Subject: denigrating Sparta
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The entirety of ancient Sparta's rich and fascinating food culture is often reduced to a caricature of brutes grunting over a nasty concoction of pork-and-blood soup in a solemn nightly ritual. The horribly inaccurate Wikipedia entry on "Ancient Greek cuisine" sums up the misperception nicely: "Spartans primarily ate pork stew, the black broth."

This view is misleading, a misreading of history, devoid of Spartan context and purpose and easily invalidated.

Ancient observers of Sparta obsessed over aspects of Spartan culture that were unusual or unique. One of these was the famous group dining clubs, or syssitia, to which all citizens (males in good standing over the age of 20) were required to belong, and all members required to attend most nights for dinner. Because this meal was so heavily commented upon, many have made a bizarre leap to assume this was the only possible meal in ancient Sparta.

Let's explore just how easily this widely held notion can be invalidated.

First, the majority of Spartans weren't eligible for syssitia membership. Women, who were a majority in Sparta, were not eligible, nor were children and teenagers. Only males in good standing over the age of 20, with good reputations and who were able to pay dues in the form of annual food donations and regular meal contributions could belong to a syssition. Male children and teenagers, as well as women and girls of all ages were ineligible for syssition membership, and never ate syssition-specific meals.

But even full-fledged adult male Spartiates ate breakfast and lunch like other Greeks, and ate dinner outside their syssitia when hunting, traveling, training away from the city or while at war. Sparta was famous throughout Greece for its many elaborate, multi-day annual religious festivals, most importantly the Karneia, Hyacinthia and Gymnopaedia, which involved a wide variety of festival-specific foods of incredible variety. These festivals superseeded all other activity by Spartans, including syssitia meals, hunting and even military campaigns.

And even within the Spartan syssition meal itself, blood soup represented only a small fraction of the total meal. According to my admittedly unscientific calculation, black soup accounted for about 3 percent of the total caloric intake of Spartan men, women and children -- hardly what they "primarily ate."

Our only source for black soup ingredients, a book called *Deipnosophists* (or "*The Banquet Philosopher*s") written by a 3rd century A.D. Greek-Egyptian writer named Athenaeus, also spells out the incredible varieties of other foods provided at every dinner. So if you accept the ingredients in the broth, you must accept the other foods specified in that same section from Athenaeus' master work.

Based primarily on Athenaeus, and secondarily on other sources, let's reconstruct a typical nightly Spartan syssition meal, then consider what was really going on.

Somewhere between a dozen and 30 or so members file in at the appointed hour and take their seats on benches at a group table. At the same time, hundreds of other such clubs are similarly gathering for the exact same type of meal.

As always, dinner will be served in two distinct parts. The first part, called the aiklon, is dictated by Spartan Law, mandated in every detail by the state and prepared by a guild of hereditary cooks. The foods prepared for the aiklon meal come from member dues in the form of a very specific amount of barley, wine, cheese, figs and money required of each Spartiate in order to maintain membership -- and citizenship. These items come from the farm that each Spartan is required to own, and produced by Helot slaves provided by the state for the purpose of growing and producing food for the Spartan people.

The second part of the meal, called the epaiklon, is made up of dishes shared voluntarily or more accurately required by custom and social dynamics, and prepared by the households of members.

Even though all the food is provided by members, it's essentially food provided by the state. Rather than taxing citizens money, then buying food, Spartan Law simply cuts out the tax man and required that Spartiates feed each other.

The aiklon course begins. The cooks serve each member a small amount of black soup, a broth made from water, blood, vinegar and salt. Ideally, this broth is made with wild boar meat of which each member is provided a very small amount -- no more than a quarter pound. Sometimes only broth is served without meat, and some older members are said to prefer broth only. Accompanying the black soup there may "possibly be an olive or a cheese or a fig," according to Athenaus, or the group may share "a fish or a hare or a ring-dove or something similar." After the soup, each Spartiate is given barley-cake (essentially an un-sweetened barley gruel mixed with olive oil). The amount of food in this initial course is very small. ﻿Each member has his own cup, into which is poured a watered-down wine.

During this first part of the meal, no food or wine is shared. Each is given his ration and nothing more.

When the aiklon ends, the epaiklon begins. The second part of the meal also includes member-contributed food, but it's done on a voluntary basis. Before it begins, members may invite boys under the age of 20 to come in and listen to the conversation. The boys file in quietly and sit on the floor around the table where the men remain seated, and are served barley cakes wrapped in laurel leaves. The practice of inviting in the boys is aimed at teaching them how to engage in proper Spartan conversation, learn Spartan stories and history and how to speak with brevity and wit.

Although that's all the boys get for dinner, the members are served whatever foods have been voluntarily provided by members. The only rules for this food appear to be that it cannot have been purchased; it must have been produced by the contributing member's farm and prepared in his home. Wealthy members tended to provide bread and fresh, seasonal produce. Members might bring olives, pomagranates, apples, almonds or any number of foods grown on the farm. Poorer Spartiates could provide game killed in the hunt, or animals raised on their farms, including small birds or very rarely, lamb.

Atheneaus quotes a 2nd Century BC stoic philospher, who taught in Sparta and served as an adviser to the Spartan king Cleomenes III. Sphaerus, who wrote a now-lost work called "The Spartan State," as writing that "Sometimes the common people bring whatever is caught in the chase; but the rich contribute wheat bread and anything from the fields which the season permits, in quantities sufficient for the one meeting alone, because they believe that to provide more than is enough is uncalled for."

Contributions confer status on the member providing, based on the quality of the food, and also the quantity: The amount provided must feed everyone a small portion. Any deficiency in quantity, or worse, excess, is frowned upon. Xenophon wrote that "from beginning to end, till the mess breaks up, the common board is never stinted for food nor yet extravagantly furnished.

Members chose the very best foods their lands and homes could produce, then shared those foods in restrained portions as a status-conferring point of pride. Epaikla foods were not supposed to be fancy, fashionable or complicated. But it's very likely that this was the highest-quality food in Greece. Sparta had the most and the best agricultural land, every acre of which was controlled by syssitia members. Each member competed against the others to provide the very best foods he could to the mess.

So what's going on here?

The nightly syssition meal was an institutionalized form of socialization, the ritualized preservation of a very ancient Doric military custom for how the ancestors of the Spartans ate in the field, and a powerful system for creating strong bonds and shaping the basic military organization of the Spartan army. First, they ate rations in the form of a soup made from animals killed in organized hunting. Then they ate anything acquired by individuals through looting or foraging.

The ritual was remarkably well preserved for centuries. The aiklon course didn't evolve much because the ingredients and cooking methods were enshrined in law. The epaiklon course, however, being "whatever you could get your hands on" evolved greatly with farming and with the attachment of status to the quality of food. For example, it's likely that breads gradually transitions from mostly barley in the early centuries to mostly wheat breads.

Consider that the Spartiate's farm fed both farm and household helot slaves, as well as his extended family. The land controlled by a single Spartan no doubt fed somewhere between 10 and 100 people. Given the importance of status within the syssition, only the best of the best foods were selected for epaikla courses. Any unusually great crop of apples or pomegranates, any especially delicious batch of olives, cheese or wine -- anything on the farm that was especially good would be diverted to the Spartiate's syssition to bolster his status. Further, this food was very fresh, probably picked or slaughtered that day and prepared in the home in the late afternoon. How could any other system in Greece result in higher-quality food?