

Looking Back - Way Back!

Don Mercer
Associate Professor, Food Science
Kemptville Campus University of Guelph

Contrary to what our kids used to say, I was not around to witness the extinction of the dinosaurs, nor was I personally present for the discovery of the wheel. However, ancient history has always fascinated me, especially the pyramids of Egypt. Being a “Foodie”, it is not a giant leap to move from amazement of the lasting monuments left by these ancient people to wondering how they lived and what they ate. For many of us, it is hard to imagine a world without convenience foods, snack foods, and of course, the microwave oven. (I will freely admit to being around when the microwave oven came into prominence).

One story that I find rather interesting concerns the origin of marshmallows. According to legend, a merchant at the time of King Tut (about 3,300 years ago) ventured into a marshy area along the Nile late one night. A beam of light from the full moon illuminated a white frothy substance near the base of some reeds, or mallows. For some unexplained reason, this adventuresome fellow decided to throw caution to the wind. He tasted the soft, sticky mass, and found it surprisingly pleasant. Being of an entrepreneurial spirit, he sweetened it, possibly with a bit of honey, and began selling his discovery in the marketplace. Word quickly reached King Tut who tried it. Tut immediately declared that from that day forward the marshmallow, as we now call it, would be reserved for the exclusive consumption of the gods - including himself, of course. Today, marshmallows are enjoyed by millions, although they are produced in a somewhat less exotic manner and contain only food-approved ingredients.

While the marshmallow story may be a fanciful tale, what did the Egyptians of this time actually eat?

The Nile River was a great provider for them. Each year it overflowed its banks depositing rich silt over the surrounding landscape. Such fertile soil supported a successful agricultural base for the economy. The Egyptians were able to grow wheat and barley in apparent abundance.

Wheat was ground by hand to make flour, which in turn was mixed with water and yeast to form a dough for bread, a staple food in all ancient Egyptian diets. The dough was molded into triangular loaves and baked in clay ovens.

Not lacking in creativity, the ancient Egyptians used their barley to make beer through a process today’s brew-masters might find peculiar, to say the least. They made a dough from barley and yeast. After partially baking the dough, they broke it into small pieces and mixed it with water in large vats. Once the concoction had fermented, dates or honey were added to flavour it.

In addition to delivering fertile soil, the Nile provided large quantities of fish such as perch and catfish. Fish were an important part of the daily diet since the desert climate made it difficult to raise livestock for meat, which only the very wealthy could afford to eat. Geese and ducks were also raised and wild birds were hunted in the marshes along the river. Food could be preserved by drying it in the sun, or by salting it.

According to depictions on tomb walls and other evidence found in burial chambers, onions, leeks, beans, lettuce, lentils, cabbage, radishes and turnips were among the vegetables grown in local gardens. Dates and figs were the more popular desserts enjoyed at the time.

To add a little pizzazz to their diets, the Egyptians used herbs and seasonings such as dill, coriander, mustard, cinnamon, and rosemary, as well as vinegar, cumin, and marjoram.

Venturing a little further back in time and travelling eastward to ancient Mesopotamia, there are unique records of the food that was typically eaten. Archaeologists have discovered 3,700 year-old clay tablets with inscriptions of thirty-five favourite recipes for various stews etched in cuneiform. This is generally regarded as being the world's first cookbook and conveys a major innovation in cooking methodology. Prior to this, foods were cooked directly over a fire or in a clay oven. However, all these recipes focussed on cooking meats, grains, and vegetables in water - an advance that opened new culinary opportunities.

Surprisingly, samples of food from more than three thousand years ago have survived through time, thanks to the dry climate of the Egyptian desert. Bread and honey have been found in tombs and can be seen in museums around the world.

All of this makes you wonder what will be found of our dietary delights three thousand years from now, and what those viewing them will think of our culinary customs.



According to legend, marshmallows have their origin in ancient Egypt