

Roman and Greek Recipes

Pancakes with Honey and Sesame Seeds (vg)



Terracotta figure of a woman grinding grain. Greek, 5th century BC.

Let us find time to speak of other cakes, the ones made with wheat flour. Teganitai, as we call them, are made simply with oil. The oil is put in a frying-pan resting on a smokeless fire, and when it has heated, the wheat flour, mixed with plenty of water,

is poured on. Rapidly, as it fries in the oil, it sets and thickens like fresh cheese setting in the baskets. And at this point the cooks turn it, putting the visible side under, next to the pan, and bringing the sufficiently fried side, which was underneath at first, up on to the top, and when the underneath is set they turn it again another two or maybe three times till they think it is all equally cooked. Some mix it with honey, and others again with sea-salt.' – Galen, On the Properties of Foods 1, 3

It's amazing how little food changes from one millennium to the next. When reading the Roman physician Galen's description of making pancakes, it is hard to remember that he is writing 1,800 years ago! The early Greek poet Hipponax had written of pancakes 'drugged with sesame seeds'. This was likely a breakfast meal and one that was possibly sold on the streets of ancient Athens from portable braziers. These pancakes are thicker than the crêpe-style pancakes familiar to us (more like a blini, or even thicker) and they are served with honey and toasted sesame seeds.

Substitute honey for maple or date syrup to make these vegan.

Serves 4

Ingredients

- 120g flour
- 225 ml water
- 2 tbsp clear honey
- Oil for frying
- 1 tbsp toasted sesame seeds

Method

Mix the flour, water and one tablespoon of honey together into a batter. Heat two tablespoons of oil in a frying-pan and pour a quarter of the mixture in. When it has set, turn it two or three times to give an even colour. Cook three more pancakes in the same way. Serve all four pancakes hot with the remainder of the honey poured over and sprinkled with sesame seeds.

Delian Sweets (vg)



Black-figure amphora showing four men surrounded by bees. These men are Laios, Keleos, Kerberos, and Aigolios, who according to Greek myth, plundered from the hives the honey on which the god Zeus was nourished as an infant. Greek, around 540 BC.

'On Hecate's Island,' says Semus in Deliad II, 'the Delians sacrifice what they call basyniai to Iris, goddess of the dawn. It is wheat dough, boiled, with honey and the so-called kokkora (which are a dried fig and three walnuts).' – Athenaeus 645

'Another sweet: Take durum wheat flour and cook it in hot water so that it forms a very hard paste, then spread it on a plate. When cold cut it up in lozenges, and fry in best oil. Lift out, pour honey over, sprinkle with pepper and serve.' – Apicius 7, 11, 6

This recipe is from the Greek island of Delos. The recipe from Athenaeus is sketchy and difficult to interpret. Were the dried fig and the walnuts ingredients in basyniai, or were they a separate offering to the goddess? Here we have assumed that they were separate – you can serve the figs alongside your Delian Sweets. The second recipe, quoted from Apicius, is a little clearer as to the method of making the sweets.

Pepper was once very common as a seasoning for sweets. It is surprisingly good with honey. Nutmeg has commonly replaced pepper in desserts and sweet cookery, but nutmeg was practically unknown to the classical Greeks and Romans.

Substitute honey for maple or date syrup to make these vegan.

Makes about 15

Ingredients

- 170ml water
- 60g plain (all-purpose) flour
- Olive oil for deep-frying
- 2 tbsp honey
- Poppy seeds or freshly ground black pepper

Method

Bring the water to the boil and add the sifted flour in one go, beating vigorously to incorporate. Cook out for a few minutes and turn out on to a large plate, or a marble slab if you have one. Allow to cool completely. Heat the olive oil in a deep-fryer or pan. Cut the paste into cubes – it will be firm but still a little sticky. Test the oil for temperature with a little of the mixture – if it rises and colours, the oil is ready. Drop the cubes in the oil, 2 or 3 at a time. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes until golden-brown and lift out on to kitchen paper. While they are still warm, garnish with a little warmed honey over the fritters and sprinkle them with either poppy seeds or freshly ground pepper.