Ancient Roman Recipes

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What foods did Romans feast upon 2,000 years ago? To get a flavor, peruse these ancient recipes, most of which come from the Roman chef Apicius. We also include modern interpretations of these recipes from two books: *A Taste of Ancient Rome* by Ilaria Gozzini Giacosa and *The Classical Cookbook* by Andrew Dalby and Sally Grainger. Imagine yourself spending a luxurious day at a Roman bath, and as the Romans today say, *buon appetito*.

**MULSUM (HONEYED WINE)**

Romans were not averse to drinking alcohol, a habit they carried into the public baths. The Roman philosopher Seneca and the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder both opposed drinking at the baths. The poet Martial complains about one sloppy bather who "doesn't know how to go home from the baths sober." The sweet Roman drink mulsum, a mixture of wine and honey, is one of the mixtures that might have contributed to this particular man's drunken evenings.

**Modern Recipe: Mulsum**  
Warm 1/2 cup clear honey and add it to a bottle of medium-dry white wine. Chill before serving.

**LUCANIAN SAUSAGES**

This sausage was brought back to Rome by soldiers who had served in Lucania, located in the heel of southern Italy, probably around 200 B.C. Peppery, spicy, smoked sausages are still made in many parts of the world, from Palestine to Brazil, under names that can be traced back to Lucania. In Brazil, for example, these types of sausage are today called*linguica.*

**Ancient Roman Lucanian Sausage Recipe**  
Pepper is ground with cumin, savory, rue, parsley, condiments, bay berries, and garum. Finely ground meat is mixed in, then ground again together with the other ground ingredients. Mix with garum, peppercorns, and plenty of fat, and pine nuts; fill a casing stretched extremely thin, and thus it is hung in smoke.

**Modern Lucanian Sausage Recipe** *(serves six)*  
1 pound belly pork, minced  
2 tablespoons pine kernels  
20 black peppercorns  
1 teaspoon chopped fresh or dried rue  
2 teaspoons dried savory  
1 heaped teaspoon ground cumin  
1 teaspoon ground black pepper  
30 bayberries (if available)  
2 teaspoons chopped fresh parsley  
3 tablespoons fish sauce  
sausage skins

1. Combine all the filling ingredients and mix well. Use a food processor if available.
2. If you have fresh sausage skins, they will be preserved in salt and need to be washed.
3. You will need about six 12-inch lengths. Tie a knot in the end of each one.
4. Put a 1/2 inch plain tube in a piping bag and 1/2 fill with the mixture; do not put too much in at one time or it will be difficult to squeeze. Take the open end of the skin, pull it over the tube and push down repeatedly until the majority of the skin sits like a collar half way down the tube. Grip this with your finger and thumb and slowly release the skin as you squeeze the bag. Stop squeezing well before the skin runs out, leaving 2-3 inches of skin to allow for shrinkage. It will take some practice before you get this procedure right.
5. When you have used up all the meat, twist each length of sausage into 4 even or similar segments.

If you are able to smoke the sausages, drape them over a coat hanger or similar item and suspend in smoke. You can still give them a smoky flavor before grilling them. If you have an open fireplace, suspend them from the mantelpiece for a few hours while you burn wood. You can use your barbecue: Sprinkle wood chips over the coals and suspend the sausage at least 12 inches above the fire for an hour or so. Otherwise, cut them into individual sausages and grill them under a medium heat.

**BOILED EGGS WITH PINE NUT SAUCE**

Perhaps the most popular of all the Roman appetizers was the egg. In fact, the ancient Latin saying *ab ovo usque ad malum* literally means "from the egg to the fruit," which translates loosely as "the beginning of the meal to the end." In this recipe, the egg is adorned with lovely pine nut sauce.

**Ancient Roman Egg Recipe**  
For medium-boiled eggs: Pepper, lovage, and soaked pine nuts. Pour on honey and vinegar; mix with garum fish sauce.

**Modern Egg Recipe**  
4 medium-boiled eggs  
2 ounces pine nuts  
3 tablespoons vinegar  
1 teaspoon honey  
Pinch each of pepper and lovage (or celery leaf)

1. Soak the pine nuts 3-4 hours beforehand in the vinegar.
2. Mix all the sauce ingredients thoroughly in a blender. This exquisite sauce should be presented in a sauce boat so that each person can serve himself or herself, since the eggs cannot be sliced and placed on a dish in advance.

**GARUM FISH SAUCE**

As they are with modern Romans, sauces and marinades were an essential element in ancient Roman cuisine. One of the most popular was garum, a salty, aromatic, fish-based sauce. Like so many other Roman treasures, it was borrowed from the ancient Greeks. Apicius used it in all his recipes, and the poet Martial wrote of it: "Accept this exquisite garum, a precious gift made with the first blood spilled from a living mackerel."

We won't recommend you try the ancient version (see below). Instead, try the easier modern recipe.

**Ancient Garum Recipe**  
Use fatty fish, for example, sardines, and a well-sealed (pitched) container with a 26-35 quart capacity. Add dried, aromatic herbs possessing a strong flavor, such as dill, coriander, fennel, celery, mint, oregano, and others, making a layer on the bottom of the container; then put down a layer of fish (if small, leave them whole, if large, use pieces) and over this, add a layer of salt two fingers high. Repeat these layers until the container is filled. Let it rest for seven days in the sun. Then mix the sauce daily for 20 days. After that, it becomes a liquid.

**Modern Garum Recipe**  
Cook a quart of grape juice, reducing it to one-tenth its original volume. Dilute two tablespoons of anchovy paste in the concentrated juice and mix in a pinch of oregano.

**SEASONED MUSSELS**

With an empire that spanned both sides of the the Mediterranean Sea, Romans often feasted on seafood. Romans might salt, smoke, or pickle their fish, or even preserve it with honey. This recipe for seasoned mussels, though, calls for just a simple cooking before they are eaten.

**Ancient Roman Seasoned Mussels Recipe**  
For mussels: Garum, chopped leek, cumin, passum, savory, and wine. Dilute this mixture with water and cook the mussels in it.

**Modern Seasoned Mussels Recipe** *(serves 4)*  
40-50 mussels  
2 tablespoons garum fish sauce  
1/2 cup wine  
1/2 cup passum (a modern version of this raisin wine is the Italian dessert wine Vin Santo)  
1 leek, chopped  
1 handful of fresh cumin and savory, minced  
  
Wash the mussels thoroughly to remove the sand, then boil them in sufficient water to cover, along with the remaining ingredients.

**PEAR PATINA**

The Romans referred to their dessert course as *mensa secunda,* or "second meal." They satisfied their fondness for sweets with desserts such as fruitcakes, pudding, sweet egg-based dishes, and sweet cheeses—and in this case, a delicious pear patina.

**Ancient Roman Pear Patina Recipe**  
A pear patina: Grind boiled and cored pears with pepper, cumin, honey, passum, garum, and a bit of oil. When the eggs have been added, make a patina, sprinkle pepper over, and serve.

**Modern Pear Patina Recipe** *(serves 4)*  
4 pears  
water or white wine (to cook the pears)  
1 tablespoon honey  
pinch each pepper and cumin  
1/2 cup passum (a modern version of this raisin wine is the Italian dessert wine Vin Santo)  
3 eggs  
1 1/2 cups milk (optional)  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
  
Poach the whole pears in water or white wine. When they are done, peel and core them, then crush them into a puree, mixing in the honey, pepper, cumin and passum. Beat the eggs, adding the milk if desired. Then blend this into the pear mixture with the olive oil. Pour into a casserole and bake for around 20 minutes at 350° F.

**LIBUM (SWEET CHEESECAKE)**

Libum was a sacrificial cake sometimes offered to household spirits during Rome's early history. The recipe below comes from the Roman consul Cato's agricultural writings, which included simple recipes for farmers. Libum, sometimes served hot, is a cheesecake he included.

**Ancient Roman Libum Recipe**  
Libum to be made as follows: 2 pounds cheese well crushed in a mortar; when it is well crushed, add in 1 pound bread-wheat flour or, if you want it to be lighter, just 1/2 a pound, to be mixed with the cheese. Add one egg and mix all together well. Make a loaf of this, with the leaves under it, and cook slowly in a hot fire under a brick.

**Modern Roman Libum Recipe** *(serves 4)*  
1 cup plain, all purpose flour  
8 ounces ricotta cheese  
1 egg, beaten  
bay leaves  
1/2 cup clear honey  
  
Sift the flour into a bowl. Beat the cheese until it's soft and stir it into the flour along with the egg. Form a soft dough and divide into 4. Mold each one into a bun and place them on a greased baking tray with a fresh bay leaf underneath. Heat the oven to 425° F. Cover the cakes with your brick\* and bake for 35-40 minutes until golden-brown. Warm the honey and place the warm cakes in it so that they absorb it. Allow to stand 30 minutes before serving.

\*The Romans often covered their food while it was cooking with a domed earthenware cover called a *testo.* You can use an overturned, shallow clay pot, a metal bowl, or casserole dish as a brick.

This feature originally appeared on the site for the NOVA program [Secrets of Lost Empires: Roman Bath](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/lostempires/roman/).

Food: For a typical Roman meal, you might begin with olives and deviled eggs, and then a lentil or barley soup, or cheese pizza (without any tomato sauce), with sausage or pepperoni, or onions and garlic, on it. A green salad with radishes would also be appropriate. For dessert, walnuts or apples or melon (fresh or dried) would be pretty normal, or little cakes made with [**honey**](http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/food/honey.htm). The Romans said that a meal went "from eggs to apples" the way we say "from soup to nuts."