what the Greeks had created, and continued the Greek thought, language, customs and beliefs for more than a millennium, but with a new religion—Christianity. When the Ottoman Turks attacked Byzantium and subjugated the Greeks for four hundred years, the Greek spirit, language and culture struggled to survive in underground hidden schools, concealed dark caves, impossible-to-conquer mountaintops, and barren islands. In the end, a little more than a century and a half ago, the Greeks slowly regained their freedom, and finally liberated their homeland. Hellas is once again among the family of free nations, and contemporary Greeks are trying to grasp their role in the 21st-century society and their place in the new world order.

Greek Cuisine Through Time

The Hellenic civilization influenced many peoples' customs, cultures, and lives. Its effects have been felt throughout time, and are evident to this day, particularly in the "Western" civilization. An important part of the ancient Greek civilization was the idea of "good living," with its central theme of good food and wine (both ample but neither in excess), fine taste and gastronomic glory, and the resulting health and well-being. The same idea survived intact over the centuries, and can be found almost unadulterated in the contemporary Greek culture. Today, at every authentic Greek table, the first order of business is for all to raise their glasses, usually full of wine, and loudly and boldly wish to all present "to your health."

Although some may believe that Homer's heroes ate only meat, it is well documented since the time of Homer that the Greeks have been feasting on delicacies such as roasted lamb with capers, boiled or fried seafood, eggs, cheese, saffron-flavored rice, lentil or bean soups, honey cakes, Persian peaches, Oriental oranges, and a large variety of wines. The ancient Greeks had sophisticated sauces made of locally available herbs such as oregano, basil, bay leaves, dill and mint, but they also used exotic spices imported from the Orient. Epicurus, an ancient Greek philosopher, articulated the prevailing belief of his time well: "Life's fundamental principle is the wants of the stomach. All the important and trivial matters

depend on this principle and cannot be differentiated from it.”

A great variety of foods were available in ancient Greece, and many diverse food cultures coexisted (Zouraris 1998). On one side, the legendary Spartans, with their well-known frugality and simplicity, had a minimalist attitude toward food. They consumed small amounts of mainly simple dishes such as the “Melan Zomos” (black broth)—a hearty, thick, meatless soup possibly made with special varieties of black chick peas (Dalby 2003)—or other legumes and vegetables (i.e., lentil). On the other end, Sybaris, a renowned Greek colony that flourished during the sixth century B.C. in what is today southern Italy, was famous for its extreme excesses and a focus on food and gastronomic excellence. It is asserted that, at Sybaris, cooks who had devised a new dish were given exclusive rights to the recipe for a year, the earliest recorded form of patent protection (Dalby 2003). All other Greek cities/states had food habits between these two extremes, with the citizens of some leaning more toward gastronomic indulgence than others (Zouraris 1998). In the middle stood the Athenians with their universal “Pan Metron Ariston” (everything in moderation), a philosophy that permeated all aspects of life in ancient Athens.

Later, during the Byzantine era, the center of Greek civilization moved east with Constantinople as its capital (ancient Byzantium and present day Istanbul). Eastern lands and cultures significantly influenced the Greek cuisine, either due to the increased variety of available raw materials or because of the different social, spiritual, and religious customs of the East. Arguably, the most important effect was that of the Persian cuisine.

Since then and until the beginning of the twentieth century, two parallel Greek cuisines have existed and developed over time (Zouraris 1998). Based on the above Eastern influences, a rich cuisine with great creativity and variety of flavors thrived in the eastern part of Greece. Eventually it became known as the Byzantine cuisine, or the cuisine of Constantinople, and it is the one that the Ottoman Turks later inherited. On the other side of the Aegean Sea, the food and dietary customs of ancient Greece and the islands continued to develop into a cuisine with a smaller but nevertheless significant variety of tastes and flavors. This “western” Greek cuisine was simple, frugal, and at times poor, but it offered an exceptional expressive clarity, and astonishing sensory rewards. Its mature version is probably best preserved today in the cuisine of the Greek island of Crete (Zouraris 1998).

Early in the 20th century and after World War I, millions of Greeks lost their homes and land in Asia Minor (present-day western Turkey), and were forced to move west to mainland Greece. This massive movement of people from the east ultimately catalyzed the synthesis of the two parallel cuisines into one contemporary Greek cuisine (Zouraris 1998). This complex and compound cuisine with its tremendous variety of plant and animal products is the cuisine found today in Greece. It is the result of incorporating several desirable elements from various other successful civilizations into the Greek gastronomic culture, and then masterfully fine-tuning it and allowing it to mature and mellow over time. It is a powerful and most enjoyable creation, and represents one of the highest achievements of the Greek civilization.

Basic Foods in the Greek Cuisine

The contemporary Greek cuisine guards its secrets well from those who seek to strip away its mysteries (Korovessis 1993). Nevertheless, the nucleus of the ancient Greek cuisine

was, and still is today, three basic foods (bread, olive oil and wine), an institution (symposion, or symposium in Latin), and the philosophy, style, behavior, rules and customs that went along with it (Zouraris 1998). When the Greeks adopted these elements as part of their everyday life, they were able to overcome their “barbaric” side and its physical needs, setting the basis of their civilization.

Bread, olive oil, and wine become basic and necessary products in the Greek diet, and they are elevated to sacred symbols and godly gifts. In contrast to other foods that are derived from hunting, fishing or simple gathering, these three basic foods are the result of agriculture and technology. They are the products of a cultivated land that have been processed further by highly sophisticated and technical steps.

Bread accompanies all meals. It is often served with feta cheese, tomatoes, and olives. In order to emphasize bread’s importance in a civilized society, Herodotus declared that: “Meat eaters that do not know bread are Barbarians.” Similarly, olive oil permeates the entire history of Greek cuisine, allowing for the continuity of taste throughout the centuries (Korovessis 1993). Finally, wine, too, has been known for thousands of years. Its birth is associated with a variety of Dionysian myths, and it has been a staple of the Greek cuisine through time. Many Greek philosophers and writers have praised wine and its importance. Homer, in his famous *Odyssey*, writes: “For myself I declare that there is no greater delight than when joy possess a whole people...as they sit side by side, and the cupbearer draws wine from the bowl and bears it round and pours it into the cups. This seems to be a thing surpassingly lovely.”

The exact translation of the Greek word *symposion* is “to drink together.” However, a proper definition of Symposium is: A group of people that eat and drink together, according to strict nutritional, religious and cultural rules, while they entertain and discuss matters about food and its presentation, diet and health, music and dance, religion, customs, etc. (Zouraris 1998). The Greeks no longer eat to satisfy hunger alone. Rather, eating and drinking have become part of a cultivated life and social structure. They have become part of a civilized society.

Food, Cuisine and Civilization

In Greece, food became the basis of civilization when people stopped eating alone and started eating in groups. When knowledge of agriculture, land cultivation, and food processing and preservation became the cornerstones of their food system, the Greeks were no longer dependent upon nature alone for their survival. They overcame the constant threat of hunger; they felt more secure about their future; and they made eating a big part of socialization, communication, learning, and philosophy.

Throughout their history, the Greeks remained utterly dedicated to the three basic foods. As they moved from the ancient Olympian Gods to Christianity: bread changed from Demeter’s gift to the body of Christ; wine transformed from Dionysus’ present to the blood of Christ; and olive oil that came from Athena’s holy tree is now omnipresent in every religious ceremony. Thus, in the Greek culture, cuisine has proven to be stronger than religion.

On a different note, in Golden Age Athens, as Athenian young men took their oath to protect the motherland, they were referring to “a land where wheat, barley, grapevines and olive trees may grow.” This oath is a clear indication of the importance of the three basic foods in the Athenian diet (with the addition of barley, which was used to make some breads, feed

the animals, and produce beer). It is also an obvious clue that in Athens, and the rest of Greece, cuisine is stronger than politics.

Epilogue

The ancient Greek cuisine spread rapidly to neighboring countries and throughout the Mediterranean region. Not surprisingly, the impact of the ancient Greek cuisine on the diet, nutrition, and health of the people of Mediterranean and the modern Western world cannot be overemphasized. However, its cultural dimension may not be well understood, unless one traces its foundations and mythological origins. The nucleus of the nutritional system of ancient Greeks, and with only small changes that of the present-day Greeks, is composed of three different foods, a social principle and its philosophical basis:

- bread, olive oil, wine
- symposion and its rules

Bread, olive oil, and wine are not only basic nutritional entities of a well-balanced diet, but they become holy symbols indicating a refined civilization with advanced technical knowledge. They are the result of a cultivated land and the products of sophisticated technological processes. Symposion, a group of diners that eat, drink, discuss, and entertain together according to strict rules derived from nutrition, religion and cultural beliefs, symbolizes the achievement of overcoming hunger as a basic human need. Food is incorporated into social activities and becomes an important part of advancing the civilization.

Philosophically, based on the relations between food and culture, cuisine and mythology, diet and religion, nutrition and processing, technology and knowledge discussed above, one could express two hypotheses: (a) to overcome hunger and disease, food must not only be harvested from a cultivated land, but it must also be processed with sophisticated methods; and (b) to advance human civilization, food must be an important part of many social activities.

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