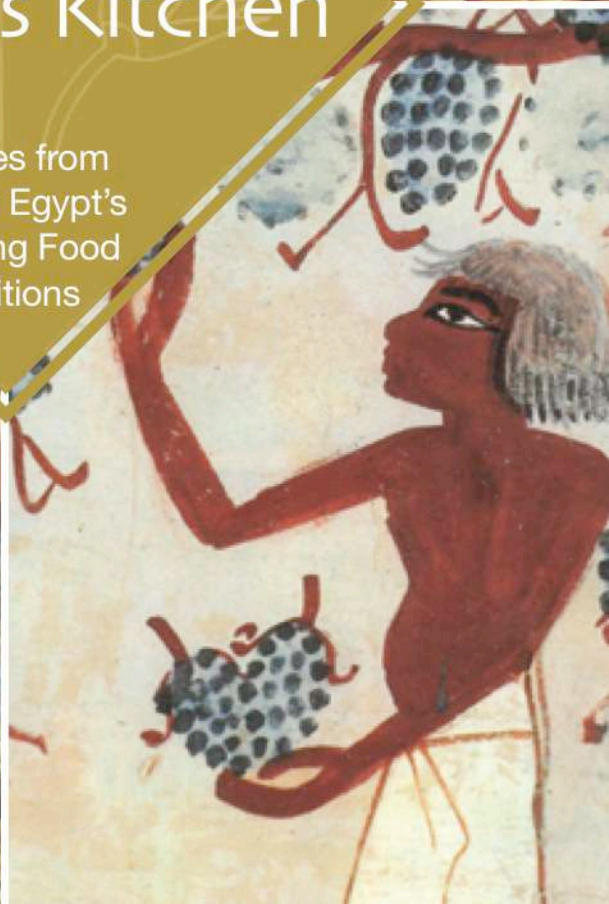
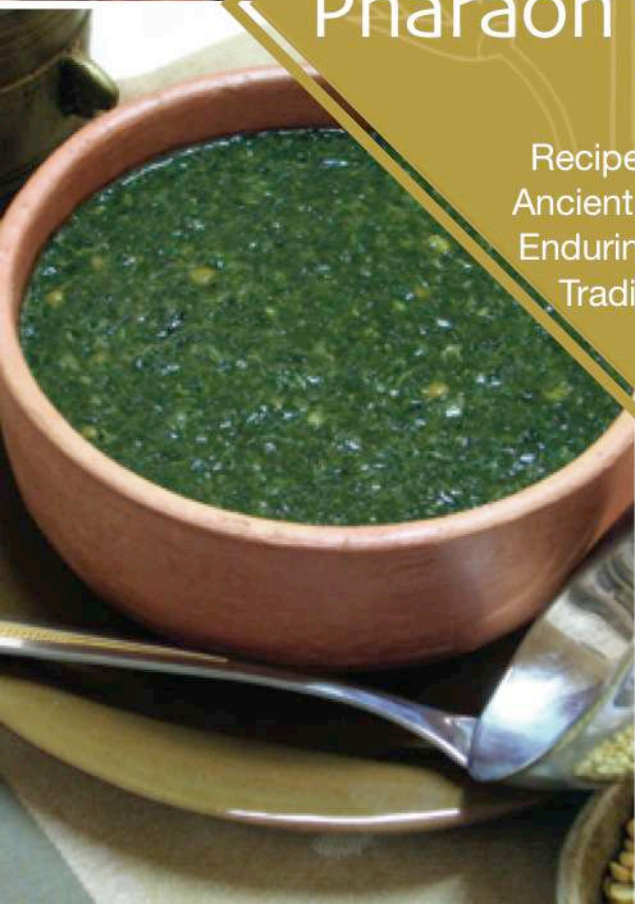


Magda Mehdawy
and Amr Hussein

The Pharaoh's Kitchen

Recipes from
Ancient Egypt's
Enduring Food
Traditions





Foreword

While ancient Egyptian civilization is best noted for its architecture, its elaborate temples and tombs, and arts and sculpture, there are other aspects of ancient Egyptian society that have been far less studied. The culture of food and drink—which entails the methods of preparation and consumption, kitchen planning and tools, as well as references in literary and other texts—is among those more obscure facets of the pharaonic era.

Food and drink are necessities of life and therefore an important area of research. The habits of the past are of the utmost relevance in the continuing habits of the present, and our knowledge of the aspects of food and drink still lacks a great deal of depth. Herein is the importance of this book. Magda Mehdawy and Amr Hussein's *The Pharaoh's Kitchen* offers a collection of modern-day recipes that have evolved from pharaonic cooking techniques and ingredients. Despite the abundant depictions of food and food preparation found on pharaonic walls and reliefs, the ancient Egyptians did not leave behind any recipes, making it difficult, if not impossible, to identify the methods of food preparation and dining etiquette of their civilization.

This book is an absorbing and serious attempt to investigate and develop the scant information about food and drink that has been passed on to us

from the ancients. The authors' findings are drawn from their own research of ancient Egyptian texts and images, classic references in literature, as well as their own extensive experience in this field. I would like to commend the authors for their worthy addition to the research of ancient Egyptian culture, and fully anticipate that *The Pharaoh's Kitchen* will receive the appreciation and applause that it deserves.

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Chapter 1

Food in Ancient Egypt

Home and Kitchen

Pharaonic Homes

Ancient Egyptian houses differed according to the social and economic class of their residents, ranging from small, basic structures for peasants and laborers to more elaborate homes for artists, priests, and men of state, villas for nobles, and palaces for kings.

Ancient Egyptians lived in simple houses made of mudbrick, the structure of which varied according to social status. At al-Bersha, house models, called 'storehouses,' were found that indicated three-story homes with separate outdoor facilities, like silos, to store grain, as well as places for weaving and making beer and furniture.¹ Houses of laborers in Tell al-Amarna built in the middle of the Eighteenth Dynasty (the New Kingdom) usually consisted of four halls starting with a corridor leading to a living room followed by a bedroom, then a kitchen. Remains were also discovered of a bigger house containing nine rooms that included a living room in the middle. Besides the many rooms, the house contained storehouses for grains and food. Another type of house, found in Deir al-Medina in Luxor, had been specifically designed for laborers, artists, and foremen working on the tombs of the west bank. Built of brick, these houses typically consisted of a

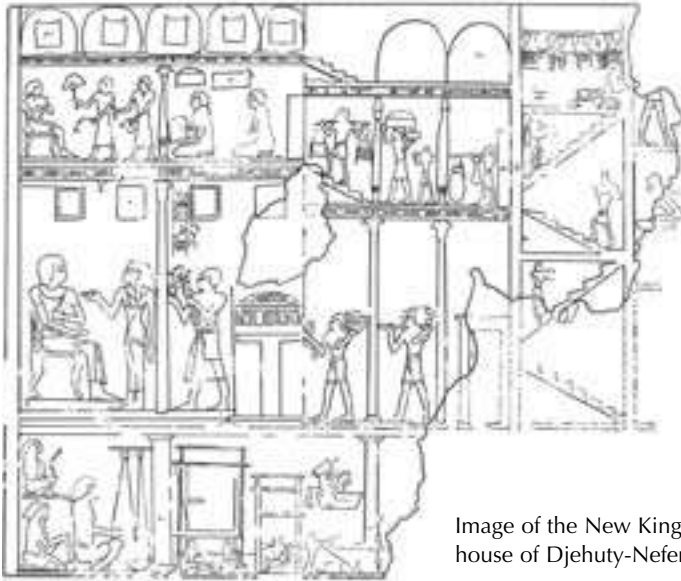


Image of the New Kingdom house of Djehuty-Nefer.

reception area and a sitting room, behind which a flight of stairs would lead to the roof, and a bedroom followed by a hall leading to the kitchen. In most cases there was also a room under ground for storage.²

A depiction of a house belonging to the nobleman Djehuty-Nefer dating to the New Kingdom shows a three-story house. The bottom floor lies mostly underground and appears to have been used for storage with rooms for servants to perform different tasks such as grinding grain. The floors above were for the owner and contained sitting rooms and bedrooms. This relief, which is currently on display at the Louvre Museum, proves that it was not rare for the bottom floor to lie at some depth below the ground.³ Big houses during the New Kingdom were typically two-story structures, with outdoor facilities such as a storehouse and a silo for grains, all surrounded by a fence with two gates. The main gate would be located right outside the house, and the other smaller one would lead to the outbuildings. The house would have a garden with a few trees, and some might contain a bench for the owner and his wife, and perhaps a small pond to attract birds. If the pond was big, there may have been a boat for pleasure rides.⁴

Roofs were usually flat and could be reached by fixed stairs, or by ladders. Some homeowners built silos on the roofs. Other country homes, like that

of the nobleman Nebamun, had a small building in the middle of the garden for the owner to receive guests.⁵

Houses of priests, civil servants, and soldiers found near Ramesses III's funerary temple in Medinet Habu were built in parallel rows and with a great deal of similarity. Some had a backyard and a row of columns. On one side was a hall, a large living room, and two bedrooms. On the other was a large storehouse for grain.

The silos used to store grain have been depicted on various tomb walls. One famous prototype of a silo in the Old Kingdom developed from a high, raised cylindrical structure similar to a small grain storehouse. Silos would be arranged in a long line against the wall of the backyard, and it is probable that the height to which it was raised off the ground made it possible for the storehouse to be filled with grain at ground level. The later models of this type from the Middle Kingdom were raised even higher and had a door mid-height to dispense grain.⁶

Houses would typically contain simple articles of furniture differing in quality and function according to the social class and wealth of the owners. Furniture would generally include a number of beds, a collection of stools and low tables made of wood or marble placed in different rooms of the house, a chair for the owner, and a variety of vessels made of stone and pottery. Homes were stocked with vessels and containers for daily use such as pans, plates, pans, and pitchers made of different materials, again according to the social status of their owners.⁷

Kitchen Planning and Cooking Tools⁸

The kitchen was located at the back of the house and would be covered by a roof of straw or branches to simultaneously block out the scorching Egyptian heat and allow the escape of cooking fumes. In villas, the kitchen was located entirely outside the house. A grain storehouse would serve the kitchen, sometimes being located alongside it or on the roof where it could be reached by stairs.

The kitchen area would be constructed along simple lines. In one corner there would be an oven covered in a layer of mud or a stove. There would also be one or two stone structures for the grinding of grains, or a tool,



Wooden model of a kitchen from the tomb of Meketre, Eleventh Dynasty, Middle Kingdom. On display at the Egyptian Museum.

known as *rehy*, which was made of two heavy stones placed on top of each other. The top one would have a hole in the middle and would be used to grind grain to make flour for bread. In another corner there would be a basin for kneading dough. The kitchen would contain pots and pans for cooking and vessels for storing water. Sometimes an alcove in the kitchen wall would hold the statue of a protecting household god.⁹

Tools used by the ancient Egyptians were fairly basic. If there was no fixed oven, a portable one would be used. This would take the shape of a circular pottery disc with a hole in the bottom where the fire was lit. If that was not available, ancient Egyptians would simply use a *canon*, a small campfire surrounded by a few stones used to hold the cooking vessel.

Although there is much that we do not know about ancient Egyptian ways of cooking, the depictions, wall paintings, tools, and cooking vessels discovered over the years have left us a general picture of the methods used. In addition to ovens and burners, there were also various pots with two handles for cooking, as well as plates, pans, pitchers, stone and clay urns,



Different types of ancient mortars, on display at the Museum of Agriculture, Cairo.

baskets to hold food, sieves, and pestles for grinding. Other implements used included knives to cut meat and butcher hooks.

Pots and Vessels

Ancient Egyptians used the rich soil of the Nile bank to make pottery. The most essential and therefore most common were basic vessels made of mud and used for cooking or storing grains and liquids.

Over the course of ancient Egyptian history there has appeared a vast array of pottery and stone vessels, judging by the many depictions of vessels on tomb and temple walls, and in hieroglyphs. Different kinds of containers were used for different purposes, including household (plates, wineglasses, goblets, and cups, platters, pitchers, jugs, urns, for cooking or for storing food, as well as milk jugs and beer and wine jars), funerary, and to store cosmetics such as kohl and ointments.

Many remains have been found from the pre-Naqada period (4000 BC) of well-turned red pottery vessels in wide circular shapes as well as tall, thin containers and others in a compressed spherical shape. At the time, the ancient Egyptians made vessels out of stone, the most common design being that with two handles resembling hollow ears. By far the most preferred material was basalt. Toward the end of the Predynastic period, there appeared vessels of red pottery and some round vessels made of pink clay.



Various ancient Egyptian vessels.

The tomb of Khasekhemwy in Abydos contained a number of vessels. Several were made of dolomite and one of carnelian with thin gold covers. Two others were fashioned out of copper and designed for the purpose of washing one's hands, one in the shape of a pitcher to pour water out of and the other a basin to catch the water.

The most common material used, however, was clay, and the most typical kind of vessel was the one used in the storage of grain or liquid. Vessels and pots were considered an essential part of one's furniture, and highly valuable personal property.¹⁰

Pots and vessels in modern-day Upper Egypt

The same kinds of vessels and pots are more or less used today, although modern plastic kitchen and glassware are also popular. For example, there are large jugs for storing and cooling water, red earthenware urns, and white

clay jugs with long necks, as well as clay kneading bowls (*magoor*) and drinking vessels (*mengal*). Modern Egyptians also use much the same utensils: casserole dishes in which to bake fish with crushed wheat, jars for storing ghee, bowls in which butter is made, and urns to make *ful medammes* (broad beans) or to cook yellow lentils with onion, butter, garlic, and pepper. Small jugs are also still used to store sour milk for up to one year, an essential ingredient in Upper Egyptian *keshk*. Likewise, jugs are used to make aged cheese, store turnips, transfer water from streams and canals, and to store and cool drinking water. Flat troughs for feeding birds and farm animals also still exist.



Deir al-Medina sieve, New Kingdom.

Food and Drink in Ancient Egyptian Society

Fertile Egyptian soil and the River Nile were main factors in helping the ancient Egyptians to cultivate a variety of plants and rear livestock. Food sources were diverse, and ancient Egyptians made good use of the different kinds of fish, vegetables, poultry, and fruits. The staple diet of most Egyptians consisted of bread and beer in addition to what produce the land yielded, such as onions, garlic, lentils, leeks, turnips, radish, lettuce, and cucumbers.

Since the Predynastic period, ancient Egyptians, rich or poor, consumed various breads made from different grains. Flour would generally be mixed with a yeasting agent, salt, and spices, and sometimes with eggs and butter. The bread could also be filled with legumes or vegetables or sweetened with honey or dates. The ancient Egyptians also used a fair share of legumes such as beans, chickpeas, and lentils as well as vegetables such as peas, lettuce, garlic, onions, and leeks. Dates were the most common fruit, in addition to figs, grapes, pomegranates, watermelon and plums, all of which appear in depictions of daily life dating back to the New Kingdom.¹¹

Depictions of daily life show the process of making dairy products such as cheese and butter as well as the extraction of oils like sesame, castor, and radish. The pharaohs frequently used herbs and spices such as aniseed, thyme, cumin, cinnamon, fennel, fenugreek, and mustard.¹²



Several phases of the harvest, including threshing and winnowing grain. Wall painting, Tomb of Menna, New Kingdom, Theban West Bank.

Food and Social Status

Types of food eaten give a clearer picture of the different social levels in the ancient Egyptian hierarchy. In the poorest stratum fell the peasants whose staple diet was bread and beer, and a few simple dishes of vegetables the land generously yielded to them. When they had meat, it was mainly that of smaller farm animals since larger livestock were used in agriculture.

Members of the middle or working classes like construction workers, ship-builders, and laborers were one rung higher on the social ladder, and their professions entitled them to daily rations. Their food varied between meat and fish with plates of vegetables, fruit, as well as the common factor of bread and beer.



Scene of eating and drinking.



Egyptians lucky enough to be born into the upper class lived a life of luxury. Their tables were weighed down with various dishes of meat, fish, and game besides all they desired of vegetables, fruit, breads, and pies. The drink of choice was wine.¹³

Food and Table Manners

The pharaohs were in many senses, gourmets, and the abundance of food sources in Egypt allowed them to vary their dishes in kind and amount, particularly on special occasions and at feasts and banquets.

But while the ancient Egyptians loved luxury, when it came to food they were apparently inclined toward moderation, a prime indication being the lithe bodies depicted in wall paintings and statues. The exaggeration and idealism that pervaded ancient Egyptian art aside, moderation in food and drink is discussed repeatedly in Egyptian literature. An Old Kingdom text addressed to the vizier Kagemni advises: “if you sit down to eat with many people, then look at the food with indifference, and if you desire it, then willpower does not take more than an instant and it is shameful for a person to be greedy. One cup will water a whole crop.”¹⁴

It was also said that, “if you sit with a greedy person, then don’t eat until he has had his fill. If you sit with a drunkard, don’t drink until he has filled his cup. And don’t trip over your own feet, running after meat. Take some when it is offered to you. Don’t refuse it, take it and only because it will gladden the offerer.”¹⁵

The *Instructions to King Merikare*, from the First Intermediate Period, encourages readers to “be content with loaves of bread, and beer.” Likewise Dua-Khety presents this advice to his son Pepy: “be content if you are satisfied with three loaves of bread, and two cups of beer. If your stomach still feels hunger, resist it.”¹⁶

Ancient Egyptians ate while seated at small tables laden with different kinds of meat, poultry, vegetables, fruits, and loaves of bread. Peasants would sit on a straw mat while the nobles would generally sit on stools or chairs, both eating with their fingers. Ladies and children would sit on cushions placed on the ground. Although pharaohs, too, are commonly depicted eating with their fingers—there is one such relief of Akhenaten and his family—here are depictions of utensils such as different-shaped plates and bowls for soups and other foods including sweet goulash, compote, appetizers and cream, as well as cutting knives, spoons and forks.¹⁷ Forks were used for cooking, not for eating.

Members of the family would probably not meet at breakfast. When the lord of the house finished washing and dressing, he would be offered a piece of bread and a glass of beer and perhaps a slice of meat and a piece of pie. Main meals were taken at noon and in the evening, with a lighter meal consumed in the afternoon, between four and five.¹⁸

Special Occasions

Despite the abundant produce, perhaps the ancient Egyptian was not unlike the Egyptian peasant of today: content with his daily bread. Ancient Egyptians were easily satisfied with a few loaves of bread, a share of beer, some leeks, and onions. The numerous tomb reliefs that picture the many pleasures of food and drink were probably more indicative of the lives of the upper strata of society, like the higher civil servants, priests, landowners, and nobles. The masses would wait for feasts and special occasions for an excuse to indulge. They likely did not have to wait long as festivals were numerous, judging by the annual special occasions relating to the seasons, the Nile, sowing, harvesting, as well as coronations and funerals.

As an agricultural society, ancient Egyptians held celebrations in honor of Renenutet, the goddess of harvest, and Min, the god of fertility, both of which were held in the summer. During the month of Keihak, feasts for the ploughing of the land were held, and the god Osiris was celebrated for being resurrected after death like the land which dies and then is reborn every season.¹⁹

Other special occasions that included food were royal feasts like coronations and anniversaries as well as the feasts of the dead in which families brought

food to the burial places of the deceased. Annual feasts to honor the gods were also held as well as other local celebrations specific to each region.²⁰

One of the most important religious celebrations was the New Kingdom Beautiful Feast of Opet, in which Amun, the official god of the state, traveled from his temple in Karnak to the temple in Luxor. The feast, which was important because it renewed the legitimacy of Opet, would continue for almost a month, and the king would present many sacrificial offerings including meat, poultry, fruit, milk, bread, and beer as well as flowers and perfume. The feast was celebrated annually and the town of Thebes was fed at the pharaoh's expense. Another big feast was the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, in which Amun visited the temples of the west bank in Luxor to welcome the cemetery gods, and which would last for ten days.

A celebration generally associated with the Ancient Egyptians is the Feast of the Harvest, commonly known today as Sham al-Nessim. The origin of the word *sham* is the ancient Egyptian *shmw* which means 'the season of harvest or summer.' Sham al-Nessim symbolized rebirth, and the ancient Egyptians believed that this day marked the beginning of creation. This particular celebration was famous for its variety of foods which included full, ripe green chickpeas that symbolized the coming of spring, and lettuce, which was popular because of its connection to the Min, god of fertility and reproduction.²¹

Types of Feasts

Formal these were celebrated throughout the country, for example the Feast of Inundation, the beginning of the seasons and the New Year

Local these were region- or city-specific, like those held in honor of a specific god

Personal folk feasts connected to a certain event or group of people

Religious these were in honor of the principal gods

Agricultural these included the feasts of the Nile, harvest, ploughing, and the Renenutet, the goddess of the harvest

Funerary these included the feasts of the dead in which families visited the tombs and graveyards of the deceased to offer them food

Banquets

Wall paintings give some idea of the banquets held by the ancient Egyptians. The variety of food presented depended largely on the status and wealth of the person holding the banquet. The wealthy would order the slaughter of a fattened bull, and the table would be laden with roasted goose, beer, wine, baskets of fruit, different kinds of bread, and numerous desserts. But most would not be able to afford such a lavish spread, so if occasion demanded they hold a banquet, a smaller animal like a sheep or goose would be slaughtered. Drinks would probably be limited to beer, which was very accessible.²²

Pierre Montet's *Daily Life in Egypt* describes how in well-to-do households banquets were preceded by much fanfare in the storehouses and kitchen. The bull was slaughtered and parts of it were grilled, then the geese were grilled. Kegs of beer and wine were prepared. The fruit was placed on plates and in baskets, and the water would be cooled in deep jugs. Musicians, singers, and dancers of both sexes were summoned. After the guests arrived and exchanged greetings, the hosts seated themselves on high-backed chairs while some prestigious seats would be set up for the more important guests. The rest sat on smaller chairs. The people of lesser social status sat on simple mats while the servants circulated among the guests, giving out flowers and perfume until it was time to serve the feast, followed by dessert. After the meal was eaten, the socializing continued with music, songs, and dancing. More dessert was then offered.

One of the most famous food scenes discovered dates back to the reign of Akhenaten in the Eighteenth Dynasty, and shows one of the pharaoh's daughters eating dried duck with her fingers. Another at Tell al-Amarna represents Akhenaten and his family eating together. The pharaoh holds a cut of roast meat while his wife Nefertiti eats one of the ducks. The queen mother is pictured chewing something and handing food to one of the younger princesses. Beside them stand tables laden with all kinds of food.²³

A typical Nubian banquet

Here is an example of a Nubian banquet comprising dishes that would have existed a very short time after the pharaonic era.²⁴ This menu consists of okra with beef, pickled palm tree pith, *roqaq* (see recipe on p. 36), roasted yam, crocodile date loaf, barley porridge, barley beer (see recipe on p. 128), boiled cardamom with cloves. Salt and fruit sugar were placed at any dining table for guests to season or sweeten their food.²⁵

Mashed Okra with Beef

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 1 kg large okra
- 3 tbsp ghee
- 1 onion
- 1/2 kg beef, cubed
- 2 1/2 liters meat broth
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp pepper
- 4 cloves garlic
- 2 tbsp dried coriander

Method

1. Wash okra and place in a sieve to dry. Cut into small pieces and lightly sauté in 1 tbsp ghee. Remove okra and drain in a sieve.
2. Grate onion and sauté in 1 tbsp ghee until golden yellow. Add beef cubes and stir a few minutes. Add broth, cover and simmer until meat is half cooked.
3. Add okra, salt, and pepper and simmer over medium heat until fully cooked.
4. Mince garlic and coriander and sauté in the remaining tablespoon of ghee. Sprinkle over dish. Serve.

Pickled Palm Tree Pith

Serves 6

Ingredients

Small palm tree pith, sliced (like pineapple)
Medium onion, sliced
1 cup red wine
8 cloves garlic, whole
1 tbsp salt
1/2 tsp chilli
2 thin slices of fresh ginger

Method

1. Mix all ingredients in a glass jar and leave for 2 days.
2. Strain and serve.

Note: Palm pith, the upper inner part of the palm trunk, is high in nutritional value, traditionally believed to contain hormones that help increase sperm level.

Barley Porridge

Serves 3

Ingredients

1 1/2 cups water or milk
1 cup barley
1/2 cup coconut milk
1 cup of honey or carob juice

Method

1. Bring milk or water to a boil, then add barley.
2. Add coconut milk and stir.
3. Lower heat and leave mixture to simmer until thickened (20–30 minutes).
4. Add honey or carob juice and serve as dessert.

Roasted Yam

Serves 2

Ingredients

- 2 yams
- 2 large palm tree leaves, rinsed
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 2 tbsp butter

Method

1. Wash yams well and wrap in palm tree leaves.
2. Bury in live coals for at least an hour until they are roasted.
3. Unwrap from leaves and season with salt. Add butter and serve.

Note: Yam is a root vegetable resembling white sweet potato but it is usually bigger (one piece weighs more than a kilogram). It contains a high percentage of carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals, and grows commonly in central Africa.

Crocodile Date Loaf

Serves 6

Ingredients

- 1 cup full cream milk (goat or sheep)
- 1/2 cup butter
- 2 cups date honey
- 1/2 kg 'agwa (pitted and packed dates)
- 1 cup coconut flakes

Method

1. Mix milk, butter, and honey, and heat until mixture forms a smooth ball.
2. Add 'agwa and stir until mixture turns into a ball that comes off the edges of the pan.
3. Remove from heat. Add coconut flakes and knead until stiff.
4. Place dough in a piece of damp cloth and, using your hands, fashion the loaf into a crocodile shape.
5. Leave to cool. When dry, slice and serve.

Note: Crocodiles are traditionally believed to bring good luck.

Food and the Gods

The ancient Egyptians identified spiritually with the forces of nature surrounding them, including the sun, moon, wind, the inundation of the Nile, the strength of fierce animals like lions, snakes, and crocodiles, or powerful animals that were of use to them like cows and bulls. There were many gods, one for each invisible force behind the phenomenon, thus becoming intertwined with the lives of the ancient Egyptians. They did not only worship tangible powers, but also less tangible ones symbolized by animals. For example, the force of wisdom was symbolized by the ibis of Thoth, and fertility by the bull.²⁶ The deification of animals made them a symbol for a certain god or power, but it did not stop the ancients from using them for food, transport, or other purposes. Thus the cow was used for farming, and though the ancient Egyptians deified the crocodile, they didn't find anything incongruous about killing it if they felt their lives were threatened.

The large number of gods worshiped in ancient Egypt was reflected in their various functions. The official god of state, changing over the ages, was accompanied by many primary gods, regional gods, and gods of secondary importance, all of whom would have a role in some aspect of Egyptian public and daily life. Nepri, the god of grain, reflected the importance of that crop in the lives of the ancient Egyptians. Renenutet, the mother of Napri, protected the harvest. Hapi was the god of the Nile and its inundation. Hatmethit was a fish goddess, fish being an important food source. Shesmu was the god of the vine, a precious crop. Osiris was the god of the afterlife and had many functions. He symbolized the agricultural cycle, renewed fertility, and made seeds and plants shoot out of the earth. Nefertum was pictured as a man with a lotus over his head and was the god of scents and the lotus flower.

These gods were closely linked to the most important aspects of the lives of the ancient Egyptians and the source of daily food. The ancients adopted other gods as well for their protection—and the protection of their families and their homes—such as the goddesses Taueret and Bastet, and the god Bes. Min was one of the oldest-revered Egyptian deities, worshiped as the god of fertility. Min's status always remained very high and he was eventually worshiped as a primary god. He was represented by lettuce, which the ancient Egyptians believed increased one's strength, vitality, and fertility. It has become very

recently known that lettuce does in fact contain a large amount of vitamin E which serves as an antioxidant and a general immune system booster.²⁷

Offerings

The offerings regularly given to the gods or to the deceased were a major part of the lives of the ancient Egyptians, the rituals accompanying these offerings woven into the pharaonic culture over centuries. One of the earliest rituals was the purification of the priest or person who was to approach sacred relics. A tomb engraving that dates to the Old Kingdom reads: "Everyone who enters here must be pure, as pure as they make themselves before entering the tomb of the great god." Purification rites often entailed washing and abstaining from eating meat or fish.

Offerings constituted a regular and organized form of worship. There were daily offerings that, while undoubtedly far less copious than the amounts of produce offered on special occasions, still contained bread, meat, and fruit. The offerings placed in front of the statue of the god and on the offering tables were the main sustenance of priests and workers in the temple. Funeral rituals were similar. Burial rites would take place in the tombs.

The ancient Egyptians believed in an afterlife and one of its prerequisites was the mummification of the deceased's body to preserve it for the other world. Ancient Egyptians also left burial 'furniture,' accoutrements that the deceased would need in the afterlife, from furnishings to jewelry to grains. They would then perform religious ceremonies and offerings would be placed in front of the tomb. A common ancient prayer was that the deceased be blessed with a thousand loaves of bread, a thousand jars of beer, a thousand geese, a thousand bulls, and a thousand of everything that is good. But offerings, which were more likely to be a few loaves of bread on the altar, frequently did not live up to the prayers. In feasts and on special occasions, fruit would be added and sometimes a calf or bull.

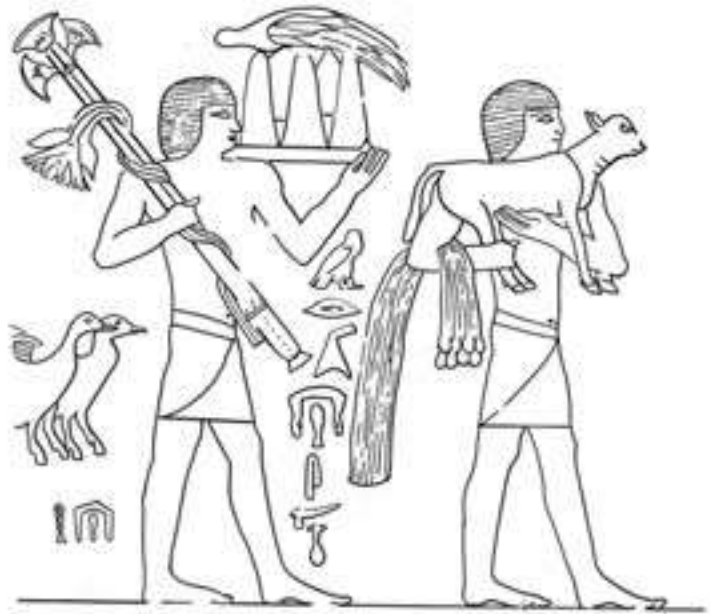
The ancient Egyptians believed that gods, like humans, needed food and drink and thus their rituals and rites obliged them to give offerings to the gods at specific times. Daily rituals started at dawn. The priest would approach the statuette of the deity and anoint it with incense. Then he would greet the god and recite some hymns. Taking the religious instruments



Bearers bringing gifts of food to add to a group of offerings. Fish, poultry, and baskets of grapes can be seen. Wall painting, Tomb of Nakht, Theban West Bank.

that would probably be lying in a box near the statue of the god, the priest would sprinkle the god with water, drape strips of linen over it, and anoint it with oil. The priest would then place the offerings in front of the god: different kinds of food and drink, bread, geese, meat, wine, and water. The offerings would be passed among the other, more minor gods, as well as to some kings and eminent figures who had the honor of having statues erected for them in the temple. After that, the priests would divide the offerings among themselves and the morning ritual would be over. In the afternoon, a simpler ceremony would take place. The priest would only pour a little water, and some incense would be burned. Evening offerings were as plentiful and diverse as those of the morning.

Offering rituals were only one of the tasks that workers in temples had to perform. For example, at the Temple of Amun different priests were responsible for the various jobs of making food, such as the wine maker, the beer maker, the baker, the dessert chefs, the chief beekeeper of Amun's temple, and the head of the kitchen of Amun's temple.²⁸



Offering bearers, Tomb of Akhethotep, Saqqara, Old Kingdom.

Sacrificial and feast-related offerings

The significant amount of food offered to the gods and the deceased in ancient Egypt is proof of the abundance of produce throughout the land. For example, the list of “the gifts of King Ramesses III to the temples of the gods” is inscribed on what is considered the longest ancient Egyptian papyrus ever found: the Harris Papyrus.²⁹

The offerings of the old feasts were instituted by King Ramesses III (Woser Maat Ra Mery Amun), the great god of this temple, and were given every second year, starting from the ninth year of his reign until the thirty-first year of his rule. These offerings would include soft bread, golden loaves, long white loaves, pies in the shape of cows, bulls, castrated calves, white mountain goats, live geese, fowl, honey, fruit, dates, milk, and grape vines. Special grains were vital sacred offerings on the Feast of the Sky and Beginning of the Seasons which were introduced by Ramesses III in honor of his father, the grand Atum, master of two lands (lower and upper Egypt) who ruled Heliopolis, and Ra Horakhty, in exchange for multiple blessings in life, work, and health.

The Burial Banquet

Chapter 99 of the Book of the Dead describes a beautiful image of life after death: “If the deceased knew of this chapter, he would arrive at the fields of the unknown where bread and wine is given on the altar of the Great One and fields and estates filled with wheat and barley will be harvested for him by the followers of Horus. And he will eat from that barley and wheat and will nourish his body with it.”³⁰

With food such an essential part of the afterlife, it is not surprising that at burial banquets, which took place during burials and in front of the tombs, tables trembled under the weight of food, drink, and bundles of flowers. The family of the deceased dressed in their finery and decorated themselves with flowers. The servants followed, serving pots of wine while everyone helped themselves to the food spread out in front of them, singing to the deceased: “Celebrate the happy day. Anoint yourself with blessings and with oil. Place wreaths and lotus flowers on the body of your beloved sister sitting beside you. Order her to sing and play tunes. Throw all grief behind your back.”

If the richer classes knew how to hold these rituals, the poor aspired to them according to their social capabilities. They maintained the same rituals in accordance with their social means so as not to compromise their status in the afterlife. The less privileged imitated the grand celebrations by making small wooden effigies in the shape of mummies inscribed with the names of the deceased and placing them inside small coffins, burying the coffins close to graves housing better-off citizens. In this way the deceased would get, through the effigy that represented him, happiness and the comfortable life of food and drink that the mummy in the bigger grave would have.³¹ This was not only for the poor: people of status also did a similar thing, commissioning their graves to be built next to those of royalty in the hopes of gaining a luxurious afterlife with the dead royal.

The Funerary Meal

The ancient Egyptians believed very strongly that the deceased would regain life in the tomb after death and would resume his or her usual activities, and thus had the same needs and daily requirements of life on earth. The ancients were buried with the objects of daily use that they might need in

the afterlife, including food. Meat was a prized possession, as evidenced by finds at a First Dynasty Saqqara burial chamber known as Tomb 3111. Excavated by Walter B. Emery in 1936, the tomb was found to contain ox skeletons as well as remains of what once were cuts of meat.³² Burial chambers would also frequently contain grain storehouses built as a circular structure with a hole in the top for storing and one near the bottom for dispensing grain. The deceased would not lack for drink either, for graves were supplied with pottery filled with wine.

In the Old Kingdom, the deceased would be buried with a list of delicacies in the hopes that the inscribed foods would forever keep his or her hunger satiated. The ancients also believed that the inscriptions carried a deep magic that would renew the supply of the deceased's favorite foods endlessly and at will. Images of the harvest, grape picking, hunting scenes, and fish pictured on tomb walls were thought to have similar powers.

A full meal was found in one of the mastaba tombs of Saqqara dating to the Second Dynasty.³³ It had been placed carefully next to the woman buried in it and contained loaves of bread, barley porridge, a cooked fish, pigeon broth, cooked quail, two cooked kidneys, ox haunches and ribs of beef, stewed fruits, possibly figs, fresh berries, pies with honey, cheese, and a vessel of wine. Ostensibly, it was not possible for the deceased to suffer from hunger with this meal next to him for eternity. As long as the food was not harmed or stolen, the spirit of the deceased could live on.