

**Before Apicius:
The World's Oldest Recipes**

by L.A. Curchin

The eating habits of the ancients are amply attested in literature, be it Homer on the beef-eating Mycenaeans, Petronius on Trimalchio's banquet, or the meals described in Juvenal's 5th and 11th satires. From animal bones and fossilized seeds and pollen the archaeologist can reconstruct the ancient diet, while pottery specialists recover the amphoras used for storing foods and the cooking and serving vessels which they imaginatively label as bean pots, stew pots, sauce boats, even ouzo cups. Food and dishes can similarly be seen in ancient mosaics and wall paintings. The menu, then, is no secret; the real problem is, how were these meals prepared? Until now, virtually our sole source of information has been the Roman cookbook attributed to Apicius, a gourmet of the first century AD, though probably written much later. But now, new and much earlier evidence of ancient cooking techniques has come to light, in the form of three clay tablets in cuneiform script from southern Babylonia. Of these "culinary tablets", which date to about 1700 BC (roughly contemporary with the zenith of Minoan civilization), the best preserved contains 21 recipes for meat stew and four for vegetable stew. (Since all the dishes are cooked in fat and water, some may rather have resembled soup.) The other tablets describe pastries, fruit and cereal dishes. The meats used are chiefly beef and mutton, and even the recipes for bird or vegetable stews often call for meat to be added.

As with modern recipes, the key to fine cuisine was a delicate combination of herbs and spices, such as onions, garlic, leeks, cumin, mint, juniper and coriander. Each recipe requires at least three and sometimes as many as ten such condiments, though the exact quantities are left to the cook's discretion. Butter and honey also figure in some of the recipes. Though all the stews were boiled, there is a wide variety

of preparation techniques, such as soaking, slicing, straining, squeezing, pounding and crumbling. Some recipes call for the meat to be seared or braised before boiling. Here are a few examples:

"Partridge Stew. Meat from fresh leg of mutton is needed. Boil water and throw fat into it. Clean the partridges. Add coarse salt as needed, plus hulled cake of malt. Crush together in a pot onions, leeks, garlic and milk. Then, after cutting-up the partridges, plunge them into the stock from the pot and cook in a cauldron. Then put them back in the pot (to simmer). Remove and carve."

"Turnip Soup. No meat required. Boil water and throw fat into it. Add onion, dorsal thorn, coriander, cumin and kanashu [a type of legume]. Squeeze garlic over top. Add onion and mint."

The most detailed recipe tells how to make "small bird" pie. The birds and their giblets are first seared in the cauldron, then boiled in a sauce of milk, water, salt and onions. While these are cooking, we make the pastry shell: "After sifting the flour, soften with milk until puffy, and knead. Add pickle juice, samidu, leeks and garlic. Use enough milk and cooking oil to keep the dough soft. Divide the dough into two portions and set half aside. Select a platter that is large enough to hold the cooked birds. Make a bottom out of the dough just kneaded, letting it overhang the rim by four fingers. Flatten this dough into a thin crust. Then select a platter large enough to completely cover the cooked birds. Take the dough which you have set aside, sprinkle with mint and roll flat to use as a top crust. Bake (the crusts), then remove from fire and rub with oil. Leave in the platter until serving time. When the birds and their sauce are cooked, pound together leek, garlic and andakhshu and place in the (bottom) platter. Add the chopped giblets. Sprinkle with sauce, and over this a little cooking oil. Cover the whole with the prepared top crust and send to the table."

Bon appetit!