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THE BANQUET OF PHILOXENUS

The usual picture of the parties and entertainments of classical Athens seems to have room for little more than wine. The word *symposion* meant, simply, 'drinking together'. Those rich enough to have a house with more than one or two rooms would have a room set up for just this purpose, at least as formal as any English dining room. It would be furnished with five or more couches around its walls, and its name would be described in precisely this way – a 'five-couch room' or something of the sort. There would be small, easily portable tables to be placed in front of each couch.

There are more details in a unique document from Sicily or Greece of about 400 BC, the strange sensuous *Banquet* of Philoxenus, a poetic celebration of obsessive culinary pleasures, a literary dinner-party:

For our hands, a silver jug, a gentle child to pour it;
sprigs of slender myrtle woven for wreaths.
Bring a pair of slaves with a shiny table, and another, and another, until
they have filled the room.
Baked in snow-white barley-rolls in baskets,
Bring a whole eel – no, bigger than that – call it a *marmite*, full of a noble eel with
a little of the conger about him,
glazed shrimps besides, my love,
sprinkled with sea-salt,
Baked in flaky pastry,
Bring a baked tuna, gods! what a huge one, fresh from the fire and the pan
with the carving-knife,
Bring steaks from its tender belly to delight us both as long as we might
be able to stay and munch.

Who was this unusual author? Modern editors assert that it was Philoxenus of Leucas, a legendary glutton of whom it was said that he had drunk drinking unbearably hot water and putting his hand into the hot water at the baths, to train himself to snatch and swallow the best of fish as soon as it emerged from the oven. Who was this glutton though he was, no one knows if Philoxenus of Leucas was anything at all. It is more likely that the *Banquet* was written by the



once famous Philoxenus of Cythera, a much more interesting figure. He was court poet to the ruler of the Greek cities in Sicily, Dionysius I of Syracuse (c. 430–367 BC), and was best known for his tale *Galatea* in which the Cyclops falls in love with a mountain nymph. The unlucky Philoxenus, rumour said, had once been caught in bed with another Galatea, the king's mistress, and had been condemned to hard labour in the Syracusan quarries as a punishment. There is nothing of this, however, in the *Banquet!*

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talk.*

At last we had had our fill of food and drink:
The servants cleared away, and brought in warm water, soap and oil of
orris to wash our hands.
They gave us muslin towels, divine perfumes, wreaths of violets.
Then the same polished tables, loaded up with more good things, sailed
back to us, 'second tables' as men say:
Sweet pastry shells,

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Crispy flapjacks,
Toasted sesame cakes drenched in honey sauce,
Cheesecake, made with milk and honey, a sweet that was baked like a pie;
Cheese-and-sesame sweetmeats fried in hottest oil and rolled in sesame
seeds were passed around . . .

With the bringing in of clean tables came the break between dinner and drinking-party. At this stage, with the sweets and nuts, wine was first served; at this point in the evening, wherever they had eaten, leisured Greeks looked for a house where the wine promised to flow.

In a respectable house, the dining room was a place for men's dinners and drinking-parties. Women of the household would be out of sight, though dancers and flute-girls, hired for the occasion, might be seen in the dining room often enough.

Entertainment and wine; poetry and music; and often, it seems, deep and serious conversation. On the occasion that is described in Plato's famous *Symposium* – how realistically, no one knows – the philosopher Socrates (c. 470–399 BC), the satirical playwright Aristophanes and their companions debated the nature of love. The occasion for that famous conversation was simply this: their host, the poet Agathon, had invited his friends to celebrate his prize at the annual drama festival of Athens.



The Banquet of Philoxenus

Socrates arrived late: typically, he had paused in a neighbouring doorway to think through a philosophical problem. One or two uninvited guests had squeezed in meanwhile, but room was still found for Socrates: the couches were big enough for two guests and even, at a pinch, for three.

Did they want a flute-girl this time? She had been booked in advance, but the guests were in favour of conversation, not music. 'I think,' said doctor Eryximachus, 'we should tell the flute-girl to go away and play to herself – or, if she fancies, to the women indoors.'

And so the discussion began. Aristophanes' fertile imagination told of the Creator who had taken beings that were originally spherical and sliced them into two. Some made two men, some made men and women, some made two women, and all of us are forever searching for our other halves. When Aristophanes' story was completed, each of the other participants gave his own ideas on the theme of love, its origin and its purpose.

The night advanced. A noise was heard in the yard, Plato tells us:

There was a knocking at the outer door, very noisy, as if it were a group of revellers: a flute-girl could be heard.

'Go and see, boys,' said Agathon. 'If it is anyone we like, invite them in. If not, say that we have finished drinking already.'



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A little later they heard the voice of Alcibiades in the courtyard, very drunk and shouting out, 'Where's Agathon? Take me to Agathon!'

He was helped in by the flute-girl and some of his other cronies. He stood at the door crowned with a thick wreath of ivy and violets, with a great many ribbons dangling over his head, and said: 'Greetings, gentlemen. Will you take as fellow-drinker a man who is already very drunk indeed? Or shall we simply put a congratulatory garland on Agathon, our reason for coming, and go away?'

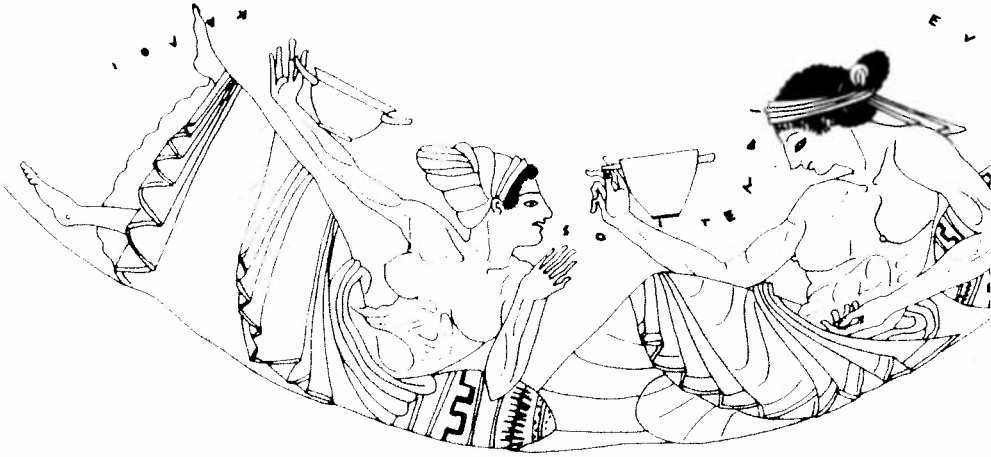
Alcibiades (c. 450–404 BC), once Socrates' pupil, now a flamboyant politician but later to be branded a traitor to Athens, was welcomed in. He was installed as the third occupant of Socrates' couch, and the discussion went on, sometimes bantering, sometimes serious. By daybreak the narrator concludes, most of the guests were asleep – but Socrates was still talking earnestly.

A more down-to-earth author, Xenophon, seems to have felt that Plato had given a false picture of the drinking-parties that Socrates attended. Xenophon's *Symposium* could hardly be more different. The conversation ranges at random over many subjects. There was entertainment, too, brought by an entrepreneur who went from door to door looking for parties. He owned a slave boy who danced and a girl who did acrobatics, leaping in and out of a ring of upturned swords. Socrates' contribution at Xenophon's drinking-party was not to send the entertainers away but to take charge of the programme. He felt that beauty could be displayed to better effect than among swords, and suggested an erotic dance that was performed by the two slaves together.

The recipes that follow will help to build a menu for a classical dinner-party. Several dishes are suggested by Philoxenus' lines just quoted, including the honey-glazed shrimps, the tuna steak and the barley rolls. A further short extract reminds us of some of the 'nibbles' that can be served as the wine continues to flow:

Fresh young chickpeas in safflower dip,
Eggs,
Young soft-skinned almonds,
Walnuts that children like to chew;
They served us all the things that are fit to serve at wealthy feasts.
The drinking, the games of *kottabos*, the clever talk, in which each smart
new phrase in turn was greeted with applause,
All came to an end at last.

Athenians, in the fifth and fourth centuries, enjoyed wines from the Aegean coasts and especially those from the larger islands, Thasos, Lesbos, Chios. The philosopher and scientist Aristotle (c. 384–322 BC),



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who lectured in Athens, was asked on his deathbed to name his successor. The choice lay between Eudemus of Rhodes and Theophrastus (c. 371–287 BC) of Eresus on Lesbos. The dying Aristotle sent for Rhodian wine. ‘This is truly a sound and pleasant wine,’ he said as he sipped it. Then he asked for a cup of Lesbian wine. ‘Both are very good indeed,’ he said, ‘but the Lesbian is the sweeter.’ His followers took the gentle hint and appointed Theophrastus to lead the school.

At least one later writer, the physician Galen, thought the wine of Theophrastus’ home town Eresus to be the most aromatic and sweetest of all. The wines of these islands are not now often found outside Greece, but the heady muscat of Samos, well known since Byzantine times, will make a fine dessert wine and a stand-in for sweet Lesbian. For a modern representative of Chian, the island where ‘black’ wine was said to have been invented, we can look a little further afield. Chian vines were transplanted to Italy in Roman times. They could well be ancestors of the Aglianico (‘Hellenic’) grapes of some southern Italian vineyards. For a good smoky red with Greek ancestry, a fine accompaniment to game and roasts, therefore, choose Aglianico del Vulture.

Honey-glazed Shrimps

SERVES TWO

8 OZ (225 G) COOKED, PEELED SHRIMPS

1 TABLESPOON (15 ML) OLIVE OIL

2 TABLESPOONS (30 ML) FISH SAUCE

1 TABLESPOON (30 G) CLEAR HONEY

2 TEASPOONS CHOPPED FRESH OREGANO

BLACK PEPPER

If using frozen shrimps, ensure that they are well defrosted and drained. Place the oil, fish sauce and honey in a saucepan and add the shrimps. Sauté them gently in the cooking liquor for 2 or 3 minutes until they are tender. Remove them with a perforated spoon and keep warm. Continue to cook out the liquor until it has reduced by half. Add the chopped oregano and pour the sauce over the shrimps. Sprinkle with freshly ground black pepper. Serve as a first course with a crusty loaf and a simple salad.

This recipe is adapted from various ancient sources: Philoxenus says the shrimps sound tasty, but his poem does not help in recommending a dish! Fish sauce (for its salt) and olive oil would undoubtedly be among the ingredients, along with the honey. Oregano is also mentioned because the Greeks were well aware of its suitability in seafood.

Tuna Steak

This young salted tuna first: it cost two obols. It has to be rinsed first. Then, seasoning a small casserole, placing the slice in it, pour white wine over, adding a coating of oil, and then simmering, I shall have it good as marrow, finally tinselling it generously with silph

Alexis 186, quoted in ATHENAEUS 117d

SERVES TWO

2 TUNA STEAKS

WHITE WINE TO COVER

SALT AND PEPPER

2 TABLESPOONS (30 ML) OLIVE OIL

3 DROPS ASAFOETIDA TINCTURE



A shopper haggles with a fishmonger over tuna steaks.

Use a medium white wine and barely cover the steaks: season with salt and pepper and add the olive oil. The steaks can be cooked on the stove or in the oven and should be ready in about 20 to 25 minutes, depending on their thickness. Before serving add the asafoetida to the liquor and reduce a little.

The original recipe (a snippet from an Athenian comedy) is for *horaion*, which seems to be one-year-old tuna caught 'in season' on its journey from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean – and this is why, which explains why the cook insists on the fact that the steak be rinsed to remove unwanted saltiness. This delightful recipe is typical of Greek preference for preparing food simply and without fuss.

'If you should come to the holy city of Byzantium,' wrote the comic playwright Archestratus, 'eat another slice of *horaion* for me there: it is tender.' The tuna of Istanbul is, indeed, unbeatable. Nowadays you can buy frozen tuna steaks with little trouble, but it can also be found chilled at good fishmongers and some supermarkets and is well worth a search.

Cabbage the Athenian Way

Cabbage should be sliced with the sharpest possible iron blade, then washed, drained, and chopped with plenty of coriander and rue. Then sprinkle with honey vinegar and add just a little bit of silphium.

Incidentally, you can eat this as a meze.

Mnesitheus, quoted in ORIBASIUS, *Medical Collections* 4, 4, 1

Oxymeli [honey vinegar]: Simmer honey till it foams, discard the scum, add enough vinegar to make it neither too sharp nor too sweet, boil again till it is mixed and not raw. For use, mix with water, just as you would mix wine with water.

GALEN, *Staying Healthy* 4, 6

SERVES SIX

1 SMALL WHITE CABBAGE

2 HEAPED TEASPOONS CHOPPED FRESH GREEN CORIANDER IN OIL

2 TEASPOONS CHOPPED FRESH OR DRIED RUE

2 PINCHES ASAFOETIDA POWDER

SALT

Honey Vinegar

4 OZ (½ CUP/120 G) HONEY

2 TABLESPOONS (30 ML) RED WINE VINEGAR

First make the honey vinegar. Follow Galen's advice: boil the honey and skim it, add the vinegar and reduce a little. Store until needed.

Finely slice the cabbage; wash and drain it. Toss with the herbs and 3 tablespoons honey vinegar and sprinkle with the asafoetida powder and a little salt.

This is quite a popular recipe among Greek and Roman writers. Oribasius (fourth century AD), a well-known doctor of the late Roman Empire, has borrowed it from a much older book of dietary advice by Mnesitheus (fourth century BC), a medical writer from Athens. The doctors are interested in this dish because it cured headaches and was good for stomach upsets. At least, that is the claim made by the encyclopaedist Pliny: he gives another version of the recipe, one that he had found in Cato's farming handbook (where it was recommended for



stiff joints). It is from the recipe of Cato (c. 234–149 BC) that I have borrowed the salt in my modern version.

Whatever its medicinal value, Mnesitheus was quite right about cabbage in honey vinegar being delicious as a starter or side dish. It still is, and is simple to prepare.

Romans were enthusiastic growers and eaters of cabbage. Pliny describes three types. The first was a curly one whose leaves were ‘like parsley’, comparable perhaps to Savoy cabbage. The second had broad leaves that could be seen growing from the stem, like kale or spring cabbage. The third had tight, closely packed leaves and appears to have been a white cabbage. He goes on to outline how many illnesses cabbage could cure. It was used as a poultice for wounds. If taken before a meal it prevented drunkenness, and if taken after drinking it could cure a hangover, but sadly our experience doesn’t confirm this!

Barley Rolls

First I shall recall the gifts to humankind of fair-haired Demeter, friend Moschus: take them to your heart. The best one can get, the finest of all, cleanly hulled from good ripe ears, is the barley from the sea-washed breast of famous Eresus in Lesbos – whiter than airborne snow. If the gods eat barley, this is where Hermes goes shopping for it.

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Among the cereals, barley was the most popular in ancient Greece, as Archestratus' enthusiasm attests, but even there it was not all that often used for bread. In Rome, by contrast, barley was the punishment ration for soldiers. Under the Roman Empire, Greeks too came to despise the grain that grows so well in the Greek climate.

Barley is very low in gluten. When only pure barley meal is used for bread, the resulting loaf is flat and heavy. Its keeping qualities are poor; the crust and texture can be very dry. It seems likely that ancient bakers, if preparing barley rolls for an elaborate banquet such as Philoxenus describes, would have mixed their barley meal with some other flour to produce a lighter loaf: coarse bread would be out of place. Elizabeth David, in her definitive *English Bread and Yeast Cookery*, recommends a 50 per cent mixture of barley meal and strong wholewheat flour, which I have followed. She also quotes a very simple barley bread recipe, originating in Cornwall, that is remarkably well adapted to classical tastes and kitchens and which provides the basis for the recipe given above: 'Cover the newly mixed bread with a cloth and set in a warm place. When risen form into cone-shaped loaves and bake under a kettle on the hearth. The loaves were usually grouped in threes, and the soft crust, where the loaves touched each other, was called kissing crusts.'

Greeks and Romans too baked on the hearth under a cover, or *testum*. Cooks piled red-hot coals over the *testum*, creating a mini-oven on the open hearth. This we cannot really duplicate: all that we can do is to heat the container that we use. The cover can be replaced by a large casserole or any large metal or crockery bowl that is ovenproof. Many of the *testa* found by archaeologists have a small number of holes in the top. I have experimented with a large, shallow, clay flowerpot, 12 in (20 cm) across and about 5 in (13 cm) deep. The drainage holes in the top of this allow air circulation. If your own 'baking cover' does not provide air holes, prop one side of the container about 1 in (2.5 cm) above the baking tray. You may have to bake twice if your container is too small to cover all the rolls. All the recipes using these covers work just as well simply baked in the oven.

The Banquet of Philoxenus

MAKES TWELVE

Leaven

2 OZ (½ CUP/60 G) BARLEY FLOUR
1 TEASPOON FRESH OR ½ TEASPOON DRIED YEAST

Dough

6 OZ (1½ CUPS/170 G) STRONG WHOLEWHEAT FLOUR
6 OZ (1½ CUPS/170 G) BARLEY FLOUR
1 TEASPOON SALT

For the leaven, dissolve the yeast in 1 tablespoon (15 ml) warm water and use to form a dough with 2 oz (½ cup/60 g) barley flour. Knead the dough briefly, mould into a pat, cross it lightly and put a thumb-print in the centre. Pour 2 teaspoons of warm water into the indentation. Place in a glass dish with a lid and leave to ferment in a warm place for at least 24 hours.

Now for the dough: sift the wholewheat and barley flours together, add 1 teaspoon salt and the leaven and form a dough with sufficient warm water. Knead well and allow to rest and rise in a bowl, covered with plastic wrap or a plastic bag, in a warm place until it has doubled in size. Divide the dough into 12 pieces and mould them with the palm of your hand into smooth balls. Leave to rise in a warm place, covered with a cloth.

Heat the oven to 400°F (200°C/gas mark 6) and also heat a baking tray and an upturned casserole, shallow clay pot or metal bowl – whatever you decide to use as a ‘baking cover’. Brush the tray with a little olive oil and place the rolls in 2 circles of 6, with the edges barely touching. Cover with the upturned container and bake for 15 to 20 minutes until lightly golden and hollow-sounding when tapped.



Cheese and Sesame Sweetmeats

Globi to be made thus: mix cheese and semolina as above; make as many balls as you want. Put fat in a hot copper pan: fry one or two at a time, turning them frequently with a pair of spatulas. When cooked, remove them, coat in honey, sprinkle with poppy-seeds, serve.

CATO, *On Agriculture* 79

The cheese and sesame sweetmeats of Philoxenus were such a tempting idea that I resolved to work out a recipe that would reflect something of the ancient flavour. A recipe in Cato's farming manual forms the basis, yet his recipe is anything but complete. 'As above' seems to send the reader back to Cato's recipe for Layered Cheesecake (see page 94); in that recipe, however, the cheese and semolina are separate components.



Some enlightened guesswork is needed to fill the gaps in the Roman instructions. What follows, then, is one way to recreate the cheese and sesame sweetmeats of Philoxenus and Cato. I prefer to use not lard but olive oil as a deep-frying medium – it was certainly more popular among the Greeks and Romans themselves.

MAKES ABOUT FIFTEEN

10 FL OZ (1¼ CUPS/280 ML) MILK

2 OZ (2 TABLESPOONS/60 G) SEMOLINA

3 TABLESPOONS (90 G) HONEY

4 OZ (120 G) RICOTTA CHEESE

3 OZ (¾ CUP/85 G) SESAME SEEDS, LIGHTLY ROASTED

OLIVE OR VEGETABLE OIL FOR DEEP-FRYING

Bring the milk to the boil and sprinkle the semolina over it, stirring all the time. Cook out briefly, taking care not to let it burn. Turn into a clean bowl and allow to cool slightly, stirring occasionally. This should give a firm paste. When it is cooler, add 1 tablespoon honey and the ricotta. Mix well and stir in 2 oz (2 tablespoons/60 g) roasted sesame seeds.

Prepare a simple deep-fryer in a saucepan using olive or vegetable oil. Test the oil for temperature by dropping a little of the mixture in the oil: when it rises and begins to colour, the oil is ready. Form quenelles using 2 teaspoons: take a small amount of mixture in one spoon, cup the other spoon around it and pull it off; repeat the action until you have a smooth egg-shaped ball. Drop 2 or 3 sweetmeats at a time into the hot fat and turn them occasionally until they are golden-brown. Lift from the oil and drain on paper towels. Cook the rest of the sweetmeats in the same way. Warm the remaining honey and toss the cooked sweetmeats in it, then toss in the remaining roasted sesame seeds. These sweetmeats are delicious eaten either hot or cold.