

How to Eat: An Ancient Guide for Healthy Living, a Buffet of Ancient Authors

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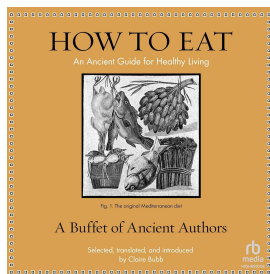
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Book Title: How to Eat: An Ancient Guide for Healthy Living, A Buffet of Ancient Authors

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How to Eat offers ample opportunities for reflection on the ways “subtle logics of medical knowledge and practice”¹ have changed from ancient times to the present. Claire Bubb, associate professor of classical literature and science at New York University, has assembled an anthology of advice from ancient Greco-Roman writers on how to eat (and sleep, exercise, bathe, and a few other things) that seems by turns surprisingly familiar (“When it comes to food, excessive abundance is never good,” p. 61) and sometimes just surprising (“Hazelnuts cause headaches,” p. 217). Throughout, she sets out to explore the ways ancient writers can help us reflect on how we think about food.

In an ample introduction, she discusses the sociocultural settings of the ancient world, provides an overview of her textual sources, and then discusses her dynamic equivalence approach to translation (“these texts are often quite lively and informal . . . and I have done my best to reproduce that tone,” p. xlviii). The body of the book itself then follows with a shorter section with samples of advice on *how* to eat and a much longer section with samples from various sources on *what* to eat. In a format that will appeal to both classicists and those unfamiliar with the ancient languages, the original Greek or Latin text accompanies each translation (Greek or Latin on the left, English on the right).

This is not a textbook discussing and evaluating ancient culture and medical advice; rather this book gives the reader a nearly first-person encounter with what the ancients actually had to say. The topical organization means that following and understanding the reasoning of any one author is more challenging, but it does allow for a sense of the variety of thoughts on any one topic. While some advice fits well with current thinking (“Any stout people who wish to become thin should do all exercise in a state of fasting,” p. 9), other recommendations come off as head-scratchers (“In the winter it is necessary to wear washed garments, in the summer they should be treated with oil,” p. 9).

The emphasis among ancient writers on foods and their perceived properties is understandable given the absence of modern pharmaceuticals, and a welcome reminder that for much of history humanity has had to address health and healing without the benefits (and risks) of modern medicines. For those interested in a taste of the ancient world, the editor even includes recipes that could be prepared in a modern kitchen (eg, honeyed ham).

Beyond relating what the ancients thought about food, lifestyle, and health, the book yields a picture of *how* they thought through these issues as well. Across nearly all the ancient authors surveyed in this book, the writing is a mixture of description (this is what people do) and prescription (this is what you should do), which suggests proceeding from assumed common sense or popular consensus. While reasoning based on body types, temperaments, and so forth, implies taxonomic categories from a philosophical mindset foreign to modern medicine, a more familiar epistemology is apparent in discussions of how “the art of medicine is only beginning to arm itself through much trial and observation” (p. 199).

While historians will find the use of ancient languages and references to source material helpful, those seeking a first introduction to ancient thinking on diet, lifestyle, and health will find this book very accessible. This “buffet of ancient authors” is

informative, entertaining, and encourages reflection on how we make decisions about what we think we know when giving counsel to patients.

REFERENCE

1. Greene JA, Jones DS, Podolsky SH. Therapeutic evolution and the challenge of rational medicine. *N Engl J Med*. 2012;367(12):1077–1082. doi:[10.1056/NEJMp1113570](https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp1113570)