

Honey's History: Thousands of Years of the Sweet Liquid Nectar

Hippocrates and Honey

Hippocrates (460 BC – 370 BC), the father of medicine, said: *Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food*. Hippocrates was a true believer that nutrition is one of the primary tools that a doctor can use, and one of the main foods that he would treat people with was honey. The sweet liquid nectar produced by bees and found in flowers could relieve all kinds of pain. According to Hippocrates, “Honey and pollen cause warmth, clean sores, and ulcers, soften hard ulcers of lips, heal carbuncles and running sores.” He would combine vinegar with honey to reduce pain in his patients. In cases of dehydration, he advised the use of mead, also known as honey water or the “nectar of the gods”. Honey water was also used by Olympic athletes. After competitions, Olympic athletes of any kind supposedly drank honey water to regain their strength. Hippocrates would mix honey, water, and various other ingredients to heal any short febrile illness or even open wounds.

Honey in Ancient Greece

In Ancient Greece, honey was considered a source of poetry and wisdom, and bees were thought of as “messengers of the gods.” In theory, no one was sure how honey was produced or where it came from — it only seemed that it was originating close to bees. That was the reason why ancient Greeks held the belief that honey could be a “star”— a star sent from the heavens down to earth, and which was placed on trees and flowers for the bees to collect. Honeybees were also regarded as a sacred symbol of the goddess Artemis; for this reason, the honey bee was featured on the coin of Ephesus for approximately six centuries. The bee was the symbol of Artemis at Ephesus, just as the owl was the emblem of the goddess Athena in Athens.



The use of honey was not limited to healing properties; ancient Greeks would use it as an ingredient to sweeten cakes or even mix it with cheese. Honey cakes were also very famous and were commonly used as offerings to the gods. A popular treatment in Athens' health spas

was “honey therapy,” and ancient Greeks would also use honey as the main ingredient for face masks.

In ancient Greek mythology, the gods were also fans of honey. The foods that granted immortality, namely nectar and ambrosia, were considered to have somewhat close properties to mead and honey.



An ancient Greek amphora showing four men, Laios, Keleos, Kerberos, and Aigolios, stung by bees, who plundered from the hives the honey on which the infant Zeus was nourished.

Honey in Modern Greece

Today, honey is considered one of the most traditional products of Greece and also one of the top exports of the country. Honey is a product consumed globally, and it can be produced wherever bees are found. In one of the five blue zones, the island of Ikaria in Greece, honey is a very popular food. Ikarians produce honey and consume it at least twice throughout their day. They usually prefer to stir it in their morning coffee or they consume it before dinner. As Hippocrates did, Ikarians also use honey as medicine for the treatment of colds or wounds.

Apart from Ikaria, honey is produced almost everywhere in Greece, but there are a few regions especially notable for their honey production. For example, thyme honey is well-known in the islands of Crete and Kythera. Fir honey is famous in Vytina, which is located in the Peloponnese hills near Tripoli. Also, it is important to mention that approximately thirty percent of all Greek honey is produced in Halkidiki. The Dodecanese Islands are a significant commercial producer and, lastly, Epirus is known for its peculiar honey, particularly bittersweet chestnut honey.

Benefits of Honey

Over the past years, numerous studies have shown that honey possesses great properties and should be consumed often as part of a balanced diet. According to the Mayo Clinic, the antioxidants in honey can be related to a lower risk of heart disease. Studies have also found that honey could have antidepressant and anti-anxiety properties or even help with the prevention of memory-related conditions. Even today, it can still be used to heal wounds, especially burns, and as a cough suppressant.

Honey has a long history in Ancient Greece, and in Modern Greece as well. From then until now, honey is still used as an alternative way in medicine but also as a nutritious food used in a lot of recipes. Honey's therapeutic properties, plus delicious taste and benefits make it a one-of-a-kind super-food.

References

1. "Honey In History: Ancient Greece". *Discover The Benefits Of Honey*, 2019, <https://healthywithhoney.com/honey-in-history-ancient-greece/>.
2. "Honey Liqueur: The Ancient Greeks Sure Loved Their Honey". *Greek Lightning*, 2022, <https://www.thegreeklightning.com/blog/honey-liqueur/the-ancient-greeks-sure-loved-their-honey/>.
3. "Honey". *Mayo Clinic*, 2020, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/drugs-supplements-honey/art-20363819>.
4. "The Ancient Greek Honey Tradition That Dates Back Thousands Of Years...". *The Raw Honey Shop*, 2021, <https://www.therawhoneyshop.com/blogs/home/the-ancient-greek-honey-tradition-that-dates-back-thousands-of-years>.
5. "The Sacred Bee: Ancient Greece And Rome — Planet Bee Foundation". *Planet Bee Foundation*, 2018, <https://www.planetbee.org/planet-bee-blog//the-sacred-bee-ancient-greece-and-rome>
6. "Why Greek Honey Is Considered Best In The World — Greek City Times". *Greek City Times*, 2022, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2018/02/20/why-greek-honey-is-considered-best-in-the-world/>.
7. Anna Wichmann. "Why Greek Honey Is The Best In The World: A Beekeeper Explains". *Greekreporter.Com*, 2021, <https://greekreporter.com/2021/03/02/greek-honey-greece/>.
8. Freeman, Zeke. "Honey And Hippocrates". *Blog.Beeraw.Com*, 2022, <https://blog.beeraw.com/honey-and-hippocrates>.
9. Monroe, Lisa. "Honey—A Sweet Secret To Longevity - Blue Zones". *Blue Zones - Live Better, Longer*, 2022, <https://www.bluezones.com/2021/09/honey-a-sweet-secret-to-longevity/>.

Images

"File:Tétradrachme En Argent Représentant Une Abeille Et Un Cerf.Jpg - Wikimedia Commons". *Commons.Wikimedia.Org*, 2012, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:T%C3%A9tradrachme_en_argent_repr%C3%A9sentant_une_abeille_et_un_cerf.jpg.

"Amphora | British Museum". *The British Museum*, 2022, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1847-0716-1.