

Food in Ancient Egypt

Most of the fertile land in the Nile valley had to be used for growing food crops, so there was not much room for grazing animals. Only rich people ate meat regularly. Ordinary people did not eat much meat from cattle, sheep or goats, but many workers kept pigs and ate fish, even though they were told by the priests that pork and fish were unclean.

Many birds were eaten. Some were caught alive and then fattened up by being forced to eat bread soaked in oil and wine. Ducks, geese and even pelicans were kept for their meat and their eggs. People also ate pigeons and quails at banquets.

Poor people would have lived mainly on bread and vegetables, such as onions, radishes, cucumber and garlic. Fruits such as melons, dates, figs and pomegranates were also grown, but oranges, lemons, bananas, cherries, pears and peaches were unknown. The bread was rough and gritty, as the corn was ground by hand using rough stones.

It was very difficult to keep food fresh in such a hot climate. Food was salted, dried in the sun or pickled to preserve it. It is thought that spices and strong flavours were needed to hide the fact that the meat was not fresh.

Milk could not be kept for long, so it was often made into yogurt or cheese. A creamy kind of cheese was called labna and there was a harder one called gebna.

The ancient Egyptians did not grow olives, so there was no olive oil. They made oil from sesame seeds and linseed. They cooked using melted down animal fat. Salt was widely used for seasoning and preserving food. There were no citrus fruits, such as lemons, so sour wine or vinegar was used instead of lemon juice. Honey was used for sweetening food.

Now answer these questions, using full sentences:

1. Why was there so little room for grazing animals in ancient Egypt?
2. Which two foods were considered unclean?
3. How were the birds fattened?
4. Which birds were used for their eggs?
5. Which two kinds of food formed the main part of the poor people's diet?
6. Name four kinds of fruit grown in ancient Egypt.
7. Name four kinds of fruit which were not found in ancient Egypt.
8. Give three ways in which the ancient Egyptians preserved food.
9. What were labna and gebna?
10. How did the ancient Egyptians sweeten their food?