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Captive King

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Cookery

A Taste of Byzantium



The citizens of *Rômania*, as they called it, the Eastern Roman Empire, were great gourmards when it came to fish and seafood. It is hardly surprising since the capital, Constantinople, was surrounded on three sides by the sea, and most of its most populous and wealthy territory had coastline, from the Adriatic to the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Not only was there the local fresh catch, but also an extensive trade in fish preserved by salting, drying and smoking. This was brought from as far away as the far side of the Black Sea. Constantinople was also an important

nexus in the spice trade from Asia, and Romans had no reluctance to combine the merchandise of that trade to produce of the sea.

East Romans of the medieval era regarded cookery as a creative art, not a craft or trade to be petrified in words, so we have no cookery books as such from them. Yet writers were willing enough to record what pleased them on their plates, and also sometimes recorded the gluttonous excesses of people they saw fit to criticize.

The following recipes are based upon such literary sources. They

have been devised to bear the best resemblance to what is known of their technology and tastes.

Further reading

E. Jeanselme, and L. Oeconomus, 'Aliments et recettes culinaires des Byzantines', *Proceedings of the Third International Congress of the History of Medicine* (1922), Paris. pp.155-168. Andrew Dalby, *Flavours of Byzantium*, Prospect Books, Totnes, 2003. Henry Marks, *Byzantine Cuisine*.



Ostreidomuditza

A dish of oysters and mussels with lentils. This is reputed to be one of the most popular dishes in the Constantinopolitan repertoire, and it is easy to see why. Quite apart from the cheapness of the ingredients in those days, quite small changes in the ingredients can make quite spectacular differences in how the dish turns out, yet it is always delicious. So one could cook it very often without getting bored. This makes it a very *ad hoc* recipe for which quantities are hard to specify.

The basic ingredients:

Oysters and mussels as you please.
(I tend to make this with equal quantities of flesh.);
Lentils;
Garlic;
Olive oil.

Optional ingredients:

Bacon;
Fish sauce;



Cumin and coriander as in the previous recipe;
Mustard (ground);
Pepper.

Parboil the lentils. (The example shown used small red lentils which turn to mush rather quickly. An alternative is to use the larger green or other lentils and not cook them so much so that they retain some texture.) Chop or crush garlic to

taste into the oil in a pot or frying pan. If using bacon, chop and brown with the garlic. Add the well drained lentils and fry for a while, making sure it is well mixed. If using the various spices they should be included with the lentils. Add the shellfish and cook only just long enough for them to take on the cooked colour. If using the fish sauce it should be added at this point. Longer cooking will tend to toughen them.

Sardines

Ingredients:

2 – 4 sardines per person. The sardines used were about 15cm / 6in long;
Equal quantities of cumin, ground, dried coriander and plain flour;
A clove of garlic per fish;
Olive oil as needed.



Scale and gut the sardines. Mix the dry ingredients fully. Crush the garlic into this mixture, and then mix in such a quantity of oil as needed to make it a slightly runny paste. Coat the sardines. It is enough for the flavour to simply coat the outside of the fish, but if you like more flavour and have plenty of mixture you can also put it inside. Cook for no more than 10 minutes. This can be done

in the oven (gas 6), in a frying pan on a low heat, or on a griddle over charcoal. The latter two methods will require turning them half way through, of course. One author of the twelfth century, writing under the pseudonym 'Poor Prodomos' (*Ptchoprodromos*), complains of the torment caused to his empty stomach by the smell of his neighbour grilling fish on a brazier!

And something to wash it down with

In the early tenth century the Arab, Harun ibn Yahya, spent some time in the City as a hostage and wrote down his observations. He described a day when areas of the Great Palace were opened to the populace and the fountain ran with a special mixture of wine made thus:

10,000 jars of wine, 1,000 jars of white honey, Nard, cloves and cinnamon, 1 camel load in total. The ingredients were mixed and put into a cistern supplying fountains emerging from a falcon, a lamb, a bull, a cock, a lion, a lioness, a wolf, a partridge, a peacock, a horse, an elephant and an angel, all mounted upon columns.

A more prosaic addition to wine was rosewater, usually supplement with a little honey. Bon Appetite!

Timothy Dawson