

## Let Them Eat Cake!

Dino Borri (March 26, 2014)



In ancient times Egyptians believed it was lettuce. For the Greeks, it was beans. For Romans, oysters. In recent times, it's chocolate. The hunt for Eros's nectar continues.

The search for food to ignite passion began a long time ago. It was a pleasant trick, which mostly produced psychological effects—not to be underestimated when it comes to [Eros](#) [2]. Aphrodisiacs have survived for millennia with their reputations unscathed, despite a total lack of scientific proof.

### **Ancient Aphrodisiacs**

The Egyptians swore by the aphrodisiacal powers of lettuce, so much so that they considered it a holy symbol of [Min](#) [3], the God of fertility. Depictions of Min leave no doubt about which part of the



body he ruled by. For the Nile Valley civilization, the onion was equally erotic. Priests who had taken a vow of celibacy were even forbidden to eat it.

The Greeks placed similar restrictions on mint. As [Alexander the Great's](#) [4] preceptor, [Aristotle](#) [5] advised the skilled tactician to not let his soldiers drink mint tea during military campaigns. Another food the Greek philosopher and his pharmacological counterpart Hippocrates agreed upon was lentils.

The former believed that the legume kept men virile well into old age; the latter claimed that lentils cooked with saffron were an aphrodisiac. Speaking of legumes, the Greek historian [Plutarch](#) [6] ascribed such virtues to beans, or fassolatha, a soup that is still a national Greek dish.

But for the people who invented democracy, the list of aphrodisiacs was much longer and included artichokes (believed to ensure the birth of sons), garlic, leaks, mushrooms, and—who can forget—onions.

### **Law of the Lake**

Less of a nautical civilization, despite its geographic position, Greece wasn't particularly fond of fish. But it sent the Romans into raptures, a people especially attuned to the pleasures of the flesh (in a non- culinary sort of way).

Romans went berserk over seafood and oysters, so much so that they developed techniques of farming them that continue to be practiced nearly unchanged to this day. The principal site for farming seafood was Lake Lucrino, near the [Gulf of Pozzuoli](#) [7] (in Southern Italy), aided by its proximity to the sea.

Seafood was so exploited—in the dining halls of the rich—that restrictions had to be placed on it more than once by various *leges sumptuariae*, laws that put a cap on luxury commodities and displays of public and private wealth, like banquets and parties.

### **The Curious Case of the Artichoke**

Artichokes are famous aphrodisiacs, most likely because of their phallic shape. As the plant spread, its fame grew.

Belief in its powers was already deep-rooted during the Renaissance. In fact, the famous sixteenth-century doctor and herbalist Pietro Andrea Mattioli writes in his *Commentaries*: “Artichoke meat cooked in beef stock is eaten at the end of a meal with pepper and ginger to increase sexual appetites.”

### **Chocolat**

More recently, most aphrodisiac properties have been ascribed to chocolate and cocoa. This association is due to a few organoleptic properties of cocoa.

According to *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, eating at least one cube of dark chocolate a day increases your sex drive. One of the substances contained in cocoa that helps fuel one's libido is theobromine, which affects the central nervous system, where it acts as a stimulant, increasing energy levels, reflexes, our ability to concentrate, and sexual desire—all qualities connected to “being in the mood.”

Theobromine increases the production of endorphins, which has an effect analogous to morphine: it gives us pleasure and attenuates pain. Furthermore, chocolate helps the production of serotonin, which has a tranquilizing effect. So, enjoy! Just about anybody can afford some good chocolate, which not only helps our amorous side, it helps our humorous side too.



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