



CUCINARE NELLA PREISTORIA

by
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Between fruits and seeds. The harvest of wild products

Due to archaeological excavations, we know that **Bronze Age** communities were able to recognize and use a wide variety of plants. Gathering wild herbs and fruits was a fundamental resource for human nutrition, much more than it is **today**.

Thanks to **archaeobotany** - the discipline that studies plant remains from archaeological contexts - we can reconstruct the flora, vegetation, and the landscape evolution to understand how humans have interacted with the environment over time. In order to do so, micro-remains (pollen and spores) or macro-remains (seeds, fruits, wood fragments, and charcoal) can be studied.

Among the various branches of **archaeobotany**, **palynology** analyzes pollen, spores, and other microscopic plant traces embedded in sediments that are only visible under a microscope, providing a detailed picture of the plant environment. Ancient pollen may be the only evidence of the plant that produced it and, consequently, of the climate and environmental conditions in which it lived.

Another fundamental branch is **carpology**, which deals with seeds and fruits visible to the naked eye found in archaeological excavations. By studying these remains, we can discover which plants were cultivated or harvested, for what purposes, and what economic, social, and cultural practices **were linked to them**.

The refinement of **recovery and analysis techniques**, both for pollen and macro-remains, has allowed researchers to significantly expand their knowledge of ancient times, as until a few years ago, the preservation and discovery of plant remains was considered unlikely.

Going back in time, archaeobotanical evidence shows that various roots, herbs, and fruits were already being gathered for food during the **Paleolithic era**. It was only with the transition to agriculture and animal husbandry during the **Neolithic** that cereal seeds took on a central role in the diet. Despite this, the gathering of wild herbs and fruits continued to supplement the diet, making it more varied and balanced.

Among the most commonly found fruit remains are **hazelnuts** (*Corylus avellana*), **figs** (*Ficus carica*), and **elderberries** (*Sambucus ebulus*). **Acorns** (*Quercus*) (see Cooking in Prehistory 5) were also particularly abundant, along with other fruits such as **pears** (*Pyrus malus*), **wild apples** (*Malus sp.*), **blackberries** (*Rubus fruticosus*), and **hawthorn** (*Crataegus*).

During the **Bronze Age**, gathering wild fruits remained an important practice. The woods and undergrowth offered a wide variety of small fruits. In addition to the species already known in the Neolithic period - such as hazelnuts, apples, figs, and pears - **plums** (*Prunus domestica insititia*, *Prunus spinosa*), **cherries** (*Prunus avium/cerasus*), **strawberries** (*Fragaria vesca*), **raspberries** (*Rubus idaeus*), **Chinese lanterns** (*Physalis alkekengi*), **cornelian cherries** (*Cornus mas*), as well as **grapes** (*Vitis vinifera*) and, in some lakeside locations, **water chestnuts** (*Trapa natans*).

A particularly interesting discovery comes from the **Parkhaus Opera site**, located on the shores of Lake Zurich. Here, in layers dating back to the late Neolithic period (the Copper Age according to Italian chronology), two fragments of **charred bread** were found. Archaeobotanical analyses revealed that one of the loaves was made from a mixture of cereal flours, while the other contained fragments of **barley** (*Hordeum vulgare*) and a small **celery seed** (*Apium graveolens*). This is the first known evidence of celery being used as a flavoring or seasoning in prehistoric times!

Alongside cultivated fields, there were probably actual vegetable gardens used to grow species such as **chicory** (*Cichorium intybus*), **carrots** (*Daucus cf. carota*), **dill** (*Anethum graveolens*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), **Swiss chard** (*Beta vulgaris*), and various varieties of **cabbage** (*Brassica rapa*). In numerous Bronze Age sites in the Po Valley, **purslane** (*Portulaca oleracea*) has also been found, a plant that is still known and appreciated today. Today, purslane is used in the preparation of salads, soups, sauces, pickles, and fried foods, it is rich in vitamins (A, B, and C), proteins, minerals, and organic acids (aspartic, citric, and oxalic), which suggests that it was already widely consumed in prehistoric times.

Among wild plants, **weeds** play a particularly interesting role. Although today the term “weed” often has negative connotations, in archaeobotany these plants are fundamental **ecological and cultural indicators**: their presence allows us to reconstruct not only the human activities carried out in a given context, but also the environmental balances that characterized the past ecosystem.

Insight into the human ability to adapt and make the most of local resources. From gathering wild fruits to the earliest forms of cultivation, the evolution of the relationship between **humans and the plant** world tells a complex story of experimentation and knowledge, traces of which continue to emerge from the soil today through archaeobotanical research.

Some **weed species**, for example, bear witness to agricultural practices or forms of land exploitation. This is the case with **Chenopodium**, a plant that could grow and be harvested alongside cereals. Its presence in archaeobotanical finds suggests the coexistence of mixed crops and harvests, but also dietary habits in which **Chenopodium** seeds could be processed into flour and consumed **alongside cereals**.

Other weeds, such as **mallow** (*Malva*), **nettle** (*Urtica*), **mugwort** (*Artemisia*), and **verbena** (*Verbena*), are typical of ruderal environments, i.e., areas subject to trampling, disturbance, or abandonment. Their presence at an archaeological site often indicates inhabited areas, paths, or spaces used on a daily basis. In addition, many of these species were used for food or therapeutic purposes, demonstrating a deep knowledge of plant resources on the part of prehistoric communities.

A special case is represented by certain oil-producing plants belonging to the **Cruciferae family**, such as **rapeseed** (*Brassica napus*) and **camelina** (*Camelina sativa*). These plants are particularly well documented in **Bronze Age** contexts, although their presence does not necessarily imply that they were used for food. Other plants were used for medicinal purposes, such as opium **poppy** (*Papaver somniferum*), or for textile production, such as **flax** (*Linum usitatissimum*).

Ultimately, studying the plants used by prehistoric communities offers a fascinating

Would you like to learn more about this topic?

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Preisto-ricetta

Savory pie with purslane and mint

Today we become gatherers for a day and look for purslane! It can be eaten raw or cooked, and all its components are edible: leaves, stems, buds... and if you find the shoots, they are very tender and have a delicate flavor.

Ingredients

Filling:

*300 g purslane
200 g fresh ricotta cheese
10 wild mint leaves
Extra virgin olive oil
Salt to taste*

*(Optional: 2 eggs, duck eggs are also fine,
for a thicker filling)*

Dough:

*200 g flour
60 g butter or 30 g animal fat
½ cup cold water
1 pinch of salt*

Let's prepare the filling:

In a bowl, soften the ricotta cheese and add the finely chopped mint. Add a drizzle of oil, a pinch of salt... and if you want a more compact filling, add the eggs as well.

Then, wash the purslane thoroughly and boil it in plenty of salted water for about 10 minutes. Drain, allow to cool, and add both the ricotta cheese and mint to the mixture. Mix everything together.

Let's prepare the dough:

In a bowl, mix the flour with the salt and butter or animal fat, rubbing it together with your fingers until the mixture becomes sandy. Add the cold water a little at a time, until you have a soft, smooth dough. Cover with a cloth and leave to rest in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes.

Assembling the pie:

Roll out the dough into a thin sheet and line a lightly greased or parchment-lined baking pan. Pour in the purslane filling and level it out well. If you like, you can sprinkle a little breadcrumbs on top: this will give you a golden, crispy crust that always makes a difference.



Curiosita'

Among all that we have seen, I have not mentioned marsh plants, which are truly fascinating because they live halfway between land and water. They are neither completely aquatic, nor **entirely terrestrial**: they sink their roots into the ground, just like plants in the countryside, but at the same time they need so much water that they can be almost completely submerged.

These plants, which grow in marshes, ponds, and wetlands, have been extremely useful to humans since ancient times. Communities living near these environments quickly learned how to exploit them: their fibers were used to build huts, baskets, mats, and containers of all kinds. In short, **they were a real “treasure” offered by nature.**

If this world intrigues you, I would recommend visiting the **Ecomuseum of Marsh Herbs in Villanova di Bagnacavallo (RA)**. It is a special place where you can discover how humans learned to coexist with water, transforming simple marsh plants into tools for everyday life.

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