

# Feasting with Archestratus

Back around 350 B.C. Archestratus—the famed Sicilian-Greek gourmet known as the father of gastronomy and author of one of the world’s first cookbooks”—traveled over land and sea with one driving goal: to discover what was good to eat and how to cook it. Kathryn Koromilas tells us what he found.

Archestratus’s culinary curiosity took him through all of Greece, southern Italy, and Sicily, the coast of Asia Minor and the Black Sea, and he recorded his findings in classical Greek hexameters that made up a humorous poem entitled *Hedypatheia* or “Life of Luxury”. The complete poem is lost today, but from the sixty-two extant fragments (Athenaeus, the late-second century Greek rhetorician and grammarian, preserved them in his *Deipnosophists*, an account of a series of banquets) we are able to see what ingredients, cooking techniques, and combination of flavors were preferred and to conclude just how cosmopolitan the well-to-do Greeks of antiquity were when they sat down to eat.

Were Archestratus able to travel through time and arrive in Greece today to dine at a taverna or ouzeri, what would impress him? Or for that matter, what would Mithaikos, who is credited with the very first recipe, or Chrysippus of Tyana, who wrote about breadmaking, or Euthydemus of Athens, who wrote about salt fish, think about modern Greeks at mealtime?

The most obvious difference, of course, is the way modern Greeks sit down to dine. Their ancestors, or at least the ancient Greeks of the leisure class, ate on couches, reclining, one might say, languidly on one arm using the free hand to eat. The food, prepared in bite-sized portions was eaten without cutlery, but most probably with bread—a flat pitta-style bread for scooping up portions and a raised

bread for absorbing soup. Two courses were served. For the first, the *deipnon* or dinner, potent flavored appetizers were served prior to the meat and fish dishes. For the second, the symposium, wine was served with specially chosen flavors and foods to accompany the drinking session and entertainment. The courses, write John Wilkins and Shaun Hill in their introduction to their 1994 translation of Archestratus’s “cookery book”, were made up of a *sitos* or carbohydrate element, barley and wheat to fill the stomach and strong flavors or *opsa* to “provide extra proteins and vitamins and interest the palate”. “These *opsa*,” say Wilkins and Hill, “ranged from the best sea bass to a salad of bitter herbs or cheese and onions. Greedy people might eat too much carbohydrate, luxurious people too many *opsa*, particularly highly-prized fish.”

Luxury and pleasure have for centuries been a fundamental aspect of wining and dining. It is no surprise that Archestratus calls his poem “The Life of Luxury” and that the subject of pleasure has preoccupied philosophers for centuries. Plato, in his *Republic*, recommends simple vegetarian fare as the ideal diet for his ideal state. But when this is met with objection the reply is that “we are not describing how to establish a city, but how to establish a luxurious city”. Indeed, vegetables hardly make an appearance in the Archestratus fragments. For him, “boiled chickpeas, broad beans, apples, and dried figs” are a sign of poverty.

Luxury for modern Greeks is most certainly equated with the abundance of meat. This might not impress Archestratus, who was clearly a fan of fish: of the sixty-two fragments of Archestratus, forty-eight concern fish. Still, in the earliest accounts of Greeks eating offered by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, meals contained almost only meat. Fish, more so than meat, however, was more highly valued by the ancient Greek chefs. According to Andrew Dalby in *Siren Feasts*, his book about food in antiquity, the luxury food is most certainly fish, quite probably due to the fact, say Wilkins and Hill, that the Greeks of antiquity associated meat with the religious rituals of worship and sacrifice.

One aspect of contemporary Greek cuisine that would most certainly impress Archestratus is the abundance of fish, in the first instance, and secondly the way modern Greeks prepare it: simply and served with just oil and lemon. In a recipe he offers for preparing shark, he writes: “In the city of Torone, you must buy belly steaks of the



karkharias sprinkling them with cumin and not much salt. You will add nothing else, dear fellow, unless maybe green olive oil.”

While it is fish that Arcestratus prefers, he does offer recipes for cooking meat. Only three meat types come up in the Arcestratus fragments and they are hare—which according to Xenophon in his *On Hunting*, were popular with huntsmen around Athens and never an animal for sacrifice—goose, and sow’s womb. Arcestratus claims there are many ways and many rules for the preparation of hare, but offers the following recipe as the best: “[Bring] the roast meat in and serve to everyone while they are drinking, hot, simply sprinkled with salt, taking it from the spit while still a little rare. Do not worry if you see the ichor seeping from the meat, but eat greedily.”

Dalby makes note of classical Greek author Lynceus of Samos who writes, in his *Shopping for Food*, of wild boar. Lynceus suggests that goat meat should be left aside “for the boys”. Other meats enjoyed by ancient Greek palates included wild ass, fox, red deer, even bear, which ac-

ording to Galen’s *On The Properties of Food*, was not the tastiest fare and had to be boiled twice. Lions, found in Epirus, were also mentioned in the ancient literature, as were plenty of birds—thrushes, black birds, chaffinches, larks, starlings, jays—all of which, in a similar fashion to Arcestratus’s hare, were spit-roasted. Snails, which were considered an aphrodisiac, and cicadas also abounded. Dalby quotes Galen who noted that “all Greeks eat snails everyday. They have tough flesh, but, once cooked are highly nourishing”.

As far as Arcestratus is concerned recipes that include rich sauces or too much cheese or oil are completely to be avoided. Sauce-based cooking was a culinary habit popular in his birthplace of Sicily, a city identified by Aristophanes with good eating and deplored by Plato as “obsessed with food...a gluttonous place where men eat two banquets a day and never sleep alone at night”. Cheese-based sauces or potent herbs, according to Arcestratus, should be added only to inferior quality fish. The better the quality of the raw product the less flavors should be added. Arcestratus always encourages simple cooking, boiling, roasting or grilling, the lightest of seasonings and oil added.

Wilkins and Hill make the connection between Arcestratus and the “Chinese approach” as found in the recipes of Yan-kit So, author of the 1884 *Classic Chinese Cookbook*. While Arcestratus may not be influenced by Alexander the Great whose eastern expeditions brought even more Asian products and lifestyle home—after all Arcestratus travels strictly in the Mediterranean and Black Sea where there are no exotic influences apart from, for example, Phoenician bread and Byblos wine—the comparisons are appropriate. The Chinese holistic approach to dining, the balance of the yin and yang energies, may be compared to the Greek approach of the humors: blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile, in the right proportions for a perfectly balanced meal.

Arcestratus approaches the study of food with such detail that even Aristotle borrows from him in his account of the history of fish. The philosopher noted how season and location influence the lives of fish, their breeding habits and general condition. Before him, Arcestratus noted the importance of season and location, as Wilkins and Hill point out, when it comes to the optimum time to eat fish, knowledge that informs the modern Greek fishermen and culinary experts today.

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