# INTRODUCTION

## Lost Flavours

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. This makes it hard to appreciate ancient Roman cuisine, because we cannot taste the dishes made by cooks who lived two thousand years ago. We can admire Roman architecture, because some of it still stands. Amazing works of glass, metal, stone and clay have been excavated. The achievements of Roman artists have remained a constant inspiration to others down the generations. Roman and Greek aesthetics have influenced countless fashions. But what we know of Roman cooking is often referred to with horror. In *Vita Romana* (1950), a book about daily life in ancient Rome, the Italian author U. E. Paoli had this to say of Roman cooking:

> It is highly likely that if any one of us had had to take part in a feast like those given by the Romans, we would have come away with a terribly spoiled stomach. The complicated recipes, prepared by cooks who were bought at a very high price, and who put all their knowledge of cookery into the management of the costliest spices and ingredients, would appear utterly impossible for us to enjoy.

Some people still hold that opinion. The modern Ristorante Internazionale stands in the middle of the excavations at Pompeii. On special occasions the cooks there make Roman dishes and are gradually becoming experts at it. But they wouldn't dream of eating the food themselves. Roman food contains cumin, coriander and lovage, which many modern Italians don't like. Italians can be conservative in their eating habits, too conservative in this case to appreciate their heritage.

Tradition has been broken, and tastes have been lost. Taste follows from experience: how can you acquire a taste for something if you can't experience it? Cumin, coriander and lovage are hard to find in Italy. And so is ancient Roman cuisine.

However, most modern folk have a yearning for new flavours, as did the ancient Romans. These days, cumin, coriander and lovage can be bought anywhere outside Italy and it may be time to re-evaluate that long-forgotten Roman cuisine. Perhaps it wasn't so bad. Could it inspire our own cooking, as Virgil inspired generations of poets, as the Roman monuments inspired architects? If we take the Romans at their word, their culinary artistry was sophisticated:

> *Syrus:* Everyone's already said so much about the art of cooking. Tell me something the other experts can't, or leave me in peace.
>
> *Cook:* Listen, Syrus, take it from me, I'm the only person in the world who knows the real tricks of the art of cooking. I haven't learned it by putting on an apron every now and again. I've devoted my whole life to the study and practice of every aspect of this art form – all the vegetables in existence, all the fish, every recipe for lentil soup. Yes, the tricks I have up my sleeve: whenever I have the opportunity to cook for a funeral, I whip the lid off the pot the minute the black-clad guests return, and thus I make the mourners laugh again . . . Any passer-by will inevitably stop at the front door, and stay there as though nailed to the wall, speechless and open-mouthed. Until someone else comes to his aid, blocks his nostrils and takes him away.
>
> *Syrus:* You're truly a great artist. (Ath. Deipn. VII-290c)

It may be a little over-ambitious to attempt to revive Roman cookery to such high standards: it isn't easy to equal great art. Try painting a fresco like the ones found in Pompeii, or writing a poem in Latin in the style of Virgil. If you think that's hard, imagine trying to imitate an art form in which you can't experience the original.

Not all of Roman cuisine has been forgotten, of course. Its impact on Europe was enormous. We owe many common vegetables and fruit to Roman gardeners. Certain wild delicacies that the Romans craved, such as truffles, are still prized. And who can deny the importance of wine? We may recognize many aspects of ancient Roman cuisine as our own, but there are also major differences.



## Difference in Time

The greatest difference that separates our cooking from that of the Romans is that in order to cook Roman we have to travel back in time. Obviously the Romans didn't have microwave ovens or electric mixers, but the gastronomic advantages of an aromatic wood stove should be self-evident.

Ancient cooking methods are cumbersome for anyone without an army of kitchen slaves – as slave labour was practically free, Romans were not into labour-saving devices. In addition, many laborious methods of preparation and production had religious significance. Plants were sown and harvested in harmony with nature, the gods and the constellations. Agriculture, cattle breeding, harvesting and slaughtering were performed according to holy rituals. Herbs and spices were pounded in a mortar, and grapes were crushed by bare feet. All of this affected the taste of food. It's easy enough to grind spices in a mortar, but making wine by dancing barefoot on macrobiotic grapes is a different matter. It's just a question of how far you want to go.

To the modern cook who might want to revive Roman cuisine, a greater restriction than the lack of a microwave is that in Roman times Europe was still pre-Columbian: America had yet to be discovered. Foods from the New World, such as potatoes, tomatoes, red peppers, brown beans, avocadoes, pineapple, papaya, cassava, paprika, maize, vanilla, cocoa, peanuts and turkeys were unknown, likewise aubergines, kiwis and kangaroo meat from other parts of the globe.

The lack of these products makes a substantial difference. Think of Italian cuisine without tomatoes, or Spanish without red peppers. On the other hand the Romans were familiar with many products from Africa and Asia, and frugality was not a characteristic of ancient Roman gastronomy. The Romans feasted on many kinds of meat that many of us wouldn't touch, such as pig's ears, fish eyes, wombs, udders and intestines. They ate all the birds, fish and mammals that were known at the time, prepared with a much more extensive arsenal of herbs and spices than many Europeans would use today.

## Complexity

The Roman cook didn't believe that lamb had to taste of lamb. As far as he was concerned, a piece of meat was like an artist's blank canvas, to which he could apply colour and shape. Sauces were far from subtle: in Apicius' cookery book most consist of ground herbs and spices, sometimes diluted with a little vinegar, brine or wine. They were powerful spice mixtures, not unlike those used in Indian curries. Many resemble modern barbecue sauces, which is understandable: the Roman stove is much like a barbecue.

Unfortunately we have hardly any descriptions of the quantities of sauce that would have been poured over a dish. A tablespoon of a spice mixture would strike us as enough to flavour a chicken, but were the Romans equally moderate? Roman recipes rarely mention precise proportions or quantities. One strange exception is the following recipe for a single chicken:

| *Pullum Oxyzonium:* | Oxyzonum Chicken: |
|---|---|
| *olei acetabulum maius* | oil, a good 6ml |
| *laseris satis modice* | *asafoetida*, a little is enough |
| *liquamenis acetabulum minus* | *garum*, less than 6ml |
| *aceti acetabulum perquam minus* | vinegar, much less than 6ml |
| *piperis scripulos sex* | pepper, 7mg |
| *petroselini scripulum* | parsley, 1g |
| *porri fasciculum* | stalk of leek |

(Ap. 241)

Try this recipe: boil a small leek, crush it finely with the other ingredients then serve it with a boiled or roast chicken. It would be delicious, except that it contains far too much pepper for our palates. You'll burn your mouth, and be amazed that the Romans managed to swallow it. Perhaps Roman pepper was milder than ours: it came from India on slow camel trains – but even if you make this dish with well-aged pepper it will still be pretty spicy.

Hot sauces possibly presented advantages in an age when transport was slower, fridges were non-existent and food went off quickly. Ingredients were expensive, too, so the Romans didn't like to throw things away when they'd 'developed a goaty whiff', to use Apicius' phrase. Apicius' cookbook contains a special sauce for rotten poultry, instructions for saving a fish sauce that has started to smell, and treating rancid honey so that it can still be sold. This is not to say that hot spices served only to mask the taste of rotten food. To some extent they may have acted as a preservative, but their most important function, as in contemporary Italy, was to 'improve digestion'.



One major difference from today's Italian cooking lies in the way in which spices were used. In Italy, for example, pork is often cooked with fennel seeds. Chops are sprinkled with salt, pepper and fennel then grilled with olive oil. Simple, but spiced none the less. Compare that with a sauce for pork from Apicius:

| | |
|---|---|
| *piper, careum, ligusticum,* | pepper, caraway, lovage, |
| *coriandri semen frictum,* | roasted coriander seed, |
| *anethi semen, apii semen,* | dill seed, celery seed, |
| *thymum, origanum, cepulam,* | thyme, oregano, onion, |
| *mel, acetum, sinape,* | honey, vinegar, mustard, |
| *liquamen, oleum* | *garum* and oil |

(Ap. 336)

All of these ingredients were ground finely and mixed together. It was hard to distinguish the individual flavours, but that wasn't the intention. The Roman cook was after a bouquet of flavours, not the monotheism of a single, recognizable spice.

## Food Art

The third difference between the cookery of the Romans and our own is a matter of culinary ethics. These days, we prize honesty in cookery. The Romans, however, found cheating tremendously entertaining.

*A:* When King Nicomedes found himself twelve days' travel from the sea, he developed a craving for fresh anchovies, which

my teacher Sosterides gave him, in the middle of winter.* Everyone gasped in amazement.

*B:* But how can that be?

*A:* You see, he had taken a fresh turnip and cut it into long, thin strips, the very shape of anchovies. Then he blanched the strips, put oil on them, salt to taste, and exactly forty black peppercorns. The king's craving was satisfied. When he tasted the turnip, he told his friends how delicious the anchovies were. In this way we can see the similarity between the cook and the poet. Art lies in imagination. (Athn. Deipin. I-7e)

Food fakery wasn't seen as deception but as artistry. Art is artificial: art imitates nature, or illustrates an idea, but it is never what it seems. The Venus de Milo is a woman made of marble, not flesh and blood. Where is the art in preparing lamb to taste like lamb?

Some cooks took food disguise too far, even for Roman taste. Petronius describes a meal at the house of a rather vulgar man called Trimalchio:

> There were prunes stuck full of thorns to make them like sea urchins. That would have been fine, if an even more curious recipe hadn't convinced us that we would rather die of starvation.
>
> A bowl was served with, as we thought, a fat duck on it, surrounded by all kinds of fish and birds, but Trimalchio said: 'Friends, everything you see here on the table is made from the same ingredient.'
>
> I was clever enough to know what it was, so I said to Agamemnon, 'I wouldn't be surprised if it's all made of other foods, or otherwise out of clay. I once saw something similar at the Saturnalia in Rome.'
>
> I hadn't finished talking when Trimalchio said, 'As I hope to enlarge my fortune rather than my belly, my cook has prepared all of this out of pork. There is none more valuable than he. If you wish, he'll prepare you a fish out of pig's womb, a wood pigeon from bacon, a turtle-dove from ham, and a chicken from loin of pork . . .' (Petr. Sat. Trim. 69)

* Little fishing was done in winter.



The above quotation comes from a satire and the detail should be taken with a pinch of salt, as it were. But such situations were not entirely invented. Trimalchio was a typical parvenu, and the Roman reader would probably have laughed in recognition at his excesses.

Martial wrote a mocking poem about a certain Caecilius, who served whole meals in which everything was made of courgette, from fish and mushrooms to black pudding and pastry.

It was not only humorists who described the Roman habit of food disguise. In the second century BC the very serious Cato noted a recipe for making 'Greek wine' by mixing Italian wines and using such flavourings as salt and reduced old wine (Cat. R.R. XXIV). Renowned cooks also prepared fake foods. Apicius tells us how an imitation Liburnian oil can be made with ordinary Spanish oil, and how rose wine could be made without roses (he put in lemon leaves and honey). He also provided a recipe called *patina de apua sine apua*: 'Anchovy omelette without anchovies'. In place of anchovies he used jellyfish. Apicius concludes his recipe:

> And no one at table will known what he is eating. (Ap. 132)

Trimalchio's cook served bacon as wood pigeon. Bacon doesn't taste like wood pigeon, but perhaps the cook was able to conjure up the illusion by serving it with a date sauce – dates were traditionally served with pigeon.

The same phenomenon occurs in French cuisine. The French eat

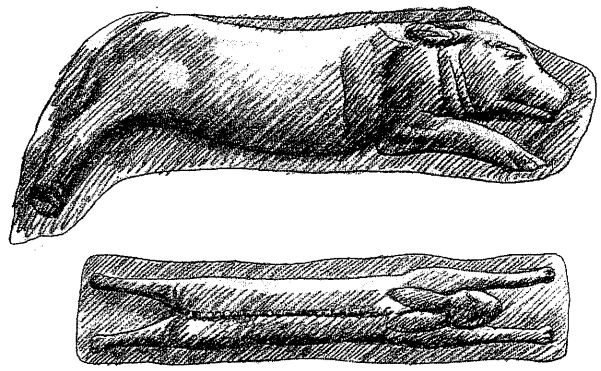

*Figure 0.1* – Baking tins

snails with a strongly flavoured butter, parsley and garlic sauce and few French people know how snails taste au naturel. When they eat mussels with the same garlic butter they call the dish *moules à l'escargot.* From there it is but a small step to stuffing mussels into snail-shells and throwing your guests into total confusion.

Birds and beasts were presented whole and carved in the dining room, in front of the guests, so if the cook wanted to pass off bacon as pigeon he had to be a competent sculptor. Judging by the number found in Pompeii, many cooks used bronze baking tins, which have been found in all kinds of shapes, such as chickens, pigs and rabbits. These tins brought food fakery within the reach even of less gifted cooks.

## Refined Simplicity

Not all Romans were keen on fakery, and some objected to the use of heavy sauces – for health reasons or because they preferred simple peasant fare. Others preferred subtly prepared food, not out of a striving for simplicity but from a desire for refinement.

> By Minerva, how delicious it is when something works so well! What a fresh fish I had, and how perfectly I cooked it! Not buried under cheese, or covered with herbs. No, when I had roasted the fish, it looked exactly as it had done when it was alive. You wouldn't believe how soft and gentle the flame was to which I exposed it.
>
> You know the way a chicken runs about with something in its beak that is too big to swallow? It runs around with it and tries to swallow it as quickly as possible. Then the other birds start chasing after it. That's exactly how it was [at table].
>
> The first man who discovered how delicious this dish was leapt to his feet and ran around clutching the food in his hands, with the other guests hot on his heels. I could have cheered. Some of the guests got hold of a little bit, others got nothing at all, and yet others kept it all for themselves. And all this when I'd used only an ordinary river fish that eats mud. You can imagine what would have happened if I'd had something unusual, like an Attic sea-devil, a wild pig from Argos or a moray eel from Sicyon . . .
>
> (Ath. Deipn. VII-288d)



## Apicius

Apicius' volume is the only gastronomic cookery book handed down to us from classical antiquity. For this reason it is an important source. Unfortunately it leaves open many questions. It contains recipes, but precise quantities are given only where the primary function is medicinal, so we have to use our own judgement. Descriptions of preparations are brief. Really, the book consists of no more than 470 lists of ingredients for professional cooks.*

Nothing is known about the author, but the language of the cookery book is 'vulgar', fourth-century popular Latin. This probably means that a cook rather than a noble wrote it, but he must have been highly respected, because 'Apicius' was a nickname that meant something like 'gourmet'. Tertullian wrote:

> . . . just as artists name themselves after Erasistratus, philologists after Aristarcus and cooks after Apicius . . . (Tert. 3.6)

The legendary M. Gavinus Apicius, who gave his name to cooks and gourmets, lived in the time of Tiberius. Many dishes bear his name. It was he who discovered gastronomic glories like the combs cut from living birds, the livers of drunken pigs, and other such delicacies:

> Apicius, the greatest and most prodigal gourmand of all, proclaimed the view that the tongue of the flamingo is highly delicious. (Plin. N.H. X-lxviii)

Martial wrote that this Apicius had made a fortune of 60 million HS (*sestertii*). He wasted most of it on gastronomy and had 10 million left when he took poison to kill himself. Apparently he could not get by on such a 'small' fortune, and was afraid of hunger or thirst (Martialis Epigr. III, 22). The story was confirmed by Seneca, a contemporary of Apicius (Seneca, Ad Heviam, 10, 8–9). The original Apicius was not a working man, but a rich and noble lord.

* The numbering and the Latin text of the recipes in this book follow Barbara Flower and Elisabeth Rosenbaum, *The Roman Cookery Book.*

Fifty years later Apicius had become a nickname. Athenaeus wrote about an Apicius in the time of Trajan:

> When the Emperor Trajan was in Parthia, many days' journey from the sea, Apicius sent him oysters that were preserved in his special way. (Ath. 1.7)

The book named after Apicius was published about seventy-five years later, and contains instructions for the preservation of oysters:

> Wash them in vinegar, or wash a pitch-treated pot with vinegar and put them in. (Ap. 12)

Some experts on Apicius, such as Jacques André, assume that many recipes from other Apiciuses have been included in the cookery book that we have today. Others, like Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti, doubt this. Ricotti shows that, according to Pliny, Apicius found various varieties of cabbage unpleasant yet devoted his life to finding a suitable recipe for them. He reached the conclusion that cabbage must be placed in salt and oil before being boiled. The cookery book ascribed to Apicius does not pay special attention to the cabbage. The sauces and recipes for cabbage are not very different from those for other vegetables.

We may not be able to tell to what extent the book by the cook Apicius is based on the culinary ideas of his namesake, the noble Apicius, but we should be grateful for the existence of a cookery book from antiquity. It provides suggestions for the direction we must take in our quest to understand ancient Roman cookery.

# PART ONE