



CUCINARE NELLA PREISTORIA

by
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Today we will tell you one of the most fascinating—and perhaps least known—stories in agriculture: the story of **legumes domestication** as well as the **first soups making in prehistoric times**. Yes, that's right: **peas, lentils, chickpeas...** those little seeds that played a key role in changing the course of our history.

The legumes we find on our plates today have not always been this way: they are the result of **centuries of selection** by early farming communities, who transformed wild plants into more productive, resistant, and easy-to-harvest crops.

If we go back in time, we see that legumes were already important for sustenance starting in the Neolithic period, when the human diet was based mainly on cereals. Archaeologists have found ancient seeds of **peas** (*Pisum sativum*), **lentils** (*Lens culinaris*), **chickpeas** (*Cicer arietinum*), **vetch** (*Vicia ervilia*), and **grass peas** (*Lathyrus sativus*) at numerous prehistoric sites.

Legumes were not just a side dish, but a real source of protein that enriched the past communities diet. Furthermore, legumes were not only excellent food, they were also a fundamental element in maintaining soil fertility.

Thanks to their symbiosis with nitrogen-fixing bacteria, leguminous crops contributed to the improvement or recovery of soil organic matter. It is likely that even in prehistoric times they were included in **crop rotation systems** with cereals, anticipating sustainable agricultural practices that are well documented from Roman times, when the technique was recorded in written texts, to the present day.

Archaeological evidence suggests that, even though legumes were not cultivated as intensively as they are today, they were still sown in small areas, perhaps near dwellings, as part of a more sustainable form of agriculture. Lentils were among the first legumes to be cultivated and consumed, thanks to their adaptability to arid climates and ease of storage. The earliest traces of lentils have been found in archaeological sites in the area stretching from **Egypt** to Mesopotamia, the cradle of numerous ancient civilizations.

And in **Italy**? As early as the **Bronze Age**, our prehistoric tables were laden with broad beans, peas, lentils, and chickpeas. In particular, at the archaeological site of Mursia, on the island of **Pantelleria**, archaeologists from the University of Bologna found thousands of charred seeds of peas, lentils, and chickpeas. **The peas** are of a very small variety, somewhere between the wild peas that we can still see in fields today and the domestic peas that we normally eat. It is important to remember that, through selection, the seeds of domestic varieties have become much larger than those of wild plants, up to three or four times larger, in order to increase yield and make harvesting easier and more efficient.

Fun fact: peas have also played a key role in modern science; in fact, in the 19th century, Gregor Mendel picked them for his experiments, which led to the Mendelian laws of inheritance. Thanks to their clear visible traits (like flower color or seed shape), peas became the key to **discovering genetic laws**, which still bear his name today.

... **how did they use to cook legumes in the Bronze Age?**

Archaeological records don't let us figure out exactly how people cooked back in the **Bronze Age**. However, ethnobotanical data and archaeological experimentations suggest that legumes were mainly consumed in soups or stews, often after being soaked to reduce cooking time and improve digestibility. This type of preparation provided a meal with **high nutritional value**, balanced in complex carbohydrates, proteins, and micronutrients.



Preisto-ricetta

Imagine preparing a Pea soup is one of the oldest and most nutritious recipes we can think of. Today we prepare it with roveja, an ancient variety of wild pea, still grown in some areas of central Italy.

Ingredients

200 g dried roveja beans

1 carrot

1 stalk of celery

1 clove of garlic

1 teaspoon of animal fat (as was traditionally used) or vegetable oil

600 ml water

Herbs to taste (rosemary, oregano, thyme, mint)

Salt to taste

The night before, soak the dried roveja beans and rinse them thoroughly under running water the next day before cooking. In a clay pot, sauté the celery, carrot, and garlic with a little fat. Add the roveja beans and cover with water. Cook over low heat for about 1 hour, until tender. When cooked, add salt and herbs.

Roveja soup is a dish steeped in history and tradition.



Curiosita'

In **Umbria** and **Marche**, roveja, also known as field pea or robiglio, is still cultivated today. It is an ancient variety dating back to **Neolithic times**. Its seeds are small and colorful, ranging from dark green to brown or gray. It is extremely versatile in the kitchen: it is employed in soups, minestrone, purées, salads... and even in desserts! In fact, its flour is used to make very **special cookies and tarts**.

Would you like to learn more about this topic?

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