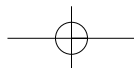
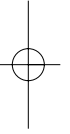
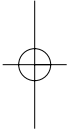


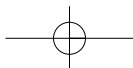
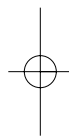
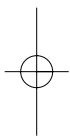


— PART I —

*During the Paleolithic age, hunger  
was satisfied by the methods of*

COLLECTING GATHERING  
HUNTING





## COLLECTING GATHERING HUNTING

## From Fire to the Pot

‘There was a time’, says a myth of the Chilouk people, ‘when no one yet knew fire. People used to heat their food in the sun, and the men ate the upper part of the food, cooked in this way, while the women ate the underneath which was still uncooked.’ The myth is not male chauvinism, but a kind of allegory of the sexual symbolism of fire.

Just as we do not know how, where or by whom fire was first domesticated, we cannot really tell anything about the way food was cooked in the most distant Paleolithic period. We can only base conjectures on the customs of existing primitive peoples. Bones and walnut or hazelnut shells have been found on excavated sites, but there is no means of knowing whether they are the remains of cooked meals, the debris of fires lit for heat, or even the remnants of incinerated raw waste matter. Professor Loon has studied the treatment of certain long bones cracked so that the marrow could be extracted, and believes they were sucked and gnawed raw. The Abbé Breuil and Dr Hulin are inclined to think the meat was roasted, from the evidence of Mousterian sites in Spain and the Dordogne. Similarly, we cannot be sure that the stones found around these hearths, some of them flat and some rounded, were really querns used for grinding grain. On the other hand, the discovery of organic ash in fossilized charcoal such as has been found at Hommersheim in Germany, together with the large number of cracked or broken bones in the immediate vicinity, does seem to constitute circumstantial evidence that these Aurignacian hearths were used for cooking food.

At any rate, the charred stones frequently found in the Dordogne appear to show that food was sometimes grilled. Again, the woolly mammoth tusks stuck, points down, on both sides of a Ukrainian hearth of the Upper Paleolithic period (the tenth millennium BC) clearly suggest roasting. The spit could have been green wood, as still used in Polynesia, or indeed in the West by Boy Scouts. Remains of a charred bird between two much reddened stones have been found in Ariège – a culinary method like the modern method of making waffles – the food in this case having been forgotten or burnt.

South American Indians still use hot stones for cooking. The ethnologist and prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan succeeded in boiling water for two hours with hot stones, in an admittedly anachronistic rubber bucket. His aim was to support his theory that circular hollows around the fire on the Pincevent site may have held receptacles. The crucial question is: what were these receptacles made of? Wood hollowed out by fire, as in Amazonia? In fact, when we heat water for instant coffee with an electric mini-boiler in a hotel bedroom, we are using an age-old technique. The stilt-walking shepherds of the Landes area in France were still boiling sheep’s milk with stones at the end of the last century.

The skin into which the Amazonians throw hot stones when making mead can also be put over the fire, so long as it is thick enough not to burst into flames. M. L. Ryder published an article in the journal *Antiquity* in 1966 entitled ‘Can one cook in a skin?’ It was illustrated by an engraving of 1581 showing a group of Irish people cooking soup in a ‘pot’ consisting of a sheepskin attached to three

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posts. Some texts suggest that Scottish soldiers were doing the same thing in 1327. M. L. Ryder tried the experiment (not in any very expert fashion).

However, suppose you had no sheepskin or other likely receptacle to hand, how could you cook a piece of meat except by roasting or grilling it? According to Herodotus, the Scythians had a method. 'If they have no cauldron, they cast all the flesh into the victim's stomach, adding water thereto, and make a fire beneath of the bones, which burn finely; the stomach easily holds the flesh when it is stripped from the bones; thus an ox serves to cook itself.'

The Indians of the northern United States and Canada were familiar with this method. The Mongols combine cooking in a skin and cooking with stones: they behead a goat and bone it neatly, extracting the inside parts through the neck. Then they cut the meat up small and put it back in the skin with white-hot stones. You wait two hours and then serve.

The Baloubas of Zaïre use the bark of trees for cooking *au plat*. Many tropical peoples, for instance the Malays, stuff hollow green bamboo canes with rice and cook them in the glowing embers.

If the first people to work clay did not instantly hit upon the idea of making fired pottery vessels, it must have been because they were getting on perfectly well without them. The people who lived in what is now Czechoslovakia some 27,000 years ago baked a number of items in the kiln discovered at the Dolné Vestonice site, but the fragments found are of ceramic votive objects: human or animal figurines. The first pottery vessels known to us were made by the Japanese in the thirteenth millennium, and it cannot be claimed that the art spread from them. When a need was felt, or chance took a hand, the idea could have occurred in a number of places. There is a theory which holds that, at a given time, ideas for certain inventions are in the air.

After the end of the last great Ice Age, about 12,000 years ago, climatic conditions favoured the spread of wild cereal plants. Mortars and mills hollowed out of the living rock at the entrances of inhabited caves have been found in Nubia and Egypt. But the communities who devoted themselves entirely to the practice of farming and depended on the cereals then cultivated did not take to pottery vessels until around the seventh millennium, when their culture was at its height. Vessels made of fired clay have been found at the Mureybet site in northern Syria. As in Czechoslovakia 12,000 years earlier, however, the oldest of the items excavated cannot have been for cooking; they are too small to be any use. They are modelled in the form of female figures, and seem to have been pots for make-up or sacred perfumes.

It may well be that the Neolithic people of Mureybet, who lived in curious round, hump-backed houses made of *unfired* bricks, derived the idea of the possibilities of pottery from the sunken hearths in which they cooked their food. These ovens were just holes dug in the earth. If the soil was not naturally clayey, the sides were coated with smooth clay to make them more stable. Heaps of pebbles can still be seen at the bottom of such ovens, mingled with cinders; they are of great interest to scholars. The ovens were used to heat stones upon which food was then placed to grill (they still bear traces of their use for that purpose). The clay on the sides of the holes was baked at the same time. Such ovens are still used in the region for baking

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Neolithic sandstone mill and grinder found in Algeria.

bread or mutton. The flat *naan* bread of northern India is cooked in a similar way, on the interior walls of clay ovens, although nowadays the ovens are portable.

Initially artistic or cultural, pottery did not become really utilitarian in that part of the world until the next millennium. But obviously the villagers of Mureybet, waiting for their soup to be cooked, perfected the original barbecue method as still practised from the Red Sea to the Caspian and through the whole of north Africa.

The Celts, particularly the Celts of Ireland, were cooking in holes in the ground 500 years before our own era, in the same way as the Mesopotamians. They used the method for boiling meat as well as spit-roasting it. The hole, lined with clay to make it watertight, was filled with water. Hot stones were plucked from a nearby fire with a bent stick of green wood and thrown into the water. It takes no more than half an hour to bring 454 litres of water to the boil by this method. The Irish scholar Professor O'Kelly tried it, and found that a nine-pound joint of meat cooked to perfection in three and a half hours, just as well and as quickly as on a modern gas stove.

At the same time soups or stews – the ancestors of Irish stew – were being made in large metal cauldrons hung over the fire from chains attached to the roof rafters in Celtic houses of the period, which usually had a central hearth with a surrounding structure. Conical clay ovens were also in use, particularly for baking bread.

The pot-bellied cauldron full of delicious things simmering away has a prominent place in folk memory. It appears in a number of legends. In the myths of the Celts,

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who had hearty appetites, the cauldron of abundance magically provides both inexhaustible food and inexhaustible knowledge. Sinister concoctions, on the other hand, bubble in the cauldrons of witches or malevolent goddesses. In Chinese legend, the elixir of immortality is made in a tripod cauldron – reminiscent of the Irish sheep-skin fixed to its three posts. Immortality is often the end to be achieved by drinking the boiled liquids of Greek myth. Medea boiled old King Pelias himself, claiming that he would be rejuvenated.

However, it is the image of the steaming pot on the table that has remained the symbol of tranquil family pleasures in the Paradise Lost of childhood. Supper,<sup>1</sup> the communal evening meal symbolized by the serving of soup, is seen as embodying the modest but stable pleasures and touchingly old-fashioned peasant virtues of the past. In France, a good mother who stays at home and is there when her family needs her is said to be ‘pot-au-feu’.

Quand on se gorge d'un potage  
Succulent comme un consommé  
Si notre corps en est charmé  
Notre âme l'est bien davantage . . .

When we fill ourselves with a soup as  
delicious as a consommé,  
it delights our bodies,  
and yet more our souls . . .

wrote Paul Scarron, cynic though he was.

*Opposite:* An open-air kitchen: engraving from *Dell'arte del cucinare, con il maestro di casa*, by Bartolomeo Scappi, Venice, 1570. The artist set out to show all the equipment necessary in a country kitchen (cauldrons, spits, covered pot, two-handled casserole, set of plates and bowls) as well as the two main methods of cooking food, by roasting (quarters of meat and poultry) and by boiling (soups and vegetables).



COLLECTING GATHERING HUNTING



## 1

## COLLECTING HONEY

## Honey in the Golden Age

Next I come to the manna, the heavenly gift of honey . . . A featherweight theme:  
but one that can load me with fame . . .

Writes Virgil in his own honeyed words, at the beginning of Book IV of the *Georgics*.

According to an Amazonian legend,<sup>1</sup> in the old days the animals were men who fed on nothing but the honey of bees. And indeed, from the dawn of time mankind has enjoyed honey, a food both miraculous and natural. After all, nature itself is a miracle. Though honey was not really the first food but only one of the first, collecting it was particularly gratifying, being very much a matter of luck and entailing just enough risk to stimulate the appetite. Delicious nourishment for travellers, hidden away like treasure, it has an element of reward about it. It was immediately associated with the most lofty and beneficent of symbolism, and I have chosen to open this history of food with honey.

O Asvins, lords of brightness, anoint me with the honey of the bee, that I may speak forceful speech among men! (*Atharva Veda*, 91–258)

Fossilized ‘bees’ have been found in Baltic amber, trapped in resin of the Upper Eocene period some 50 million years ago, at the same time as the first primates were appearing in Africa and South America. However, this insect, *Electrapis* (the amber bee), differs less from bees of the present day than the primates of the Tertiary period do from ourselves. Many other fossil specimens descended from them tell the tale of their evolution to the modern *Apis mellifera* which, like so many other species around the world, seems to have originated in Asia. Coming by way of the Middle East, like almost everyone else, the various races of that social and industrious insect, the present-day bee, arrived in Europe and Africa to gather nectar from the flowers.



## COLLECTING HONEY

Tropical America also has social bees among its native hymenoptera. They can produce sufficient quantities of honey to provide man with a useful nutritional supplement. They are not, like the European honey-bee, Apidae but Meliponinae, and are known as *lambe olhos*, 'lick-eyes'. Although they lack stings and venom they have the unpleasant habit, as their name suggests, of attacking any two-legged or four-legged raider by trying to penetrate its mouth, eyes or ears to get at their secretions, which they find intoxicating. It is a very painful experience for their victims.

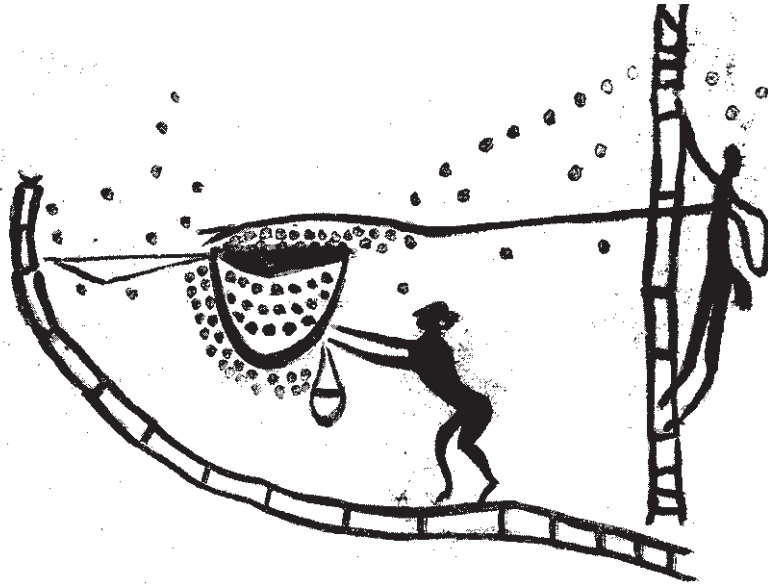
The American Meliponinae, who will feed on carrion as well as gathering honey (our own honey-bees also like meat juices), produce a runnier honey than their Old World counterparts. It is very dark and very sweet, and does not keep well unless it is boiled. It is seldom eaten straight, but is diluted in water, and is regarded as an aphrodisiac. The Indians enjoy it very much. 'O Indio e fanatico pelo mel de pau', Claude Lévi-Strauss quotes – 'wood-honey' because the bees' nests are usually found in trees – but the unclean habits of the worker bees can sometimes make it toxic.

In North America, a Cheyenne creation myth tells that 'the first men lived on honey and wild fruits and were never hungry.'<sup>2</sup> This may be considered a particularly apocryphal myth, although legends themselves are timeless, since tropical bees did not migrate north until quite a late date. According to Châteaubriand, the European bees now found in North America, whether they are domesticated or have reverted to the wild, were 'foreign to America, arriving in the wake of Columbus and his ships', and he adds that 'those peaceful conquerors have stolen from a New World of flowers only those treasures which the natives did not know how to use'. True enough, except that over the years the 'peaceful conquerors' have almost succeeded in annihilating their sisters, who may not have been actually natives but were certainly there first.

*Le gouvernement admirable ou La république des abeilles*, the 'admirable government or the republic of bees' (a title given to a treatise on apiculture by J. Simon in 1740), was thus socially and economically organized well before man had risen to his feet. The treasure stored by the provident insects was coveted by primates, and its appeal to bears is a byword. Both bears and primates will risk putting a greedy paw into a bees' nest when they smell its appetizing fragrance. Some monkeys, cleverer than others and tired of getting stung, have discovered how to stick a branch in and then suck the honey as we might suck it off a spoon.<sup>3</sup> Philippe Marcheray tells us that chimpanzees have been seen holding the palms of their large hands over their faces to protect themselves from the angry bees.

Spanish honey, which takes up quite a lot of space on the supermarket shelves of the European Community countries, being so reasonably priced, can claim what might be described as the oldest advertisement in the world, a rock painting in the Cave of the Spider near Valencia. The artist, working about 12,000 years ago, has made ingenious use of a cavity in the rock wall itself. A man clinging to creepers or ropes is putting one hand into the hole, and holding a basket to take the honey with the other. The bees are flying around him, determined not to lose their treasure. Similar rock paintings are found in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In one of them the honey hunter, decked with feathers in the Zulu manner, is perched on what looks like a ladder and holds a lighted torch up to the whirling cloud of insects as they fly away, in front of clearly depicted honeycombs.

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Collecting honey: rock painting from the end of the Neolithic period,  
Pachamadhi, Central India

‘So powerful is its gastronomic appeal that, were it too easily obtained, mankind would partake of it too freely until the supply was exhausted’, says Lévi-Strauss of honey, with particular reference to the Indians, but the reflection is applicable to human behaviour in general. ‘Through the medium of myth, honey is saying to man: “You would not find me, if you had not first looked for me.”’ Lévi-Strauss also recalls a creation myth of the Caduveo people: ‘When the caracara (a species of falcon) saw the honey forming in the huge gourds where it was to be had for the taking, he said to Go-noeno-hodi the demiurge: “No, this is not right, this is not the way it should be, no! Put the honey in the middle of the tree so that men are forced to dig it out, otherwise the lazy creatures will not work.”’

### A Taste of Honey

Certain people famous for their wisdom are said to have been fed on honey in childhood, like the god Zeus, or at important turning points in their lives: they include Pythagoras and the first Celtic Christian mystic Erthne.

The poor of the past, like primitive peoples, regarded honey in its natural state as an occasional windfall, and were duly thankful. But as soon as cooking methods of any sophistication were developed – not that everyone could take advantage of them – honey featured as an important ingredient, and was to retain that importance throughout the Middle Ages. Besides having energy-giving properties, it was the only sweetener available in a pure and natural state, although the pulp of very sweet

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fruits such as figs or dates might sometimes be used if it was available.<sup>4</sup> Cane sugar, originally and logically enough known as ‘reed honey’, was to be a fabulous luxury for the Old World of the West until after the Crusades, as we shall see below.

Besides being primarily a sweetener, honey was an important condiment. Condiments were not solely substances with strong, sharp or very scented flavours, as they are today. From the days of classical antiquity to the height of the Renaissance – with some falling off in the late Middle Ages<sup>5</sup> – most foods had honey added to them, or later sugar, whether or not we would now classify them as sweet dishes or confectionery. Spices and salt were added at the same time and in the same proportions. Was this because of the sometimes dubious quality of the food? Or was it simply the taste of the times? It is a question that has often been asked, and Jean-Louis Flandrin comments:<sup>6</sup> ‘In the dietary habits of peoples as in those of individuals, we have to distinguish between taste and necessity.’

There was and always will be a suggestion of luxury and of medicinal practices in the culinary use of honey, for in folk memory medicine derives from a kind of magic. Sweet things are perceived *a priori* as doing you good. This attitude of approval was passed on to sugar. Cooking with honey and then with sugar, a mark of privilege, was bound to be the best people’s cookery. Herodotus, writing on Egypt, tells us that the beasts offered in sacrifice were stuffed before roasting with a mixture of flour, figs, raisins and aromatics mingled with honey – to enhance the pleasure of those taking part in the ceremony and feasting in the name of the gods.

The favourite honey stuffing of Greek banquets was indubitably *hyma*. It also contained chopped cheese, offal, vinegar, onions and small quantities of other ingredients, according to a recipe given by Epaenetes. Honey provided Democritus with a simpler satisfaction, in fact the final satisfaction in the life of the philosopher who advocated the pursuit of happiness through moderation in pleasure (he also invented the theory of the atom). The story goes that when the old man, who had always lived frugally, felt his end approaching after 109 well-spent years, he decided to omit some item from his diet every day. When there was nothing left to omit, the celebration of the festival of Demeter was in progress, and he did not want to commit the solecism of dying. He had a pot of honey brought to him, and absorbed only its fragrance by raising it to his nostrils. Once the festival was over, the pot of honey was taken away and he died.

The cook Erasistratus gave his guests a kind of honey pudding called *hyposphagma*. There is one delicious and very simple dish we can still make: curds with honey, or *hypotrides*. Boil milk and immediately add some slightly fermented honey. Stir to make the milk curdle. Pour it into a bowl to set, drain it and serve it with fruit. Another natural and authentic sweet dish comes from the Mohawks and the Algonquins of Canada. Since time immemorial, these tribes have baked small pumpkins in the embers of their fires, first removing the seeds and stuffing them with honey, cider and butter (in former times, with some form of vegetable fat or with beaver fat instead of butter). This dish, *ogwissiman*, was not their only recipe using honey.

Apicius’ honey sauce for fish was a great Roman classic. The author of the *Ars Magirica* also gives the recipe for ham in a honey crust, quite a different dish from the famous honey-roast Virginia ham of the American pioneers. The North American

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Indians claim to have invented another early American dish, beans with honey, but others believe it came from the Chinese coolies who laid the railroad tracks of the American West.

Both the Greeks and the Romans also used honey as a cooking liquid. Julius Pollux, the Graeco-Egyptian rhetorician, evidently enjoyed stuffed leaves cooked in honey – not vine leaves but tender fig leaves. He gives the recipe in his second-century lexicographical work, the *Onomasticon*: make a stuffing of wheat flour, lard, eggs and brains. Divide it into small pieces and wrap in leaves. The stuffed leaves are first cooked in chicken or kid broth, then drained and cooked a second time in boiling honey. For centuries, until it disappeared from medieval hutches to return to the forests, a favourite way of eating the edible dormouse was preserved in a honey sauce or baked in honey. Guinea fowl with honey vinegar is still a speciality of the Périgord.

Honey was long used for preserving fruits, whole or as jam. *Oenanthe* was a preserve of wild vine flowers in honey. Even more delicious was rose petal paste. A similar exquisite paste was *miskwimin amo sisi bakwat*, strawberries crushed in pure honey, traditionally made in summer by the Amerindian tribes of Canada for their winter provisions. It is also delicious freshly made. In India, meat was kept from one year to the next coated in honey.

For the moment I will leave aside the pastries drenched in honey made by the people of the East and the Balkans and by the Arabs. Few if any innovations were made in the cookery of medieval Europe, but, as time passed and sugar gained ground, the use of honey was confined to sweetmeats and such delicacies, not forgetting its medicinal uses. Sweet and savoury dishes were more strictly segregated than before at this point. Today, nutritional ideas about natural foods and medical dietetics recommend the wider use of honey, but it is hardly used in cookery at all except for exotic effect. Since the 1970s, pollen and royal jelly have been highly regarded in nutritional laboratories and health food shops, much to the profit of beekeepers.

### *Honey in Legend*

There is such a wealth of symbolism connected with honey that the facts of its story can hardly be told without mentioning all it represents in the human mind. Legendary traditions explain the customs which surround it and of which it is part.

The treatment of bees and the way in which their honey was collected and eaten had the character of religious ritual. We may almost have lost our sense of that significance, but we retain a certain respect for bees, as if they still fulfilled their initiatory and liturgical role. At both Ephesus and Eleusis, the priestesses were known as ‘bees’.

The Hebrew for bee is *dbure*, from the root *dbur*, meaning ‘word’, whence the pretty first name Deborah, indicating the bee’s mission to reveal the Divine Word, the Truth. Honey, miraculously made by the bees, signifies truth because it needs no treatment to transform it after it has been collected. It does not deteriorate, and until the discovery of sugar there was no substitute. What but the bee can actually create honey by settling on the centres of God’s own flowers? Or the gods’ own flowers; it came to the same thing.

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This 'truth', a message from above, was thought to be passed on by bees in their honey so that the elect could express the truth in scholarship and poetry.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, bees were supposed to have settled on the lips of Plato, Pindar and the well-named St Ambrose of Milan as children. Not every new-born baby can grow up to be a genius, but at least one hopes for its happiness: this is the idea of the women of the Ivory Coast and Senegal who still rub a baby's lips with honey as soon as it has uttered its first cry of fury at being born. Such a baptism of honey was part of ancient Achaean and Germanic custom, and came from the primordial steppes. There is still an Eastern custom whereby a spoonful of honey is poured into the palms of a newly married couple's hands. They must lick it off for each other as a sign that they will now take all their food together, and it is said to ensure that the husband will not lift his hand to his wife except to caress her, and none but loving words will spring to the wife's lips – not just during the aptly named honeymoon but for ever after. At the moment of initiation during the Eleusinian and Mithraic mysteries, the *mystes* (initiates) anointed their hands and tongues with honey. They were purifying themselves from evil, and the good was revealed to them. Philippe Marcheray adds that the Egyptians ate honey 'at the festival of Thoth, uttering the words "Sweet is the truth"'.<sup>8</sup>

A perfect food, of the most sacred colour – golden yellow – honey features as a god in the Vedas, and as divine nourishment in the Graeco-Latin tradition. During the Golden Age, say the Orphic texts, honey ran from the oak trees and the Titan Kronos was sleeping, intoxicated with honey – the first sleep in the world – when his son Zeus chained him and took him away to the Islands of the Blest at the end of the world, where it was said that the ancient god and the Age of Gold could still be found. The implication is that honey, the first food, dates from the creation of the world, and existed even before the bees brought it to mankind.

This first food must obviously have been the food of the chief god. Greek legend situates the childhood of Zeus on Mount Lycaeus, or on Mount Ida, in Crete, where his mother Rhea hid him, and the bees supplemented the future god's diet of goat's milk with their honey. The Cretans claimed that his nurses Amalthea and Melissa were really princesses, daughters of King Melissus, who shared the care of the divine baby, Amalthea with the milk of her goat, Melissa with the honey of her bees; the name Melissa means 'she who makes honey'.

There is also a myth of a sacred cavern, a place of immortality where time did not exist, guarded by fiery bees. In the legend, Rhea gave birth to Zeus here, handing him over at once to the care of the insects. But four rash intruders wearing bronze armour for protection made their way into the cave to steal honey, which was still forbidden to humans. They were about to bear off their sacrilegious loot when the new-born child began to cry. Seeing him in his blood-stained swaddling clothes, the intruders were so frightened that their armour dropped off and the bees attacked them. But no one could die in that cave, particularly after touching the honey. To maintain the order of things, Zeus saved the robbers from the bees' venom by instantly changing them into birds which flew away. In gratitude to the bees for their devotion to duty, the god gave them bronze armour to hide their fiery nature in future, and having a good command of language for a new-born baby, he added that their courage would always remain a byword.

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To turn to the legendary origin of bees themselves, in the *Popul Vuh*, the sacred tradition of the Maya Indians, the bee was born of the Universal Hive at the centre of the earth. Golden to the sight, burning to the touch, like the sparks of volcanoes, it was sent here to awaken man from apathy and ignorance; this is the general sense behind those rural Amazonian folk-tales which deal with honey and mead. Honey and bees are universally found associated with the generative, creative fire, and also with the cave, underground cavern, grotto or hollow tree which is part of the symbolism of the female principle in agrarian myths. Proserpina, the Roman goddess of spring, the season when the bees begin collecting honey from the flowers every year, was also Queen of the Underworld. Another of her titles was Mellita. The Romans offered sacrifices of honey to appease the god of the underworld so that he would not appear in the form of a fiery serpent, i.e., as volcanic lava. The people of Pompeii cannot have offered enough honey.

Ovid says that honey was a gift of the god of wine, Bacchus (Dionysus in Greek); on his way back from an expedition he was gambolling with his attendant satyrs, who struck their sistras to mark time. At the sound of the jingling instruments, a swarm of unknown insects flew out of the wood, and Bacchus guided them to a tree; they shut themselves up in it and filled it with honey.

The Greeks and Romans mingled wine and honey together in drinking bowls. A cousin of Dionysus was called Melicertes, 'he who mingles honey', by analogy with *melidraton*, water mingled with honey, the first stage in the fermentation of that other intoxicating drink, mead. Melicertes was drowned when his mother, the wine god's aunt and nurse, went mad and jumped into the sea with him. The ocean swallowed up his corpse, but he was resuscitated, riding a dolphin, as the sea god Palaemon, and thereafter, although properly a marine deity, formed part of the train of Dionysus with the satyrs and Sileni. The foaming waves suggest the foaming of mead fermenting in a vat or poured into cups. Possibly sailors took amphorae of mead with them to keep their courage up at sea.

The most famous myth about the origin of bees is the legend of Aristaeus. It concerns the (definitely mythical) spontaneous generation of bees, a notion that proved very tenacious, lasting into the seventeenth century. The spontaneous generation of bees was an article of faith in apicultural treatises, until the microscope revealed that the 'king' bee was actually a queen, in fact a queen mother whose sole function was to lay millions of eggs from which her young would hatch. But, to quote Virgil:<sup>8</sup>

It is time to detail the famous invention of an Arcadian  
Bee-master, the process by which he often made  
A culture of bees from the putrid blood of slaughtered bullocks.

The Arcadian shepherd Aristaeus, son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene, had pursued Eurydice with his attentions, and was guilty of her death; because he was also regarded as responsible for the death of her husband Orpheus, he was deprived of his beloved bees. On his mother's advice, he sacrificed to the shades of Orpheus and Eurydice: a poppy to Orpheus, to appease his anger, and to Eurydice 'four bulls of excellent body . . . and as many heifers'. When the ninth day has dawned:



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... a miracle sudden and strange to tell of  
 They behold: from the oxen's bellies all over their rotting flesh  
 Creatures are humming, swarming through the wreckage of their ribs –  
 Huge and trailing clouds of bees, that now in the treetops  
 Unite and hang like a bunch of grapes from the pliant branches.

The bees here are obviously seen as related to blowflies, whose maggots in fact have no connection with them at all.

The myth of Aristaeus also shows the tenacity of a sexual taboo which features in the beekeeping manuals of antiquity. The shepherd's first bees were taken from him because he had desired a woman, and someone else's woman at that; you had to abstain from carnal intercourse before trying to recover a swarm of bees (reputed to be virgins) or to collect honey (a pure substance).

Honey, like wax, was much used in ancient ritual. In funeral rites, the dead were given a supply of honey to enjoy in the afterlife, since honey denoted immortality. From Neolithic times onwards, the Aryans, Babylonians, Sumerians and Cretans buried their great men in honey. There are echoes of the custom in Herodotus and Strabo. Alexander the Great revived it when he was embalmed in honey on his own death, but there is no evidence to show that it was a common custom in the Balkans. Embalming was generally with wax, as in ancient Egypt, whence the word mummy, from Persian *mum*, wax. Finally, at the festival of the winter solstice, the Hopi Indians of Arizona symbolically buried the dead year, in a spirit similar to that of the Celtic celebration of Samhain, but with a communal meal consisting of honey and flour. The same foods are associated in the Russian Jewish celebrations of Rosh Hashanah, when the head of the household gives his children bread and honey as a good omen.

## Honey in Nature and History

Nectar is a sweet substance, 75 per cent water with certain mineral elements, extracted from flowers by the bee as it flies from one to another. It has been called nature's bait for attracting insects, whose feet become laden with pollen as they work. Plant pollination is often necessary for fertilization and subsequent fruit. The more fragrance a flower has, the more it attracts visiting bees.

Bees fill their honey sacs with nectar, in which change begins to occur even on the way back to the hive, caused by the enzymes in the insect's saliva and gastric juices. The nectar becomes a mixture of invert sugars (glucose and laevulose). Back in the hive, the bees regurgitate this still very liquid honey and deposit it in the wax cells of the combs. To concentrate it further by inverting the proportions of sugar and water, the worker bees ingest and regurgitate it again, beating their wings to ventilate the atmosphere in the hive. After 20 minutes, when the process is completed, they seal the cell with a capping secreted from the abdominal glands of wax-making bees. As Philippe Marcheray points out, a kilo of honey represents a vast amount of labour; it takes the bees between 20,000 and 100,000 journeys to



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Engraving illustrating a sixteenth-century work on apiculture: the words *Non nobis* indicate that the bees themselves do not profit from the honey they make.

bring a single litre of nectar back to the hive, and five litres of nectar make one litre of honey.

The quality of the honey depends on the flowers visited by the bees, since it retains their fragrance and other properties, whether beneficial or (very rarely) toxic. The bee is particular in its choice of flowers, and a methodical worker. If it visits only a single species of flower in a day, it has to ingest nectar from 10,000 calices for a single drop of honey to be deposited in a cell. The beekeeper who wants to be selective in making his honey will therefore observe the main flowering seasons within range of his hives (bees have a range of several kilometres). He takes a partial honey harvest at the end of each of these flowering seasons, so that he can offer honey derived from a single floral species, which is considered the best kind. If it comes from the nectar of several species of flower, the honey will be simply called 'floral' or 'country' honey.

From ancient times, migratory beekeeping has also been practised; the hives are 'moved with the seasons, sometimes over a great distance'.<sup>9</sup> In Scotland, bees were traditionally taken to the moorland heather in summer.

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Honey may be thick or runny, clear or opaque. In France, the most usual sort is acacia honey, which is very sweet, liquid, and pale gold in colour. Sainfoin used to make the excellent white Gâtinais honey; this is still produced, but there is almost no sainfoin left. The thick, pale honey of Provence owes its intoxicating fragrance to lavender.

In Roman times, the ivory honey of Narbonne was the most famous honey in Gaul because of the rosemary which gives it its special flavour, as well as the plant's medicinal and in particular its digestive properties. Roman legions recruited in Tunisia are said to have started beekeeping in the Aude region as a spare-time hobby. At first, only consuls were allowed to eat the honey. Thyme honey, very dark and very strong, is made in Provence. But the occupying Roman forces liked Greek honey even better than the honey of Narbonne. This Greek honey was the famous honey of Mount Hymettus, beloved of the gods. In a way, it was divine honey, and was sold in the Via Sacra in Rome by shops stocking luxury foods. In spite of the many rules and regulations of the Eternal City, there were innumerable cases of fraud. Cunning beekeepers would place their hives in the thyme fields of the Iberian peninsula, or use concentrated infusions. Virgil, advocating this practice, recommended feeding the bees on plant decoctions in wine (*Georgics*, Book IV).

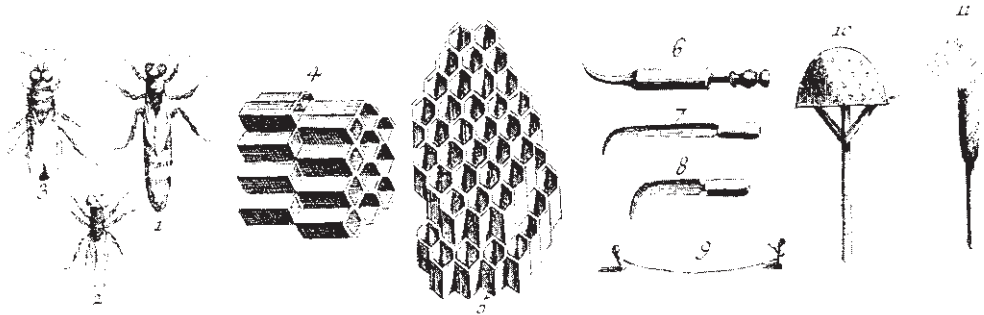
Brown, strong heather honey is produced in the Landes area of France. Buckwheat honey, another full-bodied variety, used to be made in Brittany, but is hardly ever found there now, since no more buckwheat is grown. This was the kind of honey that was formerly used in the traditional French spice-bread or gingerbread. Pine honey is unusual in that it is not entirely the work of bees. Bees, like ants and ladybirds, 'milk' the aphids which live on the sap of resinous trees, consuming so much that they regurgitate it in the form of *honeydew*. Honeydew can inundate oaks, elders, limes or cornfields in warm years when aphids abound. In 1976, for instance, the trees along the avenues of Paris and in the Bois de Boulogne dripped a kind of green syrup on car roofs and the heads of passers-by.

All the kinds of honey mentioned above, besides Spanish honey, Hungarian acacia honey and of course Greek honey, are subject to stringent legislation within the European Community.<sup>10</sup> As with wine, there are trade descriptions guaranteeing the quality of the product. A good honey is likely to be expensive. Its label should mention its floral origin and geographical provenance, and indicate the way in which it was harvested and the absence of any further treatment after extraction from the combs. Hives which have a natural environment, still rich in wild flowers and well away from industrial areas and busy main roads, will give honey of much better quality than the honey from plants grown with fertilizers and polluted by dust and petrol fumes.

Honey is taken in the summer months. The first harvest, which produces the finest honey, is taken between May and July, when the bees have had a chance to finish the nectar flow from the first flowering seasons. The second harvest is taken at the end of summer. The hives are opened when the sun is at its height; a particularly fine day will encourage the worker bees to go out to the fields, and 'sweet is their strange delight', as Virgil put it, adding:

If rain threatens, be sure they'll not roam too far afield  
From their hives: they mistrust the sky, should an east wind be due.

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Engraving from a plate in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* devoted to bees: it shows different kinds of bees, the structure of their cells, and the instruments used for extracting honey.

Modern hives have movable frames hung inside the hive-box, to augment output and respect the timing of the bees' work. The lower part of the hive contains the larvae, or *brood*, and reserves of honey which must not be touched except to check that they are sufficient. This is the domain of the nurses who look after the young and the queen, the bees who make and repair the wax cells, and the bees who clean the hive; worker bees pass in and out. When honey is taken, the hive is fumigated through its entrance and removable top to make the bees inside lethargic and discourage angry workers returning with nectar. Modern beekeepers wear a kind of space suit with a helmet, veil and gloves, to protect themselves from stings. The bee knows its own hive, and there is no point in painting hives different colours, since bees can hardly distinguish colour at all.

The frames are carefully removed, one by one, and any bees still heroically clinging to them are brushed off. To save time, they are replaced by fresh frames already equipped with wax 'foundations' imprinted with hexagon shapes. This foundation makes it easier for the bees to reconstruct their combs. The beekeeper now checks to see that there is no brood in the cells of the frames which have been removed, and opens them with a large knife. Next, usually in a special shed, several combs at a time are placed vertically in a centrifugal extractor which removes the honey from the comb. The empty combs will be replaced later. In a good year, each can give two kilos of honey. To filter out any residue of wax or dead bees, the honey is strained into a tank with a spout from which it is poured into jars. Modern technology has made the whole process easier, but this in broad outline has been the method of taking honey for thousands of years. As a French proverb says, honey is one thing, the price of honey another.

Collecting wild honey is not for the lazy, and greed alone is no guarantee of success. Skill is also called for, and courage to face the bees' stings: in fact, the traditional qualities of the hunter. Consequently, collecting honey was regarded as a man's job relating to hunting, while the gathering or harvesting of vegetable crops was seen as women's work both culturally and in ritual. When honey-hunting became beekeeping it was still a masculine occupation, or so the naturalist Buffon evidently thought, expressing his opinion in verse: 'L'abeille est implacable en son inimitié/Attaque

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sans frayeur, se venge sans pitié/Sur l'ennemi blessé, s'élançe avec furie/Et laisse dans la plaie et son dard et sa vie.'

[The bee is implacable in its hostility, attacks fearlessly, takes merciless revenge on the wounded enemy, hurls itself furiously forward, and leaves both its sting and its life in the wound.]

Taking honey becomes a battle with its established rules, man against the bee's weapon, its sting. (However, the Meliponinae of South America, although dangerous because they will infiltrate every orifice in the body, have no stings. The Indians therefore regard honey as a vegetable product – i.e., feminine – like the 'original sin' of gluttony.) Determined to view the central power of the hive as a worthy adversary, the entire Western world believed that the solitary mother insect, the queen bee, was really a king, until the discoveries of the Dutch doctor Jan Swammer-dam set them right at the end of the seventeenth century. The queen bee is still described as the 'king' or 'father' of the bees in a number of rural European dialects.

Wild bees will make their nest in any cavity large enough for a colony which may contain 60,000 individuals: a hole in the rock, or most commonly a hollow tree, where they build their combs. It is interesting to read the Biblical account of an episode after a battle against the Philistines (I Samuel 14):

'And the men of Israel were distressed that day . . . none of the people tasted any food. And all they of the land came to a wood: and there was honey upon the ground. And when the people were come into the wood, behold, the honey dropped. . . . But Jonathan . . . put forth the end of the rod that was in his hand, and dipped it in an honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes were enlightened . . .'

Had the swarm chosen a shelter low enough to form an angle with the ground, so that honey flowed out on it? Be that as it may, Saul's son Jonathan was instinctively using the technique employed by chimpanzees.

There is nothing surprising about the fact that the honey was found in a wood, since wild bees prefer woodland areas, where they can easily find flowers from which to take nectar and pollen, and buds to provide resin. They use the first two for provisions, turning the nectar into honey, their everyday food, while the pollen feeds their larvae. 'Bee glue' or propolis (Greek: *pro*, in front, and *polis*, city) is made from resin, and the bees use it to construct the stout defensive wall at the entrance to the hive, and for all repair work. Bees also secrete wax to make their combs, and royal jelly, the remarkable substance which enables a larva to reach sexual maturity when necessary and become the queen, the fertile mother of the colony.

Until our own times the only product of the hive which seemed to be of nutritional interest was honey. Today, particularly in alternative medicine, pollen and royal jelly are regarded as miraculous substances, elixirs of youth. Beeswax was and still is used for religious, domestic, cosmetic and medical purposes. Bee glue, besides its value in the making of a durable varnish,<sup>11</sup> has similar uses. We may note all these non-nutritional functions in passing.

The civilization of ancient Egypt was the first to exploit honey by breeding bees to make it. Although the Egyptians practised apiculture, as we can see from the frescoes

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in a Theban tomb of the seventh century BC, showing pottery hives similar to wine jars, a great deal of wild honey was still collected over the centuries. It is quite surprising that bees were not entirely wiped out, for they were ruthlessly plundered until medieval regulations intervened. Whole colonies were cheerfully slaughtered for a single harvest of their honey. But bees are resourceful insects, as their reproductive capacity proves. (The Japanese, moreover, have always liked eating the brood or larvae, a fashion which has spread to America today.)

The practice of smoking bees out, current as early as the date of the rock paintings, cannot have seemed to the Egyptians enough protection against the angry insects, even if the job was swiftly and efficiently done. Rameses III had his honey-gatherers escorted by archers (Philippe Marcheray). Presumably their arrows were supposed to ward off the bees' stings.

One of the first methods of setting up an apiary was simply to carry off the shelter in which wild bees had nested. If they had settled in a hollow tree, you merely had to chop off a suitable length of its trunk on both sides of the bees' entrance to get a hive ready to be taken away. You would first put the occupants to sleep, whether you did as Virgil suggests – 'release a smoke to chivvy them out' – or used an earthenware pot with a funnel containing a burning mixture of cow's dung (regarded as a courtesy to the insect), resinous substances and aromatic plants. A vessel of this kind has been found at Carthage. You then sawed off the tree trunk at suitable places, took the hive home, and as soon as they woke up the bees would go about their daily business to your own advantage. All you then had to do was empty the hive of its honey twice a year, in early and late summer, and you could go on taking honey for years.

The bees' favourite natural habitat of a hollow tree was an inspiration to beekeepers all over Southern Europe and Germany from the Middle Ages onwards. They burned out the insides of tree trunks, using red-hot iron for the purpose, to make homes for the swarms they took, and gave the bees rudimentary combs to help them settle in.

There have been hives made of cork oak, in imitation of tree trunks, in the south of France from Gaulish times to the present day; they are perfect for keeping the bees warm in winter and cool in summer. The French word *ruche* ('hive') is derived from this practice; it comes from Ligurian *rusca*, bark. The *chêne-rusc* is the cork oak of the Aude and eastern Pyrenees. (English *hive* comes from a probable Germanic root *hūf*, related to Latin *cupa*, a tub or cask, which gave rise to modern English 'cup'.) It is said that, for lack of trees and so as to transport their bees more easily, the plaited wicker hive or skep was invented by the nomads of the steppes; it was then adopted by the Celts. The idea of fixing hives to the most sheltered wall of the house was subsequently introduced. Then came frame hives and hives in several readily accessible sections.

After the great invasions of the Dark Ages, apiculture, like many branches of agriculture, developed no further for some time. People made do with honey-hunting in the forests, usually thanking the bees for their pains by suffocating them to death. But Charlemagne, wishing to restore his lands to a state of organized prosperity, laid down regulations for beekeeping at the same time as he introduced a general policy of agrarian economy. Farms were obliged to keep bees and, most important

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of all, to pay the emperor dues in kind: two-thirds of all honey and one-third of all beeswax produced. As we shall see in the course of this history of food, Charlemagne was a great manager of general stores.

As early as the era of the Pharaohs, taxes were levied for the benefit not only of the sovereign but of the priests too. Even better, they alone had the right to the best quality honey and beeswax; the common people had to collect wild honey for themselves or make do with the left-over products of domestic bees. Another industrious civilization with an orderly system of government was that of the Maya Indians, who domesticated the native bees of Central America, the stingless Meliponinae, at about the same time as Charlemagne ruled in Europe. Here again, of course, the civil and religious authorities reaped most of the profits.

Still on the subject of religious authorities, abbeys all over Europe possessed great estates over a long period of time. The monks displayed great expertise in apiculture, as well as in making wine and cheese; this may have been the origin of the proverbial beekeeping skills of country clergymen.

Charlemagne died, but *abeillage*, 'bee dues', remained a duly regulated feudal right. Every vassal owed his sovereign a proportion of what his hives produced. Since forests belonged to the lord of the manor, any of the villagers who took a wild swarm nesting in a tree for his own use was regarded as a poacher and punished under the game laws. In France of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there were sworn feudal officials, called *aviléors* or *bigres*, a kind of beekeeping gamekeepers, who alone had the right and duty to take swarms and settle them in clearings or on the outskirts of woods, in hives known as *bigrerries* or *hostels aux mouches*, 'houses for the insects'. Laws also controlled beekeeping in various parts of the British Isles at the same time.

Similarly, the times when one might take honey were codified if not actually laid down by law. So were the amounts to be taken from the bees, to prevent any danger of starving them. These arrangements derived from empirical tradition as much as from apicultural treatises and the whole classical literature of natural science, from the Greek philosopher Aristotle to the Hispano-Roman Columella, and including works by Cato, Virgil and a number of others. Although these writers often incorrectly used mythological fables as scientific explanation, their works bear witness to genuine observation and have great literary charm. The Renaissance brought what may be regarded as serious apicultural treatises by Charles Estienne and Jean Liébault (*L'apiculture et la maison rustique*) and in particular the work of Olivier de Serres on the management of rural property, *Le théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs*.

The ancient methods, however, displayed that common sense and wisdom which contact with nature was bound to arouse. In Greece, where every agricultural process was also a ritual, the first honey harvest formed part of a cycle of propitiatory ceremonies at the time when the figs ripened. This coincided with the fading of the wild flowers in late June and July. But, in addition, all the symbolism attached to honey made it even more precious. In ancient agrarian cults, the fig was regarded as a sacred tree by all Indo-European traditions of the Mediterranean area. It was universally associated with fertility rites and with rites of passage and initiation, just like honey.



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The junior priests whose duty it was to ‘reveal the fig’ were known in Ancient Greece as *sykophantes*, the word for fig being *suke*. To ‘reveal the fig’ meant announcing the official date of its ripening and the picking season. At this fortunate time of year one might eat fruits and honey, sweet and long-coveted delicacies. The ritual opening of the season is not so far from the opening of the hunting and fishing seasons we still observe, or the opening of the vintage and coffee seasons in wine-growing and coffee-growing countries. In the time of Solon, who forbade the export of figs from Attica, people who denounced smugglers were derisively called ‘sycophants’, and thus the term came to denote all informers.

That is another story, but it does show how, in Philippe Marcheray’s words, the bee, an ‘insect omnipresent in human societies, is closely linked to human thought. The great number of folk names for the bee and its products shows how it has become part of man’s daily life and those of the animal and vegetable kingdoms; it is situated at the meeting place of those three worlds.’ I would be inclined, myself, to say four worlds, including the invisible world of the mind in which it was believed that, when our eyes and lips were rubbed with honey, what we saw and what we said would never be quite the same again.

*Honey-Cakes, Spice-Bread, Gingerbread*

In 1694, the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* defined *pain d’épice*, ‘spice-bread’, a word now very frequently rendered into English as ‘gingerbread’, as ‘a kind of cake made with rye flour, honey and spices’. An early English mention of a confection of this kind occurs in Chaucer: ‘roial spicerye and Gyngebreed’.

People had been enjoying honey-cakes for centuries. The Chinese of the tenth century, under the T’ang dynasty which encouraged the arts, are thought to have invented the original recipe: their *mi-king* (honey bread) was a mixture of flour (wheat flour, since they did not grow rye) and honey. Aromatic plants were not essential. As a concentrated, energy-giving food, it was carried in the thirteenth-century saddlebags of Genghiz Khan’s Mongol horsemen. The Mongols passed the taste on to the Turks and the Arabs. Pilgrims to the Holy Land enjoyed it, and Arnold of Lübeck reports that certain Crusaders who got lost in the Romanian marshes owed their survival to it.<sup>12</sup> The chronicler gives this valuable item of the wayfarer’s diet a Latin name: *panis mellitus*. The *panis mellitus* of the Romans and the *melipecton* of the Greeks were both actually quite a different dish: a cake made of flour, usually sesame flour, which was not soaked in honey until after it had been cooked, and sometimes then sliced and fried. In the form of *panis nauticus*, this was sailors’ biscuit.

We have to remember that all sweet dishes of the ancient world were made with honey, whether for domestic or sacrificial use. Thus the famous traditional birthday cakes of Rome, particularly for people reaching their fiftieth year, were made with honey, hence their name of *quingagesima liba* (Varro, Cato, Martial). These *liba*, made of wheat flour, grated cheese, honey and olive oil, were eaten with *mulsum*, a honeyed wine, after the gods had been given their share on the family altar. A cup



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of honey, the 'libation', was also poured on the ground to rejoice the souls of dead ancestors. This custom is still practised in Romania when a dead friend is missing from the usual company of guests at a party.

The Middle Ages were not particularly inventive in their confectionery and sweet dishes, but in the thirteenth century we hear of a Flemish cake consisting simply of wheat flour and honey, like the Chinese *mi-king*. This cake is mentioned in the next century as a favourite food of Marguerite de Môle, wife of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. The people of Coutray therefore presented such a cake to the couple's grandson, Philip the Good, who was delighted and took both the cake and its maker to his city of Dijon with him.

A hundred years later, again in Dijon, we hear of *pain de gaulderye*. *Gaude* was a kind of traditional mush or gruel made with honey, and in this case was based on millet. To be made into a loaf, the *gaude* was put in a mould to solidify and cooked a second time in the oven or under the embers. This was a kind of Burgundian reincarnation of the Byzantine wheaten *grouta*. The *bassidat b'el âcel* of Tunisia, similarly, is a mixture of fine boiled semolina with the same volume of honey, and, if you are rich, with melted butter, chopped dates and raisins. It is not cooked again but chilled to make it set.

*Pain de gaulderye* was made in Dijon until the beginning of the reign of Louis XV. This was about the time when Bonnaventure Pellerin advertised himself as a 'seller of spice-bread and tavern-keeper'. Others followed his example, but it was not until the Empire that Dijon could claim a distinction boasted by the city of Reims since the time of the Hundred Years' War, when it began the commercial production of *pain d'espices* made to the recipe of a pastrycook of Bourges. He had invented it around the 1420s in honour of Charles VII, nicknamed 'the king of Bourges' because of his retreat to the region when hard-pressed by the English. The spice-bread consisted of black rye flour, dark, strong buckwheat honey from Brittany, and spices in the fashion of the times. The King's mistress Agnès Sorel, called la Dame de Beauté from the name of the estate he gave her, graciously let it be known that she could never tire of this spice-bread. A dish enjoyed at the best people's tables was savoury spice-bread cut into cubes and dipped in the sauce of meat dishes.

Spice-bread was also, of course, made in Paris, but it was not until 1596 that Henry of Navarre, a lover of good food, granted the Corporation of Spice-bread Makers its own statutes, making it a separate body from the Pastrycooks. To qualify as a Master Spice-bread Maker you had to produce a 'masterpiece . . . the mixture weighing 200 pounds, flavoured with cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves, of which there shall be made three cakes each weighing 20 pounds . . .' The corporation's coat of arms showed a large gilded spice-bread cake on an azure ground, accompanied by four wafers of the same placed in a cross (these spice wafers were very popular, and were sold in the streets of Paris until the First World War).

The Corporation of Spice-bread Makers of Reims had broken with the Pastrycooks (or Wafer Makers) in 1571, and its coat of arms remained innocent of wafers to mark the fact. The spice-bread makers of Dijon, whose products did not really become well known until the Napoleonic period, neither became a corporation nor had a coat of arms, but they successfully caught up with and even drew ahead of Reims in marketing their wares.

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Ever since the time of Louis XIII, Reims could point to a flattering mention in the *Encyclopédie méthodique des arts et métiers*: ‘The city of Rheims makes the best spice-bread, because of the care taken by the shopkeepers of that city in making their dough.’ And indeed the Académie Française completed its definition of spice-bread with one brief and proud example: *pain d’épice de Rheims*.

At first spices were added with a heavy hand, typically for the time. Catherine de Medici is said to have added certain poisons of her own to rid herself of enemies, since the whole court had an attack of colic one day after eating spice-bread. With the Renaissance, a craze for sugar came in too. The only spices some modern recipes will allow are a dessert-spoon of aniseed or, in Alsace, where there is a considerable spice-bread tradition, a pinch of cinnamon. Lemon is another ingredient, green in the Reims tradition.

But part of the secret of traditional French spice-bread, in Dijon, Reims and Paris alike, was in its making. It consisted of letting the dough rest – like the Sleeping Beauty – for several months, a year, or several years for the very finest kind. The ‘mother’ dough, as it was called, was kept cool in wooden tubs, while the honey in it brought about a delicious fermentation. Until the end of the Second World War, all that was required for traditional French spice-bread was honey, from Brittany if possible, the same amount of flour (wheat flour in Dijon, rye flour in Reims), spices or a small amount of green lemon; the dough underwent an alchemical process in wooden tubs and was then cooked in wooden moulds, shaped either into slabs or into the figures of little pigs. But in this iconoclastic age, chemistry replaces alchemy: not only is baking powder now added to the ancient formulas to make the dough rise faster, but honey is replaced by golden syrup. Some labels now specify that the product is ‘*pain d’épice au miel*’, which should be an entirely superfluous description, but is offered as a guarantee.

Up to about the seventeenth century, English gingerbread was very similar to the traditional French spice-bread, and consisted of equal quantities of breadcrumbs and honey, with colourings such as saffron for yellow or ‘sanders’, made from sandalwood, for red. Spice was also used for flavouring – not always or solely ginger; a fifteenth-century recipe for ‘gingerbread’ contains only pepper and cinnamon. This was the kind of stiff dough hardened in moulds and traditionally sold at fairs. (‘An I had but one penny in the world, thou shouldst have it to buy gingerbread’, says Costard in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.) However, molasses or black treacle began to replace honey around the Restoration period, and gingerbread gradually became more like the ginger cake of today.

## Mead and Sacramental Intoxication

The child of honey, the drink of the gods, mead was universal. It can be regarded as the ancestor of all fermented drinks, antedating the cultivation of the soil. In any case it is the simplest. Water was mixed with honey, was perhaps left standing and forgotten, and produced an alcoholic fermentation. The people of the tropical

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countries, as we have seen, seldom ate pure honey anyway, and an unfermented mixture of honey and water (hydromel) could have been common.

Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>13</sup> makes out a good case for the invention of mead as a passage from ‘nature to culture’, a process defining human behaviour, as implied in the coded message at the end of the Amazonian myth of the origin of mead he cites; it reads like a kind of postscript, as if it belonged to some quite different story, but it is not there by chance. The most important part of a message may be contained in a postscript, and it is up to the audience to attend and draw conclusions.

The myth is told by the Matako people, who are still in the Stone Age period of cultural development. ‘In ancient times there was no mead. An old man tried to make it with some honey. He mixed the honey with water and left the mixture to ferment for one night. The next day he tasted it and found it very good. The other people did not want to taste the drink, as they thought it might be poisonous. The old man said, “I will drink, because I am very old and if I died it would not matter.” The old man drank much of the mixture, and he fell down as if dead. That night he awoke and told the people that the mead was not a poison. The men carved a larger trough and drank all the beer they made. It was a bird who carved the first drum, and he beat it all night, and at dawn he was changed into a man.’ This mixture, the simplest of all, does not need cooking or fire, but it is still a culinary act, inviting us to praise the gods for the miracle of fermentation and the magic of intoxication induced by drinking the fermented liquor.

On this basis of water sweetened with honey – the *melikraton* of the Greeks, the *aquamulsa* of the Romans, which became the *meda* of medieval Prussia and the *tschemiga* of Russia – Columella, the Hispano-Roman naturalist, gives the classic recipe for mead in his *De re rustica*, an agricultural treatise written around AD 60. He recommends using perfectly pure demineralized or sterilized water. ‘Take rainwater kept for several years, and mix a sextarius [about half a litre] of this water with a pound of honey. For a weaker mead, mix a sextarius of water with nine ounces [250 grams] of honey. The whole is exposed to the sun for 40 days, and then left on a shelf near the fire. If you have no rain water, then boil spring water.’ Notice the 40 days: 40 is a number signifying a period of waiting and preparation, part of a cycle leading to resurrection or purification. The making of mead is a ritual act.

It is interesting, for several reasons, to look back at southern Brazil, where the Mocovi people make ritual use of mead as a ‘sacred, shared beverage’ at festivals and ‘the natives lived in a constant state of intoxication’.<sup>14</sup> It was being made in this way in 1943, and the recipe – for there is only one recipe, and it goes back to the dawn of time – conforms to that of the Matako myth and to Columella’s. No fire is needed, nor even in this case a wooden trough or a cooking pot, which shows that it predates any form of industry. ‘The dried skin of a jaguar or deer was hung up by the corners to form a pouch, into which the honey was poured along with its wax, and then water was added. In the space of three or four days the mixture ferments naturally in the sun.’

The leather pouch, also used over a hearth by the Fuegians and Eskimos, is certainly the ancestor of the cauldron. It will not burn as quickly as wood, even the hardest wood, and here it is not even exposed to fire. When hot water is required

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for a more elaborate kind of mead, related to beer since it contains a decoction of plants, 'honey is poured into the water and the water is heated by hot stones'. The mixture is then left to ferment under a covering of bark. I shall return to the use of hot stones later.

The brewing of these liquors and its incidental aspects – cutting down trees to make troughs, flaying of animals, the laborious process of moving hot stones – make up the sequences of a communal, social act, like the sharing of the drink itself at a later stage. Hunting became a group activity when beating for game was introduced, but there is something more here than the fever of the chase and the satisfaction of hunger: an experience of shared intoxication which, in very many festivals, takes a group of people out of their normal state of mind, out of time, freeing them from the conditioning of the outside world. It is not far from this condition to the belief that one is in direct contact with the other world. Sacramental drunkenness – a communal experience which seals alliances – was part of the Celtic festivals of Samhain, the New Year which began on 1st November,<sup>15</sup> particularly in Ireland. The Irish are still great beer-drinkers, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* contains a paean in praise of drinking.

The rite, for such it is, of intoxication is linked to fertility, harvest, success, just as they are expressed in the symbolism of honey. Drunkenness was not condemned in the ancient world. It makes men feel like gods, and the Greeks, Romans, Celts, Germanic, Slav and Scandinavian peoples not only felt (like the Amerindians) that they were part of a group of friends and allies in that state, but also that mead was the drink of immortality. No god in any of their pantheons denied himself that liquor. In final homage to the fallen kings whom the ancient Irish sent to their fathers, they were drowned in a vat of mead and their palaces set alight. (If the Celtic mead-maker, particularly in Wales, was not really a seer and healer, he was credited with those powers. Healing, like fermentation, was a magical operation, both of them graciously granted by the gods to the specialists who mediated between them and mankind.)

The Bambaras of Mali regard mead in a much more serene light, although they too consider it divine. To them it is the drink of wisdom, knowledge and truth, by virtue of the honey and the bees who made that honey. Like the honeycomb itself, truth has neither a wrong side nor a right side, and is the sweetest thing in the world. Another curious fact is that, while the Koran condemns the consumption of fermented drinks, mead is quite kindly regarded by the very pious Muslims of Mali, although their version of Islam is much tinged by animism. It is true that they do not get drunk on it, or not very drunk – it is so hot in Mali that one might drink just a little too much so as to feel better. African mead also contains chilli as a stimulant. When two friends drink together, they use the same gourd, placing their lips side by side as a sign of shared friendship. The Bambaras descend from an ancient and noble civilization.

Here I should note that ethnographers and historians in the first half of this century, and the upright German scholars cited by Dr Maurizio,<sup>16</sup> claim that 'uncivilized' peoples did not have fermented drinks. Dr Maurizio, whose work is both important and fascinating in some respects, unequivocally stated that 'savages still at the gathering stage did not have alcoholic liquors . . . [nor] did peoples still in

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the early stages of cultivation of the soil . . . this coincides with the view of Hahn, who thought that alcoholic drinks dated from the first period of cultivation with the hoe. But it is my view that they appeared in the latter period of this stage of civilization, and perhaps not until the time of cultivation with the plough.'

The myth of the Golden Age and the Noble Savage was regarded as gospel truth by missionaries and ethnologists alike, and the idea that the invention of alcohol was linked to the widespread growing of cereals suitable for bread-making (not cereals suitable only for boiling, like millet) and grapes for wine requires correction. Later in this book, we shall see how the revolutionary progress from porridge to beer and bread was made. The pot of beer and the glass of wine have been so important in the daily life of Judaeo-Christian civilizations that we tend to overlook anything else, but before their day mead, still a part of Graeco-Roman mythology, had been around for thousands of years. It was then forgotten or at least neglected. 'It is true that we do not know of any savage people of the present day making a fermented drink with honey', said Dr Maurizio in 1927. But such examples are now coming to light, and are a source of great interest.

In the Middle Ages, the availability of beer and wine did not preclude the enjoyment of mead. Indeed, the three got on so well together for so long that no feast in the ancient world was complete without large amounts of honeyed wine, *oenomelites* or *mulsum*. Northern Germans partook of *Lantetrank*, and still added honey to their favourite barley beer or brewed a type of honey beer; from the sixteenth century onwards it was usual to add hops. The people of the Vosges had a special method of their own: they enriched their mead with mashed bees to obtain a *miessaude*, a good ferment. The addition of nitrogenous matter facilitated and accelerated fermentation, a process which requires impurities; very fresh and very pure honey, on the contrary, is almost antiseptic. Some kind of contamination is necessary for liquid to ferment, whether caused by contact or by atmospheric pollution.

Mead is even made with crushed fruits. The Indians of both North and South America brewed it from that base, and the Romans gave such drinks the charming name of *meloneli*. Milk meads have been made. Mead can be distilled, and will also make vinegar.

Practically no mead is brewed today; try looking for it in the off-licence or on the supermarket shelves. Despite some efforts by farmers to popularize it, it remains a small folk industry, perhaps drunk occasionally at an ecological gathering, or as a conscious celebration of the past, or out of amused curiosity. One enjoys it and then forgets it, which is a pity, when it used to signify so much that is also now forgotten. Perhaps the gods really are dead.

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## BOCHET

(This is a recipe given by the *Ménagier de Paris*, written about 1393. It is for a household mead rather similar to beer.)

To make six sesters of *bochet*, take six pints of very soft honey, and set it in a cauldron on the fire, and boil it and stir it for as long as it goes on rising and as long as you see it throwing up liquid in little bubbles which burst and in bursting give off a little blackish steam; and then move it, and put in seven sesters of water and boil them until it is reduced to six sesters, always stirring. And then put it in a tub to cool until it be just warm, and then run it through a sieve, and afterwards put it in a cask and add half a pint of leaven of beer, for it is this which makes it piquant (and if you put in leaven of bread, it is as good for the taste, but the colour will be duller), and cover it warmly and well when you prepare it. And if you would make it very good, add thereto an ounce of ginger, long pepper, grain of Paradise and cloves, as much of the one as of the other, save that there shall be less of the cloves, and put them in a linen bag and cast them therein. And when it hath been therein for two or three days, and the *bochet* tastes enough of the spices and is sufficiently piquant, take out the bag and squeeze it, and put it in the other barrel you are making. And thus the powder will serve you well two or three times over.

(Translated by Eileen Power, *The Goodman of Paris*)