

Food, desire, and pleasure: What role should food take in an Epicurean lifestyle?

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 23, 2025 at 2:19 PM

Here are the slides that I presented in today's Zoom:

Sunday Zoom - Nov. 23, 2025

Discussion Topic:
Food, desire, and pleasure: What role should food take in an Epicurean lifestyle?

“As for me, when you want a good laugh, you will come and find me fat and sleek, in excellent condition, a hog of Epicurus’s herd!” - Horace

- Could Horace have been incorrect in his understanding of pleasure with regard to food and eating?



Ancient Greek diet:
 bread - closely resembling what we call “pitta bread” made from barley or spelt
 porridge or soup - farinaceous crops combined with vegetables
 fruit - apples and figs
 vegetables - onions, garlic, leeks, cabbage, root veg. such as parsnip and artichoke; (no potatoes or tomatoes).
 legumes - lentils and chickpeas
 fish - in the coastal cities, fresh fish. Sardines and anchovies were salted and shipped inland.
 eggs - many other dwellers kept poultry, but rarely was the poultry itself eaten
 milk and cheese - obtained from cattle, sheep, or goats
 meat - on special occasions such as civic festivals cattle or sheep (as often animal were ritually slaughtered, they would get a taste of meat. Rarely venison, if a huntsman struck lucky with a kill.
 olives and olive oil, and honey

Seneca wrote about the Garden of Epicurus in his Letter 21:

“So am all the more glad to repeat the distinguished words of Epicurus, in order that I may prove to those who have recourse to him through a bad motive, thinking that they will have in him a screen for their own vices, that they must live honourably, no matter what school they follow.”

“Go to his Garden and read the motto carved there:
 “Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.”

“The care-taker of that abode, a kindly host, will be ready for you; he will welcome you with barley-meal and serve you water also in abundance, with these words: “Have you not been well entertained?” “This garden,” he says, “does not what your appetite; it quenches it. Nor does it make you more thirsty with every drink; it slakes the thirst by a natural cure, a cure that demands no fee. This is the ‘pleasure’ in which I have grown old.”

“In speaking with you, however, I refer to those desires which refuse alleviation, which must be bribed to cease. For in regard to the exceptional desires, which may be postponed, which may be chastened and checked, I have this one thought to share with you: a pleasure of that sort is according to our nature, but it is not according to our needs; one owes nothing to it; whatever is expended upon it is a free gift. The belly will not listen to advice; it makes demands, it importunes. And yet it is not a troublesome creditor; you can send it away at small cost, provided only that you give it what you owe, not merely all you are able to give.”

V569. It is not the stomach that is insatiable, as is generally said, but the false opinion that the stomach needs an unlimited amount to fill it.

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The Danaids (1804) by J.M. Waterhouse

In the mythological story of the Danaids, the daughters of King Danaus killed their husbands and were condemned to spend eternity carrying water in a sieve or perforated jug. (source: Wikipedia)

Lucretius references this story: “And then to give constant nourishment to a mind which shows no gratitude, to crame it full with fine things, yet never satisfy it—an offering which the seasons of the year provide for us when they come round again, bringing their fruits and various delights, while we still feel we never get enough of life’s pleasures—this, in my opinion, is the story they tell of those young girls, in the flower of life, who pour water into leaky jars, yet there is no way they can fill them up. (Lucretius, Book 3, section 1003, Ian Johnston translation)

- Is the desire to experience variations of flavors of foods natural but not necessary?
- Is there no limit (no level of satisfaction) to variations of sensation (especially food), and could these desires become like the Danaids pouring water into a leaky vessel?

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“To-morrow, dearest Piso, your friend, beloved by the Muses, who keeps our annual feast of the twentieth invites you to come after the ninth hour to his simple cottage: if you miss udders and draughts of Chian wine, you will see at least sincere friends and you will hear things far sweeter than the land of the Phaeacians. - Epigram of Philodemus

Here we see that rather than eating fine delicacies and drinking expensive wine, the pleasure of friendship and pleasurable words takes priority over the variations of sensation that arise from extravagant foods.

V553. The flesh cries out to be saved from hunger, thirst, and cold. For if a man possess this safety, and hope to possess it, he might rival even Zeus in happiness.



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Excerpts from the Letter to Menoeceus

"And just as with food he does not seek simply the larger share and nothing else, but rather the most pleasant, so he seeks to enjoy not the longest period of time, but the most pleasant."

"And again independence of desire we think a great good — not that we may at all times enjoy but a few things, but that, if we do not possess many, we may enjoy the few in the genuine persuasion that those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it, and that all that is natural is easy to be obtained, but that which is superfluous is hard. And so plain savours bring us a pleasure equal to a luxurious diet, when all the pain due to want is removed, and bread and water produce the highest pleasure, when one who needs them puts them to his lips."

"We must consider that of desires some are natural, others vain, and of the natural some are necessary and others merely natural; and of the necessary some are necessary for happiness, others for the repose of the body, and others for very life.

The right understanding of these facts enables us to refer all choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the soul's freedom from disturbance, since this is the aim of the life of blessedness."

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PD08. No pleasure is a bad thing in itself; but the means which produce some pleasures bring with them disturbances many times greater than the pleasures.

VS21. We must not force Nature but persuade her. We shall persuade her if we satisfy the necessary desires, and also those bodily desires that do not harm us, while sternly checking those that are harmful.

PD10. If the things that produce the pleasures of profligates could dispel the fears of the mind about the phenomena of the sky, and death, and its pains, and also teach the limits of desires (and of pains), we should never have cause to blame them: for they would be filling themselves full, with pleasures from every source, and never have pain of body or mind, which is the evil of life.

PD20. The flesh perceives the limits of pleasure as unlimited, and unlimited time is required to supply it. But the mind, having attained a reasoned understanding of the ultimate good of the flesh and its limits, and having dissipated the fears concerning the time to come, supplies us with the complete life, and we have no further need of infinite time; but neither does the mind shun pleasure, nor, when circumstances begin to bring about the departure from life, does it approach its end as though it fell short, in any way, of the best life.

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Discussion Questions

- Could Horace have been incorrect in his understanding of pleasure with regard to food and eating?
- Is the desire to experience variations of flavors of foods "natural but not necessary"?
- Is there no limit (no level of satisfaction) to variations of sensation (especially food), and could these desires become like the Danaids pouring water into a leaky vessel?
- What are the limits of pleasure with regard to food?
- Do you think that "independence of desire" needs be practiced, or is it just a matter of having an "attitude adjustment" when the need for it arises?
- What role should food take for the modern Epicurean? (special food on the 20th? ...or a Mediterranean style of eating? ...minimizing sugary and processed foods?).
- How would you describe your own personal take on the role of food in your life, or your relationship to food?
- Do you have a healthy-living role model (or influencer) that you follow and recommend with regard to eating and food choices (doctors/dieticians/famous chefs/bakers)?

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