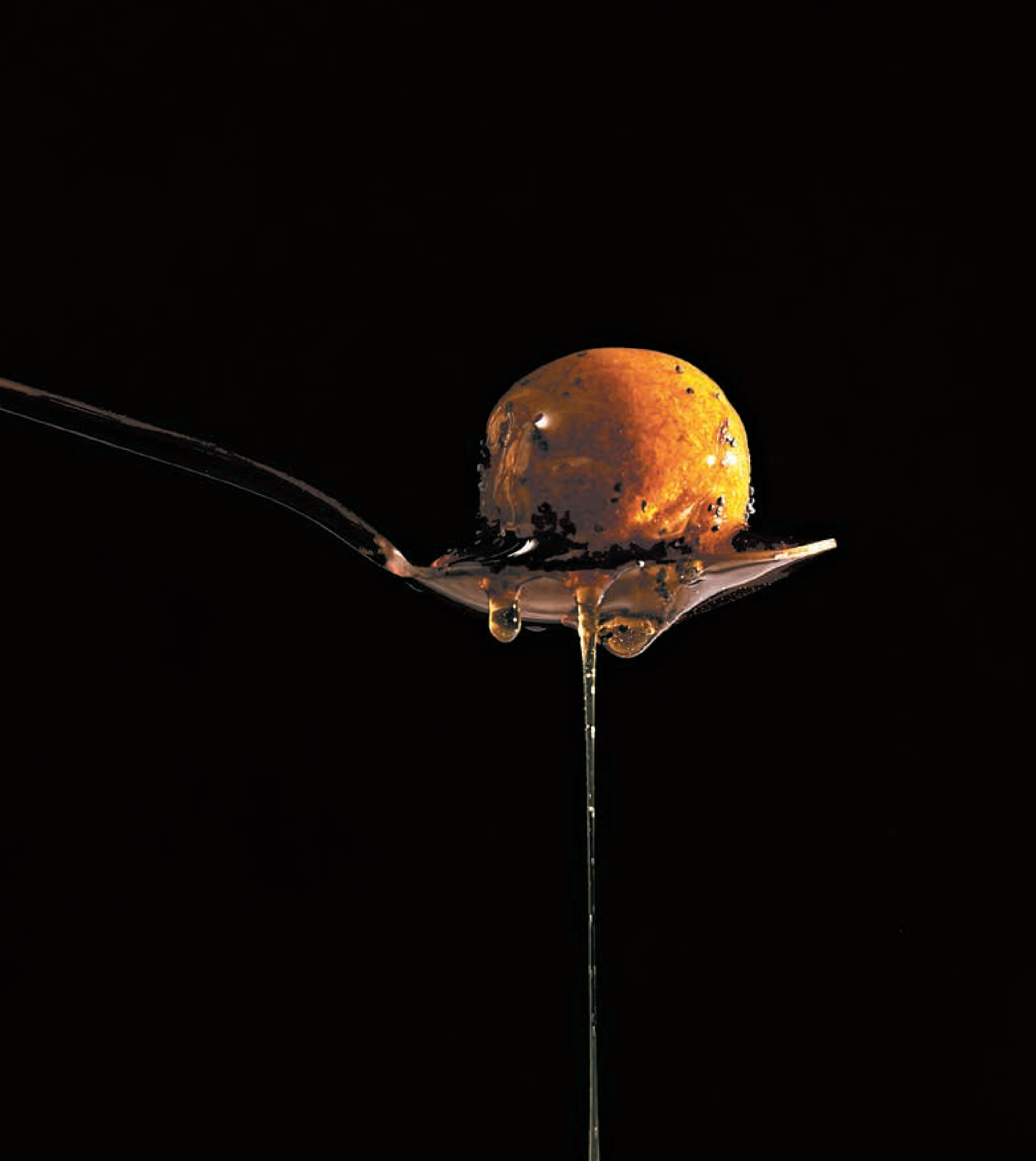
TASTING HISTORY



EXPLORE *the* PAST THROUGH
4,000 YEARS *of* RECIPES

TASTING HISTORY

Max Miller
with Ann Volkwein

Photography by Andrew Bui

SIMON ELEMENT
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For José and his endless patience

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PREFACE

This cookbook, and indeed my entire career, exists because my friend Maureen became terribly ill on vacation.

Let me explain. It was December 2015, and we were at Walt Disney World. We had planned to do all of the wonderful things that one does at Walt Disney World, but on the first day of our trip, Maureen came down with a miserable cold, and we spent the majority of the time in the hotel room eating too many nachos and watching TV. As we sat in bed in the darkened hotel room, Maureen introduced me to a show from England that she thought I, a devout Anglophile, would enjoy. And so we binged an entire season of *The Great British Bake Off* and my life was changed forever.

At that time, I had no interest nor experience in the kitchen. My then roommate still likes to remind me that I was unable to boil pasta water without his assistance; it was rather pathetic. But watching Mary Berry explain the subtle art of baking intrigued me, and I took the bakers' various failures as a personal challenge. On top of that, the hosts, Mel and Sue, would routinely step away from the tent to tell the audience about the history of whatever the bakers were baking, and for me, history has always been an ingredient to make any subject more enjoyable.

Five years and many baking mishaps later (I once used rose oil instead of rosewater in a pie, turning the apartment into a massive bowl of potpourri) and I had become quite the home baker. I was working at Walt Disney Studios in a job that I loved, and every Monday I would share my latest cake or pastry with my coworkers and it was always accompanied by a history. Whether it was out of a genuine desire to see me share the information with a larger audience or if it was merely as a way to redirect the lectures away from them, one of them encouraged me to take my interests in food and history and unleash them on YouTube.

I knew immediately how I wanted to format the show. In the years since I'd first watched *The Great British Bake Off* in the sick room at Disney's Coronado Springs Resort, Mary Berry, Mel, and Sue had all left the show, as had the history lessons, and I missed them all. While Mary, Mel, and Sue were unlikely to join me in my kitchen, the history lessons were something I could bring back, and even expand. So, in February 2020, I started *Tasting History with Max Miller* on YouTube. A week later COVID-19 hit, movie theaters shut down, and I was furloughed from my job. Over the next few months, people all over the world hunkered down in their homes and became obsessed with making sourdough bread, and I, grateful for a distraction, was there to teach them its history. Though it was not sourdough, but *garum*, a fermented fish sauce from Ancient Rome and something I wouldn't encourage anyone to make at home, that really made the channel take off.

So had my friend not become horribly sick on vacation and had a global pandemic not seen me furloughed from a job that I loved, you wouldn't be holding this cookbook and I would still be using my oven to store old magazines. It just goes to show, you just never know what lies ahead.

They say "history is written by the victors," but in my experience, history is written by those who write stuff down, and food is no exception.

Of the innumerable dishes that humans have eaten throughout history, we know of only a fraction, and it's because somebody took the time to record the recipe. And recipes, like descriptions of past events, run the gamut from a comprehensive list of ingredients, precise measurements, and well-written cooking processes to a vague description of a dish mentioning only a couple of the ingredients. Spoiler: most recipes before 1850 find themselves on the latter end of that spectrum, but that's where this book comes in.

This is a book of modern recipes with precise measurements, cook times, and instructions, but for the most part, those specifics are of my own invention. Accompanying each modern recipe that you can easily make at home is the original historic recipe on which it's based. The goal has been to bring those original recipes back to life, to rekindle history in your kitchen, but that's often easier said than done. The frustration I feel when confronted with the enigmatic "salt to taste" in a modern recipe is a hundredfold when I read "put in good things and cook until it is enough" in a medieval recipe.

For most of history, recipes were written by cooks, for cooks, and so anyone reading it would know what those "good things" were and what "enough" was. To cause added confusion, those answers likely changed from cook to cook and year to year. Unfortunately, I don't always have the luxury of knowing what a cook in Renaissance Italy or sixteenth-century China knew, and so I make an educated guess by looking at other, better-written recipes of the period or even consulting later or modern recipes for solutions. Sometimes I also have to accept that I don't know the answer, and I never will know, and I just take a stab in the dark or else abandon the recipe altogether. In any case, re-creating historic recipes is always a series of educated guesses, some more informed than others, and because of that, my re-creations won't be the same as someone else's. As I've given the original recipe along with a modern version, you can be like that historic cook with the freedom to change things if you wish.

Historic cooking, at least in this book, is less a matter of academia and more a matter of fun. As a child, I loved pretending, imagining what it might be like to be a knight in medieval England or a gladiator in Ancient Rome, and while I rarely run around the house hacking at my family with a wooden sword these days, I never lost the passion for putting myself in the shoes of those who came before me. I've found the easiest and most delicious way to do so is by following their recipes and trying to eat what they ate. Though, once I put myself in the shoes of an eighteenth-century home cook whipping Everlasting Syllabub for thirty minutes, I realized that was a horribly inefficient way of doing things when I had an electric stand mixer three feet away. So, while doing my best to preserve the nature of each recipe, I've also optimized them for the modern kitchen, making it all the easier for you to make them yourself.

A Note on Ingredients

The hardest part about re-creating historic cuisine is finding the ingredients. Frankly, with few exceptions, it's impossible to find almost any of them. Modern farming and growing practices have altered everything from chickens to wheat to carrots to pretty much every ingredient there is. And while it's interesting for scholars to debate what a carrot in the court of Charlemagne might have tasted like, for our purposes it does not do to dwell on it. That said, there are some ingredients that, while not common in today's kitchen cupboard, add depth to many of the dishes in this cookbook and so are worth finding when possible.

Ale Barm: Barm is the yeasty foam that forms on the top of a fermenting liquid such as beer or ale and was a common form of yeast used to leaven bread from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. I have opted to use dried yeast for most every recipe that requires it, but if you have easy access to a brewer, barm is worth the effort when making the mead recipe, though even then, it is not necessary.

Asafetida (Asafoetida): Still used in Indian cuisine under the name *hing*, this ingredient is infamous for its pungent odor, which transforms to a smooth leek and garlic flavor during the cooking process. It was used during the Roman Empire as a replacement for the famous ingredient silphium, which was thought to have gone extinct in the first century. Asafetida is an ingredient that cannot be replicated and is worth the purchase either online or at an Indian market. Just make sure to keep it tightly closed and store it in a sealed plastic bag, or even two.

Currants: Few ingredients cause such consternation as currants due to two different ingredients sharing the same name. Today "currants" often refers to black or red berries used in jams, but in historic recipes it typically means Corinth raisins, which are one of the oldest varieties of raisin in the world. They originated in Greece and many came from the city of Corinth, and the name eventually became corrupted to the word "currant." Their other name is Zante currant, coming from the Greek isle of Zakynthos (Zante). Anywhere that currants are called for in this book, you should use the tiny raisin-like currant rather than the berry.

Defrutum: A reduction of grape must used in Ancient Roman cooking. It is very sweet and nearly as thick as syrup. Modern versions called *mosto cotto* or *saba* can be found online. You can also reduce ⅓ cup (80 ml) grape juice to 1 tablespoon for a similar, if less complex, ingredient.

Galangal: Galangal is a root in the ginger family and offers a sweet, woody flavor to many medieval dishes. It can often be found online either dried and sliced or in powder. The slices can be ground using a cheese grater. Common ginger will work as a substitute.

Garum: This ingredient is a must for nearly every Ancient Roman recipe. It's a fermented fish sauce that was often used in place of salt, but its flavor cannot be compared to salt and cannot be reproduced by anything other than fermented fish sauce. Luckily, any Asian market will have fish sauce, and online you can find modern Italian and Spanish versions such as Colatura di Alici and Matiz Flor de Garum.

Grains of paradise: Grains of paradise is a complex, aromatic spice popular in historic recipes. They offer the heat of black pepper with a hint of citrus and sweet ginger and cardamom. Their flavor is

hard to replicate, though equal amounts of black pepper, ginger, and cardamom will come close.

Hyssop: A popular medieval herb still commonly used in tea, hyssop has a flavor that is a combination of mint and anise. Finding it in a tea bag is the easiest way of procuring this herb, as it's rarely sold fresh, but replacing it with mint and a pinch of powdered anise will serve as well.

Jaggery: Jaggery is a form of cane sugar or palm sap that is most common in Asian and African cuisine. Its flavor is less sweet and more bitter than white or brown sugar. It comes in solid blocks or cones and can be found in many Indian or Asian markets as well as Latin American markets under the name panela or piloncillo.

Long pepper: Long pepper is a spice popular throughout history, only losing favor in recent centuries when black pepper came to dominate Western cuisine. It has a similar flavor to black peppercorn but with a bit more heat and a lot more complexity. It truly is superior to black peppercorn in every way except in its availability at the grocery store. You'll likely have to get it online, but once you do you may find yourself filling your pepper mill with these instead of the classic peppercorn.

Lovage: A mildly sweet herb used in ancient and medieval cooking, lovage can be found in some gardens but is not common today and, like rue, has been used as an abortifacient. Celery leaf can be used as a substitute.

Passum: Used in many Ancient Roman recipes, *passum* was a wine made from semi-dried grapes; a raisin wine. It is very sweet and can be replaced by sweet wines such as Vin Santo or ice wine. For a less expensive alternative, a sweet Riesling or Moscato will do the trick.

Persian shallots: These are often dried and can be rehydrated in a bowl of water after a half hour. Their flavor is more akin to strong garlic than to a shallot.

Rue: An herb with a musty, bitter flavor used in ancient and medieval cooking, today rue is most often found in a dried form. In small quantities it is harmless but in large quantities can be toxic and an abortifacient. Parsley leaf can be used as a substitute.

Sandalwood powder: Sandalwood was used to color food red in the Middle Ages, though today it is more often used in cosmetics. As it is all but flavorless, a drop of red food coloring can be used instead.

Savory: Savory is an herb common in historic recipes and comes in two varieties, summer and winter. Recipes rarely call for either specifically, so it is chef's choice. Both varieties offer a robust and peppery taste to a dish—the summer variety has a tinge of heat that the earthier winter variety does not, though winter savory carries a hint of pine that is uncommon in foods today. The complex flavor of both varieties is hard to replicate, but using a combination of thyme and sage will work in a pinch.

Spikenard: Also called nard, this ingredient comes in several forms. The most common is as an oil and is not safe for use in food. The dried root can be used in food and lends a sweet, earthy flavor. As it is difficult to find as well as grind into a powder, it is an ingredient that can be left out of most recipes, as it is usually one of many herbs and spices used.

Tequesquite: Tequesquite is a natural salt mineral mined from several lakes in the State of Mexico. It usually contains sodium chloride and sodium carbonate and was used by the Aztecs as both a flavoring and leavening agent.

The ANCIENT WORLD

Stew of Lamb

City/Region: Babylon
Time Period: c. 1740 BC

FROM HISTORY

Stew of lamb. Meat is used. You prepare water. You add fat. You add fine-grained salt, risnātu, onion, Persian shallot and milk. You crush (and add) leek and garlic.

—The Yale Babylonian Tablets
(translation from Gojko Barjamovic et al., 2019)[1]

The Yale Babylonian Tablets and cooking utensils

This flavorful broth, which is more of a stew, stars one of Ancient Babylon's most loved ingredients: lamb. It also likely included the fat from a fat-tailed sheep, which are exactly what their name would imply. My favorite description of these animals was written by Herodotus in the fifth century BC:

> ***They have . . . the tail long, not less than three cubits in length; and if one should allow them to drag these after them, they would have sores from their tails being worn away against the ground; but as it is, every one of the shepherds knows enough of carpentering to make little cars, which they tie under the tails, fastening the tail of each animal to a separate little car.***

The fat from these tails is prized even today, as it tends to be less greasy than most other animal fat. Unfortunately, finding it can prove rather difficult, so we will use a different type of fat and rely on the meat to do the heavy lifting. Another feature of the stew is a crouton-like crunch that comes from crumbled *risnātu*. This is one of those words that have no definite translation, but it's generally agreed to be a sort of dried barley cake. It pairs well with the lamb, though, according to the Sumerian creation myth, the two ingredients haven't always gotten along so well.

At the beginning of the world, people on earth, on the one hand, had no bread, meat, or clothes and went around naked eating grass and drinking water from ditches. The Anuna, or great gods, on the other hand, sat on the Holy Mound where heaven and earth met having great feasts and generally living it up. For one feast the Anuna decided to create Sheep and Grain, but

A seventeenth-century depiction of a fat-tailed sheep

after a few bites the Anuna were not impressed, so they gave them to the gods Enki and Enlil to take down to the humans instead. The humans, used to eating grass, were less picky and loved the new ingredients, which they used not only for food but also to make beer, clothes, and even weapons. All was well, until Sheep and Grain sat down to dinner themselves and got a little tipsy on wine.

Grain boasts that she is superior to Sheep and that the humans love her more. But Sheep reminded Grain that it is she who is more loved by humans, as she provides the leather on which kings emboss their emblems. They also use her to make slings and quivers for arrows for protection. They use her stomach to hold water and her skin to make sandals. But Grain gave Sheep a knowing smile and said, “Beer. I make beer.” One might think that was the trump card, but Sheep counters with ability to provide meat. Back and forth they go, neither giving in until finally they ask Enki and Enlil to settle the matter. I wish I could tell you that the gods told Sheep and Grain that they loved them equally and that they should get along as sisters, but that’s not what happened. Enki says that, of the two of them, Grain is greater and Sheep should fall on her knees and praise her sister from sunrise to sunset.

Sumerian mythology is full of these debates between two related subjects: bird versus fish, summer versus winter, silver versus copper. With all of this conflict, it warms my heart to find a recipe where two of the combatants can come together and share a pot.

continues

Stew of Lamb

continued

FOR THE *RISNĀTU*:

1 cup (140 g) barley flour

½ teaspoon sea salt

⅓ cup (75 ml) water

¼ cup (60 ml) extra-virgin olive oil

FOR THE STEW:

Extra-virgin olive oil for cooking the onion

1 large onion, diced

¼ cup (50 g) rendered sheep fat or extra-virgin olive oil

1 pound (450 g) lamb, cut into large, bite-size pieces

2 teaspoons sea salt, divided

1 quart (1 liter) very hot water

¼ cup (50 g) chopped Persian shallot (see Cook's Note and page 13)

2 cups (475 ml) sheep milk (goat or cow milk will work as a substitute)

4 to 5 cloves garlic

½ cup chopped leek, plus more for garnish

MAKES 6 SERVINGS **COOK TIME:** 1½ HOURS

1. Preheat the oven to 425°F/220°C.

2. Make the *risnātu*: Whisk together the barley flour and salt, then add the water and olive oil and mix into a ragged dough. Do not knead the dough. Form it into cakes several inches across and as thin as possible without them falling apart, about ¼ inch thick. Set them on a lined baking sheet and bake for 25 minutes, then turn off the oven, but leave the cakes in the oven to cool. This should dry out the cakes so they will easily crumble. Once they have dried, crush two-thirds into small crumbs and one-third into large, crouton-sized pieces.

3. Make the stew: Add a little olive oil to a pan and cook the diced onion, stirring frequently, until it starts to brown, about 7 minutes. Meanwhile, melt 1 tablespoon of the sheep fat or olive oil in a large pot over high heat, then add the lamb and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon of the salt. Sear the lamb until it begins to brown, then pour the hot water over the meat and add the rest of the salt and fat. Bring it to a boil, then lower the heat to medium low and let it simmer, uncovered, for 5 minutes. Then add the cooked onion, the Persian shallot, the milk, and the small *risnātu* crumbs, saving the larger pieces for later. Mix the stew and let it simmer for another 20 minutes.

4. While the stew simmers, grind the garlic in a mortar until it's a paste, then add the leek and grind it with the garlic, though the mixture will not become a paste. Stir the mixture into the simmering stew. At the end of the 20 minutes, if the stew has thickened more than you'd like, add more milk. It is up to you how much broth you'd like. Then cover the pot and let it simmer for another 20 to 30 minutes or until the lamb is very tender. Serve the dish with the large *risnātu* croutons on top and garnish with more chopped leek.

Cook's Note: Persian shallot often is sold dried and should be rehydrated in water for 30 minutes before measuring.

Tuh'u

City/Region: Babylon
Time Period: c. 1740 BC

FROM HISTORY

Tuh'u. Lamb leg meat is used. You prepare water. You add fat. You sear. You fold in salt, beer, onion, arugula, cilantro, samīdu, cumin, and red? beet, and you crush leek and garlic. You sprinkle coriander on top. You add šuhutinnū and fresh cilantro.

—The Yale Babylonian Tablets
(translation from Barjamovic et al., 2019)[1]

Tuh'u is one of the many recipes found in the Yale Babylonian Tablets. It's a beet and lamb stew that, while four thousand years old, is as complex as any stew made today. Lamb being a rather expensive ingredient, about one shekel of silver each, this dish was probably served at festivals. Perhaps the Akitu festival, which took place during the spring equinox. It was a time to celebrate the prime god Marduk's victory over Tiamat, Mother of Dragons and the goddess of the primordial sea.

> ***He shot an arrow which pierced her belly,***
> ***Split her down the middle and slit her heart,***
> ***Vanquished her and extinguished her life.***
> ***He threw down her corpse and stood on top of her.***
> ***When he had slain Tiamat, the leader,***
> ***He broke up her regiments; her assembly was scattered.***
> . . .
> ***The gang of demons who all marched on her right,***
> ***He fixed them with nose-ropes and tied their arms.***
> ***He trampled their battle-filth beneath him.***
> . . .
> ***The Lord trampled the lower part of Tiamat,***
> ***With his unsparing mace smashed her skull,***
> ***Severed the arteries of her blood,***
> ***And made the North Wind carry it off as good news.***
> —*The Epic of Creation*[2]

continues

Tuh'u

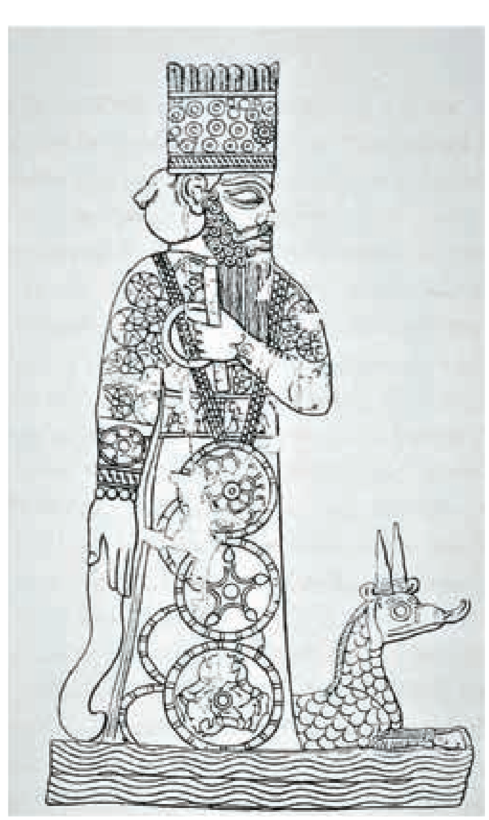
continued

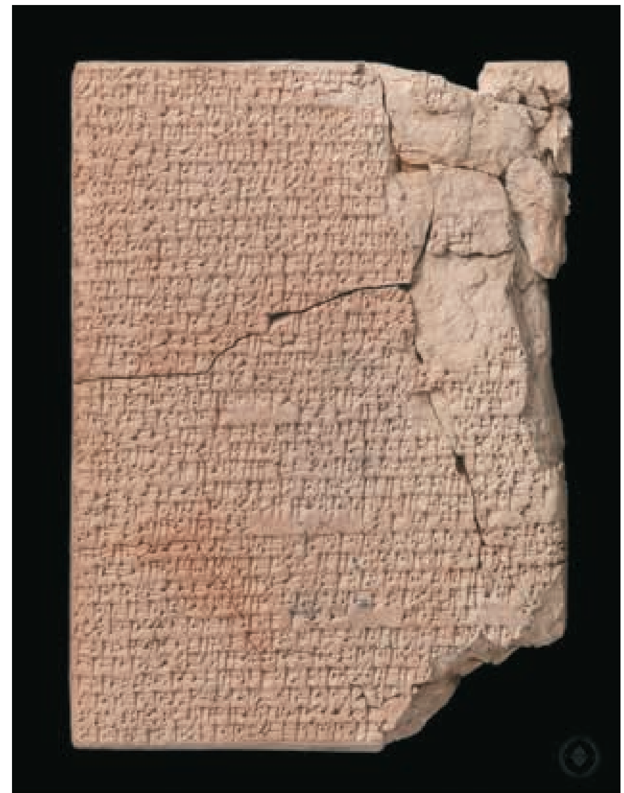
Marduk then used her body parts to create the world; her ribs held up the heavens and her weeping eyes watered the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The brutality really makes you wonder who the good guy in the story is. Even the Babylonian king wanted to make sure to keep on Marduk's good side, which is essentially what the Akitu festival was all about.

To keep in the god's good graces, it took some assistance from the Šešgallu, or high priest of Marduk's Temple, the Ésagila. The king would humble himself by removing his crown and laying down his royal scepter. Then the Šešgallu would grab the king's ear and yank him to his knees and follow that up with a good, hard slap across the face. And I mean hard. There needed to be tears. If the king didn't cry, that was a sign that Marduk was less than thrilled, and nobody wants that. So if I were the king, I'd make sure to practice my Meryl Streep–esque crying on command before heading to the temple, because if the king let the tears flow, that meant Marduk was happy and the god would agree to let the king stay in power for another year. This is a tradition I believe we should reinstate for our political leaders.

Left: The Babylonian god Marduk

Right: Yale Babylonian Tablet





MAKES 8 TO 10 SERVINGS **COOK TIME:** 1 HOUR 50 MINUTES

4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 pound (450 g) leg of lamb chopped into bite-size pieces

1 large yellow onion, chopped

2 or 3 large red or golden beets, chopped (approximately 4 cups)

12 ounces (350 ml) sour beer (it is important that this is not a hoppy beer like an IPA)

2 cups chopped arugula

¾ cup fresh cilantro leaves, finely chopped, plus more for garnish

1 Persian shallot, chopped (*samīdu*) (see page 13)

2 teaspoons ground cumin

1½ teaspoons sea salt

3 cloves garlic

1 large leek, finely chopped (approximately 1½ cups)

2 cups (475 ml) water, as needed

1 tablespoon dry coriander seeds

1 cup Egyptian leek for garnish (*šuhutinnū*)

1. Add the oil to a large pot and set over high heat. Add the lamb to the pot and sear for several minutes in the oil, turning the pieces several times until lightly browned on all sides. Stir in the onion and cook for 5 minutes. Add the beets and let cook for 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the beer, arugula, cilantro, shallot, cumin, and salt to the pot and bring to a boil.

2. Crush the garlic into a paste and mix with the leek, then add to the pot.

3. Lower the heat to medium and allow the stew to simmer for 60 to 90 minutes or until the beets and meat are cooked to your liking. As it simmers, add water when needed. The thickness of the stew is subjective, so the full 2 cups may not be needed.

4. Once the stew is cooked, ladle it into a bowl and sprinkle with coriander seeds. These can be crushed, though the whole seed will add a crunchy texture, which is most welcome. Garnish with fresh cilantro and chopped Egyptian leek.

History Facts: The words *samīdu* and *šuhutinnū* have no definite translation. *Šuhutinnū* is some sort of root vegetable and *samīdu* has been translated as both a type of shallot, leek, or root vegetable as well as a type of flour like semolina. Nobody knows, so you can make your own choice. For the sake of flavor, I've chosen to use the shallot, as it improves the flavor the most.

A lamb cost about one shekel of silver, or the same as one hundred loaves of bread, so while *tuh'u*'s not an inexpensive dish, it would be within reach of much of the population at least a few times a year.

Tiger Nut Cake

City/Region: Egypt
Time Period: c. 1400 BC

Opposite: Making tiger nut cakes, as depicted in the Tomb of Rekhmire. Reproduced by Nina de Garis Davies.

Most recipes are written with words, but this recipe for tiger nut cake is shown in pictures. On the walls of the Tomb of Rekhmire, a vizier, or chief adviser, to the pharaohs Thutmose III and Amenhotep II during the Eighteenth Dynasty, each step of the process is shown, from the crushing of tiger nuts to the final shaping of the cakes, but as they are only images, much is left to interpretation. It's clear that fat is used, but what kind? The liquid used to form the cakes has been guessed to be water, milk, or beer. And the cooking process is anything but definite. One ingredient that is clear is honey, as one panel depicts a man harvesting honey as another smokes the bees with a three-wick lamp, but it's not clear how this honey is used in the cakes. Another question is: What gives the cakes their dark color? Some have interpreted the image of a possible plate of dates as an ingredient to make date syrup to be drizzled over the cake, but who knows? Nobody. Only the role of the main ingredient, the tiger nuts, is clear.

Tiger nuts were used for all sorts of things in Ancient Egypt and were precious enough to be counted by the vizier himself. The Greek historian Theophrastus wrote of this most interesting of tubers:

> ***In sandy places which are not far from the river, there grows underground the thing called malinathalle [tiger nuts]. . . . These, the people of Egypt collect and boil in beer made from barley, and they become extremely sweet, and they are used as sweet fruits.***
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> —Theophrastus, *Historia Plantarum* 4.8.12

With these tiger nuts carrying the dish, everything else in this recipe is my best guess, but whether or not it's exactly what Rekhmire would have known, it is at least on the right track, as it makes a sweet confection that would be welcome on the table of any Egyptian vizier.

continues

Tiger Nut Cake

continued

4 cups (500 g) tiger nuts

1 cup (325 g) honey

⅓ cup (80 ml) warm water

½ cup (100 g) ghee or extra-virgin olive oil

1 cup (325 g) date syrup, if desired

MAKES 1 LARGE CAKE **COOK TIME:** 1½ HOURS

1. First make a flour from the tiger nuts. You can buy tiger nut flour, but the consistency is quite different from that of flour you make—though you'll be forgiven for saving some time. First, soak the tiger nuts in warm water for 1 hour. Drain them and use a mallet to break them into large pieces, to grind more efficiently in the food processor. Grind the broken tiger nuts in a food processor until you have a coarse flour. It is easiest if you do this in small batches rather than adding all of the tiger nuts at once.

2. Combine the flour with honey in a large bowl until just incorporated, then add the warm water, one tablespoon at a time, until it comes together like a dough. Note that you may not need the entire ⅓ cup of water, though you may need more.

3. Add the ghee or olive oil to a pan set over medium heat and warm it just enough to melt the ghee or cover the bottom of the pan. Add the tiger nut dough and cook for 4 to 5 minutes, or until it starts to smell toasted. Keep the dough moving around the pan with a spoon the entire time to prevent burning.

4. Once it's toasted, set the dough on a large piece of aluminum foil and spread it out to let it cool for about 10 minutes, or until it's cool enough to touch with your hands. Form the dough into a large cone on its side, ensuring that there is a flat base so it can stand. Then cover lightly with foil and put it in the refrigerator to firm up before serving.

5. The tiger nut cake can be presented standing on end but should be served lying on its side, with a drizzle of date syrup, if desired.