

Diet of the Gods

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Book proposal

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Logline

Diet of the Gods is my first-person chronicle of a year spent traveling the world, discovering exactly what the gods ate, and then mimicking that meal plan and seeing what happens.

It's a social experiment that starts off as a whimsical culinary adventure, but ends up introducing a new, highly effective diet regimen. (Turns out, the diet of the gods has benefits that are real, whether or not the gods themselves are).

Chapter 1

The primordial Greek gods suffered from a lot of intergenerational suspicion and hostility, in large part because most parents had good reason to fear that their sons and daughters would overthrow them. Offspring were offing their elders at an alarming rate. (Apparently, filial piety hadn't been invented yet). As a result, increasingly paranoid generations employed increasingly extreme measures to mitigate this threat, up to and including eating their children whole, which was the favored technique of the Titan, Cronos. His theory was that it would be harder for his kids to stage a coup if they'd been dissolved by his divine gastric juices.

Not surprisingly, his spouse, Rhea, grew exasperated with the dining habits of her fella, and finally spirited one of her newborn lovelies away from the omnivorous daddy/deity. The smuggled whelp, named Zeus, got stashed in a cave, where he was raised by nymphs.

Because these nymphs had to keep a low profile and hide their secret charge from Cronos (who thought of his son as a snack), they were not able to stage lavish banquets for the lad. So instead they just relied on a single unsexy staple, a one-stop-shop of nutrients, and raised him on goat's milk.

That's it. Goat's milk. That's all the kid got. And he grew up to be Zeus, mightiest creature in the universe.

I remember the moment I read about this goat's milk phenomenon, with respect to Zeus. It was fairly recently. And it stopped me mid-myth, in the middle of a page. I put the book down, and reflected. I'd read the story of the Titans, Giants, and Olympians a handful of times since second grade, and I'd always been primarily fascinated by the horrible revelation of someone or something capable of dining on their offspring. Because that cannibalism had always occupied center stage in the theater of my mind, I'd never noticed the goat's milk before. But this time, everything else in the story was eclipsed by the humble dairy product.

Goat's milk? Wait a minute. I thought gods ate manna and drank elixir and consumed other things with names that didn't actually correlate to any known food groups. I was stunned to learn that, in his formative years, one of history's all-time mega deities subsisted on what came squirting out of a bearded quadruped's mammarys.

So I did the only logical thing. I decided to subsist on it, too.

I drank goat's milk for 21 days straight, replacing my normal cow's milk and almond milk completely. I put it in my cereal. I used it for my smoothies. I drank it instead of having a beer. I drank it instead of having a pint of water after I ran. All the while, I kept wondering which Zeusian traits might manifest first. I knew that some of Zeus's signature physical traits included the ability to hurl lightning bolts, and the ability to turn himself into a bull or a swan and then make love to women in that form. But I saw very little progress in any of those departments.

What I did notice, though, was a noticeable improvement in one of the lynchpins of my physical fitness routine.

For years, as a part of my thrice-weekly workouts, I'd been doing three sets of 10 pullups in fairly quick succession. But, now, within two weeks of being hopped up on goat's milk—the infant formula that turns out to have been suitable for the supernatural—I effortlessly bumped my three sets of reps to 16, 16, and 18.

Those numbers didn't lie. When you crunched them, they amounted to a 66% uptick in output.

Whoa. Were my muscles really stronger? Or was it just psychosomatic? I needed to know.

I started by checking some of my go-to medical resources. The Cleveland Clinic is the #2-rated hospital in America, and one of its food gurus, Dr. Mark Hyman, explains that “the form of casein in goat's milk (A2 casein) is not inflammatory, unlike the casein prevalent in most cow's milk (A1 casein) that creates gut issues, allergies, eczema, and acne. Goat's milk also has high levels of medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs), which boost metabolism and brain function, and higher levels of vitamin A, which is good for your skin.”

Aha, so that's why the early Hellenistic author Apollodorus described Zeus as coming down to woo the lovely Danae in the form of a shower of gold. It's a metaphor, a fancy way of saying that the god possessed very good skin tone due to his boosted Vitamin A levels.

But what about the pullups? Where was the data specifically connecting goat's milk to physical performance? I went to another go-to resource, the National Institutes of Health, which gathers the results of gazillions of peer-reviewed clinical trials in the National Library of Medicine. There, I read the conclusions of a 2017 study conducted by

some gentlemen from the Military Medical University in Yangpu District, Shanghai. The report had lots of cool data, the upshot of which was that “MCTs enhance exercise performance.” OK, full disclosure, they were monitoring the exercise performance of lab mice. But, heck, the mice were evidencing signs of “enhanced mitochondrial biogenesis,” and who doesn’t want that? I got an *A* in A.P. Chemistry, so I know enough to know that I have mitochondria, too, and that they’re the engines in your cells that make the wonder compound ATP, which triggers muscle contraction.

Ta-da. There they were. The dots. Now all I had to do was connect them.

1. Goat’s milk boosts MCT levels.
2. MCTs boost mitochondrial activity.
3. Mitochondria create ATP.
4. ATP makes muscles fire.

That’s all the syllogism I needed. After all, pullups are just muscle contractions. And now I could do 66% more of them. “Enhanced mitochondrial biogenesis” due to goat’s milk seemed to be a very plausible biochemical culprit.

Cross-referencing my workout results with Zeus’s résumé and the findings of Messrs. Wang, Liu, Xu, et al., I started to suspect there was a real correlation between the hypotheses of mythological nutritionists and the conclusions of modern science. In fact, I did more than just suspect it. I felt it. I felt the goat’s-milk-induced Zeusian vigor. So much so, that I even started wearing faded t-shirts emblazoned with thunderbolts to the gym, where most folks demonstrated their ignorance of the great myths by mis-identifying me as a Flash Gordon fanboy, rather than as a latter-day iteration of the Hurler of Lightning, Protector and Ruler of Mankind.

I mentioned to my friends what I was up to, and they got a kick out of it. Some even started their very own goat’s milk regimens.

I felt like I was living in a bizarre infomercial. Instead of hawking some miracle supplement or anti-aging cream, I was advocating the benefits of one of mother nature's oldest and humblest nutrient delivery vehicles. Milk from a goat. And instead of citing a bespectacled Harvard M.D. as my primary medical authority, I was referencing Zeus.

And that's when the idea hit me. *Why limit myself to Zeus? Why not push the concept all the way and explore the diets of all the gods?*

Based on my prior exposure to certain mythologies and religions—and a quick scan of some less familiar and more exotic ones—it was pretty evident that the gods of the world all have fascinating tastes in food:

- Jesus Christ's first miracle, at his Mother's request, was to turn 6 stone jars of water into wine at the Cana wedding party. What's interesting is that scholars have done forensic party-planning analysis and determined that He actually made at least 120 gallons of wine, which, as far as I can tell, makes Him the New Testament's first small-batch vintner. (Some still debate whether He ever actually sipped this wine—or any wine—Himself. After exploring things a bit further, I believe I have the answer to this question. More on that later.)
- Most of us measure nutritional yield in terms of things like the presence of caloric fuel for fitness, or the absence of fat for the minimization of our midriffs. But the stout Scandinavians attribute other, more impressive powers to grub. Like immortality. The Asgardian gods (including Thor) acquired the ability to live forever because they ate the supernatural Golden Apples of Iduun. Like other apples, these golden ones probably provided 14% of the recommended Daily Value of Vitamin C. But unlike other apples, these also apparently provided 100% of the Daily Value of that less-common nutrient, Life Eternal.

At first, I thought this would be an easy fruit to explore, because I've seen apples at Whole Foods that are golden, and delicious. But on closer inspection, the Norse lore reveals that there are some restrictions and protocols. The everlasting-life-giving apples grow only in Asgard, and they can only be picked by their namesake, the goddess, Iduun. So I ditched the Whole Foods approach (they really do need a *Diet of the Gods* section, though), and launched into the project of finding exactly where Asgard is, locating its orchards, and then finding someone named Iduun interested in going apple picking with me.

These Asgardian apples made it clear that there would sometimes be an extra dimension of complexity to my quest. In some cases, store-bought produce would suffice. For example, the goat's milk I'd used had performed well. In fact, I even remember the brand I used— [REDACTED] (but it'll remain redacted, until they offer me a gonzo endorsement deal). In other cases, though, I'd need to travel pretty far afield in order to source specific nutrients and geo-locate rare dishes...

- This would be the case with the Hindu god Annamurti, when it came to eating what he ate. He's the patron deity of kitchens and sustenance, and he's still presiding in his shrine in Srirangam, India, where, for centuries, in the form of a statue, he's been wielding a ball of rice in one hand and a local dish of sweetened milk and rice in the other. I would go there and ask his priests to prepare it for me, because they're the only ones who know the recipe.
- Rice makes a cameo in many of the immortals' meals. Shinto god(dess) of foodstuffs, Inari, is often portrayed riding a fox and cradling a sheaf of rice, to which he/she is partial. But Inari has some peculiar strengths, and odds are it's not the rice, but rather a different dessert item, that's responsible for them. Some of Inari's shrines are bedecked with an ornamental device called the Hoju-No-Tama, which is a pear wrapped in a halo of flame. What does eating a fire-

retardant pear do for you? Well, Inari could change gender, on demand. The god's Asian pears did not quite do that for me, but their other benefits are indubitable.

- And what about those dishes that are shrouded in mystery, or seem impossible, or vile? While it was clear, from the get-go, that this adventure would be one of the great culinary quests, requiring a peculiar and very real kind of gastrointestinal fortitude, there would nonetheless be a few cuisines that I would just simply *not* be adopting. Like the bill of fare of Cronos, who ate every one of Zeus's siblings (and was later forced by Zeus to regurgitate them). That would be a no-go. But most everything else was fair game. Including those famously indefinite food items favored by the gods—nectar, ambrosia, and manna. Sure, everyone can name them. But what the heck are they, exactly? I'd find out, and then feast on them. Bravely.
- And then, of course, there was Bacchus. Adopting his (primarily liquid) diet was going to be fun.

I set out to be the first person to compile all of the gods' individual entrees and beverages into a single ur-menu, the definitive compendium of divine dining options. And I wanted to go even further than that, as well. Simply creating a compendium wouldn't be interesting enough for me. I didn't want to just *explore* the Diet of the Gods. I wanted to adopt it. After traveling the world and deciphering what the mysterious and miraculous foods were, I'd eat them. For a full year.

Like Thoreau, who went into the woods to discover what happens to the human soul when you live off (and with) wild nature alone, I'd be running an experiment. On myself. *If a mortal ate what the gods ate, what would happen? More specifically, Which of the ancient gods' diets are most conducive to the health metrics we care about in our modern age? Which*

divine foodstuffs boost cardio capacity, which ones shrink waistlines, which ones enhance well-being, and which ones sharpen mental acuity? I'd find out.

And first up, out of respect for Jesus, I decided to dive into wine. Now all I had to do was find a wholesaler willing to home-deliver six stone jars of it...