

A Dinner in the Romania

Late Antique fare for Golden Arrow, 17th December 2022

This feast is (very conjecturally) based on Latin sources from Classical and Late Antiquity to reproduce possible dishes served in the post-Roman West. The ingredients would have been available in a more Mediterranean climate, in places like Ostrogothic Italy, Visigoth Spain and Gaul, or later Lombard Italy and Frankish Aquitaine. They are not plausible for places like Anglo-Saxon Britain or the Frankish Rhineland. We are serving one a main course and a dessert course, though the more authentic design would be for the main course dishes to be served in succession, with the egg dishes coming first.

On the Table:

We begin the feast with bread and a set of condiments that will accompany all dishes.

Honey mustard

Grind one sextarium of mustard seeds with five pounds of honey and one of Hispanic oil, diluting with one sextarium of strong vinegar. Grind diligently everything together and use.

This recipe is from Palladius' *opus agriculturae* (VIII.9) and very likely goes back far in time. The combination of honey with strong spicy flavours, be it mustard or pepper, was popular in Roman upper-class cooking.

mustaceus bread

Recipe for must cake: Moisten 1 modius of wheat flour with must; add anise, cummin, 2 pounds of lard, 1 pound of cheese, and the bark of a laurel twig. When you have made them into cakes, put bay leaves under them, and bake.

(Cato #121)

This is one of my favourite recipes from Cato's *de agricultura*, which I draw on extensively. I cannot prove that these dishes were still made in the fifth or sixth century CE, but it seems likely to me given how rooted they are in the traditions of Italian agriculture and how little they depend on imported ingredients. This bread would depend on the action of wine yeast to leaven it, and the addition of lard, cheese curds and spices combine to give it a soft crumb and rich flavour.

epityrum olive relish

Recipe for a confection of green, ripe, and mottled olives. Remove the stones from green, ripe, and mottled olives, and season as follows: chop the flesh, and add oil, vinegar, coriander, cummin, fennel, rue, and mint. Cover with oil in an earthen dish, and serve.

(Cato #119)

This is another dish from Cato that I suspect to have continued in use, and in this case there is a note in the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* that suggests something very similar was eaten in medieval Greece. I find that this improves as it stands and steeps for a few days, but there is no reason to think it was made for storage.

Horseradish pepper relish

Pepper the radishes well; or, equally well: grate it with pepper and brine.

(Apicius III 14)

This recipe is from the Apicius recipe collection and would have represented a luxury, using imported pepper. Grated horseradish mixed with salt water to make a sauce and seasoned with pepper is actually quite good, and omitting the pepper, it makes a plausible non-luxury condiment.

Mensa Prima (main course)

ofellas garatas (honey-roasted pork)

Ofellas garatas: Place the meat pieces in a pan and add one pound of liquamen, similarly of oil, not too little honey, and fry them.

(Vinidarius I 3)

These instructions come from the recipe collection of Vinidarius, a text that is tenuously dated to Late Antiquity and may come from Ostrogothic Italy. The instructions are fairly basic, but the result is quite delicious. Honey is often found associated with meat in archeological analyses of food remnants from grave goods. I added this dish because the event attracted a growing number of fighting aficionados who are generally known to relish meat.

Beef stew

Beef which has been steamed can be used both roasted in a dish and also braised in a sauce, provided that, as soon as it begins to give off a smell, you put the meat in some water. Boil it in as much fresh water as suits the size of the portion of meat; you should not have to add any more water during the boiling. When the meat is cooked, put in a casserole about half a cup of sharp vinegar, some leeks and a little pennyroyal, some celery and fennel, and let these simmer for one hour. Then add half the quantity of honey to vinegar, or as much honey as you wish for sweetness. Cook over a low heat, shaking the pot frequently with one's hands so that the sauce coats the meat sufficiently. Then grind the following: 50 peppercorns, 2 grammes (quantum medietatem solidi) of spikenard and 1.5 grammes (quantum pensat tremissis I) of cloves. Carefully grind all these spices together in an earthenware mortar with the addition of a little wine. When well ground, add them to a casserole and stir well, so that before they are taken from the heat, they may warm up and release their flavour into the sauce. Whenever you have a choice of honey or must reduced by either a third or by two thirds, add one of these as detailed above. Do not use a bronze pan, because the sauce tastes better cooked in an earthenware casserole
(Anthimus #3)

This recipe from the letter of Anthimus, a collection of dietary advice produced in the sixth century for the Frankish court. It's a favourite in Late Roman reenactment and notable for the precision of its instructions. Originally, this was the sole meat dish I had planned.

Venison in sauce

Sauce for deer: pound pepper, lovage, cumin, oregano, celery seed, laser root, fennel seed, grind it, pour on liquamen, wine, passum, and a little oil. When it has boiled, bind it with starch.

(Apicius VIII.2.1)

We received a sizeable donation of stewing-grade venison for our feast and I added a third meat dish at short notice. This is from the Apicius collection, a luxurious seasoning for deer meat that I interpreted as a serving sauce, but that may just as well have been intended to go over a roast.

Patina of asparagus

Another patina of asparagus: Put the offcuts of asparagus that would otherwise be discarded into a mortar and grind them. Add wine and pass it through a sieve. Grind pepper, lovage, fresh coriander, savory, onions, wine, liquamen, and oil. Pass the mash into a greased pan and, if desired, stir in eggs into it to bind it. Strew on ground pepper.

(Apicius IV.14.6)

Patinae were pan dishes, usually based on egg with added ingredients, that were very broadly comparable to a modern frittata. This one again comes from Apicius and is made with asparagus stalks. I do not claim that serving asparagus is plausible in December, but it is a good recipe.

Patina of olives and dates

The fourth course, then, was served in the middle of a sizzling pan (sartago fervens) in which lay such a mixed dish (compositum ... cibum) that was made of beaten (conclisis) eggs quickly (parumper) mixed with flour, which is customarily adorned with pieces of dates and the roundness (rotunditatibus – slices?) of olives.

This is one of my personal favourites, a dish described by Gregory of Tours in his *liber in Gloria Martyrum* (#79). I read it as a kind of patina, something akin to an omelet made with olives and dates cut into rings. The combination is very attractive. I find it is improved by drizzling it with honey, but tastes vary on this count.

Beets in vinegar sauce

Cook the beets with mustard seed and serve them well pickled in a little oil and vinegar.

(Apicius III.11.2)

This is one of my favourite vegetable dishes from the Apicius collection, though I still suspect the interpretation using beetroots rather than chard leaves is a modern misreading. I still make it this way because it is very good.

Carrots in cumin sauce

The carrots are boiled and sliced, stewed with cumin and a little oil and are served.

(Apicius III 20)

Another basic and lovely vegetable dish from the Apicius collection, though again, contemporary carrots would have been very different from the sweet, soft modern kind. I went with a simple interpretation of cumin and oil, but the collection also has more complex cumin sauces to choose from.

Lentils and chestnuts

Take a new sauce pan, place therein the chestnuts carefully cleaned, add water and a little soda and place on the fire to be cooked. This done, crush in the mortar pepper, cumin, coriander seed, mint, rue, laser root and flea-bane moistened with vinegar, honey and broth; add vinegar to taste and pour this over the cooked chestnuts, add oil and allow to boil. When done crush it in the mortar. Taste to see if something is missing and if so, put it in, and at last add green fresh virgin oil.

(Apicius V 2)

This recipe is not easy to interpret. It may be for a spicy chestnut puree that is served like lentils, but being right in the chapter on lentils, I interpreted it as being for a condiment that goes with lentils instead. The combination worked very well.

Barley polenta

Also from barley is made a good recipe that I call alfita in Greek, but which in Latin is called polenta and which the Goths in their foreign tongue call fenea.

(Anthimus 64)

This is a starchy filler for anyone who does not like or cannot have the bread. Instructions here are limited, but other sources suggest barley porridge was made with coarse meal and cooked to a fairly stiff consistency. I basically made it like modern polenta, sliceable, but spoonable. If you serve this on its own, garlic and onions are good additions. Since it went with an entire spread of highly seasoned dishes here, I went with just a little salt and olive oil.

Moretum herb cheese

*(...) He then the garden entered, first when there
With fingers having lightly dug the earth
Away, he garlic roots with fibres thick,
And four of them doth pull; he after that
Desires the parsley's graceful foliage,
And stiffness-causing rue, and, trembling on
Their slender thread, the coriander seeds,
And when he has collected these he comes
And sits him down beside the cheerful fire
And loudly for the mortar asks his wench.
Then singly each o' th' garlic heads be strips
From knotty body, and of outer coats
Deprives them, these rejected doth he throw
Away and strews at random on the ground.
The bulb preserved from th' plant in water doth
He rinse, and throw it into th' hollow stone.
On these he sprinkles grains of salt, and cheese
Is added, hard from taking up the salt.
Th' aforesaid herbs he now doth introduce
And with his left hand 'neath his hairy groin*

*Supports his garment;’ with his right he first
The reeking garlic with the pestle breaks,
Then everything he equally doth rub
I’ th’ mingled juice. His hand in circles move:
Till by degrees they one by one do lose
Their proper powers, and out of many comes
A single colour, not entirely green
Because the milky fragments this forbid,
Nor showing white as from the milk because
That colour’s altered by so many herbs.
The vapour keen doth oft assail the man’s
Uncovered nostrils, and with face and nose
Retracted doth he curse his early meal;
With back of hand his weeping eyes he oft
Doth wipe, and raging, heaps reviling on
The undeserving smoke. The work advanced:
No longer full of jottings as before,
But steadily the pestle circles smooth
Described. Some drops of olive oil he now
Instils, and pours upon its strength besides
A little of his scanty vinegar,
And mixes once again his handiwork,
And mixed withdraws it: then with fingers twain
Round all the mortar doth he go at last
And into one coherent ball doth bring
The diff’rent portions, that it may the name
And likeness of a finished salad fit. (...)
(Pseudo-Virgilius *Moretum*)*

This cheese preparation has the distinction of having an entire poem written about it, and one from which the national motto of the United States is taken (“*e pluribus unum*” - yes, it’s from here). We have other recipes for *moretum* that suggest the idea is a strongly flavoured, cold paste made with garden vegetables and usually cheese. Made in the way described by pseudo-Virgilius, it is both a good source of protein for those who do not eat meat and an excellent way of clearing your sinuses.

Mensa Secunda (dessert course)

We served a platter of assorted fruit and nuts as was the Roman custom at the end of a meal, though again the selection of fruit took little account of seasonality. In addition, there were a few sweet nibbles to choose from:

White cheese with honey

But fresh, sweet cheese which is unsalted is suitable for healthy people. However, if it is extremely fresh it is good to dip it in honey.
(Anthimus 80)

I am not entirely certain why Anthimus believes cheese to be healthier if it is served with honey, but the combination works well.

Dulcia domestica (honey-coated stuffed dates)

Little home confections (which are called dulciaria) are made thus: little palms or (as they are ordinarily called) dates are stuffed — after the seeds have been removed — with a nut or with nuts and ground pepper, sprinkled with salt on the outside and are candied in honey and served.
(Apicius VII 13)

This, again, would have been extremely luxurious even at the height of the Empire, but we know that imported dates were available as late as the sixth century. It would certainly be possible to make this as a treat, and it is one.

Cydonitum quince bread

Having discarded the shell, cut quinces into narrow, thin slices and remove the cores. Boil them with honey until they are reduced to half their quantity and sprinkle on pepper while boiling.
(Palladius XI 20)

A confection described by Palladius in his *opus agriculturae* and mentioned earlier by Galen as an import from Syria, this is a lovely way of serving quinces preserved through the winter. Cooking it down to reduce by half produces a thick paste that sets to the consistency of gummi bears.

Globi (semolina dairy fritters)

Recipe for globi: Mix the cheese and spelt in the same way, sufficient to make the number desired. Pour lard into a hot copper vessel, and fry one or two at a time, turning them frequently with two rods, and remove when done. Spread with honey, sprinkle with poppy-seed, and serve. .
(Cato #79)

Finally, another recipe from Cato. Fritters like these are still made all over Europe, and there is every reason to think the tradition never died out. The cheese referred to here is very fresh, basically cheese curds or cottage cheese, producing a soft, springy dough.

Note that the translations are not mine. [Cato](#) and [Apicius](#) were taken from the Lacus Curtius site, [Moretum](#) from virgil.org. Since they are intended for publication on the internet, I needed a copyright-free source. Translations of most classical Latin texts are available for free online, these are usually old and not always reliable. I certainly do not trust them as they are given here, but provide them for the readers' convenience. If you want to look at Roman cooking yourself, my preferences are for the [Cato translation by Andrew Dalby](#) and the [Apicius by Sally Grainger and Christopher Grocock](#). Both are copyrighted and not available for free download legally, but worth buying if you can.

Simplified Recipes

The quantities are calculated to make a feast to amply feed ten to twelve guests. Using only one main dish and one or two sides will produce a meal for four. Note that I substituted soy sauce for garum (fish sauce) in these recipes specifically to accommodate guests who eat neither fish nor meat. If you have no such constraints, using nuoc mam or colatura di alici will produce a more authentic flavour.

Honey mustard

1 cup honey
½ cup mustardseed flour
½ cup white wine vinegar
¼ cup olive oil

Carefully mix the mustardseed and honey, then add the vinegar and olive oil. If the honey is very thick, it can help to soften it by heating. Adding a little salt helps the flavour.

Mustaceus bread

1 kg flour (type 550 or 405)
125g lard
250g quark
½ litre grape juice (or new wine)
2 packages yeast
anise
cumin
bay leaves

Work the lard into the flour. Season with anise, cumin, and salt (salt sparingly). Add the dry yeast and the quark, begin to mix, then add lukewarm grape juice and knead to make an elastic dough. Let rise in a covered bowl until doubled, punch down, divide into individual rolls and distribute on baking sheets over scattered bay leaves. Cross-cut the tops. Let rise again, then bake at 180°C for 30-45 minutes.

Epityrum olive relish

125g green olives
125g black olives
½ cup vinegar
1/3 cup olive oil
coriander
cumin
fennelseed
mint
salt

Coarsely chop the olives and mix. Add the vinegar and oil. Season with coriander, cumin, fennelseed and mint. Steep, and serve.

Horseradish pepper relish

250g horseradish
salt
pepper
(potentially) olive oil

Peel and grate (or process/blend) the horseradish. Season with pepper and add salted water to achieve a thick but fluid consistency. Add olive oil if desired.

Ofellas garatas

1 kg roasting-grade pork (more if bone-in and skin-on)
1/2 cup honey
1/2 cup soy sauce
1/2 cup olive oil

Marinate the meat in a mixture of oil, honey, and soy sauce overnight (ideally in a freezer bag or similar). Lay out in a deep roasting tin with the marinade poured over. Cover and cook slowly (at c. 150°C) for 2-3 hours until done. Uncover for the final 30 minutes of cooking and increase the temperature to 180°C. Slice and serve with the juices and sauce poured over them.

Beef stew from Anthimus

750g stewing beef (Gulasch or similar)
1 leek
1/2 cup vinegar
50g celeriac
1/2 cup wine
1/3 cup honey (or *sapa*)
pepper
cloves
salt

Place meat in a wide pot and just barely cover with salted water. Simmer until soft (depending on how tender the meat is, this can take 2-4 hours). Alternatively, start the meat in a slow cooker the previous evening and cook overnight on Medium.

Mix vinegar and honey in a saucepan. Slice the leek and celeriac and add. Slowly simmer until it is fall-apart tender. Season with fennelseed and celery leaves, pepper, and cloves. Add the sauce to the meat and keep simmering. Alternatively, add the ingredients to the slow cooker, increase heat to High and cook with the lid ajar to reduce liquids.

Stewed Venison

500-750g stewing venison
1/2 cup vinegar
2-3 tbsp soy sauce

2 tbsp olive oil
1 cup wine
pepper
lovage
cumin
oregano
celery
fennel
asafoetida
starch.

Place meat in a wide pot and just barely cover with salted water. Simmer until soft (depending on how tender the meat is, this can take 2-4 hours). Alternatively, start the meat in a slow cooker the previous evening and cook overnight on Medium.

Heat vinegar, wine, soy sauce, and about one cup of the cooking liquid of the meat in a saucepan. Season with salt and spices to taste (I aim for a peppery, notably sour flavour here because so much of the other food is sweet). Reserve 4-6 tablespoons of the liquid in a cup and mix it with 2 tablespoons of starch. Return to the pot and heat to boiling, stirring continuously until the sauce thickens. Add the meat to the sauce. Dilute as needed with further broth. Drizzle with olive oil before serving.

Patina of asparagus

250g green asparagus
6-8 eggs
1 tbsp dried onions
1 tbsp olive oil
2 tbsp soy sauce
pepper
lovage
coriander
savory

Pare and cook the asparagus. Cut off and reserve the heads. Process/blend the rest into a paste with a little wine. Add spices, soy sauce, and oil. Beat with the eggs. Pour into a heated and oiled pan or baking dish and cook in an oven at 175° until firm. If desired, brown over the top with a blowtorch. Arrange the heads on top and serve in pieces or slices.

Patina of olives and dates

6-8 eggs
½ cup flour (type 405)
2 tbsp olive oil
100g dried dates, sliced
100g green olives, sliced

Beat the eggs with the flour and a little salt. Slice the dates and olives into rings and reserve. Pour the egg mixture into heated and oiled pan or baking dish and cook in an oven at 175°C until firm. After the first 10 minutes, scatter the dates and olives over the top. Serve in slices or pieces.

Beets in vinegar sauce

500g cooked beets
½ cup made mustard (if desired)
¼ cup olive oil
1/3 cup vinegar

Cook the beets and allow to cool. Peel and slice into bite-sized pieces. Mix vinegar and oil and toss the pieces in this dressing. Mustard can be added to taste if desired. This may be made a day in advance to marinate properly.

Carrots in a cumin sauce

500g carrots
cumin
soy sauce
olive oil

Peel and cut the carrots into rounds. Quickly blanch in hot water and cook till still 'al dente', then drain. Season with salt and cumin, drizzle over a little oil. Serve warm.

Lentils and chestnuts

250g red or yellow lentils
350g boiled chestnuts
2-3 tbsp honey
2 tbsp vinegar
2-3 tbsp olive oil
pepper
cumin
coriander
mint
asafoetida
salt

Cook the lentils in water until boiled to a mush (follow instructions on packet, typically 2-3 parts water to one part lentils). Season with salt and a dash of oil.

Cook and process/blend the chestnuts. Mash into a puree with vinegar and broth. Season with honey, pepper, cumin, coriander, mint, asafoetida (sparingly!) and olive oil. Heat again.

Serve in bowls with the chestnut puree over the mashed lentils.

Barley polenta

250g barley groats (ground pearl barley, basically)
1 tbsp olive oil
salt

Grease loaf tins with oil. Stir barley groats or coarse barley flour into boiling water (one part barley to four parts water) and keep stirring until it sets into a thick, gummy liquid. Pour into the moulds hot and allow to cool. Unmould, slice, and keep warm until serving.

Moretum garlic cheese

300g white cheese (Hirtenkäse, feta, peynir or such)
1 bulb garlic
½ cup celery leaves
1-2 tbsv vinegar
oil (small amount if necessary)

Process/blend the cheese, garlic, and celery leaves together. Add oil to adjust consistency (you want a thick, green paste). This may be made in advance and refrigerated.

White cheese with honey

300g mozzarella
½ cup honey

Slice cheese into bite-sized pieces and drizzle with honey. Serve on a plate with a small fork or spoon.

Dulcia domestica

300g dried dates, stoned, whole
100g almonds, whole
1/3 cup honey
pepper
salt

Using the cuts made during stoning, push one almond into each of the dates. Roll in salt. Dissolve the honey in a pan and bring to a full boil, then add the dates and toss them until they are completely coated and the honey thickens. Take care not to burn them. Remove from the heat, lay out on baking paper or a greased cookie sheet and sprinkle with pepper. Cool and serve. These will be very sticky.

Cydonitum quince bread

750g quinces
2 cups honey
pepper

Peel, core, and slice the quinces. Place in a deep pot with the honey and gently heat to boiling point. Slowly cook at a low heat, stirring regularly, until the quinces fall apart and a homogenous mash results. Slowly reduce to about half its original volume, then pour out on baking paper and spread to even thickness. Allow to cool and set. Slice into individual servings.

Globi

250g semolina (soft wheat)

125g Quark

2 eggs

1/3 cup honey

1 tbsp poppyseeds

Fat for frying

Mix the Quark, egg and semolina to make a thick, stiff dough. You may want to add a little flour for ease of handling. Heat the fat in a pan or deep fryer to 180°C. Shape the dough into small balls and drop into the hot fat. Fry until golden brown, then drain, drizzle with honey, and sprinkle with poppyseeds. Serve warm.

Feast Ingredient List:

Honey mustard

honey, mustardseed flour, white wine vinegar, olive oil

Mustaceus bread

flour, lard, quark, grape juice, yeast, anise, cumin, bay leaves

Epityrum olive relish

olives, vinegar, olive oil, coriander, cumin, fennelseed, mint, salt

Horseradish pepper relish

horseradish, salt, pepper, olive oil

Mensa Prima (main course)

Ofellas garatas (honey-roasted pork)

pork, honey, soy sauce, olive oil

Beef stew from Anthimus

beef, leeks. Vinegar, celeriac, wine, honey, pepper, cloves, salt

Stewed Venison

venison, vinegar, soy sauce, olive oil, wine, pepper, lovage, cumin, oregano, celery, fennel, asafoetida, starch

Patina of asparagus

green asparagus, eggs, onions, olive oil, soy sauce, pepper, lovage, coriander, savory

Patina of olives and dates

eggs, flour, olive oil, dates, olives

Beets in mustard sauce

beets, mustard, olive oil, vinegar

Carrots in a cumin sauce

carrots, cumin, soy sauce, olive oil

Lentils and chestnuts

lentils, chestnuts, honey, vinegar, olive oil, pepper, cumin, coriander, mint, asafoetida, salt

Barley polenta

barley groats, olive oil, salt

Moretum herb cheese

white cheese, garlic, celery leaves, vinegar, oil

Mensa Secunda (dessert course)

Fruit

Nuts

White cheese with honey

mozzarella, honey

Dulcia domestica (honey-coated stuffed dates)

dates, almonds, honey, pepper, salt

Cydonitum quince bread

quinces, honey, pepper

Globi (semolina fritters)

semolina, quark, eggs, honey, oil, poppyseed