

## Off the Stage and into the Spotlight: Examining the Greek *Mageiros*

The Greek comic chef or *mageiros* first appeared as a stock figure in Athenian Middle and New Comedy as an arrogant character with an inflated ego. This egoistic depiction must have been a stark contrast from the audience's perception of the *mageiros* for the humor to have been well-received (Wilkins 2000). The chefs of comedic tradition were morally questionable characters with a penchant for stealing from their employers. They often utilized language relating to other crafts when describing their own, adding a pretentious flair to their speeches. When instructing others, comedic chefs stressed the importance of proper cooking techniques and tasting to adjust seasoning (Konstantakos 2015). If we were to take comedic playwrights at face value we would be left with a shallow, exaggerated portrayal of a person, however, these depictions should not be entirely discounted.

It is unlikely that Athenian chefs of the Classical period were afforded any manner of elevated social standing themselves, but they filled a vital role in society. The appearance of the stock character and his particular brand of dedication to his art suggests that proper cooking and good eating had become important enough to permeate broader Athenian culture.

A *mageiros* could be hired from the agora to carry out sacrifices, select food items, as well as plan and cook the meals. Their particular skill set made them a potential resource for wealthy, status-seeking individuals. As wealth in Athens increased so did the ability for some more fortunate residents to partake in luxurious eating. Displays of wealth were an important aspect in the social landscape of Athens. The variety of food served at a dinner party or a wedding reflected onto the refinement and status of the event's host (Dalby 1997).

The division between rich and poor was visible in nearly every aspect of life. It became important not only to participate in luxury food culture but also to be able to create it with

the help of a skilled chef. The fragments of Arcestratus that have survived in Athenaeus's *Deipnosophistae* functioned as an instruction manual on the best foods. Many of the fragments concern seafood, informing the reader of the most luxurious fish, where they could be found, and how to prepare and eat them. Arcestratus wrote not in prose but rather in verse making it likely that his work would have served as entertainment for wealthy men during a symposium rather than a practical book for the chef (Wilkins and Hill 2011). However, if we direct our attention back to comedy, we find that the chef is frequently the only character interested in the meal's preparation. Hosts and slaves grow impatient with the long-winded speeches of the chef (Dalby 1997). This suggests that in order to serve a luxurious meal an interested and qualified chef was essential.

This paper seeks to remove chefs from the comedic stage and instead place them inside a real-world context in order to better understand their societal roles. Middle and New Comedy provide an excellent insight into the functions of a *mageiros* but much of the embellishment must be stripped away in order for an accurate portrayal to be revealed. Were they ritualistic butchers, common slaves, beacons of social status, or arrogant, loud mouths? It seems all of these interpretations were applicable during the development of a culinary culture in Athens.

### Bibliography

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