

## Ancient Rome as Melting Pot: Cooking Goes Global

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Ancient Rome was a cosmopolis into which the products of the world flooded in all their variety. This general survey explores the Romans' approach to food as a symbol of ethnic and cultural diversity and considers concepts such as terroir, food grading, social hierarchy, health, appetite, boredom, novelty, disgust, dietary inconsistency, foundation myths of blending and mixture, and the naturalization and codification of cooking styles. The recipes preserved in Horace's *Satires* and Apicius's cookbook are our most detailed guides. Cooks, along with exotic foodstuffs, were said to have been imported into Rome as part of the corrupting spoils of empire, turning a nation of rustic porridge-eaters into sophisticated and discriminating gourmets whose habits disrupted traditional notions of Roman frugality and unfussiness. But what did the Romans then give back? Along with their roads and laws, did they ever formulate or export a distinctively "Roman" cuisine?

World events sadly made it impossible for me to attend the conference "Food: Sacrificial, Spiritual, and Secular" in person. But one consolation was having the chance to indulge in Taiwanese food long-distance.<sup>1</sup> I learned through reading how the eating choices of this cosmopolitan island reflect its rich political history and its different settlers and indigenous peoples. In my mind's eye, I went exploring among the night markets and the Michelin-starred restaurants. I sampled stinky tofu, iron eggs, coffin bread, and beef noodle soup (both the cheapest and the most expensive in the world). As Maggie Hiufu Wong writes, "The island's food is a mash-up of the cuisine of the Min Nan, Teochew and Hokkien Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> It was, however, a great pleasure to attend the conference virtually, and I thank Professor Sophia Liu for her warm welcome and Melissa Wu for her smooth organization.

communities, along with Japanese cooking techniques. It's a culinary love-in with diversely delicious offspring" (Wong). This offspring, I gather, ranges from the pedigree to the outright illegitimate: deconstructed haute cuisine at Raw and Tairroir, queasy kitsch at Modern Toilet (best left to the imagination). Like everywhere else, Taiwan offers standards like pizza and hot dogs. The island has also been touched, inevitably, by the bland global fingers of Starbucks and McDonalds.

Reaching for the tastes of Taiwan through words and pictures brought it home to me just how remote Ancient Rome still is, even to someone who once spent years of her life studying its food, forming a mosaic of impressions stuck together from a thin residue of literary texts. It is not just that we are just physically and temporally separated from the experience of Roman and Taiwanese eaters. No one can ever fully grasp another individual's memories, tastes, and appetites. Like Taiwan, the ancient city of Rome, biggest city in the world (around two-fifths of the population of modern Taipei), had something to offer every taste, every eater. When the orator Aelius Aristides (second century CE) writes in praise of the city, he claims that one hardly needs to travel—whatever the world produces, it comes to Rome:

For whatever the seasons make grow and whatever countries and rivers and lakes and the skills of Greeks and non-Greeks produce are brought from every land and sea, so that if someone wants to look at all these things, he needs to view them either by visiting the entire civilized world or by coming to this city. For whatever is grown and made among each people cannot fail to be here at all times and in abundance. And here the merchant ships come carrying all these products from every region in every season, and even at every equinox, so that the city appears to be a kind of common emporium of the world.<sup>2</sup>

If Rome is a city, he says, then Greece is its suburbs, and fertile Egypt, Sicily, and Africa are its country farms. But there this harmonious "domestic" economy stops: Rome's commerce with lands beyond the borders of the empire is positively parasitic. Reaching for hyperbole, Aelius Aristides imagines India and Arabia being depleted of their delicious spices and left starving: "We see so many cargoes from India and Arabia Felix that we imagine that their trees will have been stripped bare; if they need something of their own produce, they will have to come here

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<sup>2</sup> *On Rome, Oration 14.200.*

and beg for a share of their own food.”

Globalizing rhetoric of this kind could be applied to any metropolis today, and any number of ancient cities as well. But by the time Aelius Aristides was writing Rome was clearly the main magnet for the world’s food products.<sup>3</sup> What I want to consider in this paper is what Rome gave back. To put it another way: if the city gave its conquered territories baths, roads, and imperial bureaucracy, why did it not also export a distinctive Roman cuisine? For a start, Aelius Aristides bases his praise of Rome on a paradox. If the city was equivalent to the Roman empire, there was no “not Rome.” One could be a Roman in Egypt, in Greece or in Gaul. The lack of a distinctively Roman food was in the first place politically and culturally determined; such was the osmosis between city and world that “Roman” was just not a distinguishing marker. It is well known that Roman eating habits left a permanent trace on European Romance languages. For example, Italian *fegato* and French *foie*, liver, derive from Latin *ficatus*, fed on figs, from the practice of flavouring the flesh of live birds; Italian *cucchiaio* and French *cuillère*, spoon, come from Latin *cochlearia*, a special spoon for getting snails (*cochleae*) out of shells. Beyond that, things are much less certain.<sup>4</sup> We know now what *alla Romana* means (spaghetti carbonara or cacio e pepe, artichokes *alla romana*, tripe *alla romana*). But we have nothing like the same sense of ancient Roman culinary identity.

Another factor which makes it difficult to identify cuisine as specifically Roman is that “Roman” was a citizen identity, not an ethnicity (Dench 93). When Virgil speaks of the struggle to found “the Roman race” (*Romanam . . . gentem*, *Aeneid* 1.33), that is a very artificial phrase. What he is suggesting, basing his myth of Rome on the ethnic blending of Trojans and indigenous Italians, is that the larger Roman family was an upscaled version of the other Roman noble houses (the so-called *gentes*) (Gildenhard 93). Romans replaced myths of racial purity with ones of diversity, assimilation, and interbreeding. Accordingly, their foundation myths tend to be about incorporating the outside into the inside, whether it is the principle of marrying out, enshrined in the story of the Rape of the Sabine Women, when the Romans seized a bunch of wives for tired and lonely warriors, or of welcoming refugees, as in Romulus’s shelter (*asylum*) on the Capitoline Hill for anyone from a foreign state who needed protection and a new home

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<sup>3</sup> See Dalby, *Empire of Pleasures*.

<sup>4</sup> A rare (because so specific) Greek-Roman distinction is recorded by Plutarch (*Cato Minor* 46): Cato the Younger’s gifts to actors included beets, lettuce, radishes, and pears for the Greeks and jars of wine, pork, figs, melons, and bundles of wood for the Romans. See also Polybius 12.4.5 on the scale of Roman pork-rearing.

(Dench 1-35). In that sense, Rome resembled the modern United States, a country of immigrants without a central ethnic core (apart from native Americans). And in that respect, it differed from the Greeks. As historian Greg Woolf writes: “Unlike the Greeks, united by their common racial descent, Romans regarded material culture and morality as much more central constituents of their sense of self” (Woolf, “Becoming Roman: Staying Greek” 130).

The problem remained that material culture, which should include food, was incompatible with that other central constituent, morality. The Romans have a foundation myth for cooks, too, but not a very positive one. Ancient writers disagree about the exact date when cooks came to Rome, but their arrival is always linked to military campaigns. Livy (39.6.7) sets it at 187 BC, when the general Gnaeus Manlius Vulso came back from victory in Galatia, bringing with him tapestries, tables, girl musicians, and—worst of all—cooks. Polybius (31.25) identifies it with the war with Perseus of Macedon in 168. Sallust (*Catiline* 10) prefers the destruction of Carthage in 146. Cooks appear in the speech he gives Gaius Marius, a man of the people, who boasts that he is less pretentious than his other countrymen: “People say I’m so cheap and unsophisticated that I hardly know how to put on a decent meal and I don’t pay a cook or actor more than a farm manager” (*Jugurtha* 85). Interestingly, the Latin leaves it unclear if he has a cook or not—only that, if he did, he did not pay him much. Centuries later, Pliny would complain that a cook once cost more than a horse but would now consume his master’s entire income (*HN* 9.67). Although Pliny lived in the age of the rock star chef, those chefs’ names do not survive, only those of the consumers, famous gourmets like Apicius, or the famous pleasure-lovers who introduced specific dishes to Rome. Cooks remained outsiders and invisible: foreign, male slaves who brought with them enchanting secrets to spice up the bland staples of native Roman diet, mythologized as if it were part of the pure childhood of Rome, once a simple agricultural village.<sup>5</sup> If Roman diet is ever presented as a unity, it is downplayed through a comic lens, when Plautus mocks the Romans as the Greeks see them: as crude “barbarians” who live on porridge and greens, ready to be corrupted by fussy, unhealthy foreign influence (Gowers, *The Loaded Table* 57).<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the coming of the cooks is a myth for the beginning of Roman sophistication. Livy, again (39.6.7): “The cook, cheapest and most despised

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<sup>5</sup> See Gowers, *The Loaded Table* 17; Purcell 340 cites Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 5.109, which implies a historical progress in cooking styles, from roasted to boiled to flavoured with sauce.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, this stereotype dates from a time when the Romans were spreading the habit of bread-eating instead (Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins* 11).

of all slaves in our forefathers' times, increased in price. His work, once seen as servile, was now considered an art." But local opposition to this "art" persisted.<sup>7</sup> Around the time that cooks arrived in Rome, the ruling classes instituted strict sumptuary laws, which forbade eating large poultry and the interesting parts of pigs except on feast days. This moral legislation had an underlying political aim: to preserve the authority and financial solidarity of the ruling families (Clemente). Meanwhile, in Plautus's Roman comedies, set in Greece, slaves salivate over sweetbreads, pigs' livers, and sows' udders, while chefs boast of their magical powers and their exquisite sense of flavouring, unlike those ignorant cooks who drown their dishes in grass or serve up boring cabbage (Gowers, *The Loaded Table* 66-76, 101). This captures a lasting opposition: staples were produced at home, spices came from far away, like silphium from Libya, cinnamon from China, pepper from India, myrrh from Arabia (Goody 102-05). In fact, it was the provinces, Sicily, Egypt, and Africa, Rome's farms, that produced most of the wheat for Rome, and one thing the Romans can be said to have influenced is an empire-wide change from porridge-eating to bread-eating, which apparently meant needing to drink more, hence the spread of vine-growing and wine-drinking, too.

These two impulses—the moralizing one, expressed in the sumptuary laws, versus the sense that having a cook and being interested in food was to be wired up to the world, to be a full human being, to give Rome a place on the cultural map—were opposed throughout Rome's history. Did it perhaps suit the Romans to have it that way: to keep cuisine a foreign influence, uncomfortably incorporated, rather than a core export? Some of these contradictions emerge from our single surviving Roman cookbook, Apicius's *The Art of Cooking* (*De Arte Coquinaria*), which is attributed to a famous gourmet of Tiberius's time, although the recipes were collected later, perhaps in the reign of Trajan, around the beginning of the second century CE (the era of Aelius Aristides), or later, in the fourth or fifth centuries. Many of the recipes are named after towns near Rome, such as Baiae (which gives its name to a seafood stew: *Embractum Baianum*, 9.14), or the port of Ostia (Ostian Meatballs, *Ofellae Ostienses*, 7.4.2). Apicius gives us just one *alla Romana* recipe, for a drink, Roman Vermouth (*Absinthium Romanum*):

This is how to make Roman vermouth. According to the recipe from Camerinum, you need wormwood from Santo for Roman vermouth, or, as a substitute, wormwood from Pontus, cleaned and crushed, 1 Theban ounce of it, 6

<sup>7</sup> Two centuries later, Seneca (*Epistles* 88.18) is still writing: "I also exclude from liberal studies wrestling and all knowledge that is composed of oil and mud; otherwise I should also be compelled to admit perfumers and cooks and all the others who apply their minds to serving our pleasures."

scruples of mastic, 3 each of nard leaves, costmary and saffron, and 18 quarts of any mild wine. Filter when cold. Charcoal is not required because of the bitterness. (Apicius, *The Art of Cooking* 1.2.1)

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The recipe tells a story about paths of supply from the Roman hinterland and the edges of the empire. The base ingredient is wormwood, sourced either from Santo, Saintonge in modern France, or from Pontus on the Black Sea, but the recipe itself originates in Camerinum in Umbria. In other words, it is hardly clear what makes it distinctively Roman. John Edwards has investigated another Apician recipe, for “Indian Peas” (*Pisum Indicum*, 5.3.3). He argues that it is unlikely that peas (even dried ones) came all the way from India, and unlikely that a recipe came so far, either. We know of no tradition of eating curry in Rome, as there is for example in Britain or Portugal, following the colonization of India. A closer look shows that the recipe involves boiling peas in cuttlefish ink, so making them look as if they are dyed in indigo—which came from India and was called *indicum* (Edwards 260-61). In other words, the recipe has nothing at all to do with authentic Indian cooking, unless one counts the Indian pepper sprinkled on at the end, which was by now ubiquitous.

Other recipes in Apicius with foreign names include one for “Parthian (that is, Persian) Chicken,” with caraway seed (*Pullum Parthicum*, 6.9.2). Again, it is unclear if this denotes a breed of small chicken or a style of cooking (we know, for example, that *pullum numidicum*, “African chicken,” is what we now call a guinea fowl). Another authentic-looking recipe is for “Parthian Baby Goat or Lamb” (8.6.10): served with Damascene plums, that is, dried prunes. Pliny offers a clue: he mentions as “Parthian” a particular style of spatchcocking chicken, which he calls “salesmanship” (*mangonium*), making half a chicken cover a whole serving dish. As always, trickery or fussiness can be blamed on non-Romans, “kitchen-artists,” as Pliny calls them (*HN* 10.71) But it often remains hard to tell what the place-names mean, what the connection is between the style of cooking and the assigned place of origin, and whether these are genuine recipes introduced by non-Roman cooks or imaginative fantasies, an engagement with Rome’s “Other,” like the “Indian Peas” (both India and Parthia were beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire, and Edwards points out that around the time that the collection may have come into being, in 115 CE, Trajan made an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to conquer Parthia. Again, contact with an enemy influenced cooking styles. Apicius is known for being interested in how to make a social impression, offering tips for keeping up appearances: how to eke out silphium, a rare and expensive flavouring, with nuts (1.15); how to make oil that tastes like

the best olive oil; and, most famously, how to make “Anchovy Without Anchovy” (4.2.12). Sometimes he takes simulation to almost unpalatable limits, for example with *Sumen Plenum*, “Stuffed Sow’s Belly,” the full womb of a female pig (7.2.2), where *plenum*, “full, stuffed,” which can also mean “pregnant,” is suggested visually here by serving the organ stuffed with baby mussels.

In any case, if the Romans had wanted to package and spread their cuisine, there was no media culture, no restaurant culture, and, as we know it now, no ease of travel or transportation. When Cato famously held up a fig that was still edible three days after it was brought from Carthage, this was something exceptional which showed how just terrifyingly close the Carthaginians were to the gates of Rome.<sup>8</sup> Most fruit arrived in dried form: figs from Turkey; prunes from Syria; dates from Palestine. What is clear is that Ancient Rome gave the world plenty of raw ingredients. The Romans introduced Britain, for example, to abundant fruits and vegetables: asparagus, turnips, peas, garlic, cabbage, celery, onions, leeks, cucumbers, artichokes, figs, medlars, sweet chestnuts, cherries, and plums. On that list are cherries, a well-known example of a food imported into Rome, then exported out again. The cherry was first brought by the Roman general Lucullus from Pontus on the Black Sea, where he had fought King Mithridates, all the way to Rome, then crossed the sea again some hundred years later (Pliny, *HN* 15.102), during emperor Claudius’s invasion of Britain. Again, we can see that food paths for the Romans were also military paths. Varro relates that Roman soldiers fighting in Southern Italy picked up charcuterie skills along the way, bringing back *lucanica*, Lucanian sausages, named after a region there (*Lingua Latina* 5.111). An interesting case is *garum*, the notorious sauce made of fermented fish intestines, which gave Roman food its subtle underlying umami taste. This essential ingredient arrived from Greece and Carthage and became a Roman industry, though the best *garum* was said to be made in Spain and called “*garum* of the allies” (*garum sociorum*). Even Seneca, who came from Spain but had vegetarian tendencies, wrote: “Do you not realize that *garum sociorum*, that expensive bloody mass of decayed fish, consumes the stomach with its salted putrefaction?” (Seneca, *Epistles* 95.25). Martial even praises a man for still being attracted to a girl who drank large quantities of *garum* daily (11.27).

In Taiwan, too, certain foods which may not be particularly common or essential to national diet have become fetishized inside and outside the country because they attract and repel at the same time. Stinky tofu, for example. On the one hand, the fermentation process is connected according to universal criteria

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<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, *Cato Maior* 27.1; Pliny, *HN* 15.74.5 Meijer thinks Cato’s account is implausible.

with rottenness and ill-health; on the other hand, it is associated with great skill in preparation, great delicacy, and, we now know, nutritional value, as well. Its Roman equivalents were garum, dormice, and sow's udder. The first could, as we have seen, be connected by philosophers with decay and be deployed as a symbol or symptom of the moral corruption that infected Rome and its eaters. The second and third, dormice and sow's udder, are associated more with the unnatural speeding up of animals' lives or with disturbing their metabolisms in a way that suggests analogies with their greedy human eaters (Gowers, *The Loaded Table* 73-76). Another vegetarian text, Plutarch's "On Eating Flesh," complains that people stick red-hot skewers into pigs' throats to make their blood emulsify and thus make the flesh more tender; or jump on female pigs' udders just before they give birth to destroy the piglets and, again, tenderize the flesh; or people who sew up the eyes of birds, cranes, and swans, fatten them in the dark and make the flesh more appetizing with strange and spicy mixtures (2.1). Sow's udder is a kind of dark secret of Roman dining rooms: banned in the sumptuary laws, never shown in art until late antiquity, as John D'Arms has pointed out, but adored by many eaters (D'Arms 448-50). In Europe, the Scots terrify foreigners with their haggis, the pig's stomach filled with unmentionable bits. The French shock the pet-loving English with their snails, frogs, rare meat, and foie gras; apparently the French are obsessed with the idea that the English eat fluorescent green jelly, which most of us have not seen since childhood.

Most of the food facts listed by Pliny are catalogued with disapproval, and there remained a strong puritanical streak in most Roman food writing. Is there nowhere to find positive teaching about Roman cuisine? One unusual poem among Horace's *Satires* (2.4) fills nearly a hundred lines entirely with kitchen tips, apparently taken down in note-form by their speaker, Catius, after a top-secret lecture. All the speakers in this collection of poems, *Satires* II, claim to have found the secret of lifelong happiness (*vita beata*), whether in Stoic philosophy, flattering rich old people to get their money or holding dinner parties.<sup>9</sup> The poem has been read as a covert *ars poetica*, an allegory for new rules of writing small-scale, delicate Roman poetry, a kind of self-mockery by Horace the perfectionist poet (Gowers, *The Loaded Table* 158). But these rules, which claim to systematize a protocol for delicate flavouring, a science of cooking, may also be part of a trend in late-Republican and Augustan Rome where authority was

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<sup>9</sup> Compare Cicero, *De Finibus* 2.23: "Men of taste and refinement, with first-class chefs and confectioners, fish, birds, game, and so on, of the choicest kind: careful with their digestion . . . with drapery, silver, Corinthian bronzes, and the setting of the feast and the dining-room all matching: that these men live well or enjoy happiness I will never allow."



wrested away from traditional elites by the new experts who codified knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Blending the arts of pleasure with ideals of healthy and moderate living, this is *nouvelle cuisine* in all senses, although the obsession with food is itself satirized as an unhealthy one.

As another Roman poet, Statius says, if the dinner is full of good conversation, it does not matter how a pheasant differs from a crane, what sort of goose has the biggest liver, why a Tuscan boar is tastier than an Umbrian one (*Silvae* 4.6.8-10). But Horace's speaker does care about these things. One problem was the networking systems of Roman society, which demanded that one entertained guests in a manner that fitted their social status. Cicero once wrote to a pleasure-loving friend that they both needed to up their game when everyone else was holding impressive dinner parties: the friend's old fallback dish, fish, and cheese pie (which incidentally has a Greek name, *tyrotarichum*), won't do any more, nor that funny octopus, dyed red like a triumphing Jupiter (whatever this was, it is a reminder that grand dinners with their parades of dishes were based aesthetically on funerals and processions, things the Romans did well). Meanwhile, Cicero's other friends are learning the art of dining (Cicero, *Ad Familiares* 9.16). Cicero is being ironic, or partly so; conversation and networking were the most important aspects of mealtimes for him, as he confesses elsewhere (*De Senectute* 13.45). But it is interesting to think of 46 BC as a year of foodie distractions; Rome was in the middle of a civil war, and by the end of the year Julius Caesar would himself be the giant red-painted octopus celebrating a triumph over the Gauls.

Another thing that makes Horace's speaker's instructions remarkable is that they suppress many of the foreign ingredients that, as we have seen, marked most Roman haute cuisine. It may be significant, then, that when Horace enquires who the mystery lecturer was, he asks, "Was he Roman or foreign?" (*Satires* 2.4.10). Instead, there is a proud display of Italian seafood—oysters, mussels, and sea urchins—while Umbrian boars are earnestly recommended over Laurentine ones. There is also a strong emphasis on protecting the body from heat and chills, not overloading it, and on removing bad smells from the dining room, along with dirty napkins or glasses. All this seems to go against the love of excess, the impulse to procure exotic food for its own sake, which anthropologist Jack Goody has seen as necessary to achieve distinction, socially and culturally, in all hierarchical societies (Goody 97-153). Catius's modest boast of being the first to mix white pepper with black salt on clean little dishes seems far away from Pliny's semi-humorous accounts of Rome's culinary first inventors: Hortensius who

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<sup>10</sup> On this trend, see Wallace-Hadrill 1997; 2008.

served the first peacock in Rome (Pliny, *HN* 10.23) and Maecenas who served the first baby donkey's meat (Pliny, *HN* 8.68), almost a parody of the ruling classes' usual military achievements, Messalinus Cotta is commemorated as the undisputed inventor of grilled goose feet, pickled with cocks' combs, "for every man deserves to be awarded the prize for his culinary achievement," says Pliny (*HN* 10.27)—especially when the goose in question even walked all the way from Gaul to Rome, driven by its master. He says elsewhere (*HN* 10.31) that goose brought from the Alps will have lost its flavour by the time it reaches the city (Gowers, "Tasting" 93). True, Horace's speaker includes fish brine from Byzantium and saffron from Cilicia in Turkey. But these are exceptions in a system whose main characteristic is its pursuit of native good quality, seasonality, and balance between body and environment.<sup>11</sup> Is this, in short, an attempt to codify a national cuisine? Is Catus thinking in terms of terroir; is he an ancient locavore?

In this respect, Catus perhaps has something in common with the trendy cooks of modern Taipei, at Raw or Tairroir, who use perfect seasonal ingredients to deconstruct Taiwanese dishes or who serve food as if it is still alive in its original habitat or try to capture fleeting experiences through food (for example, chef Kai Ho at Terroir serves a dish called Memory of a Highway Rest Area). This is actually an international style of cuisine, found from Italy to Copenhagen to California (many Taiwanese chefs have trained in the Europe and the US). But everywhere the focus is on keeping local food alive, self-consciously. The black chicken served at Raw, for example, nestling on a bed of straw, recalls another Horatian dish, a fish served in sauce with prawns "swimming" around it (*Satires* 2.8.42).

Of course, without modern refrigeration, it was difficult not to eat some foods local in Rome. Pliny's discussion of cheese is interesting in this context (*HN* 11.240-1). His main criterion for soft cheese is freshness of flavour. He says the best soft cheese is found in Provence but it does not travel well. Cheese from the Apennine mountains, closer to Rome, is next best. But excellent goat's cheese is also made in Rome itself, "where the good things of all nations can be judged

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Catus recommends black mulberries as the finish to a summer meal (*Satires* 2.4.21-23) and purifying Massic wine in the night air (*Satires* 2.4.51-54). I suspect that the medicinal or pseudo-medicinal aspects of his precepts have been under-appreciated. André Chiang at Raw adheres to eight culinary principles, his "octaphilosophy" (Unique, Pure, Texture, Memory, Salt, South, Artisan and Terroir), and explores Taipei's 24 micro-seasons in his menu. With less refinement, Roman emperors enjoyed a dish of sow's udder, pheasant, wild boar, and ham in pastry known facetiously as the *tetrapharmacum*, "fourfold drug." Ann-Marie Hadzima kindly sent me information about seasonal nodes and their relationship to food prescriptions, on the eve between Cold Dew (寒露) and Descent of Frost (霜降).

at close quarters”—because of course it is freshest there, seen from a Roman eater’s perspective. Some things just cannot be imported in a perfect state. That is why Petronius’s Trimalchio fantasizes about importing mushroom spores from India and bees from Athens, so as to fulfil a Roman fantasy that the best things in the world can be homegrown on one’s own farm (*Satyrica* 38). Martial jokes about impressing friends with his just-picked, muddy produce (7.31): “Barnyard birds with their eggs, golden, lightly dried Chian figs, baby offspring of a bleating goat, olives too young to bear winter, parsnip tinged with early frost.” The joke is that this all comes straight from an urban farmers’ market:

Do you think they all came in from my farm? . . . my bit of land sends nothing to Rome except me. Whatever you get from your farm manager and tenant farmer in Umbria, and from your market garden by the third milestone and from the Tuscans and the Tusculans, I have the whole Suburra [the main food-market of Rome] supplying me.

That is why tips for preservation were so important: cheese macerated in vinegar and thyme, as with jars of Greek feta cheese today, can be restored, Pliny says, to something of its youthful freshness.

Niu Ba Ba, a restaurant in Taipei, serves the most expensive beef noodle soup in the world, taking a national staple to standards of unheard-of perfection. What is striking about this dish is that it does not use local meat, but instead boasts of containing the world’s best beef, imported from Japan, Australia, the United States, and Brazil. In one sense, it is a democratic dish. Anyone who has 10,000 Taiwanese dollars to spend can walk in and eat it in its many-layered perfection, and there are cheaper versions for those who do not. This “Presidential Beef Noodle Soup” recalls something rather more complicated, the special dish invented for the greedy Roman emperor Vitellius called “The Shield of Minerva,” which combined the livers of char-fish, the brains of pheasants, and peacocks, with the tongues of flamingos and the entrails of lampreys, “brought in warships from as far away as from the Carpathian Sea and the Spanish Straits” (Suetonius, *Vitellius* 13.2). In other words, the plate was a map of the Roman empire and its transportation links, one that let the emperor contemplate his territory while literally consuming it. At the other end of the spectrum is the little anonymous Latin poem called *Moretum*, literally “the thing stirred up in a mortar with a pestle.” A hundred lines are devoted to the humblest of subjects, a farmer getting up early and making his picnic lunch: first a round loaf of bread, then a round soft cheese into which he mixes herbs, to make an uneven blend of green and

white. The concluding motto *color e pluribus unus* (*Moretum* 102), “one colour was made out of many,” became a motto of diversity, ending up on the American Great Seal and then on the green and white US dollar bill; the united state of the globe-like cheese was reinvented for the United States of America: *e pluribus unum* (“one unity out of many,” where, as has been pointed out, the crucial word *color*, colour, is missing)(Fitzgerald 216). These dishes offer us the “world on a plate” in different ways. Immediately, however, Suetonius goes on to show us another side of Vitellius, a glutton who was not satisfied by this amazing dish and three other meals a day, helped by emetics. He writes:

He was not only a man of insatiable appetite, but he used to gratify it at inappropriate times, with any rubbish that came his way; at a sacrifice, he would snatch meat and cakes from the fire, and eat them on the spot. When he travelled, he did the same at cookshops (*popinae*) by the side of the road, whether the meat was freshly dressed and hot, or had been left over from the day before and was half-eaten. (*Vitellius* 13.3)

Suetonius is having fun imagining an emperor as the ultimate bulimic consumer. But even Catus, Horace’s gourmet, interrupts his very precise instructions by talking about the best thing to eat if you get tired of fancy food. Sometimes, he says, the only thing that hits the spot is fast food: “Even the jaded stomach longs to be revived with ham and sausages and all the rest of the stuff that comes in smoking hot from the filthy cookshops” (*Horace, Satires* 2.4.59-62). This choosy eater orders in from the ancient equivalent of Deliveroo; going to the takeaway oneself was to mix too much with other people.<sup>12</sup> Juvenal describes a tavern (*popina*) at Ostia, the port of Rome, as the ultimate democratic experience, where a nobleman could rub shoulders with sailors, thieves, runaway slaves, and where everyone shared the same food and the same table (*Satires* 8.173-76). Such deconstruction of the social hierarchy was something for which even a privileged emperor might yearn. Nero used to put on concealing headgear and cruise the all-night fast-food joints, in a kind of debased parody of the general who mingles in disguise with his common soldiers (*Suetonius, Nero* 26).

When Horace writes from Rome to his farm manager, stuck in the country, he says: “I miss the countryside and you miss the brothels and greasy spoons of the city” (*Epistles* 1.14.21-23). It is important to remember that every so-called Roman had, in Cicero’s formulation, two homelands (*patriae*): the city and his

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cicero, *Against Piso* 13.

place of origin (Dench 132; Cicero, *Laws* 2.2.5). At his other home, in Bilbilis, modern Bilbao, in Spain, Martial rejoices in the abundance and authenticity of the local produce, which he describes hyperbolically: “Do you want anything from Spain: red mullets, oysters, hares so plentiful that they trip over your hunting nets?” (10.37.7-16); or again, “Cordoba is more fertile in olives than oily Venafrum (outside Rome), as free-flowing as the oil-jars of Histria, its sheep are finer than those of white Galaesus and not faked by red or purple dye” (12.63.1-5). At the same time, the cosy oak-log fire over which his housekeeper hangs her cooking pots provokes nostalgia (12.18.19-21).<sup>13</sup> Yet he is perfectly happy to buy from the market when he is in the city.

Could it be that this is what ancient Rome gave the rest of the world? Not just new fruit and vegetables, and mixed dishes which conveyed the eclectic, infinitely absorbent aspects of Roman culture, but the very idea that the same person could have mixed and changeable appetites and different eating identities? Horace allows one of his slaves to satirize his master’s inconsistency: “If you don’t get asked out to dinner, you praise simple cabbage; but as soon as you get a last-minute invitation, you rush out of the house to some rich and endless feast” (*Satires* 2.7.28-73, 107). The slave prefers easy street food. But Horace is typical of upper-class Romans in having the luxury to be inconsistent. Many different factors played their part in shaping the diet of Romans like himself: mood, season, environment, nostalgia, boredom, hypocrisy, hypochondria, fear, self-indulgence, memory, and social context.<sup>14</sup> Split between simplicity and complexity, nature and art, speed and leisure, Rome and home, and bewildered by infinite choice, the Romans set the pattern for urban eaters of the future.

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<sup>13</sup> Contrast the grumpy tone of Sidonius (fifth century CE), contemplating some inferior hospitality: “I might still sorrowfully take refuge in a dingy tavern, blocking my nostrils against the smoke from the kitchen, where the scent of sausage and thyme and juniper berries rises from aromatic saucepans, and the steam of cooking pots mingles with the smoke from spitting frying pans” (*Letters* 8.11.3).

<sup>14</sup> The recent invention of Taiwanese bubble tea is popularly attributed to boredom or playfulness.

**Ex-position**  
**June**  
**2021**

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