

Byzantine Gastronomy

Byzantine cuisine synthesized dishes from ancient Greece and the Roman Empire with new ingredients and many innovations. The Empress Theodora (ca. A.D. 500 – 548) invited cooks from different parts of mainland Greece and the islands to cook for her. As the capital of a powerful and rich empire, Constantinople, a bustling city of as many as 1,000,000 inhabitants at its height during the Macedonian dynasty of the late 9th-early 11th centuries, was the center of the domestic and foreign trade of Byzantium. Grain, wine, salt, meat, cheese, vegetables and fruits flowed from the provinces into its markets. The capital was also the centre of luxury trade: exotic spices and lavish foods (such as black caviar) were popular imports for the wealthy land owners, the officials of the State and Church and the rich members of the new middle class, the “mesoi”, who could afford them.

Beans were a common source of protein for the peasants, the poor and the monks during fasting. The variety of vegetables, fruits and condiments-black pepper, honey, olive oil, vinegar, salt, mushrooms, celery, leeks, lettuce, chicory, spinach, turnips, eggplant, cabbage, white beets, almonds, pomegranates, nuts, apples, lentils, raisins etc. which were listed as food of the poor by Ptohoprodromos (Poems-1150), mirrors both the interest in good eating and the availability of healthy ingredients regardless of economic class. Tomato and potato were not part of the Byzantine diet, as they were introduced to the area many years later.

Bread played a very important role in the Byzantine diet, so much so that the guild of bakers of Constantinople and their animals were never used by the state in order that bread baking could not be interrupted (Book of the Eparch, 911-912). The wealthy ate very good quality bread which was contrasted with the low quality bread of the poor and peasants.

Given the location of Constantinople, close to the fish rich Bosporus, its inhabitants were piscivores. Fresh fish, fish cured with salt, shellfish (which was considered appropriate for fasting but also an aphrodisiac), fish roe were part of their diet. A special sauce, “garos”, was prepared from the intestines of fish.

Although fish was an important part of their diet, Byzantines enjoyed meat as well, mainly pork and sheep or goats. Young and tender animals were boiled or roasted, marinated in vinegar and honey (oxymeli). They also knew how to cure meat . Apokti (salted and dried meat) and apaki (a vinegar –cured and smoked pork meat) are two Byzantine innovations. Liver and tripe were also consumed, as well as sausages (loukanika). When the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottomans in 1453, fish no longer comprised one of the main delicacies in the palace; it was replaced by meat and rice, which were part of the diet of the nomadic Turks.

The increasing availability of rice and sugar, thanks to Arabs, enriched Byzantine cooking and confectionary. Spoon sweets and various puddings (such as rice pudding) trace their roots to Byzantium. Wine, either alone or combined with honey or spices, was very popular, continuing the tradition of Ancient Greece. *Konditon* was a wine flavored with cinnamon, black pepper and spikenard.