

The Taste of a Dig

COOKING UP
SUCCESSFUL
FIELDWORK

BY WILLIAM
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Many things are necessary for an archaeological project to succeed, but a cook is particularly critical. If you combine hard work, harsh living conditions, and bad food, you have a recipe for disaster. A good cook is arguably the most important member of an excavation team for the simple reason that much of dig life revolves around the kitchen. A cook may also fill other necessary roles,

ranging from cultural adviser to nurse. Without the ministrations of such a person, an archaeological team can wither and fall into petty bickering, losing sight of their true goal, the discovery of the past. Simply put, a cook can make or break an excavation.

I have worked in many settings, from the islands of Puget Sound to the arid Syrian steppe, so I have seen a range of cooks and their effects on excavation projects. Some digs completely forego the hiring of a cook, and in this worst of situations, hungry team members have to fend for themselves. They must share duties of cooking and cleaning, but after a long and dirt-filled day of excavation, such chores lead to discontent. Because cooking is not a skill that everyone possesses, and fast food rarely delivers to the desert, the arrangement is almost never well received. At the opposite extreme, some excavations are conducted in an area of haute cuisine and have the budget to afford nice restaurants for the crew. Of course, both of these examples are



Abu Yakoub (right) and his assistant in our Syrian kitchen. Yakoub was the culinary mentor of Ibrahim, our former cook, and has been the cook at Tell es-Sweyhat since his pupil was lured away two seasons ago to cook for a German excavation.

relatively rare. Most projects provide the basics for their teams, but archaeological budgets are typically low and the excavation locale is rarely luxurious.

The most common solution is to hire a local cook who prepares food for the team on a daily basis. This person must be both adaptable and talented. A cook who can create good food under normal field conditions is invaluable to any team. Once discovered, this person will be hired persistently and may be in demand at many other sites in the region, occasionally lured away from one excavation to work at another. Securing a good cook, and thereby solidifying the flow of palatable provisions, eases the general trepidation at the beginning of a field season and helps everyone survive the ordeal much more pleasantly.

In Colorado we had a fabulous cook whose blue corn almond eggplant enchiladas made the aches of working long hours at 6,000 feet disappear. In Scotland, our cook continually produced hearty and pleasant meals — such as scones for breakfast and shepherd's pie for dinner — to provide energy for our ambitious walking survey of the highlands and islands. And our cook in Syria concocted meals that rated five stars among our intrepid band, keeping us singing his praises and consuming extra helpings of flavorful soups, spiced kabobs and satisfying rice or pasta deep into the night.

Yet, communicating a desire for specific dishes is sometimes difficult in areas of linguistic and cultural

field experience

differences. In my first season in Egypt, our cook was a tall, aged, wise-looking man. He had spent long years cooking in his home country, and we knew his local dishes would be wonderful. When we requested these meals, however, he typically said, “Oh no, I know what Americans like — hamburger!” and he would proceed to make vaguely rounded beef patties to be presented with a flourish, and a wilted garnish.

Meat is quite typically the central ingredient in field dishes, but it is not unusual for an archaeologist to be vegetarian. Local cooks in many parts of the world have trouble understanding such a diet. If you have the means, in their opinion, you will naturally eat meat. It is difficult to explain that eating only vegetables is relatively expensive in America, and generally considered a mark of good health. In truth, many foods are specific to particular cultures, and it can be difficult to explain precise culinary regimens or concoctions to anyone not familiar with them. Banana nut bread, for instance, was a mystery to our Kurdish cook in Syria, and I personally have yet to understand melokiyeh, a rather slimy Egyptian soup. Made by lengthy boiling of a plant with qualities similar to okra, its texture ultimately resembles a watery rubber cement.

Furthermore, particular foods almost inexplicably accompany particular holidays. When March 17 rolled around one season at Tell es-Sweyhat in Syria, an Irish-American team member brought to our mud brick kitchen an assortment of green paraphernalia, including paper plates, hats, and napkins, that he had packed away for just this occasion. Naturally, our cook, Ibrahim, was curious. Our director set about trying to explain the tradition. “We celebrate St. Patrick,” he said in Arabic, “the holy man who chased the snakes from a green island.” The dapper Kurdish man was dumbfounded. He was sure he had misunderstood. “Hayya?” Ibrahim uttered the Arabic word for “snake” hesitantly, accompanied by a slithering motion of the hand. In an attempt to overcome the lingering suspicions of the language barrier, our erudite dig director began an animated pantomime of chasing a snake around the room with a stick. Ibrahim remained uncertain. “Hayya?” he blurted again, his eyebrows raised in an expression of such utter disbelief that we all began to laugh. “Yes,” continued the respected



Linda Harris (visiting artist at the Giza Plateau) sits before an array of Middle Eastern dishes presented by the family of one of our workmen in a small village near Cairo.

professor as he cavorted around the room, “and we eat corned beef and cabbage while drinking green beer.” “Hayya.” The Kurdish cook shook his head. As an excellent chef who had even worked for restaurants in Aleppo, he simply couldn’t understand the concept of overcooked cabbage and green beer. He slowly resigned himself to accept the insane tradition, but it would nevertheless puzzle him for days to come. At subsequent meals throughout the season he would occasionally approach us with an odd look on his face and repeat the single word, “Hayya?”

When you have a good cook, culinary cultural diversity is part of the fun of the dig season. Dinnertime antics become important morale-building experiences. Breaking bread is the best way to bond with other members of the group. And if that “bread” is good, after-dinner chats are more pleasant, and evenings generally alternate between discussions of work and more jovial interludes until the team slowly fades to their respective beds.

The crew that conducts grueling fieldwork deserves to fade to those beds well fed and satisfied, having had more than simple gruel for dinner. A good cook is essential to establishing that feeling of well-being. And after all, when field morale is high, the work can only benefit. 🏠

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