
Linguistic Foolery

Answers from Old Sources: Elven Food

By Darth Fingon

The following answers to questions about daily Elven life are taken from exploration of Tolkien's early Elvish language wordlists. Answers are based only on analysis of given words and the theory that if Tolkien invented a word for it, it's fair game to use it. Personal interpretation may vary.

What do Elves eat? Are they vegetarian?

Short answer: no. Elves are not strictly vegetarian.

That said, the secondary answer is: yes. Some Elves are vegetarian. In fact, a word for 'vegetarian' exists, as does a word for 'food made from plants'. But 'food made from animals' is right up there as well. We also have words for domesticated cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, etc., and barn fowl and chickens, so it makes sense to assume Elves ate all of those. And preserved, salt meat, too, in case you thought they kept all that livestock just for fun.

So what else? If they ate domesticated livestock, they ate wild game. There's a word for that, and words for specific animals. Deer, boar, rabbit, goose, duck, fish, and more all appear. Eel? Sure. You can even try some camel for an exotic feel. And let's not forget other, non-meat foods that come from animals, such as eggs, milk, cream, butter, cheese, and honey.

Everyone can imagine Elves eating fruits and vegetables, but it's important to note that they didn't necessarily just pick their food from plants that happened to be there (though they may very well have happened upon random berries, mushrooms and nuts, and fruits such as apples and pears). They made vegetable gardens for produce such as potatoes, cucumbers, and peas. They harvested crops, including corn, rye, and oats, which they used to make porridge. They baked bread and cake, and made wine from grapes.

Really, Elves can eat anything. Even if you disregard the words that could be viewed as something other than food, we still have examples from every food group that can be interpreted as nothing else: salt meat, cheese, produce, and bread. Elves raised and hunted animals for food, and did have an agricultural system in place to grow (most of) the rest.

And finally, just because 'the morning meal' has always bugged me, there is a word for 'breakfast'.

Speaking of food, is it possible for Elves to get fat from overeating?

Probably. They have a word for 'fat man', after all, and 'fat belly' or 'paunch'. Then there are numerous different adjectives from varying sources that mean 'fat' (and equally numerous adjectives meaning 'slender' or 'thin') and verbs such as 'to grow fat'. On top of that, one can also be fleshy, corpulent, overfat, or overfed. And of course one can be a glutton.

Recall Salgant, who was short and squat. Logic says there has to be more like him. Surely all these words were not made to describe only one Elf.