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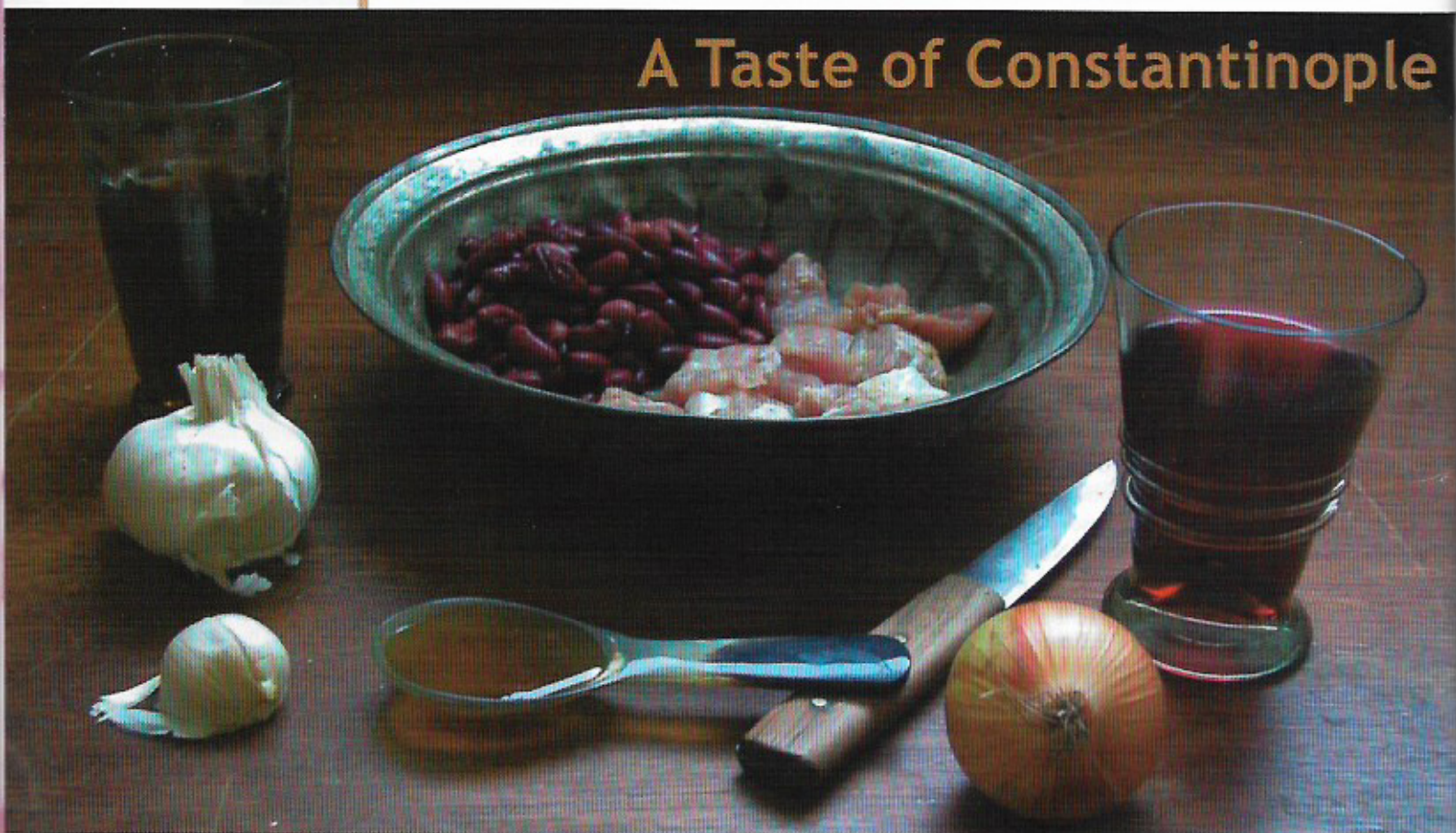


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Historic Cookery

A Taste of Constantinople



The impression of the cookery of the earlier Roman Empire that has come down to us through such sources as the cookery book of Apicius and the satirical description of Trimalchio's Feast is one largely of great complexity — dishes with many diverse ingredients and combinations of flavours which would often seem very unpalatable to modern tastes, and dishes which are deliberately made to seem quite alien to their original ingredients. In so far as it is accurate, this picture must relate only to the elite of society. The food of the majority is largely lost to us, but was surely simpler.

It seems that no cookery books were written in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire which survived through Europe's Middle Ages, but there is much evidence which can give us an impression of their food more widely across the social classes. It is clear that even for the elite, food of the 'Byzantine' period was normally rather simpler than in the earlier time.

Cookery is, of course, a creative art not science. Even when recipes exist, they must be interpreted and adjusted in order to produce something enjoyable. In the absence of recipes, reconstructions of 'Byzantine' food are necessarily more creative and speculative, yet if one uses ingredients, methods and tools known to have been used, and keeps to a cautious simplicity, the result must bear some resemblance to a historical form. Making a dish enjoyable for one person will differ from another, and more so over time and across cultural boundaries, but people always did eat what they enjoyed when they could, so making a historical dish in manner which is enjoyable to the modern diner will reproduce the experience of the historical diner if not exactly what he or she actually ate.

Romans who could afford it had access to a wide array of condiments, many imported from the East. However for most people the norm would have been simpler, and across poorer cultures the staple diet has always been pulses.

Stragalia

One basic pulse dish with an exotic flavour is to take chick-peas, boil them until soft and dry off, then braise them in extra-virgin olive oil mixed with equal quantities of powdered cumin and coriander.

Sweet and sour pork and beans

A simple combination of condiments which did not need to come from far afield was *oxymelitos* (οξύμελιτος) or 'sharp-sweet', made with vinegar and honey. This was applied to a variety of pulses and meats. Here pork and beans, both believed at the time to be particularly nourishing, are combined, but each can be cooked separately this way to excellent effect.

Ingredients

For one big eater alone or two people when accompanied by another vegetable.

- 250 gm cubed pork
- 100 gm of dry beans or 1 x 400 gm tin of cooked beans drained
- 1 medium onion
- 3 large cloves of garlic
- 80 ml wine vinegar
- 40 ml red wine
- 3 Tablespoons honey
- 2 teaspoons of *garon**

**Garon* (γαρον) is the Greek name for the old Roman *liquamen*, a salty liquid made from fermented fish. It is still used in east Asian cookery, and can be bought as 'Fish Sauce' or under the names used in various Asian countries, such as *Lal Nan* or *Nam Pla*.

Method

If using dry beans, parboil them in lightly salted water and drain. Chop the onion finely and soften in olive oil over a low heat. When clear add the finely minced garlic. Next, raise the heat slightly, add the pork and brown all over. While the pork is frying, combine the wine, vinegar, honey and *garon*, ensuring they are fully mixed. Once the pork has browned, add the mixture. Once it almost comes to a gentle simmer, reduce the heat. Simmer very gently until all the liquid has reduced to a thick syrup.

For a stronger flavour and thicker syrup, the quantity of condiments can be doubled and reduced for longer.

Even on the most affluent dinners, root vegetables - carrots, radishes and so on - and herbs were simply laid on the table fresh from the garden to be eaten raw. Such fresh flavours complement this dish well.

Further reading

E. Jeanselme and N. Oeconomos, 'Aliments et recettes culinaire des Byzantins', *Proceedings of the Third International Congress on the History of Medicine*, (1922) Paris, pp. 155-168.

B. Flower, & E. Rosenbaum, *Apicius: The Roman Cookery Book*, Peter Nevill, Ltd.: New York, 1958.

Henry Marks, *Byzantine Cuisine*, Self-published [1270 Montecello Dr, Eugene, OR 97404, USA - efentesdeme trios@hotmail.com] 2002.

Andrew Dalby, *Flavours of Byzantium*. Prospect Books: Devon, England, 2003. Watch for more in a forthcoming *MHM*

