

Eat Wisely

On Grains – Grains of the Poor

Which came first- drinking beer or eating bread? It's a question archaeologists have been puzzling over for some time. There is an entirely reasonable school of thought that posits the beginning of agricultural civilization arises from the desire of people to settle near cultivated grain so beer could be brewed. This would mean barley, from which when boiled and fermented much joy has its origins. A Babylonian prayer concludes with the wish “May I sit in splendor and drink undiluted beer.” Nevertheless, from the rise of classical civilizations in the Mediterranean, the Greeks and the Romans, it was wine, that would be the drink of choice, and beer as such would become the drink of the less well to do. Some people, not without reason, believe that this is where history began to take a wrong turn.

Barley is by far the most ancient of cereals, but that fact alone could not buy it the prestige wheat carries. It is a demanding crop, fickle, thirsty for water, and prone to failure. All of the grains we are discussing in this article are considered lesser foods, less nourishing, and certainly of a lower status than wheat.

Barley had a long standing reputation of imparting strength (the Egyptians thought so, but did not care for it, aside from beer), while the ancient Greeks made a great deal of use of it. The Spartans were famed for an exceedingly vile stew made with barley- and while we do not know precisely why it was so reprehensible, it was said only a Spartan could be tough enough to eat it. Roman gladiators and athletes were called “barley men”, yet oddly, by the first century CE, Galen notes that Roman soldiery refused barley on the grounds that it weakened them. The fiber content of oats and barley, while highly prized now, were of little worth to the early physicians, who thought of the grains as passing through the body too rapidly to give it much nutrition. Wheat, on the other hand, required more time to break down, and thus won first prize for food value.

Barley was also thought to have something of a cooling property to it, to the point where Galen claims that a body cannot derive warmth from barley no matter how it is prepared. One of the ways in which barley was used was as a ptisane, that is, a decoction of barley boiled gently for a long time, the broth then drained off and seasoned with vinegar and salt, although some variations contained a bit of leek and dill as well. Barley water, as such, still has a handful of devotees, but even in this instance, it was bested by wheat. Pliny mentions a ptisane made of wheat called alica, which he claims is superior to the barley version in almost every way, save for purging the stomach. *The Good Wife's Guide*, gives a recipe made with barley, water, licorice and fis. The barley is boiled until it bursts, and is then strained through linen and served over rock sugar. Ptisanes were often used as medicine, the term is now out of use, except by the French, who use it to designate herbal teas, all of which seem devoid of

barley.

An Arabic version of the same, given by al-Warriq, omits all the other ingredients and adds sugar, if wanted. This would be considered healthful for those suffering from fevers, in particular. In addition, there are drinks known as *sawiq*, which are made from finely crushed seeds and grains, to which hot water is then to rinse them of hot properties, it is then prepared with chilled water and sugar. This is an excellent provision for traveling. Those made from barley were considered the most cooling, but not surprisingly, those made with wheat were considered superior, sweeter, and more nourishing.

For the poor, barley was the general basis for gruels, sometimes made with the addition of vegetables and a little meat, if available. Crumbled bread (generally rye, or barley bread) would be the sops to mop up broth, from this we derive our term soup. Barley for porridge was prepared in Arabic cookery the same way wheat was, that is by skillet griddling the grains, then crushing them before boiling them in water. In this way, the Berbers made a kind of coucous with barley. Berbers also made a kind of porridge with grilled barley ground into a flour, which was then boiled in water, and after it is cooked a small amount of argan seed oil is mixed into a depression made in the gruel. This oil from an evergreen tree would have been a very distinctive flavor, but the dish was also made with the far more prosaic honey and butter.

Polenta, which we now think of as being made with cornmeal, in its original version was made with barley meal, or sometimes with millet. This does not mean that polenta made with cornmeal is not period- there is mention of cornmeal polenta dating from 1559. This ancient Roman dish, which once was a kind of porridge stirred in one direction for roughly an hour, has a large number of variations. Galen mentions one of barley, wheat, millet, and cracked chickpeas cooked to thickness in water and goat's milk, a recipe one guesses, that has not well survived the test of time. Platina gives one that incorporates cheese, eggs, rosewater and honey along with the barley meal and it is baked. In Italy, sturgeon were "milked" for their eggs, and it is ironic to think that this unsalted caviar was worked into some polentas as a seasoning.

Platina mentions barley dishes like this as being eaten frequently, but for Hildegard von Bingen, barley, whether consumed as bread or cereal, is "vexing" as food. The proper use of barley for the ill, she believes, is for a person to briskly boil barley, and bath in the water used to cook it. Likewise, barley, oats and fennel boiled together and strained make a sustaining broth.

A noble dish for Poles was to pour boiling water over barley flour and pour a thick beer over it, allowing it to ferment, and then add milk and honey to the dish. This was an ancient and highly esteemed dish. Lesser persons would make this soup with any fermenting liquid available, and use buckwheat, rye, or oats.

We feel virtuous when we eat oats at breakfast, since modern science tells us it is ever so good for us. However, turn the clock back on period dietary writing, and oats are barely considered fit food for people. Samuel Johnson's quip about "oats, which in

England are given to the horses, in Scotland supports the people” was a very old joke when he recycled it for his *Dictionary* (1755). The Celtic peoples seem alone in their devoted cultivation of this grain, and this was much out of necessity-it grows well in northern and wet climes, and those other Celtic peoples who could grow other grains did so as soon as they were introduced to them. It is somewhat difficult for those of us who like oats to understand the aversion the classical world had for them. The Greek botanist Theophrastus dismissed them as a kind of “diseased wheat”, and the universal opinion of the Roman world was that the lowly oat could not provide decent sustenance for a person. Galen says that after oats are boiled in water, then eaten with sweet or honeyed wine, or boiled must.

Oats contain a thick husk and an enzyme which can turn rancid rapidly, but its ability to feed northern peoples makes a virtue out of necessity indeed. That being said, oats do not contain the gluten needed to make a light bread and the well born diner almost everywhere other than Scotland would turn their nose up at the heavy bread it makes, or at porridge which features oatmeal.

Alone among dietary writers with a kind word for oats is Hildegard von Bingen, who says of them that they are hot in nature, and a happy and healthy food for people who are strong. She believes it good in that it nurtures a cheerful mind and a clear intellect. It should not be eaten by those who are very ill or have too cold a nature, as they will be unable to digest them. However, the insane, if placed in a sauna, and if hot water which oats have been cooked are poured over the rocks, the steam from such will help restore their senses, or so she asserts.

Byzantine physicians were not so sanguine on the subject. They found oats to be cold and astringent, and suggest that they ease difficulty in urination, as well as digestive problems in those who have a too hot, choleric temperament. It is interesting to note that the people of Troy were said to eat oat bread, whereas their Achaean rivals were consumers of barley, of which Homer said “makes the marrow of men”- however, it is unlikely that a preference of one dense, barely digestible loaf over another really led to the launching of a thousand ships”, and more curious still was the long standing presence in Greece of a Celtic tribe, the preference of Celts for oats already noted.

Among the Irish, oats were the chief grain crop, followed by barley, with wheat, of course, being reserved for the highest classes. A legal tract even specifies how porridge is to be made for each class, the poorest eat oatmeal with buttermilk or water and eaten with stale butter. Sons of chieftans are given a larger portion of porridge, which is to be made with barley meal and new milk, and served with fresh butter. The sons of kings, however, dine on stirabout with wheaten meal and new milk, and this is sweetened with honey. The soups of the poor are made with wild leaves, sorrel, watercress, and fount fungi, then thickened with oats or barley.

The Scots parched their oats in a kiln or toasted them in a pot over fire, then ground them in a stone quern. Oatmeal in this fashion was boiled as a porridge and eaten with milk and salt. The introduction of sweetening porridge was considered unthinkable by most Scots, even if available, it would have been considered a decadent practice. Oats

would also be a prominent item in haggis, where a meat or organ meat would be sewn up in an animal stomach and boiled over a fire. The oats supply itself, given a shorter growing season- it began to shorten drastically by the twelfth century, would often mean that grains themselves would be absent in daily diet. For many of the people who lived in the Western Isles, bread itself was virtually unknown, and reserved for one's social betters.

The Poles used parched oats ground into a flour and cooked this up with water, pork fat and salt. Some of type of this oatmeal was considered fine enough to be served at court, so it is fair to speculate that the oats would have been ground fine, and cooked with meat, spices, and a good broth. Mostly, however, oats were eaten by the lower classes, and often was reserved for fodder or making a mash to feed the hunting dogs

Millet, Galen believes, is poorly nourishing and cold, and tends to have a drying effect on the stomach. He mentions rustic folk as boiling a flour of millet and mixing in pork fat and olive oil. Again, it lacks gluten with which good bread can be made, although, like barley, millet was one of the primary flours for the bread of the poor. However, Pliny describes the bread as being extremely sweet. He also mentions that millet is made into a white porridge, and that the Sarmatians of the Pontic region live primarily on millet, mixing the raw grain with mare's milk, or blood drawn from a horse's leg. The Byzantine physician Hierophile found millet difficult to digest unless taken with milk and almonds, which diminished its drying effect.

Hildegard von Bingen dismisses millet as being cold as well, having no virtue of nourishment save for filling the stomach and eliminating hunger pangs. Moreover, it makes a person's brain watery, upsets their humors, and should be avoided altogether. Such however, was not always a practical consideration. More than one Italian town under siege (Venice in 1372) was saved by a supply of millet when the wheat stores gave out. In dire emergencies it would be rationed, keeping the population alive, if not exceptionally happy.

Arabic dietary writers did not hold millet in high esteem, citing its cold nature, its inability to digest well, and its tendency to constipate. (In this connection, Pliny said millet was very good for the treatment of dysentery.)

Millet kasha is one of the oldest foods among the Poles, and was very much a staple of their diet until potatoes were introduced in the 17th century. It was traditionally made cooked in milk with honey as a sweetener for better tables, or boiled and salted, then browned in butter. It is possible that Hildegard von Bingen's dislike of millet may have come from inferior strains- millet grows well in Central and southern Europe, and the Poles seem to have had a particular genius for it, developing several strains to meet particular growing conditions, which, it must be admitted, isn't easy work for watery brains.

Millet bread for the Poles was often in the form of flat breads or baked in a kind of cake, like oats. The quality of the bread would depend on it being mixed with other

flour (again, preferably wheat.) Unlike most of Europe, wealthier Poles tended to consume millet frequently, especially as a staple during Lent, and as mixed with much pricier rice as a luxury dish. Porridges of millet were commonly consumed by the poor and were eaten plain or with milk, or sometimes cooked with vegetables and whatever meat could be had. An undemanding way to prepare kasha is to cook it up in the same way they prepared oats- with water, pork fat and salt. For the noble classes, however, the millet would be finely ground and cooked with egg yolks, meat stock and spices- a blend of honey and saffron makes a delicious version of this dish.

Kasha can also be made with buckwheat, which is technically not a grain at all, since it is more closely related to sorrel and rhubarb, but its seeds are ground and used like a grain. Moreover, it is very hardy and produces rapidly, making it very popular throughout Eastern Europe and Russia. It was introduced into Germany by the 15th century, from whence it spread to France and Italy. Despite the fact that it came from Eastern Europe, it was known as “Saracen corn”. One of its charms is that it will grow in fields where it is difficult to grow other grains, and it quickly became a peasant staple in porridges and thick pancakes. Another unusual aspect of this plant is that honey derived from its flowers is strong and quite powerful, and it made its way into the making of *pain d'epice*.

In reading through al-Warriq's brief description of the humoral properties of bread made from various grains one is struck by the curious inclusion of a number of foods we would not normally consider grains, such as fava beans, chickpeas, lentils. This is because such things were used to pad out other flour, and on occasion, even become the flour itself. They were not considered very nutritious at all, and while each ingredient on its own has its own merits, using them as extenders for flour must have been a depressing affair indeed. Only Hildegard von Bingen has kind words for the flour of fava beans, which she finds good for the body and easily digested. In Europe, chestnuts were often ground and used as a kind of flour and a basis for gruel, and in times of famine, the poor were often condemned to attempting to make bread from various grasses and weeds. This would have been a dicey venture at best, and there is some speculation that the use of such plants as darnel, which grows near wheat made the peasants exceedingly docile, a further dark consideration is that the nobility knew and encouraged such use to mitigate the troubles that might arise from a rebellious populace. True or not, the lower orders were continually urged or forced to eat bread not made from wheat. An unpopular alternative was sorgham, but on occasion one even finds mention of acorn, water lilies, cattails and clover. A happier addition would have been the above mentioned buckwheat. During the years between 1305 and 1310, the price of grain doubled, which would have made these measures necessary. A loaf found in a medieval excavation in Scandanavia even revealed bits of pine bark worked into the dough.

After the Black Death, the consumption of grains in the form of bread alone began to

diminish, especially among the English, and more meat and ale made its way into peasants diets, further more poor could afford to bake their own breads, with the slow introduction of home ovens and the diminishing of communal ovens. This was not necessarily true however for the Scots, alas. Nor was it true for two Sicilians, during a particularly bad famine from poor wheat harvests, who were found on a beach, starved, and their mouths stuffed with grass, so desperate were they for want of grain.

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