

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 it 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 you 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.

pg. 2



The Danaids (1804) by J.M.W. Turner

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 cram 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?

pg. 3

"To-morrow, dearest Pilo, 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.

V533. 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.



pg. 4

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 diet, 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."

pg. 5

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.

V521. 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.

pg. 6

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 to 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 influencers) that you follow and recommend with regard to eating and food choices (doctors/dieticians/famous chefs/bakers)?

pg. 7

Post by "Kalosyni" of November 25, 2025 at 8:22 AM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4817-food-desire-and-pleasure-what-role-should-food-take-in-an-epicurean-lifestyle/>

During last Sunday's Zoom meeting I mentioned the newly posted book by Gassendi-Bernier.

Here is an excerpt relevant to food:

Quote

We have hitherto treated of Pleasure, as it is generally understood: We shall now speak of that particular specifick Pleasure unto which a Wise Man confines himself, as being in its own Nature not only very easie to be obtain'd, but also most lasting and free from Repentance. In a word, that Pleasure that we before called the Tranquility of the Mind, and the exemption of the Body from Pain, now we have great Reason to call it most Natural; for at this sort of Pleasure Nature seems chiefly to aim, as not having regard to other Pleasures, which are always shifting and in a constant Motion, any otherwise than to make them useful in the obtaining this; as for Instance **It hath appointed the Pleasure of Tasting, to make the action of Eating more grateful, and by that means to oblige us to the Act, whereby to satisfie our Hunger, which is that pain we feel, and caused by the cravings of an empty Stomach. But in reference to the satisfaction and tranquility of Mind which we enjoy when Hunger is appeas'd. This Nature hath reserv'd as her last End, and designed it as her chief Good: We have great reason to say, that it is very easie to be obtain'd, because it is in every one's Power to moderate his Desires, by supplying himself with things necessary for his Body, whereby to free it from Pain, and thereby render his Mind calm and easy.** I say, That it is very lasting, because other Pleasures pass away in a Moment, and free from us, whereas this continues the same, unless it be interrupted and perish by our own Miscarriages. Lastly, I describe it to be very free from Repentance; for all other Pleasures may be attended by some Evil, whereas, this is altogether innocent, and draws upon us no such Mischief. - pg. 113

Here is the [link to "Three Discourses of Happiness, Virtue, and Liberty"](#).

Also, I'm posting a video which explains how certain foods spike the release of insulin, which causes fat storage, but also certain foods greatly increase food cravings because of how quickly they are digested.

So it is important to see all the causes regarding cravings and over-eating - that food choices affect us greatly.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=pdf3eZyupVc&pp>

Post by "Pacatus" of November 26, 2025 at 6:09 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4817-food-desire-and-pleasure-what-role-should-food-take-in-an-epicurean-lifestyle/>

I have always been a bit of an over-indulger when it comes to food and drink. With regard to drink, I decided by middle age that overindulgence brought more pain than pleasure, and modified my behavior accordingly. With regard to food, it has been age and economics – rather than any hedonic calculus – that has mandated change: I simply cannot eat like I used to (both in terms of quantity and some foods that I used to enjoy) without unwanted discomforts; and economics, as much as aesthetics, has led to greater simplicity.

My model is my paternal grandmother, Mae (who lived to just 99). In her early twenties, she lived a bit of a high life in San Francisco, but moved while still young to the old family farm in Pennsylvania. There, she maintained a large garden – of flowers, various vegetables and a bit of corn – which she tended every day in season (she leased the fieldland to a neighbor farmer to work). She also harvested (and stored in a cellar in winter) apples from a small orchard near the house, and gathered wild black and red raspberries from the brambles along the lane.

Her eating was mostly modest: perhaps cereal, or an egg and toast, for breakfast; a light lunch; a small portion of meat (say, chicken or a pork chop) with sides of vegetables, corn and/or potatoes for dinner. But on holidays (especially Thanksgiving), she prepared a feast and invited the whole family and some friends. The favorite was roast leg of lamb, pierced with garlic cloves; onions au gratin, sweet potatoes with gravy, and salad. She seldom drank – but always kept some bourbon and scotch and various liqueurs in the sideboard for guests.

I used to have her recipe for risotto – but it got lost over the years. I like to cook – but now am a simple galley-kitchen cook, and the meals get simpler with the years. Usually a glass of wine with dinner, and some brandy in the evening.

If I have a personal hero, it is Mae.