

Eat Wisely

Mellimania

Rare is the foodstuff that can enliven a meal, soothe and heal a wound, preserve other foods and if need be, embalm your own dead. Such is the nature of honey. One looks in vain for a civilization that does not have a prolonged and significant use of this great substance. Our quest for it dates back well into prehistory, and methods of beekeeping date to the Egyptians, and shortly after that to Mesopotamia and the Chinese. When Alexander the Great was buried, honey was poured over his body, but this was only a resuscitation of a very ancient method of honoring the bodies of deceased worthies- the practice had been around for many centuries before.

The subject of honey is wrapped in mythological significance- to the Greeks, it was the food of the infant Zeus, and it was by use of honey that Circe seduced the companions of Ulysses with cheese, bread, and fresh honey with strong wine, or so Homer tells us. Pythagoras was said to have given honey as the reason for his long life, and Athenaeus says of his followers that they eat bread and honey chiefly, and especially at breakfast, since they believe this keeps them free of disease. A famed philosopher, it was widely believed, was kept alive for several days by the scent of honey alone. Indeed, in describing the Golden Age that long proceeded them, philosophers and poets of the ancient world invariably mention honey flowing from the trees. To the Hebrews, the land of promise their god gave to them was described as that of milk and honey.

The Greeks fondness for honey was marked by their use of it in breads and sweet cakes, the use of which marks the ancestor of the cheesecake, which the Romans, clever enough to recognize a good thing when they saw (or tasted) it, were quick to adopt. The honey of Greece was the acme of honey in the Roman Empire, particularly the thyme, as Columella was to note, followed by savory, wild thyme, and marjoram. Pliny, on the other hand, felt that that of Sicily was foremost. The Romans introduced beekeeping into Iberia and Provence, and while Spanish honey was long regarded as inferior, the honeys of southern France were sometimes sold as counterfeits for the much higher prized Attic honeys.

A favored Roman sweet was to removed the crusts of bread, steep them in milk and then fry them in oil, after which they were doused in honey. Honey was also a prime ingredient in sauces for birds and fish. Apicius tells us that figs, apples, pears, and cherries were preserved in honey alone, while turnips are best kept with myrtleberries in honey and vinegar. One can also preserve meat with honey, but the method works far better through the winter than the summer.

The collapse of the Roman Empire proved disastrous for the apiaries of Europe- the continual warfare of waves of invading peoples proved the ruination of much of the bee colonies of Roman settlements, and for many centuries, the method of acquiring honey reverted to the ancient methods of collecting wild honey.

The return of apiaries was spurred largely by the rise of Christianity throughout

Europe- not because of an increased demand for honey, but rather for beeswax to provide illumination for churches and its monastic houses. Not only did beeswax prove superior to tallow for candles, the fact that it was the product of bees made it theologically satisfying: bees were considered a creature that reproduced itself free of the taint of sexuality, and the efficient, orderly life of the hives were considered models for the way humans ought to live. It was not until after period that certain errors of perception about bee life were corrected, such as that bees were thought to center around a king, instead of a queen, and that any mating at all took place. It was widely believed that to produce a hive of bees, one simply had to leave a beef carcass laying about, if one used a horse or donkey, you were sure to get wasps or hornets.

In the Byzantine world, the practice of beekeeping did not die out at all- less affected by the turmoil of the West, both monastic communities and farms produced a steady supply for use of the people of Constantinople, as well as providing a key element in a monk's diet. Synesius, a visitor to Athens wrote that “the glory of their philosophers has passed, but that of its bee masters remains.”

The Balkan peninsula enjoyed a flourishing honey trade, supplying not only the empire to the east, but supplementing honey supplies in the west as well.

Irish beekeepers claimed the early saints brought bees to Ireland with them, and St. Patrick was said to codify the laws that stipulated how bees were to be kept and honey sold, but in truth, the Irish had apiaries long before the arrival of the Church, and the practice of keeping bees was firmly established in England without Roman introduction.

Milk and honey were often seen as the counterpart to the Christian Eucharist, and taken after communion in a rite observed up until around 600 C. E., as a way of underlining the belief that “the grace of the Holy Spirit bathes one, fills us with honey and butter equally.” Even when the rite itself faded away (one still finds this custom in the Coptic Church), it was often the practice to give infants milk and honey immediately after baptism. Both saints Ambrose and Basil were said to have bees alighting on their mouths just after birth (a distinction they share with Plato and Virgil) reaffirming the long standing belief that honey and wise words are deeply related.

Charlemagne, shrewd and prescient in the management of the farms in his domains, specified that every farm ought have hives, and further stipulated that two thirds of the honey produced belonged to him, and one third of the beeswax. After his death, the right to honey as a feudal tax remained in place, with vassals paying out to sovereigns, and keeping a hefty portion for themselves.

German and Polish honey trade relied for a long time on a refinement of wild honey collecting, that is, instead of creating a skep or wicker hive for the bees, a log would be hollowed out instead. Production of domestic honey through skeps produced a greater yield, but in Eastern and Central Europe, the log method was preferred- indeed, such was how honey had been produced from the old times when honey was procured from

the forest, and a bee goddess was in the local pantheon.

In the Islamic world honey had, from its inception, a place of honor. An entire sura of the Koran is devoted to honey as being beneficial and healing to man. The Persians had a long history of mixing honey with almonds, pistachios or walnuts, and sprinkling them with rose water. When this is put to seething sesame oil, the result is halva. The Muslims of Spain developed the art of making turrón, and its delicious cousin, the nougat. Yet one more tasty innovation from al Andalus comes from Turkey, where one pours honey and melted butter and nuts over successive layers of phylo dough, a heavenly creation we know as baklava, which in my mind is possibly one of the greatest ideas ever.

A French etiquette manual from the fourteenth century disparages the eating of such dishes as “they cannot be eaten in a cleanly fashion”, but one wonders if this isn't a way of expressing a form of sour grapes obliquely- all the above mentioned dishes would have been quite expensive in northern Europe.

The use of honey in cake would not be as prohibitive however, and we find spiced cakes appearing in France as early as the first Crusade. They appear in Russia at almost the same time, later variations included almonds and milk. The *pain d'epices* favored of the Northern Europeans is related to a Byzantine dish, a wheaten dish known as *grouta*, a kind of frummenty sweetened with honey and studded with raisins or carob, and it also bears some resemblance to a cake enjoyed by both Greek and Roman, in which a cake of sesame flour was soaked in honey after it was cooked. The simplest version we know of is a Flemish cake in which wheat flour and honey are mixed and then baked.

Sometime during the early fifteenth century, a pastrycook from Bourges made a new cake in this fashion, using dark rye flour and the dark, strong buckwheat honey from Brittany, along with spices. This recipe found its way to the city of Reims, and the *pain d'epices* made there became legendary- so much so that the Spice Bread Makers broke with the Pastrycook (or Wafer Maker) guild and formed their own corporation. To be a master spice bread maker one was required to bake masterpiece- three cakes, each weighing 20 pounds, flavored with cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. There was a great secrecy about the method of making this bread rise, they used a sourdough method, which since it involved rye flour as well as a thick honey, we know that it was set to rise in a dark, cool place- for a good many months, a practice that challenges the patience of even a seasoned sourdough baker.

These cakes, along with their cousin, gingerbread, were said to be good for the heart.

According to one version of the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, the preferred method of eating honey was in the comb, and it makes us speculate that much of the honey available to people was served in this simple fashion. Platina, however, tells us that it is better cooked than raw, to avoid cramps and bloating of the stomach- people still argue over

this (few ideas are ever new in arguments over food). He points out that it is good for people with cold, damp bodies, and correctly identifies summer honey as much better than what is collected in the autumn. He does, however, make the error of believing that honey is created by bees from dew, and wax is collected from the flowers that bees visit.

We may contrast this point of view with that of Ibn el-Beithar, a physician of Malaga from the twelfth century who wrote that “honey relaxes the bowels, and stimulates the appetite, It is the best treatment for gums, and it whitens the teeth; it gives good results for tonsillitis,; it stimulates coitus; taken with water it cleanses intestinal ulcers...” This last point is interesting, since honey is recently in vogue as a popular cure for stomach ulcers.

Hildegard von Bingen, to one's surprise, is not fond of honey, saying that people who are fat who consume it will have “decayed matter in them”; if it is cooked, thin people of dry temperaments will find themselves harmed by it. Worse yet, the eating of honeycomb wax is a source of melancholy.

Hippocrates was, however, most fond of honey, advising oxymel (vinegar and honey) for pain- this mixture is also one of the most common in Byzantine cuisine; he advocates hydromel (water and honey) for thirst. He believed it to be a good expectorant and an aid to better breathing, and with great classical sense he believed that if eaten with moderation, it was very nourishing and good for the complexion, but if taken alone, or in too great a quantity, it provoked urine and purged the body too much.

Later physicians would use honey to disguise the disagreeable tastes of their medicines, often of such a dicey character that one might have fared better with simply the honey itself.

Honey was also in great demand for the production of mead, of which the ancient world knew several varieties, and the consumption of which often rivaled that of beer. A fire that once broke out in a German town was extinguished with mead, as there was not sufficient water available.

Outside the Muslim world, however, for a very long time, honey was the only available sweetener for food, aside from the use of fruit. The Arabs had a much longer contact with sugar, and they themselves debated which was the better choice. It should not surprise one then to learn that it was often bartered for salt at equal weight, and that the decision to raise bees, fraught as it is with much travail, heartache, and legal interference, was often the path to making a farmer much wealthier than those who did not keep hives. Bartering in honey itself could prove hazardous to one's well being- the Hanseatic League's citadel in Novgorod was under siege by peasants who felt cheated by the prices offered their wild honey- when the Czar intervened, he did so by not arbitrating the price of honey, but imprisoning the merchants and seizing their goods.

For such an important product, the threat- and temptation- for adulteration was great indeed, as was the fear of theft- throughout Europe the penalty for stealing honey was stiff enough- Charlemagne was concerned about the placement of hives, that they not be too close to the houses of others, but he was more concerned about people poaching the

good stuff.

As with all good things, desultory thoughts lurk-there was also the suspicion that someone had poisoned the honey itself. Mysterious ailments could befall one who accepted a “gift” of honey- Xenophon's Greek soldiers succumbed to a “mad honey” that left them in a stupor and despondent for several days. In 946, Olga of Kiev's men had taken in several tons of fermented honey that left them unable to defend themselves against their besiegers, who slaughtered them to a man. Science would eventually find the source of the problems as a particular honey derived from rhododendron- although the malady does not always erupt from it, the Pontic honeys from rhododendron are particularly prone to it, hence its name *deli bal*. In small amounts, the honey produces a mildly hallucinogenic effect, in large doses, the predictable results are unpleasant to contemplate. *Delibal* was a popular Turkish export to the taverns of Central Europe during the 18th century- a treat I find uncomfortably close to huffing solvent.

Catherine de Medici was thought to have used poison to rid herself of certain pestiferous courtiers- after all, she was Italian, and Italians, all right thinking French people would recognize as poisoners. So when she served spice bread one day and the entire court fell ill with colic, the natural line of reason was that *Italian* honey must have been used, and further that *all Italian honey must be poison!* Nevermind that the respected physician Ibn el-Beithar asserted that honey counteracted many poisons, nor is it far fetched to assume that perhaps some other form of food poisoning might have been at work, nor indeed was it all that unusual for a de Medici fete to take a turn for the ill- recall that she consumed far too many artichokes at one sitting- the unsettling thought in the minds of many French just then was that the honey itself had been poisoned. And perhaps, after all, it had been. But I would prefer not to believe so, I would tend to think as Marsilio Ficino, another wonderful figure of the Renaissance, regarded honey, that it is “solar in its power, and therefore good,” and so, renders one less susceptible to dark thoughts and ill deeds.

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