

Recipe from Antiquity

The Art of the *Mageiros*

By Yvonne Yiu



Lentils, poached fish and mulberry sauce. A BOWL. Dm. 25.5 cm. Clay. Western Greek, 4th cent. B.C. CHF 1,700. A PLATE. Dm. 12.5 cm. Clay. Attic, 400-375 B.C. CHF 600. A BOTTLE. H. 21.5 cm. Glass. Roman, 1st-2nd cent. A.D. CHF 2,900. A SMALL BOWL. H. 4.3 cm. Glass. Roman, 1st-3rd cent. A.D. CHF 2,600.

"No one who does wrong to a cook (*mageiros*) ever escapes completely unharmed. Our art has an aura of sanctity about it, I suppose. With the table attendant (*trapezopoios*) you can do what you like," the cook Sikon notes with some satisfaction after hearing that the bad-tempered old man, Knemon, fell into a well after refusing to lend him a cooking pot. (Menander, *Dyskolos* 644-7).

The close ties between the art of cookery and the performance of sacred rites – something the cooks of Middle and New Attic Comedy liked to preen themselves with – lead back to the origin of the profession of the *mageiros* that first becomes tangible in written sources of the 5th century B.C. In Ancient Greece, the slaughter of an animal was always performed in conjunction with an act of sacrifice. Certain pieces of the beast were burned as an offering to the gods and then the remaining meat was cooked and eaten. In Homeric and Archaic times, the men of a household (*oikos*) were responsible for these tasks and in the case of state sacrifices they were performed by the priestly nobility. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* describe how heralds (*kerykes*) fetched the animals, sacrificed them and prepared the meal while distributors (*daitroi*) shared out the meat to those present. (*Il.* 3.116-8, 18.558-9, *Od.* 17.331-5). Scholars assume that the persons who carried out these duties did so only from time to time, on specific occasions, and not as their main occupation. Gradually, however, a degree of

professionalisation set in, possibly initially at popular sanctuaries where local people lent a helping hand to the visitors who came to sacrifice to the gods. For example, it was said of the people of Delos, "that they used to supply the services of *mageiroi* and table-attendants to all who came to Delos for the sacred rites." (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 172f). By the Classical Period, the professional profile of the *mageiros* had taken on its definitive shape. It was so self-evident which tasks he specialised in that Sophists could even use them for their trick questions. Socrates, for instance, recounts a discussion he had with Euthydemus: "Well, he asked, do you know what is each craftsman's special piece of work? Whose proper task is it to slaughter and skin, and after cutting up the joints to stew and roast? – That of the *mageiros*, I said. – Now, if one does one's proper work, he said, one will do rightly? – Certainly. – And is it, as you say, the *mageiros*'s proper work to cut up and skin? Did you admit this or not? – I did so, I replied, but pray forgive me. – It is clear then, he proceeded, that if someone slaughters the *mageiros* and cuts him up, and then stews or roasts him, he will be doing his proper work. – O Poseidon! I exclaimed, there you give the finishing touch to your wisdom!" (Plato, *Euthydemus* 301c-d).

In his satyr play *Cyclops* (411/408 B.C.), Euripides draws a gruesomely grotesque picture of a *mageiros* who skilfully executes the tasks described in the Platonic dialogue – slaughter-

ing, cutting, roasting and cooking. Parodying Book 9 of Homer's *Odyssey*, the play describes Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus. The one-eyed giant accuses the hero and his companions of theft and drives them into his cave to sacrifice them, "to no other god but me and my stomach here, the greatest of divinities." The "cook from hell" (*Aidou mageiros*) expertly handles the equipment required to perform the sacrifice: the *sphageion*, a large vessel used to collect the blood, the double axe (*pelekys*) with which the victim is killed, and the sacrificial knife (*machaira*), with which the meat is cut up. His expertise also extends to the cooking of the food. With the joyful anticipation of a gourmet, he roasts the tender pieces on the fire, "a hot feast from the coals" and throws the tougher limbs into the cauldron to "boil them meltingly tender." (Euripides, *Cyclops* 243-6, 335, 394-404).

Cratinus's *Odysseis* (before 423 B.C.), a fragmentarily preserved parody on the same theme, lists not only the cooking techniques of the Cyclops, but also the sauces in which he dips the meat: "In return for which, I shall grab you, 'O trusty comrades mine' and toast you, and boil you, and grill you over charcoal, and roast you, and into sea water/brine (*alme*), and vinegar brine (*oxalme*) and garlic brine (*skorodalme*) I will dip you, and the one that looks to me the tastiest of the lot, I will gobble him down, my good soldiers!" (Ath. 385c-d/Edmonds, Cratinus Fr. 143).

Polyphemus's Sauces (Ath. 385c-d/Edmonds, Cratinus Fr. 143)



Alme: Filter sea water and boil for a few minutes to purify it. Alternatively, dissolve 4 g sea salt in 100 ml water. **Oxalme:** Mix equal amounts of vinegar and *alme*. This sauce was used not only for meat, but also for fish: "A large fish was now served in *oxalme*, [and one of the guests] observed that any fish dish served in *oxalme* was very tasty." (Ath. 385b). **Skorodalme:** Crush 4 cloves of garlic and

mix with 2 tbsp sea water. This sauce may be an archetype of *skorodalia*, a garlic sauce popular in modern Greece. *Skorodalia*: Soak 4 slices of white bread in water, squeeze out excess liquid and puree together with 4 cloves of garlic, 4 tbsp olive oil, 2 tbsp vinegar and ½ tsp salt.

Although the Cyclops acts like an accomplished *mageiros* in the plays by Cratinus and Euripides, he is, of course, a *mageiros* only in the figurative sense. Indeed, a professional cook never makes an appearance in Old Attic Comedy and it is only occasionally that the protagonist is said to display the skill of a *mageiros*. For example, the chorus comments on Dikaiopolis's preparations for the Choes festival, saying: "See, how he knows his business, like a cook (*mageirikos*)! How well he understands the way to prepare a good dinner!" (Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, 1015-7). When, however, in Middle and New Attic Comedy the focus of the plays shifted from politics to the representation of daily life, the professional cook could step into the limelight. Conceited and verbose, the *mageiros* typically enjoyed delivering lengthy speeches highlighting his attainments, much to the despair of the host, who exasperatedly tried to interrupt the flow of words: "Mince the meat, not my eardrums!" or groaned in resignation: "Lord! What with your dishes and *kandauloi* and skins, the pleasure is gone before the feast begins." (Ath. 386a, 516c/Edmonds, Alexis Fr. 172-3).

In the cities, *mageiroi* offered their services on the marketplace and were hired by persons who wished to sacrifice or hold a banquet. Competition was fierce and thus they had no qualms about reviling each other. "When taking on a *mageiros*," one host relates, "I heard all the insults they said against each other in competing for work: one does not have a discerning nose for a cooked dish, another has a foul palate, another has polluted his tongue on unseemly desires for flavourings, or 'too much vinegar', 'too much salt', 'burns the meat', 'too sweet a tooth', 'can't stand the smoke', 'is afraid of the fire.'" (Ath. 661f/Edmonds, Poseidippus Fr. 1). Conversely, the cooks in Attic Comedy liked to brag about their culinary feats. The *mageiros* in *The Brothers* by Hegesippus, for instance, boasts: "Whenever I chance to be working at a funeral feast, as soon as they come from the carrying-out procession dressed in black, I take off the lid of the pot and make them turn from tears to laughter. Such a pleasant sensation runs through their bodies, as if they were at a wedding. – Just by serving lentil soup and sardines? – They are a sideshow for me. But if I get my way and arrange the kitchen as I want today, then you will see the Sirens at it once again. With a savour like that, no one will be able simply to walk

past this alley. Every passer-by will instantly stand open-mouthed at the door, nailed to the wall, speechless until one of his friends runs along with his nostrils bunged up and drags him off." (Ath. 290b/Edmonds, Hegesippus Fr. 1).

Lentil Soup (*phake*) (after Ath. 290d/Edmonds, Hegesippus Fr. 1)



Soak 300 g lentils overnight and cook in 6-8 dl stock until done (about 15 minutes). The Stoic Chrysippus of Soloi recommended the addition of onions; the Presocratic philosopher Zeno of Elea liked his soup with plenty of coriander seeds; in a comedy by Antiphanes it was served with sliced sausage and the young men of Athens spiced it up with a dash of vinegar. These young men should be avoided, a *mageiros* warns his apprentice, when they "get up a subscription dinner and put into the urn what money they can find" in order to pay for the food and drink. At such a dinner you "get beaten [...] and have to work all night. If you ask them for a little fee one says 'first bring me the pisspot. The lentil soup lacked vinegar.' You ask again. 'You will be the first cook to get a good hiding,' he says." (Ath. 158b, 160d, 292d/Edmonds, Diphilus Fr. 43)

The food the cooks of Attic Comedy were most passionate about was fish. The *mageiros* in Philemon's *Soldier*, for instance, is propelled before the audience by an intense urge to relate a *tour de force* of culinary minimalism: "A desire has come over me to come out and to declare to earth and heaven how I prepared this dish! What a tender fish I had! And how I served it! Not drugged with cheeses nor in a flowery presentation. But when baked it was just like it was when alive." This sublime dish engendered a feeding frenzy amongst the guests: "The first of the diners who discovered the pleasure to be found in the stewing-pot jumped up and ran off in a circle with the dish in his hands and the others chased hard on his heels. They screamed out loud, for some of them grabbed a bit and others got nothing." (Ath. 288d/Edmonds, Philemon Fr. 79). By contrast, the *mageiros* in *Locked Up Women* by Sotades prepares a fish menu of epic dimensions. In a lengthy monologue he explains

how he cooked 14 different types of fish and crusteacans: "First I got some prawns. I fried all these in a pan. Next a fine shark: I baked the middle piece and boiled the rest after the mulberry sauce had been prepared. Then I carried in two huge heads of greyfish. These I flung into a mighty stewpot, lightly adding green herbs, cumin, salt, water, and some oil. [...] A nice dish is boiled squid stuffed, as are the lateral fins of the cuttle gently roasted [...]." In the wake of this *aristeia* in the battlefield of the kitchen, the *mageiros* concludes with smug satisfaction: "What's left? Nothing else! This is my entire art!" (Ath. 293a-e/Edmonds, Sotades Fr. 1).

Poached Fish in Mulberry Sauce (after Ath. 293b/Edmonds, Sotades Fr. 1)



Poach the fish for ca. 8 minutes in a broth made of 3 dl water, a handful of fresh herbs, ½ tsp cumin seeds, ½ tsp salt and 1 tbsp olive oil. To make the mulberry sauce, gently simmer 200 g mulberries and 1 tbsp honey until the desired consistency is reached.



A COMIC ACTOR, POSSIBLY A COOK. H. 8.7 cm. Bronze. Greek, 4th cent. B.C. CHF 14,500