

Food

In ancient Egypt, the basic foods for the common (nonwealthy) people were bread, vegetables, and fruits. Egyptians enjoyed eating and drinking, but only wealthy people could afford luxury meals and drinks. Moreover, many kinds of plants, vegetables, fruits, and flowers were used for the daily cult in temples, for funerary use in tombs, or for decoration. In gardens and orchards, a great variety of fruit trees, vegetables, herbs, and spices were grown. Egyptians spent much time during their lives in preparing for death and providing food for eternity and everything they had enjoyed during their lives. The knowledge about the Egyptian diet mainly comes from paintings, food remains, and mummified bodies in tombs.

Egyptians enjoyed gardens. Kings had gardens in their palaces, and temples had gardens inside their enclosure walls and sometimes out in front. Egyptian houses are depicted with fruit trees and vines and a pool in the middle of the yard, all surrounded by a wall. The gardens and orchards produced a great variety of foods for the living and for the dead. Plants, fruits, and vegetables were grown to feed the family and workers and to pay taxes for the temple and the pharaoh. The orchards and gardens of the temples, and those planted in front of tombs, provided food for the priests and offerings for the cult. Apart from food, plants were also used for decoration.

A great variety of vegetables were planted, such as garlic, onion, cucumber, lettuce, asparagus, and legumes (lentils, beans, and peas). Many vegetable oils were produced from the castor oil plant, flax seed, and radish seed, and oil from seeds of the horseradish tree was highly priced. From palm and fruit trees, many kinds of products were obtained, such as dates from the date palm tree, which could be eaten fresh or dried; nuts from the doum palm; and figs from the sycamore tree. Pomegranate, olive, and almond trees appeared in Egypt during the Eighteenth Dynasty (1550–1295 BCE), when there was a great deal of trade with the Near East.

The vineyards provided grapes that were considered delicious to eat fresh or dried (raisins), although they were mainly used for wine making. Wine was a luxury drink and seven times more expensive than beer in the village of the royal tomb builders at Deir el-Medina in Western Thebes during the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BCE). Spices such as cinnamon, anise, fennel, rosemary, and coriander were appreciated and used for cooking as well as in medical prescriptions.

Bread and beer were the staple foods for both poor and rich, and grains were basic for the food from which bread and beer were made. The most cultivated grains were emmer wheat and barley. Barley would have been mainly used for baking and brewing in the poorer houses. In better off homes, bread loaves and cakes of different forms, such as ovals and triangles, were produced, and for special occasions some were sweetened or flavored with seeds, nuts, or spices. Honey was expensive and highly appreciated as a sweetener.

Regarding the diet of the ancient Egyptians, a big difference existed between the royal family, nobles and priests, and the common people, such as farmers and servants. The diet of nonwealthy Egyptians consisted basically of bread, onions, and beer but also fish, pork, vegetables, such as cucumber. Lots of pork bones have been found in settlements, such as the workers' village at Tell el-Amarna. For

most Egyptians, the basic animal protein sources were fish, pork, and wildfowl. The poorer the person, the smaller the animal he or she could eat.

Fish were caught in the Nile by fishermen with nets and then prepared, for example, being dried or salted, and kept in storerooms to be consumed later. Birds and fowl, such as ducks, geese, pigeons, finches, cranes, and storks, were hunted to eat. Ducks and geese were kept in poultry yards, where they were fed on grain. The force-feeding of geese is documented in the mastaba tomb of Kagemni at Sakkara, dating to the Sixth Dynasty (2345–2181 BCE), and this scene is considered as evidence for the precursor of modern pâté. Goose provided a large meal and was eaten on special occasions. Apart for their meat, some birds were raised in aviaries for obtaining eggs. Eggs of birds, including pigeons and, possibly, pelicans, were eaten but also offered to gods with fresh green leaves to keep them cool. Pigeons and also fish roe were considered special foods in ancient Egypt, much like today.

In ancient Egypt, goat and lamb were consumed on special occasions. Children drank the milk of the goats and sheep, and the milk was also used for the production of cheese and a kind of yogurt, although their Egyptian names are unknown. Chicken was introduced into the diet much later, during the Ptolemaic Period (332–30 BCE).

Meat from cattle was a luxury product. Only the royal family and the wealthy elite could afford eating meat from cattle (ox and cow), antelope, and gazelle. Cattle were the most highly prized of all domestic animals. It was expensive to feed the animal for some years until it had grown up and could be slain, and of course it needed proper farm fields in which to graze. Beef was the main meat offered on a daily basis in temples and tombs, and as the priests were paid with the food offerings, they had a diet high in red meat.

No ancient Egyptian books of cooking recipes have been found, up to now, that could give us information on methods of food preparation. Food remains in tombs have provided evidence that oil, salt, and garlic were used for cooking. Some tomb scenes show meat being boiled or roasted on a skewer. Fish was normally grilled. Fowl were consumed quickly: they were hung up, the feathers removed, and then washed. Duck and goose were first salted or dried and then grilled. Salt was used to preserve both meat and fish. Fish could be also smoked, and another way to preserve it was to sun-dry it.

Fasting (willing abstinence or not eating certain foods) was a sign of respect during the period preceding the burial of a dead person. There seem to have been taboos on eating pig or certain fish for priests; in the case of fish, it was for their connection with the myth of god Osiris. Common people used to eat twice a day, in the morning and the evening, and they did it on low tables. There was a common dish from which people ate, either with his or her hands or with the help of bread. Before and after eating, they would wash their hands with water. Wealthy people sat on chairs at a small table where an individual service was set, but without cutlery. Furthermore, they would also rinse their mouths with salty water after their meals.

Beginning with the Old Kingdom (2686–2160 BCE), reliefs and paintings in elite tombs show the servants producing and preparing food and drinks for the

dead to enjoy in the afterlife. The different steps of baking, brewing, and wine making are represented. The tomb owner is shown fishing and hunting birds in the marshes. Workers and servants prepare fish and fowl, and butchery scenes of domestic cattle are shown. Tomb paintings of the Eighteenth Dynasty show lavish banquets with guests, where a cup of wine is offered to welcome them. In the Theban tomb of Nebamun, an offering table is shown loaded with red meat, fowl, cucumbers, fruit, honeycombs, wine jars, and lotus flowers for decoration. In reliefs of the rock tombs at Tell el-Amarna, food stored in the palaces is shown. There are a few market scenes in tombs, showing an exchange of grain in small bags for fish, cakes, or loaves of bread.

Food remains from the tombs and the village of Deir el-Medina include loaves of bread; fruits, such as grapes, figs, and dates; and ducks, beer, and wine. Ovens were still in place in some of the house. In the tomb of the architect Kha (Theban Tomb 8) at Deir el-Medina, bread loaves of many types, including ones in the shape of animals, and sealed amphorae labeled that they contained wine, salted meat, dried fish, dates, grapes, and garlic were found. There were also three large string nets filled with doum palm fruit. In the tomb of King Tutankhamun (Valley of the Kings, KV 62) at Thebes, food for his afterlife included different loaves of bread, as well as grain to make bread; 48 boxes of meat, the majority of which was wings and breast of duck; quite a number of spices, including coriander, sesame, black cumin, and fenugreek; chickpeas and lentils; several types of wine; honey; dates; grapes; and almonds.

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See also: Agriculture; Animals; Beer; Fish; Hunting; Pottery; Tomb Models; Tomb of Tutankhamun; Wine

Further Reading

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Footwear

From the earliest times onward, people in ancient Egypt wore sandals, which we know from archaeological finds as well as depictions, the most famous being the sandals shown on the Narmer Palette dating to the late Predynastic (3200–3000 BCE). These sandals were made of leather. Probably in the Old Kingdom