

Eat Wisely On Bulbs

Platina goes to the trouble of mentioning Megarian bulbs in his book on dietary concerns, and it is a curious thing to do. The practice of eating bulbs was well known among the ancient Greeks, and those from Megara, an area to the north of Athens grew those that were praised for their aphrodisiac qualities. It was not really clear to Platina what these Megarian bulbs were, by the time he and his contemporaries were busy trying to recreate a full range of foods based on the writers of classic antiquity, the people of Megara had given up on bulbs, except, perhaps in moments of desperation. We can chalk this reference up to wishing to show a bit of erudition, since he mentions Celsus, Varro, and Pythagoras in the section on bulbs, but gives the reader no hint that he, nor anyone he knew actually ate such a bulb.

Those who did eat bulbs in the Greek world gave them mixed reviews at best. Theophrastus mentions a variety that is quite sweet all on its own, but it must have been a rarity. One writer sums it up by saying that after the boiling and pounding and compounding the bulb with a variety of spices, it seems only to be a lot of trouble for very little reward.

The good Roman physician Galen was familiar with the practice of eating the grape-hyacinth bulb, an excellent expectorant, that is made more palatable by boiling it twice, which renders it nutritious, but no longer of value as medicine. They are best eaten, he says, with vinegar, oil and fish sauce. Eating them to excess, he says, has caused some men to notice that they “have more semen and an increased sexual appetite.” One can, if brave enough, seek out one of the trendy chefs who have revived foraging as a means of sustenance and tried to raise this to an art, but the report I read of this was more than a little disparaging on the topic of grape-hyacinth.

The bulbs we are more familiar with are of course, the onion, the leek, and garlic. It is interesting that Galen does not consider them foods at all, but only food flavorings, and bitterness is not something he highly recommends. He points out their heating qualities to the body, and grants that they can thin out thick humors, and after being boiled twice, they are not very bitter at all. Nevertheless, they give the body no real nutrition-and uncooked they give none at all! The only people he thinks ought eat these foods are those who have accumulated mucous and need to relieve themselves of it.

The Romans, like the Greeks, and the Egyptians before them, did eat onions, and fairly large amount of them at that. Some Egyptians went so far as to mummify onions so as to enjoy them in the afterlife.. Contrary to Galen's school of thought, Pliny points out that another school of physicians believed that onions gave one good complexion, and taken daily on an empty stomach, promote a good state of health. The smell of onions, which makes one's nose run, Pliny takes to be a sign of the good they do one's

eyes. He also thinks they induce sleep.

Simeon Seth, believes onions to bring on urination, and are good for the production of semen, and increase appetite, but because they are not very good for the stomach and cause headaches, he mentions it is very important not to eat them raw. They are exceedingly good for those suffering from chest irritations and coughs.

Al-Warriq says onions make one thirsty, are a good aphrodisiac, and are a help to the appetite, unless taken raw, in which case one ends up with a headache. However, onion pickled in vinegar he thinks to be perfectly neutral in its effect, good for the appetite, but not causing thirst. Cooked onion is of course better for one than raw, white onion being the preferred, least pungent variety.

Hildegard von Bingen believes the power of onion is derived from the dew at daybreak. She thinks them poisonous when eaten raw, however, they lose this property once cooked. Even when cooked, onion is not good for the ill, or those with a weak stomach, although they can help with those suffering from fevers.

Platina says that doctors agree that onions feed inflammation within the body, and they not only bring on headache, but are deleterious to the memory

All dieticians agreed that onions must be cooked, most contending, as Galen did, that cooking alone made them nutritious. Some later period writers, like Estienne, condemns all sauces made with onion, garlic or dill as being very injurious- but then he is almost alone in his complete opinion which held that all heat (even saffron, if used to excess) was damaging to the body, and that spices as such ought be used only to a minimum.

Galen thinks that leeks, like onions, can be made less unwholesome if packed in vinegar. Pliny clearly believes that leeks are quite beneficial to people, he recites a litany of cures to which leeks can be applied, including the use of leek in breast milk to cure ringing in the ears, or pouring leek juice blended with honey into the ears at bedtime to relieve headache. Leeks will counteract mushroom poisoning, but while it is exceptionally good for the voice, it damages one's eyesight. They increase the fertility of women. Apicius, who gives short shrift for the onion, because of the odor they leave on a person's scent and breath, treats the leek with far more respect.

Simeon Seth, writing from the Byzantine perspective, says that leeks are diuretic, and produce defective humors (they digest badly), and are neither good for one's sleep or stomach. They bring on headaches, and do harm to the liver, kidneys, bladder, and eyes.. If cooked (after boiling them twice) in vinegar, garum, oil and cumin, they can be useful to those with a "cold stomach", that is, one whose digestion is feeble and whose appetite is slight.

Al-Warriq says that the leek brings on nightmares, although he thinks it is good for the appetite. The Baghdadi Cookbook discusses a wider variety of leeks than any other source. The wilder ones are said to be sharper in taste and more prone to give people problems, some types, like the a variety grown in Babylon, are said to improve one's temperament, rejuvenate and cure impotence, a pretty tall order for any medicinal food, and probably worth a few nightmares. But most Arabic physicians deplore their effect

on the stomach, and say moreover that they rot the teeth and gums.

Hildegard von Bingen is not a fan of leeks, as she believes it upsets one's sexual equilibrium. On no condition ought it be eaten raw because of its poisonous nature. But well, if one *must* eat it raw, she grudgingly suggests that it be soaked in wine with salt, or vinegar for half a day, at which point it can do a person relatively little harm. Then she seems to become a bit confused and says that if a sick person wants to eat leek, they should eat it raw, tempered as described before, and that it is better for them raw than cooked.

The Welsh are quite fond of the leek, and their patron saint, David, is said to have subsisted on a diet of leek, a little bread and water. While he did not complain of nightmares, and seems not to have been tormented with lust, he was known for a wondrous and pleasing voice.

Platina adds a number of virtues and drawbacks to the leek, including their ability to lessen stiffness and healing fractures in the body. He claims that it combats drunkenness, stimulates passion, and softens the bowels. He does not specify if it does all three at once. Nor what one should do if this would happen.

The French temper the leek's force by boiling them twice and adding herbs and spices considered cooling, while in Italy, one finds them cooked in goose broth and sprinkled with sugar to cool down their powers. This latter treatment, however, does not seem to be sound thinking from a humoral viewpoint.

Life for many would be unthinkable without garlic. Galen, who has not said much favorable about bulbs thus far, grudgingly admits that if boiled a short time, garlic can be used as a healthy relish. Pliny is far more vociferous in his claims for it. Garlic he believes to be good for those who have moved and may be suffering from a change in water. He says pounded garlic added to milk is given to asthmatics, which most would agree is a fairly drastic cure. He also says that in ancient times it was given as a cure to the insane. It is used also as a cure for toothache. In general, he finds it better cooked than raw, better boiled than roasted, and when boiled, is very good for the voice. If taken with oxymel (a mixture of vinegar and honey) it drives out tapeworms. A diet of food and drink is said to be beneficial for epileptics. Eaten with beans it is good for cough. Garlic induces sleep, and helps the skin's complexion. Naturally, such a nifty food acts as an aphrodisiac, but one must be warned that it dims eyesight, causes flatulence, makes one thirsty, and is overall damaging to the stomach.

Simeon Seth thinks garlic is a good means of protecting the health of those who suffer from colder temperaments, those who suffer from thick and heavy humors. He thinks it helps the body as a diuretic, although as noted above, bad for the eyes, the lungs, head, and kidneys. Oddly, he says it helps relieve thirst (albeit boiled). It is not good for the sexual powers of those of warmer constitutions, but an aphrodisiac for the melancholic and phlegmatic, who, presumably, need all the help they can get. Toothache, which is caused by humoral turbulence and not so much a disdain for flossing, is healed through the use of cooked garlic. He says it is good for cough, ulcers, and leprosy. Eaten, or

applied to the skin, it helps dispel poison. He does not advise women who are pregnant or lactating to eat garlic, nor are those who are concerned with their own regularity to eat it often.

The Arabic physicians find garlic's chief assets in its ability to rid the body of flatulence, thinning the blood, and breaking down the ill effects of coarse foods. It is considered a good antidote to poisoning and a remedy for coughs and illness brought on in winter weather. The elderly can eat garlic with impunity, the younger are advised to have it pickled in vinegar or take it with sour foods, because of its extreme heating properties. It increases thirst, is bad for the stomach, and its drying effect is harmful to coitus.

The ever surprising Hildegard von Bingen believes that the heat of garlic is just right for people. It is a better for people than leeks, and furthermore, is best consumed raw., and cooking ruins it. It is not harmful to the eyesight, and she finds that the only problem with garlic is eating too much of it, as this will overheat the blood.

Platina echoes everything Pliny has to say on the subject of garlic, and he discusses the more obvious problem of its ill effect on the breath- on this topic, the Arab physicians say rinse the mouth with wine, for garlic, for leeks, consume some walnuts. He also points out that garlic, like all bulbs, is favored more by people who live in the countryside.

From classical Greece and Rome on, the use of bulbs were something of a guilty pleasure. From a purely hygienic viewpoint, the sweat and breath of the bulb consumer was a problem, one that could not quite persuade them from forswearing use of them, but neither do we find noble voices singing their praises. In the close quarters of city life, this makes a great deal of sense. But it does not mean that people of all classes did not eat them. Late period dieticians also underline this as a class distinction, garlic, onions, and leeks are best left to those who eat crass foods and need the effects of these bulbs to cut through their humoral detritus as best they can. But this will not do for a refined sensibility, and for them, the consumption of bulbs must be tempered in sauces. And even then, as we have seen, some dieticians cannot be persuaded that the heat of bulbs is in any way good for one's senses. Others would suggest that they were good correctives to the frigid and moist humors of a salad, or else mixed with bread and vinegar in a sauce for meat.

They were often thought more suitable for rustics and hard working folk. Sailors, in particular benefited from these bulbs, as they were thought to help fight off infection from tainted meat, lack of good fresh water and the general poor conditions found aboard ship. Still others found them a corrective itself to the climate of northern Europe.

Under any circumstances, to eat too many bulbs would bring on dire consequences- even for those of cold temperaments, once the heat of the bulb had burned through the thick and viscous humors, an excess amount would tend to corrupt the blood and congregate in the spleen, the seat of melancholic maladies. For reasons that we now find hard to understand, indigestion was often thought to be the source of poor or blurry vision.

But in the end, it is concern for the odor on the breath that one finds so often intervening in our long love affair with the bulbs. In 1330, King Alfonso of Castile, offended by the scent, forbade the appearance at court of any knight or courtier who had eaten garlic or onion within four weeks. Perhaps it was thought that he simply wanted fewer people at court- four weeks is a very long time to go without the heat and pungency that so many deeply crave.

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