

Rusks and Mastic: How to Incorporate Cuisine into a Byzantine Empire Course

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Introduction

Teaching Byzantine history offers educators a fascinating opportunity to explore how the Roman Empire continued from antiquity into the late Middle Ages.¹ As with any history course, standard lectures and discussion of primary sources are essential to teaching effectively about Byzantium. Via lectures, instructors can explain complicated subjects such as Chalcedonian Christology and the Byzantines' relationship with the Kyivan Rus'. Through primary source discussion, instructors can guide students into analyzing historical evidence in texts like *The Secret History* by Procopius and *The Alexiad* by Anna Komnene. In addition to these traditional teaching methods, I have adopted another strategy for my university-level Byzantine Empire course: incorporating food and food history into the curriculum. During a class meeting dedicated to "Byzantine Cuisine," I bring in six Byzantine foods for my students to sample: barley rusks, olives, feta cheese, pork sausages (*loukaniko*), *bougatsa* (a pastry), and the sweet Easter bread called *tsoureki*. I also pass around five of the Byzantines' favorite spices – rosemary, cinnamon, anise, mastic, and mahlep – so that students can inhale their aromas. A significant learning outcome of this lesson is that students will be able to explain a fundamental aspect of daily life in Byzantium: what and how people ate and drank. More specifically, as students sample these foods and smell these spices, they are adding gustatory and olfactory experiences to the historical facts they have learned.

This culinary activity is part of The Byzantine Empire course I teach at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. UMass Lowell is a public research institution that offers a variety of academic programs, including majors in business, engineering, the humanities, sciences, and health sciences. The Byzantine Empire is an upper-level undergraduate history course that emphasizes reading and discussing primary source documents as well as the completion of written research projects. Most of the students who take The Byzantine Empire are history majors, though students from other disciplines also enroll to satisfy arts and humanities general education requirements.

My "Byzantine Cuisine" lesson is an example of object-based learning. With this method of education, teachers integrate objects, including artifacts, artwork, specimens, manuscripts, and rare books, into the learning environment. A key aspect of object-based learning is that it is multisensory. This means, as Helen Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson explain, that it "invokes a variety of senses and encourages a form of interactive or experiential learning."² How does this prove useful? Judy Willcocks reports that the multisensory

1 As I explain to my Byzantine Empire students during our first class, the "Byzantines" actually called themselves "Romans" and understood themselves to be subjects of the "Roman Empire." In the modern world, we refer to this civilization as the "Byzantine Empire" to distinguish between the medieval, Greek-speaking remains of the Roman Empire and the universal empire of antiquity. "Byzantine" derives from "Byzantium," the name of the ancient city on the Bosphorus where Constantinople was founded in the early fourth century. For more details, see Timothy Gregory, *A History of Byzantium*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1, 60-63. Gregory's survey of Byzantine history is the textbook I ask students to read. Besides satisfactorily narrating the events of Byzantine history, another strength of this book is that, at the end of each chapter, it lists relevant primary sources available in English translation and secondary studies recommended for further reading. The latter is especially useful for my students as they select a monograph to read for their book review, an assignment intended to augment their knowledge of Byzantine historiography.

2 Helen Chatterjee, Leonie Hannan, and Linda Thomson, "An Introduction to Object-Based Learning and Multisensory Engagement," in *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Learning in Higher Education*, ed. Helen Chatterjee and Leonie Hannan (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 1.

and interactive elements of object-based learning can lead to students having deeper and more memorable learning experiences.³

Educators in various academic contexts attest to the pedagogical value of object-based learning for the study of history. For example, Georgina Brewis and Charlotte Clements write about the “curated teaching collection” that Brewis uses at University College London in her course on the twentieth-century history of British voluntary and nongovernmental organizations. The collection includes objects such as a wooden tray made by servicemen blinded during World War I, a BBC “Radio Circle” badge from the 1920s, and a 1970s Woodcraft Folk shirt. Brewis and Clements state:

Each object is linked to themes and topics we cover on the course – allowing us to have an “object of the week” to discuss as an ice breaker. In week one, students are encouraged to examine several objects in detail to come up with their own ideas about what the object is and what cause or organisation it might be linked to...Handling physical objects can provide a tangible link to the past, allowing students to think about the experiences of those who might have used or worn the objects, but whose stories might not have survived in written form.⁴

And Jeanne Brasile, the former director of Seton Hall University’s Walsh Gallery, reflects on how students benefited from object-based learning at Walsh Gallery. In November 2022, students in a Viking history course visited to see replicas of the Gundestrup Cauldron and the Book of Kells. As the students examined these objects, they could relate the imagery back to prior reading and coursework. Brasile observes:

Students were taken by the scale of the work, the construction of the cauldron, and the high relief imagery, which is visible 360 degrees around. Objects are powerful tools for learning, especially when students realize they are standing in the presence of an object made by people or cultures from long ago. In this sense, objects can become almost like time machines, bringing us back to pivotal moments in human or natural history.⁵

In the case of my “Byzantine Cuisine” lesson, this activity centered on food and spices offers students a significant window into daily life for people in Byzantium. Food can be a decisive marker of one’s occupation, social class, economic status, religious beliefs, and geographic location – all of which could influence Byzantine daily life. Moreover, after the students have been learning visually and auditorily all semester long, it also allows me to engage their senses of taste and smell. Consequently, many of my students will remember this culinary lesson far more clearly than my best lectures or our most spirited discussions of primary source documents. Ian Mosby made similar observations while teaching modern history at the University of Guelph. As he lectured on the Canadian home front during World War II, he shared Canada War Cake and Depression-era Poverty Cake with his students. These cakes, which were both made without butter, eggs, and milk, and tasted like spiced raisin bread, helped Mosby to communicate how social class influenced Canadians’ individual experiences of wartime shortages and rationing. He noted that these cakes also revealed something about the “taste of war” on the Canadian home front. Mosby asserted: “Food is not simply a great way to get students interested in history. As museum curators and public historians have long known, the sensory experience of history can sometimes be far more powerful and illuminating than the text-centric narrative structure that historians tend to rely upon.”⁶

In this article, I explain how I organize this Byzantine cuisine activity and how it enriches students’ knowledge of the social, military, and religious history of the Byzantine Empire. I begin with the structure and organization

3 Judy Willcocks, “The Power of Concrete Experience: Museum Collections, Touch and Meaning Making in Art and Design Pedagogy,” in *Engaging the Senses*, 48.

4 Georgina Brewis and Charlotte Clements, “Teaching History with Objects,” *The Social History Society*, December 19, 2018, https://socialhistory.org.uk/shs_exchange/teaching-history-with-objects/.

5 Jeanne Brasile, “Bringing History to Life!,” *Seton Hall University Archives & Special Collections Center and the Walsh Gallery Blog*, November 30, 2022, <https://blogs.shu.edu/archives/2022/11/bringing-history-to-life/>.

6 Ian Mosby, “Eat Your Primary Sources! Or, Teaching the Taste of History,” *Active History*, May 9, 2013, <https://activehistory.ca/blog/2013/05/09/eat-your-primary-sources-or-teaching-the-taste-of-history/>.

of the food-oriented lesson. Next, I describe the six foods and five spices that are the core of my presentation. I discuss their respective histories and quote germane primary sources that my students and I read out loud during class. Among these texts are excerpts from the ancient Roman recipe collection called *Apicius* and Procopius's *History of the Wars*. I then offer suggestions for other ways teachers can incorporate these foods and spices into their Byzantine history curriculum. Lastly, I review the evidence that students had a positive response to this experiential learning activity.

An Overview of the Structure of My “Byzantine Cuisine” Lesson

After my students and I complete our chronological survey of Byzantine history from the reign of Emperor Constantine I (r. 306-37) through the aftermath of the tumultuous Fourth Crusade (1202-04), we spend a few class periods considering topical subjects. Besides Byzantine cuisine, we also study cities and villages in Byzantium as well as Byzantine art and architecture. Pausing our chronology with the thirteenth century allows us to examine these themes that run throughout Byzantium's long history before we ultimately conclude the course with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

To begin the unit on “Byzantine Cuisine,” I arrange the food on a table in the classroom. Some of the foods are easy enough for me to prepare at home; others I buy already prepared at the supermarket and a local Greek market (more on this below). I place notes next to the foods on the table to indicate what they are and to make recommendations for condiments. The students then load up their plates with the sweet and savory delicacies they would like to sample, as I commence my illustrated PowerPoint presentation.

As the “Byzantine Cuisine” lesson begins, first I introduce my students to the book I relied heavily on to prepare my lecture: Andrew Dalby's *Tastes of Byzantium: The Cuisine of a Legendary Empire*.⁷ Its inclusion in the lesson serves two purposes: first, to remind students about the course's emphasis on Byzantine historiography, and second, so that students will know what to read if they want to learn more about this subject. Not only does *The Tastes of Byzantium* describe captivatingly what Byzantine people ate and drank, but it also contains excerpts from relevant primary sources as well as some recipes.

Next, I describe the overarching traits of Byzantine cuisine. It was largely a synthesis of ancient Greek and Roman culinary traditions. The former emphasized seafood; the latter, exotic flavors and spices. Through trade, the Byzantines also adopted foods from neighboring civilizations. For example, the waters of the Black Sea, the Sea of Azov, and the rivers in Rus' lands became sources of caviar and smoked sturgeon. And it was through trade at places like Alexandria, Edessa, Trebizond, and Mosul that the Byzantines acquired rare Eastern aromatics and spices such as musk, nutmeg, and sandalwood.⁸

We then proceed to consider a full menu: what did the Byzantines eat for bread, fruits and vegetables, cheese, seafood, meat, and pastry? It is in this segment of the lesson that I discuss rusks, olives, feta, *loukaniko*, *bougatsa*, and *tsoureki*. So, students are eating, tasting, and smelling these six foods as I explain their respective histories. Next, I talk about the importance of water and wine as beverages. Since this is an undergraduate course, I cannot serve alcohol in the classroom, but I briefly elucidate the history of wine in the Mediterranean, and particularly the sweet wines, resinated wine (flavored with pine resin), and spiced wines that were so important to the Byzantines.⁹ As for the five spices, I weave discussion of them into relevant points in the lecture. I pass the spices around in small plastic jars so that students can appreciate their aromas.

7 Andrew Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium: The Cuisine of a Legendary Empire* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010). For a brief discussion of Byzantine cuisine within a larger global context, see Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 170-73.

8 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 59-60, 122. For a more detailed introduction to the cuisines of the ancient Greeks and Romans, see Joan Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 150-72.

9 For more on water and wine in Byzantium, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 85-93, 180-82. For information on retsina, the traditional white wine of Greece flavored with pine resin, see Diane Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 51.

Lastly, we conclude with an introduction to Emperor Constantine VIII (r. 1025-28), the hedonistic brother of the austere warrior emperor Basil II (r. 976-1025), whose conquest of Bulgaria we study earlier in the course. I inform the students that of all of Byzantium's rulers, Constantine VIII was the only one we are aware of who took interest in gastronomy. We then read out loud part of Michael Psellos's *Chronographia* 2.7, where he described Constantine's talent for preparing sauces and colorful, fragrant dishes. Psellos wrote:

[Constantine] was a man of enormous size...His constitution, moreover, was more than usually robust, and his digestive powers were extraordinary, with a stomach naturally adapted to assimilate all kinds of food with ease. He was especially expert in the art of preparing rich savory sauces, giving the dishes character by combinations of color and perfume, and summoning all Nature to his aid – anything to excite the palate.

Byzantine Foods and Spices

The first of the six foods that I share with my students is one of the daily breads that Byzantine people ate: barley rusks (Figure 1), called *paximadia* in Greek. As students take their rusk, they notice immediately that it is not like the soft, moist bread they are used to as they eat sandwiches and dinner rolls. Rather, it is hard, dried bread that was described as “dipyros” in ancient Greek, which means “twice-baked.”¹⁰ But why would anyone want to eat bread like that? To answer this question, we read the following quotation from Procopius, where he explained why it was so important for Byzantine soldiers: “The bread which soldiers are destined to eat in camp must of necessity be put twice into the oven, and be cooked so carefully as to last for a very long period and not spoil in a short time, and loaves cooked in this way necessarily weigh less.”¹¹ Its value, then, lay in the fact that it lasted a long time and was light to carry. These advantages are surely why, I remind the students from *The Secret History*, the once indigent Emperor Justin I (r. 518-27) brought rusks with him in his cloak as he journeyed from his native Illyria to Constantinople to join the Byzantine army.¹² So, as students sample rusks, they are eating and tasting the same bread that was familiar to common people and soldiers in Byzantium. For those who might want to try baking rusks, they require only a few simple ingredients. However, it may be difficult to find barley flour in a regular grocery store. Also, the baking process alone takes at least three hours.¹³ An easier option may be to buy rusks at a local Greek market or online. Because of how hard rusks can be, I bring olive oil and diced tomatoes to moisten and soften the bread.



Figure 1. Barley Rusks (*Paximadia*)

Second, I offer my students table olives (Figure 2). In antiquity, olives were a key source of food and oil both for the Greeks and the Romans. They became one of the main foods that Greek and Roman peasants ate, and were an essential part of the Byzantines' diet, too. People in Byzantium consumed olives preserved in brine, vinegar,

10 For rusks and their long history, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 17, 22, 27, 79, 99-100; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 38-39. For more on the history of barley specifically, see Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 33.

11 Procopius, *History of the Wars* 3.13.15

12 Cf. Procopius, *The Secret History* 6.2-3

13 For a *paximadia* recipe, see Elene Paravantes, “Authentic Greek Barley Rusks - Paximadi Kritiko,” Olive Tomato, April 4, 2018, <https://www.olivetomato.com/greek-barley-rusks>.

or honey vinegar.¹⁴ I prefer to bring in a medley that includes purplish-brown Kalamata olives and large green Halkidiki olives seasoned in extra virgin olive oil and salt.¹⁵ I opt for the medley so that students can see some of the different colors, and taste some of the different flavors, of olives. Table olives can be easily purchased at supermarkets and at local Greek markets.

Third, students sample feta cheese (Figure 3), which the Byzantines called *prospthatos*. It is white, soft, and tangy. It can be made wholly with sheep's milk, or primarily with sheep's milk, with a small amount of goat's milk being added. Using sheep and goat's milk to produce cheese became a common practice in ancient Greece. Because feta is preserved in brine, it is quite salty.¹⁶ To gain insight into a western European's opinion of the taste of feta and how it was marketed in Crete during the late fifteenth century, we read the following passage from the travelogue of the Italian pilgrim Pietro Casola: "They make a great many cheeses; it is a pity they are so salty. I saw great warehouses full of them, some in which the brine, or *salmoria* as we would say, was two feet deep, and the large cheeses were floating in it. Those in charge told me that the cheeses could not be preserved in any other way, being so rich."¹⁷ Like olives, one can conveniently buy feta cheese at the grocery store or at a Greek market.

The fourth food that my students try is the smoked pork sausages called *loukaniko* (Figure 4). I talk about it as we consider the kinds of meat that were popular in Byzantium. (Since some students may not eat pork, it is advisable to remind them at the beginning of class that they are not required to eat the sausages for this activity.) Reportedly, it was soldiers of the late Roman Republic who brought knowledge of *loukaniko* to Rome, after serving in Lucania in southern Italy; hence its name.¹⁸ To get a better sense of how *loukaniko* was made, we read this excerpt from *Apicius*: "Pound pepper, cumin, savory,



Figure 2. Table Olives



Figure 3. Feta Cheese

14 For typical Byzantine vegetables and fruits, including olives, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 74-77, 80-81. For the importance of olives in ancient Greece and Rome, see Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 87.

15 For more on popular Greek olives, and particularly Kalamata and Halkidiki olives, see Jim Botsacos with Judith Choate, *The New Greek Cuisine* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 20-21; Diane Kochilas, *The Glorious Foods of Greece: Traditional Recipes from the Islands, Cities, and Villages* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 208; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 26.

16 Andrew Dalby, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 190; Botsacos, *The New Greek Cuisine*, 22; Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 154. For the importance of cheese, broadly speaking, in antiquity, see Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 83-84.

17 Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, 190. I am quoting Dalby's slightly modified and more easily comprehensible version of the early twentieth-century English translation of Casola's account: Pietro Casola, *Canon Pietro Casola's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494*, trans. M. Margaret Newett (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 1907), 203.

18 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 27-28; Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, 181; Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, 65-66. For typical Byzantine meats, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 27-28, 69-71.

rue, parsley, bay berry spice and *liquamen*. Add meat which has been thoroughly pounded so that it can then be blended well with the spice-mix. Stir in *liquamen*, whole peppercorns, plenty of fat and pine nuts. Put the meat in the skins, draw them quite thinly and hang them in the smoke.”¹⁹ As we can glean from this evidence, these sausages were intended to be zesty – and they continue to be today. I offer students both orange-peel-flavored and leek-flavored *loukaniko* so that they can taste these different exotic flavors. Like the olives and feta, one can buy *loukaniko* at a regular grocery store or Greek market. When sliced, they take approximately thirty minutes to bake.

Fifth, I introduce students to *bougatsa* (Figure 5), which is made of thin, flaky phyllo dough that is filled with custard. Its origins can be traced to Cappadocia in Anatolia, while that region was still part of the Byzantine Empire. In the beginning, *bougatsa* was just sheets of phyllo, sometimes sprinkled with crystalline sugar, that men ate while working long hours in the fields. It was not until the eighteenth century that one of the Greek women in Izmir (formerly called Smyrna) had the idea to add semolina flour and cream to the phyllo, thereby creating the traditional *bougatsa* known to the modern world. One can sprinkle powdered sugar and cinnamon to further sweeten it. I inform students that this pastry is considered the culinary symbol of Thessaloniki,²⁰ once the second city of Byzantium, whose long history we study in the course. So, as students sample *bougatsa*, they can experience one of the main tastes associated with this city so famous for its Byzantine churches, late Roman ruins, and impressive Museum of Byzantine Culture. Making *bougatsa* is not difficult and requires only about an hour.²¹ *Bougatsa* can also be purchased frozen at the supermarket or Greek markets; at Greek markets, one may even be able to buy it freshly prepared and warm.

Sixth, I offer my students *tsoureki*, or sweet Easter bread (Figure 6). It is similar to the special breads called *kollyrides* that the Byzantines used to make at Easter time. They baked them into different shapes, and each loaf had a red egg in the middle. Still today, Eastern Orthodox Christians customarily bake *tsoureki* on Holy Thursday and eat it on Easter Sunday. It is made with



Figure 4: *Loukaniko* (Purchased at Sophia’s Greek Pantry in Lowell, Massachusetts)



Figure 5: *Bougatsa*

19 Apicius 2.4. *Liquamen* (Latin), or *garos* (Greek), was the salty fermented fish sauce known to people throughout the universal Roman Empire of antiquity. It continued to be popular in Byzantium during the Middle Ages. For more on *garos* and how to make it, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 27, 68, 177.

20 Philip Chrysopoulos, “Bougatsa: The Fascinating Greek Delicacy that Comes from Byzantium,” *Greek Reporter*, January 9, 2025, <https://greekreporter.com/2025/01/09/greek-delicacy-bougatsa>; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 365.

21 For a *bougatsa* recipe, see Maria Koutsogiannis, “Bougatsa (Greek Custard Pie),” *Food by Maria*, last modified July 10, 2024, <https://www.foodbymaria.com/bougatsa>.

sweet spices and is usually braided, a practice that dates to antiquity, when pagans believed that braiding bread might ward off evil spirits. The bread itself, as it rises and takes its final shape, is supposed to symbolize Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. One can decorate the bread with either sesame seeds or sliced almonds (though it may be advisable to skip adding nuts in case any students are allergic). At least one red-dyed egg is placed on top of each loaf and symbolizes Christ's blood.²² Regarding the red egg, I tell students about an Orthodox tradition that connects it to Mary Magdalene, the first person to see Christ after his resurrection. According to this story, after Pentecost Mary traveled to Rome, where she proclaimed the gospel. While at a banquet where Emperor Tiberius was present, she preached to him about Christ and insisted that he had risen from the dead. She signified this by holding up an egg as a symbol of new life. Tiberius responded by saying he would not believe in the resurrection unless that egg turned red. It then became red in Mary's hand, and she showed it to the emperor, announcing "Christ is risen!"²³ *Tsoureki*, therefore, is a great and useful food to share with students, not solely because of its sweet taste and smell, and its unique appearance, but also because it offers us insight into Byzantine religious beliefs and customs. Like *bougatsa*, one can bake *tsoureki* at home, though it can be a complicated process requiring well over three hours.²⁴ Some may find it easier to buy *tsoureki* already prepared at a Greek market or bakery. It is available throughout the year, but comes with the traditional red egg only during the Easter season. Greek markets often carry the red dye used to color the eggs, and it can also be purchased online.

Regarding spices, since they were a valuable commodity for the Byzantines, I have customarily passed around rosemary leaves, ground cinnamon, and anise seed (Figure 7). We think about rosemary as I discuss meat. Although recommended as seasoning for roast lamb, overall rosemary's presence in Byzantine cookery was actually quite minimal. However, because of its strong scent, it proved useful for improving the odor of Constantinople's streets in anticipation of imperial progresses.²⁵ So, the people of the City would have associated



Figure 6: *Tsoureki* (Sweet Easter Bread)



Figure 7: (left to right) Rosemary Leaves, Ground Cinnamon, and Anise Seed

²² Philip Chrysopoulos, "Tsoureki: A Beloved Greek Easter Bread and Its Timeless Traditional Recipe," *Greek Reporter*, April 17, 2025, <https://greekreporter.com/2025/04/17/tsoureki-greek-easter-recipe>.

²³ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Mary Magdalene: A Visual History* (New York: T&T Clark, 2023), 25-27.

²⁴ For instructions on dyeing Easter eggs red and a recipe for *tsoureki*, see Marilyn Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs in America*, 2nd ed. (Bethesda, MD: Nea Attiki Press, 2002), 290-92.

²⁵ Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 39; Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, 190.

rosemary with public appearances of the emperor; and we today have a scent we can identify with Constantinople. I pass around cinnamon as we study *bougatsa*. Students will, of course, be very familiar with its taste and smell, since it is so common in the modern world. However, I explain that during the Middle Ages, cinnamon was a rare and precious exotic spice that came to Byzantium from as far away as Sri Lanka and southern China. The Byzantines used it to season various kinds of meats, gravies, and soups.²⁶ We consider anise as we explore the different sorts of wine Byzantine people were accustomed to drinking. Anise wine was among the spiced wines they drank.²⁷ Since it is not advisable to offer students wine in the classroom, passing around aromatic anise seed still allows them to get a sense of what this beverage smelled like. Rosemary, cinnamon, and anise can be easily and inexpensively acquired at supermarkets and online.

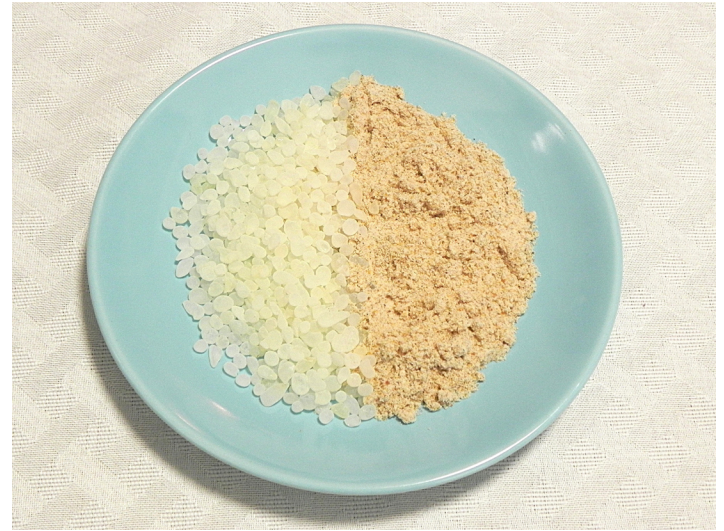


Figure 8: (left to right) Mastic Crystals and Ground Mahlep

More recently, I have started to introduce students to mastic and mahlep (Figure 8). Together, these spices give *tsourekis* its particular and unforgettable sweet flavor and fragrance. Mastic was produced in only one location in the Byzantine Empire: the southern part of the Aegean island of Chios. It is the crystallized resin of a shrub called the *mastichodendro*. Mastic crystals, or “tears,” are translucent and pale-yellow in color. One must crush them into powder to use mastic for baking. Like anise, mastic was also added to wine to flavor it.²⁸ Mahlep comes from the kernels of the dried, cracked pits of St. Lucie cherries. Like the mastic crystals, these kernels must be ground into a powder,²⁹ which is beige in color. Discussing mastic and mahlep presents instructors a great opportunity to teach students about two exotic spices they will have probably never heard of before. However, unlike rosemary, cinnamon, and anise, mastic and mahlep cannot be bought at regular grocery stores and must be purchased online or at Greek markets. They may also be more expensive than the other three spices, but are worth the investment for what they add to this lesson.

These six foods and five spices are the heart of my “Byzantine Cuisine” lesson. In my experience, it has worked well pedagogically to introduce them all during a single class period dedicated to this subject. However, that is not the only way to incorporate Byzantine food and spices into a history course. Some instructors may find it useful, for example, to share rusks and *loukaniko* during a class period focusing on Byzantium’s military history. Or perhaps one could bring in *bougatsa* for a lesson that concentrates on Thessaloniki and its Byzantine art and architecture. *Tsourekis* could prove strategic for a class meeting dedicated to the study of Byzantine Christianity. Passing around some, or all, of the spices I discuss might be useful for a lesson considering trade in Constantinople, and what it would have smelled like seeking to acquire exotic spices in the City’s markets.³⁰ Or, for a final class meeting, feta,

26 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 46-47, 52, 161-62.

27 Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 182; Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire*, 171. Two anise-flavored spirits that are popular in Greece are ouzo and *tsipouro*. For more details, see Marianthi Milona, ed., *Culinaria Greece: Greek Specialties*, special edition, trans. Susan Ghanouni, Harriet Horsfield, Pat Pailing, and Rae Walter (Ullmann and Könemann, 2007), 62-63, 328-31; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 58.

28 Milona, *Culinaria Greece*, 332-33; Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 44, 51; Kochilas, *The Country Cooking of Greece*, 360-61; Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs*, 291-92.

29 Robyn Eckhardt, “Turkey’s Most Elusive Spice,” Taste Cooking, August 14, 2018, <https://tastecooking.com/turkeys-elusive-spice>; Rouvelas, *A Guide to Greek Traditions and Customs*, 291.

30 For more on the importance of spices in Constantinople’s economy, see Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium*, 38-43.

olives, and *loukaniko* might serve as tasty historical snacks as students offer final reflections on what they learned during the semester. Instructors might even make cooking foods like *loukaniko* and *bougatsa*, which do not take long to prepare, a classroom activity. There are plenty of options. Teachers can tailor what elements of Byzantine cuisine they use based on their curriculum and various pedagogical goals.

Student Response to “Byzantine Cuisine”

How have students responded to the “Byzantine Cuisine” lesson? Do they perceive it to be a beneficial experiential learning activity? Their feedback in spring 2025 course evaluations demonstrates that it was indeed effective. First, the subject matter clearly piqued their interest. One student described the lesson as “very interesting and engaging,” and noted that this was “probably the most focused I have been in a college class.” But more specifically, students emphasized that they appreciated the activity’s multisensory approach that enabled them to taste the history we were considering. A student wrote: “The class on cuisine, where we got to actually taste what we were learning about, was one of the best in-class experiences I’ve ever had at [UMass Lowell].” Another student commented: “The class on Byzantine cuisine was extremely interesting and reminded me of one of my favorite YouTubers, ‘Tasting History,’ and this can be a fun way to learn history.”³¹ And another student stated: “I thoroughly enjoyed the Byzantine cuisine lecture. It is one thing to just hear about the food that these people ate, but to be able to taste it in person enhanced the lecture to another level. The food itself was also very good and made for a very memorable lecture that I will remember for a long time.”

Besides student comments in course evaluations, faculty observation of my “Byzantine Cuisine” lesson likewise confirms its pedagogical effectiveness. When I gave this lecture most recently, on April 9, 2025, the chair of UMass Lowell’s History Department, Christoph Strobel, attended. He shared his feedback with me in a report he wrote after class. He described that he “walked into a class filled with delicious food smells.” Regarding the lesson’s content, he stated:

The class moved away from the usual lecture and primary source discussion format that dominates the history classroom. The lesson on Byzantine cuisine engaged not only the students’ senses of sight and hearing, but also their senses of taste (sampling Byzantine foods) and smell (smelling the spices familiar to the Byzantines). It was adamantly clear that the students had fun with this lesson and that they had a memorable experience.

Conclusion

To conclude, incorporating Byzantine cuisine into a course on the Byzantine Empire is an effective teaching strategy that deepens students’ knowledge of history and promotes experiential learning. Students will come away from this object-centered activity able to explain what and how Byzantine people ate and drank. They will be able to do so based on their own experience eating Byzantine food and smelling some of the Byzantines’ favorite spices in class. Regarding food, as students eat barley rusks, they are consuming the same hard, dry bread so familiar to Byzantine soldiers and common people – people like Emperor Justin I. While trying olives, they are enjoying the same savory staple found on tables throughout the Byzantine world. With feta, they can taste this popular salty cheese whose marketing was described by Pietro Casola in the fifteenth century. While sampling *loukaniko*, they are eating the same flavorful pork sausages that Roman soldiers first encountered in southern Italy, and which eventually became one of the Byzantines’ favorite meats. With *bougatsa*, students get to try the delicious phyllo and custard pastry now synonymous with Thessaloniki, Byzantium’s second city. As they eat *tsoureki* and observe the symbolism of this braided sweet bread and its red egg, they are reminded of the Byzantines’ belief in Christ’s resurrection and how these medieval people adapted non-monotheistic culinary traditions for their own purposes. Concerning spices, as students sniff rosemary, they are experiencing a scent associated with the streets of Constantinople before imperial processions took place. With cinnamon, they are inhaling what was once a rare and costly spice from Asia that the Byzantines used to season food. While smelling anise, they are experiencing

31 A reference to “Tasting History with Max Miller,” <https://www.youtube.com/@TastingHistory>.

an aroma people in Byzantium were accustomed to as they drank spiced wine. And as students sniff mastic and mahlep, they are smelling the very spices that give *tsoureki* its sweet fragrance and flavor. Indeed, making an examination of Byzantine cuisine part of a Byzantine history course is an enriching cross-cultural experience that students will very likely not forget.

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