

How does History taste like? A closer look on food archaeology.

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What is food archaeology?

Archaeology is the study of human remains or remains made by man in order to get a large scale comprehension of human culture. Food archaeology is a very new specialisation focusing on what people ate and everything related to foodways, like how, who, what and where was cooked, cookware and cutlery, hospitality and everything that surrounds a meal. Food archaeology is also considering eating habits according to status in society, religious practices, and availability of food in a certain period or geographical region.

What is food and foodways?

Food is either a prepared meal, the activity of eating, a (festive) meal or groceries. Foodways are the practices relating to food and its production or consumption. These practices can be from different aspects like economics, cultural or social.

Methods and sources

Archaeologists have several methods at their disposal to investigate past food practices: faunal and botanical remains, organic residues in unglazed pottery, chemical analysis such as stable isotopes in bones or dental calculus but also human remains, artefacts, and architecture. All these help finding out how past cultures or men gathered, farmed, prepared, cooked, and ate.

The main sources are archaeological artefacts, written sources like recipes, letters, ration and delivery lists and visual representations such as mosaics, wall reliefs and paintings.

Although it seems to be a cross-disciplinary all-including task, there are still some limits. If no recipes are found all the information gathered give us an impression on what could have been eating. How food really came into the plate with which other foods it was mixed and how it could taste will remain unknown to us.

Experimental archaeology

An attempt to recreate ancient dishes is slightly possible through experimental archaeology. But one should be aware that groceries back in times are not the same than today and the taste must have changed. Recreating an ancient dish nowadays is an interesting and entertaining assignment to get a glimpse of what could have been eating, well knowing that the taste will never be redone.