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## Fava-the Magic Bean

By Layla Eplett | August 8, 2012



Photo 1-2: Throughout the ages, beans have been offering an escape from all sorts of scary situations.

A friend of mine once recounted his evening of clubbing after taking magic beans, describing them as transporting him to an entirely new place. I could see why he did it; if I was surrounded by adults sucking on pacifiers and hula hooping to techno beats, I'd want out of there, too. My preferred method of transport might involve a more practical trip, such as one by taxi or subway, but to each his own. (Photos 1&2) Long before the days of raves, another boy was offered magical beans that also took him to a place high in the sky. The beans in *Jack and the Beanstalk* are believed to be fava beans and they have a magical history all their own.

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With evidence of their incorporation into diets dating back to at least 6000 BC, fava beans are one of the oldest cultivated plants. Their hardiness and ability to endure cold climates contributed to their endurance as a crop. It also earned the beans magical status in Sicily, where they were considered more than merely food.

Sicily experienced a serious drought in the Middle Ages that led to hunger and crop destruction. Sicilians prayed to Saint Joseph for rain. He answered their prayers by making it rain, not in the way Fat Joe might in da club, but by actually making it rain. The hearty fava beans were the only crops to be salvaged and helped prevent a famine.

Since then, Sicilians have honored Saint Joseph annually on March 19th. Part of the festivities on Saint Joseph's Day include placing fava beans in church altars and incorporating fava beans into the accompanying feasts. On the day they are traditionally sown, All Souls Day, fava bean shaped cakes are baked in their honor, known as *fave dei morti* or "beans of the dead."

Of course, fava bean consumption and honoring isn't limited to special occasions. They are consumed throughout the year in risottos, pastas and stews and the lucky bean can be carried at any time. A fava bean in the wallet is thought to bring fortune and keeping a few in a pantry is said to ensure it will never be bare. (This might just be a case of logic not luck since a cupboard containing fava beans will technically never be empty.)

Grown in abundance along the Nile River, Egyptians have incorporated fava beans into many traditional dishes including falafel and ful medames. But its magico-religious affiliation meant certain groups were restricted from eating it. When an object such as the fava bean is considered to contain supernatural properties, it can be viewed as simultaneously beneficial and harmful.

As a result of their magical reputation, it was taboo for priests to consume fava beans. Instead, they functioned as symbolic offerings to gods. Pharaoh Rameses III offered 11,998 jars of fava beans to the god of the Nile. Herodotus claimed some Egyptians were not only prohibited from eating the beans but were also restricted from even looking at them. Due to their usage in religious ceremonies, priests may have had an abstinence only policy regarding savoring their tempting flesh. As a result, fava beans were not just a magical fruit but also a forbidden fruit in which priests were required to exercise a form of self-denial. In other words, these priests were in denial, and

we're kind-of sort-of talking about the river in Egypt.

Although Egyptians felt a mixed sentiment towards fava beans, there was only one thing the Greek philosopher Pythagoras felt for them—sheer disdain. Highly influential for his contributions to mathematics, Pythagoras had a large number of followers known as Pythagoreans. Part of being a Pythagorean included adhering to a vegetarian diet. Unlike most vegetarian diets, in which beans are incorporated as a source of protein, Pythagoras had such a hatred for favas he forbid his followers from consuming or even touching the bean. And you thought [Madonna hated hydrangeas](#).

When he wasn't busy coming up with theories about triangles, Pythagoras spent his time coming up with reasons to hate beans. Ancient philosophers including Aristotle and Cicero attempted to explain Pythagoras's aversion to fava beans. One theory was they were forbidden due to their resemblance of both male and female genitalia.

Another theory regarding their appearance was they were shaped like human heads. Therefore, eating fava beans was analogous to eating the head of one's parents. It was also believed a chewed bean smelled like the blood of a murder victim when left in the sun. Cannibalism is never an appealing option, unless of course, the fava beans are served along with a nice Chianti.

Some thought their unsegmented hollow stem functioned as the gates of Hades. Similar to an elevator, it was theorized the stem transported souls in between worlds. Finally, it was also believed Pythagoras disliked the magical bean because it's also the musical fruit. Their gassy noises were a distraction; according to him, the more you eat, the more you impair your ability to concentrate on more important things like why  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ .



Photo 3: Sometimes a fava bean is just a fava bean.

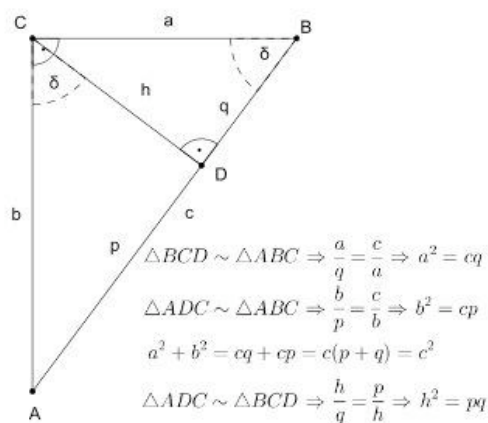


Photo 4: Not Measuring Up: Pythagoras had more success with his mathematical theories than his culinary ones.

In the end, Pythagoras's hatred of favas may have led to his demise. According to legend, Pythagoras was given the options of facing his enemies or fleeing through a fava bean field. He decided to keep it real in the field—ever the fava diva, Pythagoras declared something to the effect that he wouldn't be caught dead in such a place. And he wasn't. Instead, he was caught and died while attempting to escape without going through the field. This might be the most legitimate reason of all for Pythagoras to hate fava beans.

Of course, these are all speculations regarding Pythagoras and he'd probably be the first to point out that all theorems require proof. This is something researchers have attempted recently, theorizing he may have suffered from favism, an allergic-like reaction that occurs when certain individuals are exposed to fava beans.

Favism is a hereditary disease found worldwide but it is most prevalent in the Mediterranean. The red blood cells of individuals with favism lack G6PD, an enzyme needed to break down peptide glutathione. Since this substance is present in fava beans, the exposure to fava beans or even their pollen can trigger fevers, jaundice, hemolytic anemia and death.

Reviewing the prevalence of favism in the region during his life, [Simoons](#) has disputed claims that Pythagoras himself suffered from favism. While we might never know the real reason behind Pythagoras' fava bean aversion, the relationship between illness and favas contribute to an understanding of their taboo. It seems counterintuitive that people living in regions affected by favism would continue to eat something potentially harmful. Its endurance as a crop might be explained by its relationship with another disease, in which fava beans may contain medicinal properties.

Some areas throughout the Mediterranean where fava beans were cultivated also had a high incidence of malaria. Scientists observed a correlation between the consumption of the bean and the prevalence of the disease. Fava beans were discovered to contain chemical compounds that were similar to quinine based medications used to treat malaria. When fava beans are consumed, they create a hostile environment within the body for malaria. In other words, in regards to their sentiment towards fava beans, malarial parasites would be on Team Pythagoras.

There is still more to be learned about the fava bean but one thing that is for sure—from high in the sky to Hades, exploring the magic bean is quite a trip.

“If you are a dreamer, come in,

If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,

A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer...

If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire

For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.

Come in!

Come in!”

-Shell Silverstein, The Invitation



Photo 5: With fava bean season in full swing, there's no reason not to accept an invitation to become a magic bean buyer. Try experimenting with this recipe for Egyptian falafel.



Photo 6: Fee fi fo fum, I smell delicious Ta'miyya! Fresh fava beans and parsley give this Egyptian falafel its beautiful green coloring.

### EGYPTIAN FALAFEL (TA'MIYYA)

1 pound fresh fava beans, peeled and skinned

Handful of parsley leaves

1 teaspoon cumin

1 teaspoon fresh squeezed lemon juice

1 clove of garlic

½ teaspoon baking powder

Salt to taste

Toasted sesame seeds for coating

Vegetable oil for frying

- 1.) Make sure you don't have favism.
- 2.) In a food processor, blend parsley, lemon juice and garlic.
- 3.) Add in favas, cumin, salt and baking powder. Process until the mixture is pureed but still a bit chunky.
- 4.) Shape the mixture into small patties, about 2 inches in diameter.
- 5.) Place falafel on a cookie sheet and allow them to rest in the refrigerator for at least an hour.
- 6.) Coat the patties with sesame seeds and then fry in vegetable oil until crispy and golden brown.
- 7.) Serve with tahini sauce.

**Images:** [Photo 1](#), [Photo 2](#), [Photo 3](#), [Photo 4](#), [Photo 5](#), Amy Karr, [Photo 6](#)



**About the Author:** Layla Eplett has always been curious about food. At the age of five, she shoved peas up both her nostrils in a misguided attempt to eat like the elephants she had seen at the zoo. From this event, Layla gained an appreciation that humans have the option of breathing through their mouth if other airways are obstructed. She also realized the importance of becoming a more astute observer. After shifting her focus from elephant to human behavior and improving her participant observation skills, Layla attended The University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies earning a Masters in Social Anthropology of Development. She now combines her love of learning about food and anthropology in her blog, [Fare Trade](#) where she documents her culinary adventures. She is happy to report none of them have involved food in her nostrils.

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