



# Historically Speaking

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## Ancient Greek Food



### Food of the Gods

The gods of the ancient Greeks are depicted in myths to have two significant foods: ambrosia and nectar. The name, ambrosia means "death-defeating" or "immortality". Nectar was called the divine drink of the Olympian gods. It had the magical property to confer immortality on any mortal who had the luck to drink it.

However, one mortal, favored by the gods was Tantalus. He was allowed to eat and drink with the gods and became arrogant. He bragged about it to others and was given an eternal punishment as a result. But that is a story for another time, as it is extensive.

The ancient Greeks had three to four meals a day. The main foods they ate were bread, made from wheat, and porridge, made from barley. Evening meals might include quail or hen eggs, fish, legumes, olives, cheeses and figs. Olive oil was used to flavor cooked items. They ate many different vegetables such as chickpeas, olives, onions, garlic, cucumbers, asparagus, grapes, cabbage and carrots. The diet of the common people was basic and less diverse than that of the wealthy class.

Men and women ate their meals separately. Men were usually fed first and servants attended to accommodating their meal. According to Aristotle, "the poor, having no slaves, would ask their wives or children to serve food." Flat bread was sometimes used as plates, but terracotta bowls were more common. People generally ate with their fingers, using knives to cut meat and spoons for soups. Meat, however, was much less of the diet in those times than today, and the wealthy and those who lived in the country where hunting and trapping were possible, were more likely to have it than the poor and those living in the cities. The meats typically included; fish and fowl, rabbits, pigs, goats, sheep and limited cattle. In the Greek islands and along the coasts, seafood was commonly eaten. Fowl included pheasant, chicken, quail, moorhen, capon, pigeons, doves, thrush, blackbirds, larks, sparrows, partridge and even cranes. All classes ate cheese and yogurt made from goat and sheep milk, but used very little butter.

The common drink was wine including white, red and rose varieties. It was usually mixed with water and sometimes sweetened with honey.

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## Food in Egypt

The Nile River rose each summer starting in July. This resulted in flooding the low-lying plains on either side of the river. The flooding deposited a layer of black soil over the land, rich in nutrients needed for agriculture.

Under normal conditions, the flood plains supported a rich variety of plants and animals that provided food for the ancient Egyptians. Most of the people were involved in farming. When the flood waters began to recede in mid-September, farmers blocked canals to retain the water for irrigation.

Livestock was important to the Egyptian economy supplying meat, milk, and hides. Herdsmen and shepherds lived a semi-nomadic life, pasturing their animals in the marshes of the Nile.

### Food staples

The principal food crops, barley and emmer, were used to make beer and bread, the main staples of the Egyptian diet. A large variety of vegetables were grown, including onions, garlic, leeks, beans, lentils, peas, radishes, cabbage, cucumbers and lettuce. There were also fruits, such as dates, figs, pomegranates, melons and grapes, and honey was produced for sweetening desserts. The Egyptian diet was supplemented by fish, fowl and meat, although peasants probably enjoyed meat only on special occasions. Domesticated animals raised for food included pigs, sheep,

and goats. Grapes were processed into wine for the noble class, but beer was the favorite drink of the common people, and was consumed by the noble class as well. Food was served in pottery bowls but no utensils were used for eating.

### Hunting and fishing

Pharaohs and nobles participated in hunting, fishing and fowling expeditions, a means of recreation that had ritualistic and religious significance. Hunting scenes often depicted on temple walls and tombs reinforce the prowess of kings and nobles. Rabbits, deer, gazelles, bulls, oryx, antelopes, hippopotamuses, elephants and lions were among the wild animals hunted for their meat and skins.

Fishing allowed the working class to add variety to its diet. The poor substituted fish for meat, which they could not afford. The Nile, the marshes of the delta and the Mediterranean Sea offered them a rich variety of species. Fishing methods included the use of a hook and line, harpoons, traps and nets. Birds, including geese and ducks, were also hunted in the marshes and papyrus thickets along the Nile. Small fishing boats were made from papyrus reeds, which are naturally filled with air pockets, making them particularly buoyant. These boats were also used for hunting game in the Nile marshes.

