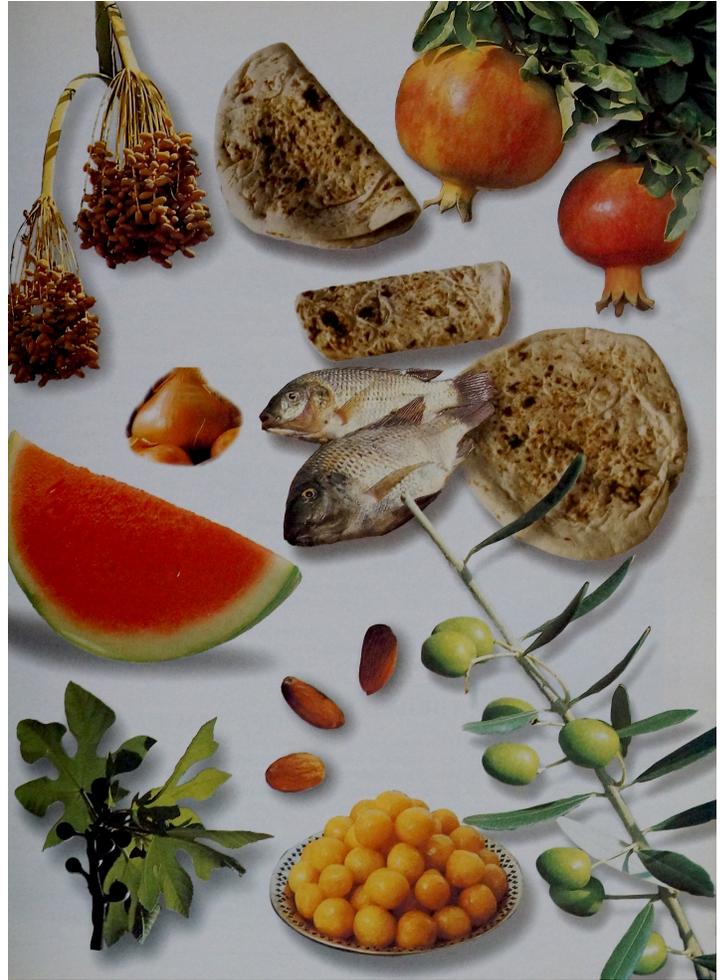


What sorts of food were common in the time of Jesus?

Generally speaking, the Israelites of the time of Christ's time were frugal eaters. Frankly until about 100 years ago, frugality in eating was more imposed than chosen. The food was more scarce and less convenient than today. It's availability was seasonable, and all the elements needed to be made from scratch, including hauling in the water from wells etc.

Bread was the essential, basic food. So basic was it that in Hebrew "to eat bread" and "to have a meal" in the same thing. Bread was treated with great respect and many rules existed to preserve that reverence. Any crumbs of over the size of an olive were expected to be gathered, and never simply discarded. Bread was never to be cut, but always broken. The poor ate barley bread, the rich the bread of wheat. Barley or wheat grains were ground between two millstones, almost always by women, and this was done at home. From this the flour and then the dough was made and worked in kneading troughs. To make the heavy barley bread rise, women use very strong millets, and barley yeast. The loaves were usually made round, such that one spoke of "a round of bread," or simply "a round." Because bread would become moldy very soon, one would only bake enough for a day or two.

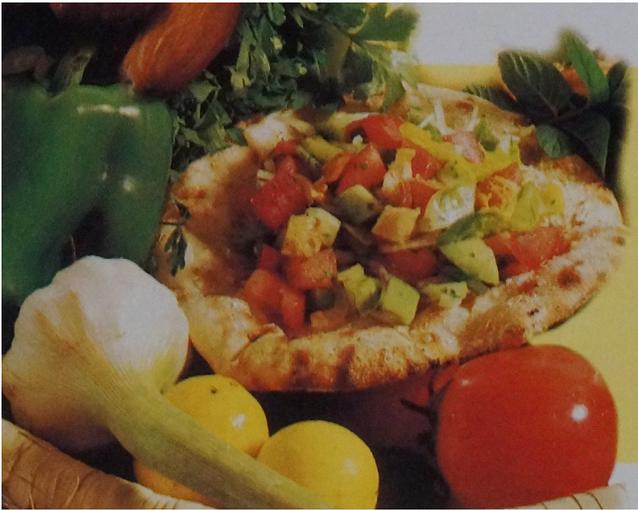


Corn (grain) – Though the Bible mentions corn, it has nothing to do with what we call corn today. Such a crop was unknown in Middle East. "Corn" in the Bible refers to what we call grain.

Milk - Cows milk was rare, and in any case it was not liked as much as the more common milk of ewe lambs and of goats. Since milk tended to spoil quickly, cheese making was very common.

Honey was the sweetener that was used for most things. Cane sugar was unknown the Holy Land. The source of honey was bees, which like today were colonized. Saps from various trees and the thickened juice of grapes (jelly) were also common sweeteners. So much honey was made in the holy land, that some of it was exported.

Eggs - As for eggs, very few of them were eaten. The thought of eating eggs was something brought into the Holy Land only from the outside, especially to the East. It tended to be food only for the very wealthy. Indeed, the eating of poultry at all seems to have come to Jewish regions only after the exile in Babylon (587 – 500 BC).



Vegetables - The diet of ordinary people included a great many vegetables: beans and lentils came first on the list. Cucumbers as well were very much esteemed. Onions were very popular.

Meat – There was far less meat consumed than today. Meat was a food of luxury and only the wealthy ate a great deal of it. Poor people never slaughtered an animal for their own eating, except when there was a family feast. Generally when such a feast approached, an older animal was chosen, and fattened up by feeding it grain. Therefore such an animal spent its last months eating well and working little so that its muscles were softer, and fatter. Goats, and lambs provided the most common meat; occasionally a calf (i.e. a cow). The animal was usually roasted. Chickens were scarce, though pigeons and turtledoves were cheap. Game was much sought after, but generally only the wealthy ate much of it. Deer and gazelle were considered kingly dishes, and peacock was reckoned a great delicacy.

Fish - But for most common people, fish was more important than meat. Bread and fish was a common meal. This is illustrated by the miracle of The loaves and the fishes, as well as the meal at the lakeside in Galilee where Christ prepared fish for them over a charcoal fire. The Sea of Galilee had great quantities of fish; and fish were also gotten from the Mediterranean Sea. Since fish soon turned bad, it was often salted. The consumption of fish was so great, that some of it had to be imported.

Locust - One of the most surprising forms of food was the locust. (But perhaps no stranger than some of our things today such as frog legs, snails, and live oysters). An ancient Jewish document claims that there were 800 different kinds of edible locust. Sometimes they were cooked rapidly in salt water and had a shrimp like taste and color. Usually their head and legs were taken off. Sometimes they were dried in the sun. After being dried, some were ground down to powder, known as Locust powder which tasted rather bitter and was often mixed with flour to make a much prized bitter biscuit.

Butter (oil) - Butter was rare in use, olive oil was much more common. So abundant were olives and olive oil, that some was exported. Many olives were eaten directly, others had the oil pressed from them at an oil press at home (right). Olive oil was highly prized, and many passages in the Bible hold it up as a symbol of strength and health.

Fruit - had an important place in the people's food. They had many melons and figs along with pomegranates, blackberries and dates. Here too fruit was an abundance, so it was often exported as well.

Nuts – Nuts were in some abundance, especially walnuts, almonds, and pistachios. Like today, they were roasted.



As for seasonings and other condiments, the ancient Jews seem to like their food strongly seasoned. Certainly there was salt in abundance from the Dead Sea area, which also helped preserve certain foods. Other common spices were mustard, capers, cumin, rue, saffron, coriander, mint, dill, rosemary, garlic, onions, and shallots. Pepper however was scarce and expensive as was cinnamon, both of which came from the Far East.

Without refrigeration, fish, meat, and some vegetables were preserved by salting, or pickling them.

Pork was absolutely forbidden as was rabbit, and any meat with blood still in it. Meat had to be carefully drained of all blood, for it was believed that life was in the blood, and life belonged to God.

Drinks - People drank water when it was pure, the Spring water was to be preferred strongly over well water. Milk, and vinegar diluted with water were also drunk. Juice from pomegranates or dates was a preferred fruit juice. And a kind of light beer was made from barley and millets.



Wine was a very important staple, it is said that God himself first showed Noah how it was made. Vineyards and grapes were in abundance in ancient Israel. And the grapes were occasionally eaten directly, but most of them went toward making wine. Psalm 103:15 says that *wine is joy to man's heart*. The book of Proverbs (31:6-7) also prescribes that there should be wine for the afflicted hearts. In Ecclesiastes 31:27 the author wonders what kind of life one could lead without it. Indeed, the vine was a symbol for Israel in the Scriptures. Since wine was considered sacred, it had to be kosher, that is made only by Jewish hands. It was only red wine that was consumed in biblical times; there is not even one mention of white wine. Wine was always spoken of as having the color of blood, and thus it was a deep red or purple color. They

kept wine either in tall jars, or in wineskins made out of goats hide with wooden stoppers. Wine was filtered before it was consumed. Like today, there were different qualities of wine, some drier, some sweeter, some considered inferior some more desirable. They drink wine out of metal goblets or earthenware mugs, and although glass was known, it was scarce and expensive

Wine in moderation was considered a great blessing, but the ancient Jews were also well aware that excessive wine could be dangerous. Scripture is full of warnings about drunkenness. Nevertheless, wine was often had in some abundance, because water is not often pure. When Paul tells Timothy to drink some wine to settle his stomach, he was alluding to the fact that water alone tended to cause the stomach to be sore and inflamed, and to bring either diarrhea or constipation. Wine had the medicinal effect and helping kill water-born bacteria (of which the ancients knew nothing) as well as cheering the heart.

Food of course was very seasonal in availability. And thus the diet would be affected by harvest cycles. Here is a rough estimate of the harvests of different things:

Mid September – Ploughing time

Mid Oct – November – Olive harvest

Mid November – Grain is planted. Rainy season begins

February Flax harvest

Late March, Barley harvest

May – Wheat harvest

Mid June – Figs

July, - Grapes and vintage.

August - Dates and late figs



A Menu and Recipe for a Typical Festive Meal

Salad: Mint, rue, coriander, parsley, chives, green onion, lettuce, coleroot, thyme, carmint, green fleabane, celery.

Main Course: Roast lamb with hot mint sauce.

Side dishes: Chard made into salad with lentils and beans, mustard as a green vegetable, artichoke.

Dessert: Pear compote made with dried pears boiled in wine and water together with honey. Pomegranates could be served off season (i.e., not in the summer or fall) because they had been placed in hot sea water until discolored, and dried 3 days in the sun, then re-hydrated by placing in cold fresh water overnight.

Dried apples mixed with toasted sesame.