

EDUCATIONAL SCHOOL KIT

THE ROMAN DIET

WHAT DID WEALTHY FAMILIES IN ANCIENT ROME EAT? THE SYMPOSIUM

In the most ancient times, the wealthy Roman families dined in the atrium of the house, near the hearth, where the Lares were venerated. In the imperial age, the place dedicated to banquets became the triclinium (dining room) which takes its name from the "three klinè" sofa-beds, on which the guests could lie down: they ate semi-reclining, leaning laterally on the left arm and holding free the right arm to be able to grab the food from the low tables diligently set up.



Triclinium of Dionysus, Museum of Santa Giulia Brescia

The kitchen was usually small in size because it was only used for preparing and cooking food. It consisted of masonry counters used as work surfaces on which pans, pots, grills and all the tools to be used were placed.



Kitchen, Domus of Dionysus, Museum of Santa Giulia Brescia



Roman pot, Museum of Santa Giulia, Brescia



Roman colander, Museum of Santa Giulia, Brescia

The hearth was the cooking surface, made with a row of tiles on the outside to prevent the ash from falling, which instead fell under the cooking surface. The sinks were used to clean dishes: they could be wooden, terracotta or masonry basins with a hole for draining the water.

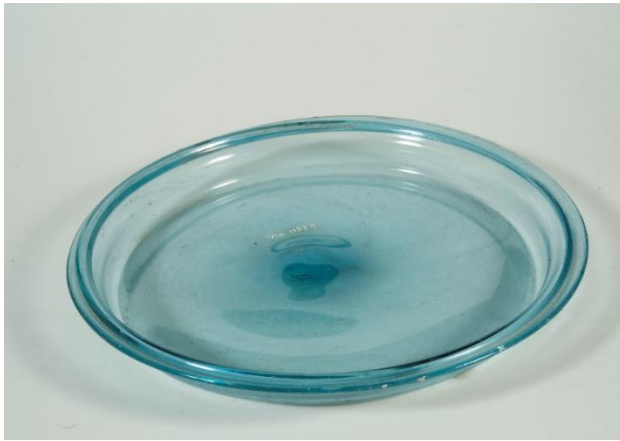
In ancient Rome there were three main meals: breakfast (*jentaculum*), lunch (*prandium*) and dinner (*coena*).

The Romans woke up early in the morning and used to have a frugal breakfast. Later, between the third and the fourth hour, that is, between eight and nine in the morning, there was the **jentaculum**: a hearty breakfast of bread, olives, cheese focaccia and fruit.

The second meal of the day, the **prandium**, was held around the sixth or seventh hour, that is, before noon. It consisted of a quick, cold meal, mostly the leftovers of the previous day's dinner. It was based on vegetables, fish, eggs, mushrooms. Given its simple composition, the table was not even prepared and the food was often eaten standing up.

Finally, at the end of a day of activity, after having gone to the thermal baths to restore the limbs, the Romans would return home for dinner. The **coena** was spent in the company of friends who gathered around a rich or modest table according to the economic resources of the landlord. It originally took place in the early afternoon and was the main meal of the day; the move to a later hour was a consequence of the improvement of living conditions and the reduction of time dedicated to work; dinner became the most important and significant moment of the Roman citizen's day. The duration varied in relation to the richness of the list, the attractions offered

and the loquacity of the guests: it usually ended before nighttime with the exception of particularly important banquets that lasted until late at night.



Glass plate, Museum of Santa Giulia Brescia



Silver spoon, Museum of Santa Giulia Brescia

Dinner began with an appetizer (*gustus*), usually based on vegetables, followed by the first course (*primae mensae*), full of fish and meat dishes. At the end, sweets (*secundae mensae*), fresh and dried fruit were served.



Fresco with lobster, Domus of Dionysus, Museum of Santa Giulia Brescia

THE BREAD

Even in ancient times, bread was a staple food, although, in the form we know today, initially, it was food for the privileged.

Initially the Romans, especially the plebeians, ate mostly *puls* or *polta*, a kind of polenta, which was prepared with spelled. Polta was a thick cereal soup cooked in an earthenware pot and enriched with broad beans, cabbage, onions, cheese and sometimes bits of meat or fish; all to make it tastier up, to such a mixture of ingredients that led to satiety in a short time. A change took place towards the end of the 5th century B.C. when hard and soft grains of superior quality were discovered. These came from Egypt and Libya, the so-called granaries of Rome. It was thanks to the arrival of wheat that bread as we know it today was born.

What was called bread was originally just a hard biscuit. This was also caused by the insufficiency of the yeast and the poor quality of the latter, which, being stored for too long, ended up becoming sour. Given the hardness, the bread was mostly eaten dipped in wine, oil, soups or sauces. The introduction of new types of wheat made rapid progress in bread making. Thanks to them, focaccia and bread became less hard and less acidic.

From a report by Pliny, it appears that the birth of the bakery dates back to the year 171 BC. The first bakers were initially only freedmen or citizens of humble status.

The bakers, to satisfy the tastes of a clientele that was becoming more and more varied, gradually began to place bread for all tastes and budgets on their counters. In imperial Rome there were 258 public bakeries and they were teeming with pastry chefs, workers, hired helpers, slaves who began to work long before the sun came up to ensure the survival of all citizens.

The main qualities of bread were divided into:

panis niger (black bread): poor man's bread made with sieved flours of poorer quality

panis secundarius: lighter, sifted several times

panis candidus: white, of very fine flour, was the bread of the upper classes

OTHER FOODS AND CONDIMENTS

What we know about ancient Roman cuisine came mainly from the cookbook of Marco Gavio Apicio, a well-known gastronome of the imperial age, who wrote the work "*De re coquinaria*". From this we learn that tastes were different from ours; the Romans preferred foods and combinations of flavors that today are not reflected in our recipes.

On the Roman table there was no shortage of eggs, cheeses, mushrooms, focaccia. They also consumed large quantities of fish and especially meat such as that of ox, pork, poultry, hares, pigs. An important contribution to the table was given by the hunting he brought to the kitchen: wild boars, dormice, roe deer, fallow deer, red deer and a great variety of wild birds such as thrushes, pigeons, storks, cranes, peacocks and pheasants. The ways of cooking it were many but being very hard meat they were cooked until flaking.

On the tables of the rich, meat or fish dishes were served with various sauces that were prepared in the most imaginative ways.

VEGETABLES

As for the vegetables, they ate lettuce, artichoke, cabbage, broad bean; a lot of fruit was consumed, grown in large quantities and then dried. Fruit was used, together with honey, also as a side dish to meat due to the Romans' preference for the sweet-salty flavor.

CONDIMENTS

The condiments were similar to ours: oil, vinegar and salt. An exception was the famous **garum**, one of the main ingredients of Roman cuisine. A kind of brine used instead of salt, very expensive. The ordinary garum was made with fish entrails macerated in salt, the quality one, on the contrary, was obtained with small pieces of fish and not with residues.

THE SPICES

The dishes were prepared with a large amount of spices, most of them of oriental origin: anise, cloves, coriander, juniper berries, fennel seeds, black and white pepper, mustard, sesame, saffron, ginger, laser, nard, myrtle berry, cardamom, rue seeds and berries, laurel berries, dill seeds, lovage, rocket, caraway seeds, mint, sage, calamus, oregano, cypress, thyme, pyrethrum leaves, cedar, parsnip, rush roots, marjoram, wildflower, water pepper, capers and savory.



Viridarium reconstruction of an ancient roman garden, Museum of Santa Giulia Brescia