

Welcome to the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. This is a supplemental episode.

In this episode, we're going to take a look at food during the Three Kingdoms era. As we have seen throughout the podcast, food plays a significant role in the novel. It seems like every other scene we're having a feast or a banquet for some reason or another. So let's talk about what people ate in this era.

I should mention that much of the information for this episode comes from a book called *Society and Life in the Wei, Jin, and the South and North Dynasties*. I talked about those dynasties in the 100th episode Q&A. Together, they spanned the years between 220 and 589. That's more than 350 years, so obviously, not everything in that book would apply to the Three Kingdoms period, which is at the beginning of the time period covered by the book. I'm going to do my best to limit our discussion to only things relevant to the Three Kingdoms period, but just know that some of the things we touch on might be more extrapolations based on what happened before and after the Three Kingdoms period, and I'll note that when the information is about periods before or after the Three Kingdoms. It's not an exact science, but we'll do our best.

Before we talk about food, let's first talk about the absence of food. The end of the Han dynasty was a time of chaos, warfare, and natural disasters, all of which contributed to mass-scale famines. We see this mentioned in passing in the novel on a few occasions, but it didn't really get much attention. In real life, though, this was a serious problem.

For instance, there was a kid's limerick that circulated around the region around the Yangzi River at this time that went something like this: "The armies are the size of cities; the dead bodies are like forests; it's easier to get a hold of gold than millet, and millet is worth its weight in gold." Yeah they didn't exactly coddle the children back then, did they?

When regular food was not available, the people had to get creative. For instance, we have records of Yuan Shao's men turning to mulberries for sustenance. Yuan Shao's cousin Yuan Shu, however, had it

even worse. His men apparently had to eat locusts. Of course today we'd look back and say that they were early practitioners of today's eat-insect food movement.

But sometimes you can't even find a swarm of locust to sate your hunger. In those situations, we have records indicating that desperate folks turned cannibalistic. Remember when a hunter served Liu Bei a piece of his wife for dinner because he couldn't catch any game? That wasn't just invented out of nothing; people apparently were forced to eat the dead on occasion during this time. And it didn't end with the Three Kingdoms era either. With all the turmoil over the next 350-plus years, there were records of more cases of severe famine leading to instances of cannibalism.

Now that we have established that people were on the menu during times of severe food shortages, let's talk about what they ate, aside from each other, during times that weren't quite Walking Dead-level horrible. Now, these days, when you order Chinese, you get your meat-and-veggie dish, whether it's beef and broccoli or sweet-and-sour chicken, and usually there's a bowl of rice on the side. In the Three Kingdoms era, and really for much of Chinese history, however, the main dish was the rice or some variant of grain-based staple food, and the meats and vegetables were the side dishes. In Chinese, the word for eating a meal is literally "eating rice." So let's first look at the staple foods -- the grains that made up the bulk of people's diets.

Staple foods, by the way, were extra important during the Three Kingdoms era because your average Zhou's usual daily meals were vegetarian. Commoners would only have meat around the holidays, if they were lucky. And this vegetarianism wasn't just practiced by peasants; we see evidence of it in higher levels of society as well. Low-level government officials, for instance, also tended to not have meat. Even some high-level officials were rather frugal in their daily eating habits. Even when you get to the palace, you see signs of this frugality. For instance, the servants of Lady Bian (4), the wife who gave Cao Cao four sons, were said to have received meals of only vegetables and grains.

Not surprisingly, what type of staple food you ate depended on which part of the empire you lived in and which tier of society you belonged to. Geographically, the Yangzi River served as the dividing line between North and South. In the South, where water was more plentiful, the primary staple food was rice, which requires a lot of water to cultivate. In the more arid North, people depended on grains such as millet, wheat, barley, and beans.

Of course, not all grains were created equal. During the Three Kingdoms period, rice was the preferred staple food in the South, and it was considered a rare commodity in the North. So the emperor, presumably, had rice. In the North, wheat was the most commonly grown grain, but it was apparently placed under millet as far as perceived value went. Wheat was relatively cheap compared to rice and millet, which made it the daily food of the commoners. In fact, wheat was apparently looked down upon by the well-to-do citizens of the empire as peasant food.

One story that supports this comes from the kingdom of Wu. An official in the Wu court had a little too much to drink at a government banquet and threw up. An official inquiry followed, not because he made a fool of himself and emptied the content of his stomach at an official function, but because of what was in that content. Now I don't know why anyone would want to take a closer look at someone else's fresh vomit, but when the other banquet guests looked, they found -- gasp -- wheat, which was a food considered far below what this particular individual should've been eating. The idea of a court official having to subject himself to wheat was disturbing enough to prompt an inquiry, and this guy had to reassure them that, "No no, I've got plenty of rice at home; I just chose to eat wheat because it suits me." So the next time you have a little too much to drink at a cocktail party and regurgitate your last meal, just tell the stuffy suits who are gawking at your vomit that no no, I've got plenty of filet mignon and escargot at home; I just prefer hotdogs and burgers.

The most common way of preparing any of these grains was to simply steam them, much like how rice is prepared today, minus the electric rice cooker, of course. But often times, you would also see people make congee, which is basically a rice porridge, or wheat porridge, or millet porridge, or even bean porridge, depending on what kind of grain you had access to. This was often done during times of famine, because it's one way to stretch what little grain you have.

Interestingly, congee was also eaten during times of grief or mourning, like when a parent was seriously ill or had just passed. The idea was that you would replace your normal diet with this obviously second-grade food to demonstrate your grief through an act of self-denial. We have records of Zhang Zhao (1), the senior adviser to Sun Quan in the Southlands, doing exactly this after his father died. It was written that during mourning, Zhang Zhao and his brother did not wear fancy clothing, did not eat any salt or vinegar, and only ate a little bit of wheat porridge each day. This act was apparently seen as praiseworthy, and people lauded Zhang Zhao for it.

Aside from steaming grains and making porridge, people also turned the grains into flour to make dough, from which came a bewildering array of creations that are lumped under the Chinese word “mian (4) bing (3),” which basically refers to bread products but can also include noodles. In fact, the Chinese word for noodles is mian (4), the same as the first character in mian (4) bing (3). There are seemingly infinite variations of mian bing. It's kind of like how the Italians have a million and one types of pasta. If you really want to get a glimpse of how people turn the same dough into a dazzling array of rolls and buns and noodles, I'd recommend checking out episode 2 of the 2012 Chinese TV series “A Bite of China.” It's all about staple foods. I'm watching that as I write this, and it's making me hungry. I'll include a link to the video on YouTube, which has English subtitles.

One interesting side note while we're on the subject of mian bing. One of the more famous variations of mian bing is called man (2) tou (0). In the present day, it's basically just a steamed bun with

nothing inside. But when it first began, it was more like a meat bun. The reason I make a point of mentioning it is that this particular creation was supposedly the work of Zhuge Liang, and we'll see later in the novel how and why he tried his hand at being an avant garde breadmaker.

Alright, so that's enough about staple food. Let's talk about the side dishes, aka the meats and the veggies. People of this era had a variety of vegetables, such as eggplants, celery, leeks, carrots, turnips, cucumbers, winter melons, taro, and mushrooms, just to name a few. Now, if you were a farmer in a village, naturally you would be planting your own vegetables. If you lived in the city, chances are you would be getting your vegetables from a market, although there are some city-dwellers who planted their own vegetables. But as we learned from the novel when Liu Bei started his own vegetable garden as a way to mask his true ambitions, such things were not deemed worthy of the aristocracy.

As for fruits, around this time, they had things like dates, peaches, cherries, grapes, pears, plums, apricots, chestnuts, Asian hazelnuts, pomegranate, persimmon, and Chinese crabapples. From the periphery of the empire, they also had exotic imports like sugar canes, bananas, dragoneyes, lychees, bayberries, loquats, the fruits of the areca palm, and olives.

Aside from vegetables and fruit, there might have been another important vegetarian food item -- tofu. I say "might have been" because while Tofu is most commonly believed to have been invented during the Western Han Dynasty by a prince in the imperial house, that claim has not been conclusively verified, and there are arguments disputing that what they made during the Han Dynasty was actually something resembling present-day tofu. But in any case, let's say maybe they had tofu. To make tofu, you take soybeans -- which we knew they grew during this time -- soak them, grind them, filter them, and boil them to make soy milk. Then you let the soy milk coagulate into bean curds, and then you press the bean curds into tofu. What you get is a block of mild-tasting bean curd that can then be flavored for both savory and sweet dishes and is an excellent source of protein, which is important because, again,

most people in the Three Kingdoms era did not eat meat very often, so you had to get that protein from somewhere.

Let's face it, though: Tofu is nice, but there's nothing quite like a nice hunk of meat. So let's talk about what kind of meats people from this era ate when they did have meat. Pigs were pretty common, as were cattle and sheep. Other livestock, such as horses and donkeys, were also eaten. Oh yeah, and dogs were also on the menu, along with chickens.

Then there were the sources of meat that were more geographically segmented. In the North, sheep dominated, because the North had much more contact with the nomadic tribes outside the northern frontiers of the empire, and one of the favorite herd animals for those nomads was sheep. In the South, where rivers and other bodies of water abound, we see more reliance on fish, shellfish, and waterfowl. Beyond that, there were the things that you could hunt. Game included rabbit, deer, and wild birds.

So now we have covered what types of food people ate. Let's take a look at how they actually prepared these foods. Around this era, there were already a number of cooking methods. One of the most common methods was roasting over an open fire, whether it's a slab of meat on a stick or a whole animal. Expanding our parameters a bit and looking at the time of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, which was about 70 years after the Three Kingdoms era, it's recorded that one of the delicacies at feasts was cow heart, roasted on an open flame, which, as someone who loves offals, sounds pretty awesome.

Aside from roasting meat on an open flame, people also wrapped meat in some kind of container and roasted that. Now granted, this next bit comes from a time about two centuries after the Three Kingdoms, but it's interesting enough that I wanted to include it. A cookbook from this time described something akin to a Chinese haggis. They took fatty mutton, mixed it with various seasoning, and stuffed

it all into a sheep stomach. After stitching up the stomach, they would dig a hole in the ground, start a fire in the hole, and then cooked the sheep stomach and its contents on the embers of the fire.

Next, we have a cooking method where you put meat in a pot with a little bit of water, cover, and then cook it on a low flame. This was often used to cook pork and geese, as well as various vegetables. When you use it to cook meat, apparently the result is that the fatty parts would not be greasy.

Now, if people of this era don't want to eat fresh meat right away, they could preserve it by drying, and they would do this for animals large and small. For larger animals like pigs, cattle, or sheep, they would butcher the animal and cut the meat into strips. For smaller animals, like chicken, ducks, or rabbits, they would remove the internal organs and dry them whole. One way they seasoned the meat before drying was to make a marinade by cooking bits of cattle or sheep bones with fermented black soybean, strain out the bits, and then add to the liquid salt, onion, flower peppers, ginger, and dried orange peel. This marinade would be used to soak the strips or slices of meat or whole animals. After a thorough soaking, the meat would be kept in a cool, shady place to dry. Once it's dried, it would be put into paper bags and kept in storage. It's said that this method of preservation would keep meat edible from winter through summer, and of course, dried meats are still a staple of Chinese cooking even today.

So those are some of the ways people cooked meat. What about fish, which as we discussed earlier, was a common part of Southern diets. There were many recorded methods of cooking fish, including pan frying, deep frying, braising, and steaming. People also made dried fish and fish sauce.

They also had a way of making salted fish that is still practiced in some variation today. One recipe I found said to take a grass carp, make a cut in its tail, and put it in a freshwater basin for half an hour to let it slowly bleed out. Then you would clean the fish and pad it dry with a towel. After that, cut it into thick fillets, and put the fillets in a pot with salt, minced ginger, minced garlic, and some good ol' high-proof grain alcohol and let it all marinate for half a day. Then you strain the fillets and dry them,

and then put them into another pot and add pepper, chili powder, black rice flour, and sesame oil and mix. Then, you put the fillets into a clean jar and cover. The lids of the jars are like a big salsa dish, with a big rim around the opening. Once you seal the opening, you would pour some water into the rim, which apparently helps with the fermentation process. Then you let it all sit for about 10 days before you take it out and eat it. Personally, fermented fish just doesn't sound that appetizing to me, but hey, to each their own.

Alright, so we've covered a number of cooking methods, but what about flavoring? What kind of seasoning and spices did they use? The most common ones included salt, ginger, garlic, green onions, flower peppers, orange peels, orange leaves, cinnamon, coriander or cilantro, black pepper, long pepper, onion bulbs, and celery. They also used flowers like magnolias and plum blossoms, as well as fruits such as pomegranate and something called Cornelian cherry, which has an acidic flavor supposedly like a cross between a cranberry and sour cherry. They also used grain alcohol, vinegar (which was also called 'bitter wine'), bean sauce, and the fermented black beans I mentioned earlier.

To sweeten their food, people would primarily use honey, and this was apparently a particular favorite in the Riverlands during the Three Kingdoms era. Interestingly, around the same time, the Riverlands were also producing sugar canes, but they were not yet being used to make cane sugar. People to the west, from Central Asia, WERE making rock sugar out of sugar canes, and these would get imported into China as rare commodities. In fact, apparently Cao Pi, the first emperor of the kingdom of Wei, once sent an envoy to deliver some rock sugar to Sun Quan in the Southlands as a way of showing off. It wasn't until the Tang Dynasty, some three-plus centuries after the end of the Three Kingdoms era, that the technique for making rock sugar reached the Heartlands of China.



Alright, so now you have a feast with some nice cow heart roasted over an open flame, or maybe a Chinese haggis, and some yummy salted fish, along with your platter of veggies and fruits. So what do you use to wash all that food down? Why, high-proof grain alcohol that could make you go blind, of course. In the novel, when we say wine, what we mean is grain alcohol. And during the Three Kingdoms era and the subsequent periods of chaos, people apparently drank this stuff by the bucketful. According to my main source of information, the alcohol consumption during these periods significantly outpaced that of the earlier Qin (2) and Han Dynasties. I guess living through a bloody time period where the population might have plummeted by as much as 71 percent would drive anyone to drink.

In fact, raging alcoholism seemed to be something of a mark of distinction among certain circles of society. Learned scholars, for instance, might hit the jug hard as a way to express their dissatisfaction with a state of things that did not allow them to make full use of their talents.

One such group of scholars was known as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Groves. These guys were Daoists who lived during the time when the Sima clan usurped the throne. Now, the novel didn't get into this, but the Sima clan were apparently avowed Confucianists, and that meant these Daoist scholars were on the outs with the new court. To cope with the disappointments in their lives and professional prospects, some of these Seven Sages adopted personas of drunken pranksters and eccentrics as a way to spit in the face of the government. They kind of set an example for many who came after them. In fact, someone once wrote that, "One need not possess extraordinary talent to be known as a famous scholar. You just need to procrastinate, drink yourself stupid, and read the Li (2) Sao (1)," which was a famous poem by an ancient scholar who also felt his talents were not recognized and put to good use.

So anyway, now that we've established there was great demand for alcohol during this time, let's look at the demand side of things. To make grain alcohol, you of course needed grain, and lots of it. In fact, records indicated that when one particular county during the Eastern Jin Dynasty, which began

about 70 years after the Three Kingdoms, prohibited alcohol for a year, it saved more than 1 million bushels of grain, which surpassed all the land rent in that county.

So it takes a lot of grain to make wine. Well, remember how we mentioned back at the beginning of this episode that there were frequent famines during this period? That doesn't exactly bode well for the brewing industry, does it? In fact, when he was ruling the Riverlands, Liu Bei apparently implemented a prohibition on alcohol because a drought had put a damper on the grain supply. If you were caught with brewing equipment in your house at that time, well, you were going to be punished as if you were brewing.

But for the most part, prohibitions generally did not last long, just like America's brief flirtation with the concept. Most of the time, individuals were able to brew and sell their own alcohol, and many brewed for their own consumption, like the Wu commander Lu (4) Kang (4), who in the novel offered some to his Jin counterpart Yang Hu.

Aside from grain alcohol, there were wine made from grapes during this time. During the Western Han Dynasty, grapes and grape-based wines made their way from Central Asia into China, but their quantities were limited, and even in the Three Kingdoms period, wines made from grapes were seen as a rare treat. The first Wei emperor, Cao Pi, once sang its praises in a decree. All the warfare and chaos during the period made it hard to transport grape wines from the west. If you were back in the Three Kingdoms era and you had hunkering from a nice chardonnay, your best bet would be to go to Liang (2) Province, which lay in the northwestern corner of the empire and was the closest to the wine-producing regions of Central Asia.

Well, let's say you can't hold your liquor, and we certainly have seen a character or two who couldn't, what might you drink while everyone else around you was getting blitzed? Tea would be one popular alternative. Tea began in the southwestern regions of China and was already being drunken

during the Han Dynasty, but at that time, it was being taken more as medicine. By the Three Kingdoms era, though, it had become more of a recreational drink. And by the time of the Western Jin Dynasty, which immediately followed the Three Kingdoms, tea was becoming a common drink in the common household.

And since we're on the topic of tea, let me pause and plug Lazlo Montgomery's excellent 10-part series on the history of tea in China on his China History Podcast. Go check that out if you want a real deep dive into the subject.

Alright, I think that about does it. We've covered a lot of ground about food and drink in the Three Kingdoms era, give or take a couple hundred years in some cases. I hope you've enjoyed this supplemental episode, and I'll see you next time on the Romance of the Three Kingdoms Podcast. Thanks for listening!