

COOKING *APICIUS*

COOKING
APICIUS

ROMAN RECIPES FOR TODAY

Sally Grainger



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDRAS KALDOR



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A note on the illustrations

Andras Kaldor's pictures are based on the mosaic pavements of the Rio Verde Roman villa at San Pedro de Alcántara near Marbella in Spain. These date to the first century AD. In the peristyle or patio there are several decorations relating to food and cookery, such as animals, ovens, bowls, grills, soup dishes and so forth. These are all in black and white *tessellae*.

Preface

This new collection of adapted recipes taken from the ancient cookery book known as *Apicius* was in part inspired by the completion of the recent edition of the Latin text that my husband Dr Christopher Grocock and I have published. In that volume I hope we have managed to translate the Latin in as precise a way as possible, and to solve some of the more common confusions found in the original recipes.

I began reconstructing Roman dishes in the mid-1990s, and in 1996 published with Andrew Dalby *The Classical Cook Book* for the British Museum Press. It seemed entirely appropriate that I should take advantage of the publication of *Apicius* to select and test a new batch of recipes for the modern cook to follow.

Over the years we have endeavoured to understand these Roman recipes by reconstructing them using authentic equipment and techniques. The translation of the written text is the result of a learning process where we stood in the shoes of the slave-cooks and attempted to prepare the food as they might have done, given the obvious limitations of time and situation. We do not expect that our readers will be willing or able to follow our lead and build their own Roman kitchen, though I am aware that there will be many fellow re-enactors who will, I hope, benefit from my recipes.

The recipes that follow are a selection from *Apicius* that you will find easy to reproduce in your own kitchen from ingredients that can be sourced with a little effort. I do not include items that are unfamiliar or bizarre such as sterile sow's womb or dormice. There are over 450 recipes in the original text to choose from but many, particularly the sauces, are repetitious both in taste and form, and I have selected only those that appealed to me. There are also a number of large-scale dishes in *Apicius* that use boned and stuffed lamb,

kid or suckling pig, and I have avoided these too. It is possible to interpret these dishes using smaller joints of meat and occasionally I have included one. I have included a section on *gustum*, 'hors-d'œuvre', which includes side-dishes, a section on *mensae primae*, 'main courses', a section on vegetables and side-dishes, and sections on fish and also desserts. I have tried to avoid the more elaborate and expensive foods and to concentrate on the many everyday dishes that are found in *Apicius* and that represent the diet of a reasonably financially secure Roman citizen.

The original selection that I made from *Apicius* for the *Classical Cook Book* was quite small. Over the years, I added to my repertoire many more recipes which I found appealing, but they were added in a piecemeal fashion. In order to prepare for this book I had to cook Apician recipes day after day. I have always considered Roman food to be underrated, but even I have been pleasantly surprised at new dishes and new tastes that emerged from the testing process. These new recipes have only now come to life for me, and I hope for you, because I was able to learn from the constant repetitive cooking. The difference between a good cook and a really successful one is the repetitive working process that irons out faults and flaws and gives you that sense of confidence in your choices. I hope I have been able to pass on to you that confidence in these recipes. There are a few recipes that I have chosen (seven in fact) that I have already interpreted in the *Classical Cook Book* but I have revised them here. One or two of them cannot be bettered and are so successful that to miss them out of a book entitled *Cooking Apicius* would have simply been wrong. In the case of others, we have re-interpreted the Latin, and therefore the recipes themselves, and this has led to a re-interpretation of the modern adaptations.

Roman food, and particularly Apician Roman food, has a terrible reputation. Many of the recipes in *Apicius* have so many spices, herbs and liquids that the food they represent seems, to the untrained eye and palate, to be simply over-done. The consensus among scholars and archaeologists over past decades has been that the spices were

there to reflect wealth, not taste, and were chosen by the decadent Roman gourmet for the status they projected rather than their suitability or flavour. But crucially, these modern commentators have not had the requisite training to interpret recipes written by cooks for other cooks to read. For this, in fact, is the true nature of *Apicius*: a practical handbook of recipes, many written in a kind of shorthand that only another cook could understand. It is therefore a tricky business to turn the recipes in *Apicius* into successful dishes without acquiring some prior knowledge of the techniques and ingredients. The numerous spices were used with considerable restraint and in fact the very subtlety of their use is easy to misinterpret, and the results of such misinterpretation would support modern criticisms, but with care, the flavours of the various ingredients can be balanced (*temperas*, 'balance', is a recurring instruction), and the results are stunning. We would not criticize the food of the Indian subcontinent for its spicing, nor that of South East Asia or Africa, though the cuisines of these areas can be just as intoxicating in their use of spices. In Rome, literary tastes developed an appreciation for surprise and complexity of expression and just such an appreciation came to dominate their cuisine. This does not mean that all their food was intensely flavoured; there are numerous recipes for simple and plainly seasoned food in *Apicius*, something often overlooked. We have defined the collection as a whole not so much as simply 'high status' but more as a cosmopolitan and urban collection of recipes covering a wide section of the population of Rome and her empire.

Thanks are due to the team of tasters who helped us to consume weekly Roman feasts; and to Andrew Dalby for his advice on modern wines and syrups. Christopher Grocock, my husband, deserves especial thanks for his enthusiastic appreciation of all the Roman food he was compelled to eat. Sometimes, in the text which follows, the authorial 'I' slips into 'we'. This is intentional, for many of the conclusions have been arrived at jointly with my husband in the course of working on our edition of *Apicius*.

SALLY GRAINGER, 2006



Introduction

Historical background

I believe the recipes in *Apicius* were actually read and used by slave-cooks rather than read by any gourmet. It is a practical handbook, a ‘blue-collar’ text we might say, and consequently there is some confusion over the title and the author of the book. There are many references in ancient sources to a notorious gourmet called Marcus Gavius Apicius (AD 14–37). He is famous for two things in particular: sailing around the Mediterranean looking for the largest prawns, and for dying in style by poisoning his last banquet; he was certainly no cook. Cooks were skilled slaves who laboured to produce, while the élite consumed the fruits of that labour. There was a complete separation of the production and consumption of high-status food in the Roman world. What then (if anything) has this man to do with the collection of recipes which appears to bear his name? In studying this text we have come to the conclusion that, apart from the few recipes that seem to be named after him, there may actually be little direct connection at all. We believe that the name *Apicius* became associated with gourmet food through Apicius’ reputation. Later it became associated with the food itself and the cooks who prepared it, and ultimately came to refer to the collection that contained those recipes. In reality, *Apicius* is the title of a book rather than a reference to its author, though later commentators didn’t necessarily understand this and assumed that the name referred to a single individual. This is why I put the title in italics to distinguish it from the man Apicius himself. We discuss this in detail in our scholarly edition, but in summary the following points need to borne in mind.

Latin style

Apicius the gourmet would have been ashamed of the Latin used in the recipes, to say the least. He would have been a member of the educated ruling élite in the first century AD and would almost certainly have written in the polished style familiar from classical Latin. The *Apicius* text is written in what we have called ‘blue-collar’ Latin, and what is usually termed ‘Vulgar Latin’, the Latin of the street and work-place rather than the study and poetry reading.

Context

Many ancient literary works about food provide not so much instruction about how to prepare a dish, but instead emphasis on the origins and qualities of the various ingredients. The knowledge that these gourmet authors had was theoretical rather than practical and the recipes that these books contained were obtained from the cooks. The *Apicius* text has no emphasis on the source or even identity of ingredients and there is no narrative or general information as we might expect if the text had been read by gourmets. It simply would not satisfy an educated Roman looking for information about the food he could expect to eat.

‘Author’s voice’

There is no author’s voice in *Apicius*. There is also, crucially, no compiler’s voice either. We simply do not hear at all from any of the cooks as individuals, as we might expect had the book been written, even in part, by a confident and successful ex-slave cook. We might also expect to hear from someone who, as a controlling hand, may have compiled the book, but we hear nothing. This has led us to believe that *Apicius* was not compiled by a single hand, but that

it grew 'organically' from a small original collection into its final form as recipes were added haphazardly in the kitchen. The person responsible for transmitting the book was a disinterested scribe rather than a compiler. The existence of this scribe explains many of the inadequacies of the text: the repetitions, the confusions over the titles of the recipes and the general lack of precision.

In summary, then, *Apicius* was written from the perspective of the producer of meals, not the consumer. The gourmet Apicius might well have enjoyed eating (some of) these dishes, and describing them in purple terms, but he certainly was not the author of the *Apicius* text.

Dining in Rome

Here I want to give you a brief description of the daily habits of an urban Roman of secure financial means so that you can place the recipes in context and understand what was being eaten and when. There are many reference books which can give you a more detailed account of daily life in Rome and I have included a brief bibliography in the back if you want to read more detail.

The Apician recipe book existed and was used in a hot Mediterranean environment. Italy, North Africa, Spain, Greece and Turkey was its sphere of influence. The Roman day in this Mediterranean world would have been somewhat different from the span of the working day in northern Europe and particularly in Britain. The weather and the amount of daylight hours would have surely altered the traditional daily routine and also the kinds of foods on offer. In northern regions even the foods available to those wealthy enough to buy from traders would have been very different from the fresh produce in Italy. We know that the most wealthy Romans living in Britain would have been able to control such things as temperature and light as well as being able to purchase the very best imports so that they could pretend they were still in Italy, but they could never

entirely deny their geography. The recipes in *Apicius* are not British and should not be transferred directly to a British context without taking account of the differences. Slave-cooks in Britain may well have used similar recipes but there is no direct evidence that they did and certainly no evidence that these recipes had a measurable effect on our culinary heritage. Such influence that Roman food had on that came much later, through the international medieval cuisine that subsequently developed from Roman food and spread across Europe in the late Middle Ages.

Our context, then, is Rome. We will not think in terms of the excessively rich, who (according to the poets) indulged in the debauched and gluttonous banquets of the Roman imperial court. Rather we should consider the audience for *Apicius* to be the ordinary well-to-do Roman knights, businessmen and traders of all kinds, land owners and skilled craftsmen and even, occasionally, the more successful members of the proletariat. The day begins at dawn and the average Roman dresses with considerable speed, as the process of washing and changing clothes occurs when they visit the baths later in the day. Breakfast is a scratch meal of the barest minimum: water and a piece of bread, or cold left-overs from the night before. Time is at a premium if one is to do the day's labour or social activities in the comfort of the morning's heat rather than the afternoon. The length of the Roman 'hour' fluctuated according to the seasons but, according to Carcopino, it seems the day's labour did not extend beyond seven hours in summer and probably six in winter. For those of secure means, whether through their own labour or through private income from their land, the afternoons were free. Lunch for the non-labouring classes was, as with breakfast, a snatched meal of left-overs, cheese, fruit, bread, simple single items involving the minimum of cooking. The whole gourmet experience was confined to the evening meal: the *cena*. We may assume that the labouring classes who needed to keep their energy levels up during the working day may well have consumed considerably greater volume of food at mid-day.

The proletariat of Rome – traders, craftsmen, skilled labourers, retailers of all kinds as well as the unskilled labouring masses – lived in the urban sprawl in *insula*, flats constructed of wood above the stone- and brick-built houses and businesses on the ground floor. The higher up you lived, the poorer you were, and the less likely you would have access to cooking facilities. Street food, or to be precise ‘fast food’, was a common factor in the diet of the proletariat. Therefore we can imagine ordinary labourers buying such things as pasties made with a coarse oil-based pastry filled with pulses and mince meat; meatballs; blood sausages as well as offal; white sausages with cooked pulses; and simple *patinae*: the Roman frittata with any amount of meat, fish or vegetables in them. All these were potential lunch items available from street vendors, but also available at home. You will find examples of these dishes in the section ‘Hors d’œuvre and side-dishes’ and also in the section ‘Vegetable side-dishes’.

As the day moves towards the time for dinner, the leisured classes and those now free from labour headed for the baths. Women had already been to their ablutions at mid-day. Wealthy men had private bath houses in their own homes or exclusive clubs but the labouring classes had access to large-scale public bath complexes such as the baths of Caracalla or Diocletian where thousands could engage in the same basic routine. This was to exercise, socialize, bathe and get a massage, change your tunic, possibly shave and get a hair cut, attempt to get a dinner invitation if you didn’t have one, snack on small delicacies and ultimately wander home to a lavish or more humble dinner.

There are many examples in *Apicius* of food that might be on sale at the baths. We actually have two recipes in *Apicius* that are specifically designed for after bathing. These are meatballs in a sauce (*Apicius* 2.2.7) and cuttlefish (*Apicius* 9.4.3). The Roman fort of Caerleon in south Wales had a bath complex with a vast swimming-pool designed for amphibious training. Archaeologists have found that the drains were blocked with the bones from chicken wings and lamb chops. The marinade for chicken on page 68 would be

a suitable sauce to accompany chicken wings. The marinated liver, the stuffed kidneys and any of the meatball recipes are all potential bath-house snacks.

The *cena* itself was a very formal meal with a set number of courses – three – though the number of individual dishes within each course was limitless. The meal always started with a drink, either of honeyed wine, *mulsum* (a mixture of wine and honey rather than a mead), or a *conditum* (a spiced wine generally using pepper but sometimes also dates and saffron). The modern phrase ‘from soup to nuts’ is mirrored in Rome by the term ‘from eggs to nuts’. Eggs typically formed part of the *gustatio*, ‘first course’, along with numerous small appetizers to stimulate the palate. A banquet menu recorded by Macrobius lists amongst many things for the hors d’œuvre, oyster *patina*, fish *patina* and sow’s udder *patina*, which suggests that the eggs served at the beginning of the meal could be quite elaborate. Salad, olives, bread, tuna, *isicia* or ‘meatballs’, shellfish of all kinds with dipping sauces are all candidates for the *gustatio*. The *mensae primae*, ‘first tables’ (because the tables were brought in already laid), comprised the impressive main courses. Roasted joints of meat and poultry, whole stuffed piglet, lamb or kid, whole baked fish, more *patinae*, *minutal* or ‘stews’, moray eel, hare, the list is endless, and this book has many examples of both more elaborate and simple main-course dishes.

The best way to imagine a Roman banquet is to think in terms of a Chinese meal. There was a vast array of dishes served in bowls and platters and, we think, the guest often had a small dish or platter to eat from. Food moved from the large communal serving dish to individual dishes and then was eaten with the fingers. Softer foods were eaten with spoons and the guests could also have a knife to cut their own meat from the joint if slave-carvers were not present. Each person would have a relatively small amount of each item on his plate at any one time and the process of consumption was slow and steady, rather than the hurried meal we are used to. In fact, the meal itself could take many hours to complete. The position of the various items on the table seems to be very important, as is the position of the guest

on the couch. We even hear of some less important guests, freedmen or hangers-on at the lower end of the couch, failing to get the most desirable foods because they could not reach them. Bearing this in mind, a Roman meal should not resemble the meat and two veg. of modern dining. There should be at least four or more individual hors d'œuvre served in separate bowls, with small dishes or plates for each guest to eat off so that they can take from the communal dishes. This is equally true of the main course. The whole roast beast with elaborate decoration would be carved into small pieces by a slave so that each guest only picks up what he needs and dips the meat into the accompanying sauces, served in little bowls.

The *mensae secundae*, 'second tables' or dessert, comprises fairly simple items such as fruit, nuts and sometimes honey cheesecakes. In *Apicius* there are few dessert recipes, and this has largely been explained by the fact that baked goods tended to be dealt with in a separate literary form. *Apicius* is a cook's collection rather than a literary cook book, and this separation of sweet and savoury shouldn't necessarily apply. Recorded menus that have come down to us that give examples of dessert do suggest that single uncooked or unprepared items were the norm. This may be a better explanation of the absence of more complex sweet dishes from *Apicius*. I have sampled all of the cooked desserts in *Apicius* and you will find most of them in this book. Serve one with a selection of fruit and nuts to finish your meal.

How to use this book

The recipes that follow have been tested in my own kitchen using conventional kitchen equipment. There are, however, some essential items that you will need before these dishes can be embarked upon. First you will need a large pestle and mortar, either a replica Roman *mortarium* – if you are lucky enough to get one – or a heavy Chinese stone mortar with a large basin. Many of the recipes benefit from

being made in a mortar rather than a food processor. You will find the results much closer to the authentic experience of Roman food, even though you may find the labour involved a little taxing at times. If this is not possible, an electric spice (or coffee) grinder will be useful and, of course, a food processor to replace the mortar. Finally, a small diabetic scale or a digital scale will be useful too.

I have found that the use of spices in *Apicius* needs particular care. The spices are deployed with subtle restraint to create complex sauces that are not overpowering. When a recipe contains many different spices, none should be used to excess or be allowed to dominate in the finished sauce, but rather a balance of all of them is necessary. Some spices are stronger than others, some are bitter, some sweet, so a balance of equal amounts rarely works. This is particularly so with spices like lovage, which is very bitter and can overpower and spoil a dish very easily. Cumin is ubiquitous and a wonderful spice in its place, but it does need to be kept at bay by the other ingredients if possible. Fish sauce is the magic ingredient that brings everything else into balance and should be used just as we would use salt. Read the section on special ingredients and follow the instruction on how to adjust the salt levels in your Thai or Vietnamese fish sauce to ensure you have the right balance before you start. I also try to add the fish sauce to a sauce at the end of the cooking process, unless I state otherwise, so that it doesn't concentrate the saltiness too much. You never find that the fish sauce dominates. Taste often to see how the flavours work together. If you have overdone the fish sauce there will be a strong cheesy/fishy quality that will overpower everything else, and it will also be too salty. Honey can often bring it back.

I do not claim to have achieved the definitive interpretation of these recipes. Rather they are Sally Grainger's Roman recipes, and the next Roman cook will do it very differently, I am sure. Bearing this in mind, I have been precise in the amounts of spices I recommend and I suggest that you select and use the measuring spoon, etc., carefully at first. After you have got the measure of Roman food you can take some risks with the spices and the ratios.

Other equipment you will need

Small teaspoons: this is what I mean by the ‘tsp’ measure. Choose a small coffee spoon rather than the standard size used for stirring tea and note that, unless stated, the measure is always level. It is helpful to use a knife to trim the laden bowl of the spoon. A ‘heaped tsp’ is a rounded measure not bursting over the sides.

Large teaspoons and dessert spoons are occasionally used and are referred to as ‘large tsp’ and ‘dessert spoon’.

Tablespoon, ‘tbsp’, is a large serving spoon rather than an oversized dessert spoon. This is generally used for liquids: the oil, wine, vinegar, fish sauce and honey that make up the basic sauces of Roman food. This tablespoon corresponds in weight on a diabetic scale to about 1 oz/25 gm. I use a spoon because measuring a small volume of liquid in a jug can be inaccurate, and I also wished to follow the habit of the Roman slave-cooks who frequently gave their quantities by ratio rather than with precise measures.

As a general rule, I give metric volume or weight measures for larger amounts of solids or liquids. Once you have selected your measuring equipment, do not switch to different forms particularly within a recipe.

If you are testing a recipe or two, it is recommended that you roast and grind the various spices needed for each dish each time. Neither buy them already ground, nor anticipate your labours by pre-grinding in batches and storing. The flavour will never be adequate and the texture of the finished dish will not correspond to one where a mortar has been used, Roman style. If you are using a coffee grinder for convenience (I certainly do), do not grind the spices too finely. You should be aiming to replicate the product of a mortar. If you are preparing a feast or special meal with many dishes, you can then pre-grind a batch of the spices that you will need, such as lovage, cumin, celery seed, coriander, dill etc.

With the exception of peppercorns, spices benefit from the release of their fragrance by roasting before they are ground. Use a heavy

frying-pan, without fat or oil, and dry-fry them over a slow heat, tossing them frequently, so that they take colour and toast, but do not burn – in which case they will be acrid. Each spice reacts differently to heat, so they should be roasted individually.

The volume of whole seed to ground spice is virtually equal (i.e. for the purposes of the recipes, 1 level tsp whole cumin = 1 level tsp ground cumin) You will find both ground and whole spices referred to in the recipes.

Many of the dipping sauces that you find served with cold meat require that a paste be created in the mortar. This can be done in a food processor but the texture will always be a little grainy as the nuts and fruit will be cut into small pieces rather than rubbed into paste. You may also find a hand blender successful.

In the recipes I occasionally stipulate set or runny honey. Set honey can be controlled in the spoon, while runny honey can run away from you!

The majority of the recipes serve at least 6 people with a small or medium portion of the dish.

Special ingredients

The Romans cooked with an array of unusual spices, sauces and other ingredients that you will need to obtain or prepare in advance of cooking Roman food successfully. A few may take some effort to locate or make and I have here and there suggested alternatives. Investment in your Roman store cupboard will yield the dividend of dishes much closer to an authentic taste of Apician food.

Herbs and spices

You will find that many of the most common herbs in use today are found in *Apicius*, such as oregano, green coriander, thyme, mint, dill weed and parsley. However, some that are less familiar are also employed.

Savory (*Satureia hortensis/montana*). This comes in summer and winter varieties and is a small woody shrub with thin, oblong, dark leaves similar to thyme in appearance but with a distinctive flavour not unlike marjoram. It is readily available from herbalists in dry form but grows with little attention in any English garden so you can dry your own.

Rue (*Ruta graveolens*). A bitter perennial herb with small grey-green leaves and a pungent aroma. It has a reputation for being dangerous and it should be avoided by pregnant women. In small quantities it is quite safe and adds necessary bitterness to sweet dishes in Roman food. It is not regularly available as a culinary herb and the only sure way to obtain a supply is to grow your own. It is pretty much indestructible and establishes itself well in a sunny site. Many garden-centres sell it and, as you will only require a small amount in any dish, it should not take long to be ready. It should be picked with great care as a chemical in the

leaves can react with sunlight and, if touched, can burn the skin. Pick in the shade and, if you think you are susceptible, it would be best to avoid the task or get someone else to pick it for you. Out of the sun it is generally harmless unless you have particularly sensitive skin.

Lovage (*Levisticum officinale* syn. *ligusticum*). This is a hardy umbelliferous perennial similar to angelica in appearance and with a strong celery taste. It is not absolutely clear whether Roman cooks used the green herb or just the seeds in their recipes – they never identify the spice beyond its name. I believe that the seed was the standard ingredient, largely because in the recipes the spice occurs after the pepper at the beginning of a list and never among the other obvious herbs. It is also worth noting that the list of kitchen ingredients at the beginning of the Vinidarius collection of recipes includes lovage seed. For these reasons I do not often use the green herb. Lovage seed is a flat, ovoid seed similar in length to cumin, with ridges running from end to end. It is not in any way similar to celery seed in appearance or to the *ajwain* or *ajowan* (which does look like a large celery seed) which I have often found in packets in Indian supermarkets labelled as lovage. Care should be taken to identify the correct spice. It is available from herbalists and garden-centres. In the long term, growing and harvesting your own is the surest way to obtain the right spice. The flavour of *ajwain* is often likened to thyme; it can act as an emergency substitute.

Asafoetida (*Ferula assa-foetida*). This spice is obtained from the resin leached from a umbelliferous plant native to Iran and Afghanistan. In Roman cookery the resin was called *laser* and the plant was called *silphium*, though this was originally a separate and distinct plant native to north Africa which became extinct around AD 50 after which the resin from Parthia (Iran) replaced it. It has a distinct and pungent aroma reminiscent of fermented garlic, and is very common in Indian food. It is in Indian supermarkets that you will find it today. It comes as a yellow powder, sometimes

under the name 'heng', and needs to be used with care. Its effect is considerable. Sometimes the true resin can be bought from Indian suppliers and it is recommended that you try to find this if you can, though the powdered form is perfectly adequate and was in fact the most common form of the spice in the ancient world. If you are able to acquire a piece of resin do as the *Apicius* cookery book recommends at 1.13 and place it in a glass vessel or jar with 20 pine kernels. The flavour and aroma will transfer to the kernels which you use instead of the resin – replacing them with a new supply. You will have to experiment over time to gauge the strength of flavour of the kernels and adjust the recipes. The use of asafoetida is very much a personal one, like the heat of chilli; you need to know your limitations and that of your guests!

Bay berries (*Laurus nobilis*). These are small round kernels about the size of a pea (often also split) which have a similar flavour to bay leaf, but can be eaten – while bay leaf itself is generally not consumed. **Note well** that this is the berry of the bay tree and should not be confused with the flowering laurel (*Laurocerasus officinalis*) which is *very* poisonous and produces berries similar in appearance. Until recently bay trees in the UK could not set berries in the autumn for lack of the correct temperature. Instead, they would attempt to flower again, producing small, pale green buds. Recent global warming has resulted in berries forming on many large bay trees, particularly in the south of England, and it is now possible to obtain them through careful harvesting. The berry will be a dark red to black in colour and should be left for as long as possible on the tree to ripen. Harvest just before the frosts and dry carefully. The skin will peel off to reveal the kernel which needs to be fully dried before storing in an air-tight container. The flavour is very interesting and I use them in a number of successful recipes in this book.

Myrtle berries (*Myrtus communis*). The common myrtle is a hardy ornamental shrub that produces berries which are dried and still

used in Middle Eastern cooking. You may be able to purchase them from Turkish or Iranian delis or greengrocers. Alternatively, plant your own bush or raid a neighbour's. Just as with bay berries they will need to be left on the bush until late autumn and taken when dark blue to purple, then dried carefully and thoroughly before storing. Note that if these berries are not fully dry they rapidly go mouldy in their container.

Fish sauce

Fish sauce – which they called *garum* or *liquamen* – is fundamental to Roman food; in fact it is the ingredient that brings all the others together in a harmonious balance. Without it, the many flavours of the spices and liquids would be loud and discordant in the mouth, and the reputation that Roman food has for overpowering seasoning would be all too true.

The taste of fish sauce has recently been identified as the ‘fifth flavour’ alongside sweet, sour, salt and bitter. *Umami* is the ‘all-round-the-mouth’ meaty taste one gets from mushrooms and monosodium glutamate. It is not just salt flavour, there are all kinds of complex cheesy elements to it too, though the Romans used their fish sauce instead of salt and rarely used salt alone in their savoury or their sweet cooking. The effect of the sauce is not fishy or rotten or rank but immensely satisfying and integral to the cuisine. The Romans cooked with a variety of fermented fish sauces whose distinguishing characteristics can be difficult to understand in the modern world. It is only recently that I have been able to identify and classify the various types with any degree of accuracy. It may be that other food historians will have different opinions as to the nature of these sauces. I would not claim to have solved all the problems of interpretation. If you wish to read more about Roman fish sauce see the excursus on *garum* and *liquamen* in the appendix to our edition and translation of the Latin text.

Garum was a sauce made from the fresh blood and viscera of selected fish, mainly mackerel, fermented with salt. As it fermented, the mixture cleared and a dark brine was drawn off that was used at table by the diner (and sometimes in the kitchen). We do not find *garum* on its own mentioned in *Apicius*. Experiments we have conducted have produced a sauce with a distinctive blood aroma which makes it quite different from the other fish sauces. It was a relatively high-status condiment and was used in some of the *oenogarum* sauces that were part of Roman cuisine. However, these sauces using blood *garum* do

not appear in *Apicius*. I believe its use was predominantly by the diner at table rather than by the cook in the kitchen.

For the purposes of this little book we only really need to know about *liquamen*. This was made by dissolving whole small fish, as well as larger pieces of gutted fish (including the empty mackerel bodies used to make *garum*), into a liquor with salt. The fish, often anchovy, were layered with salt in a barrel or pit and left for anything up to four months. The whole mixture cleared from the top and settled into layers. The paste at the bottom was called *allec* and was used as a pickle in its own right. The liquor was called *liquamen*.

We know that cleaned fish and slices of fish such as tuna were also salted to preserve them. The salt leaches water out of the flesh in the early stages, and this effusion we can firmly identify as *muria*, a fish brine. It is quite pale and far less ‘fishy’ than the other fish sauces. We find this form of fish sauce in other food literature but not in *Apicius*. It appears to have been used predominantly by the lower classes, though this is not at all certain. In Italy, in the Bay of Naples, a modern company reproduces the ancient techniques and makes a liquor from the salting of fish. It resembles many of the Thai fish sauces familiar today and could not be distinguished from them in blind tastings.

We know about a fourth kind of fish sauce made from a mixture of whole small and medium-sized fish with extra blood and viscera. This composite sauce, made by combining the elements of *garum* and *liquamen*, was a late development to the culinary tradition dating from the 6th century AD and I do not believe it was used in the recipes of *Apicius*. If you have some knowledge of fish sauce and you are asking yourself ‘what about...? She has not considered...?’ then please read the article on *garum* and *liquamen* in our edition.

For the purposes of reconstructing Roman recipes today we only really have access to the various South East Asian fish sauces. These are similar to *liquamen* in nature because anchovy and salt are allowed to dissolve together into a liquor. The differences, however, can be crucial. Some of the best Thai fish sauces are fermented for anything

up to 18 months. They are also made with a much higher ratio of salt to fish than that indicated for Roman sauces. An ancient sauce was made with one part salt to seven parts fish, while a Thai sauce is made using a ratio of 1:3 and some times even 1:1. The length of time required for fermentation is not an issue we can deal with, but the salt can be adjusted to correspond to Roman *liquamen*. The following recipe produces a suitable blend for the recipes in this book. There are many varieties of fish sauce available and each one is slightly different. Some are very salty, others less so. Some are dark, almost black, while others are quite pale and golden. Still more are blended with sugar. You may only have access to one type and you need to assess its qualities. For our purposes, pale is better than dark and the less salty is also better. Ideally, you should buy a blended variety already slightly sweetened, as this is how the salt levels are adjusted.

Adapted fish sauce

1 l. carton white grape juice

1 bottle 'Oyster brand' fish sauce or a pale variety of fish sauce

Tip the grape juice into a large saucepan and bring to a gentle simmer. Cook at the lowest setting for however long it takes to reduce by half. This is never set in stone as grape juice can have a higher or lower sugar content. Cool and store. You can use this for other recipes in *Apicius* as well as for your fish sauce. The ratio that works for me is two-thirds fish sauce to one-third grape syrup. This produces a blend that is neither too salty, nor has it lost too much of the cheesy/meaty elements that you need. You might find that you need to adjust this ratio depending on the type of fish sauce that you have. The darker varieties tend to be saltier but unfortunately this is not always the case! You might try half and half to achieve the correct blend. Experiment! The initial cost is low and well worth the effort in the long run.

Grape must syrups

Defrutum

This is a syrup made from grape juice similar to that described for the fish sauce above but it has special flavouring and needs to be much thicker. It is defined as ‘fresh must boiled down to $\frac{1}{3}$ of its volume’. This reduction is not necessarily fixed as the sugar content of grape must can vary. What matters is the flavouring. This could be from either figs or quinces, added to the syrup while cooking. It is possible to purchase this variety of syrup in Italy and the UK today. It is known as ‘Vincotto with figs’. The English translation on the label is ‘sweet vinegar condiment’ but this is not quite accurate. It is not a vinegar as it has not soured, although it has been aged 4 years. Many of you will already know that Italian *saba*, Latin *sapa*, meaning a grape syrup, is the origin of balsamic vinegar. Such syrups were left to age for longer than usual and they soured in the oak barrel producing the luscious vinegars we know today. There are a number of recipes that call for *defrutum*, and often the liquor is used to give colour to various sauces. The following recipe makes a relatively large quantity and is easily performed. You will find it is extremely useful as a condiment for all kinds of dishes where you would ordinarily use balsamic vinegar. Try it on salads, or in sauces and gravies, too.

2 l. red grape juice

5 dried figs

Bring the grape juice to a gentle simmer and cook on the lowest setting for at least 2–3 hours. Check constantly to ensure it does not reduce too much and take it off the heat when the volume has reduced by two-thirds. You might find it useful to mark the pan in some way to indicate the correct level. Cool and remove the figs. Store in a corked or close-fitting, lidded bottle. The figs are quite amazing and I recommend you plan the process so that they can be served as a dessert immediately with ice-cream or crème fraîche.

Caroenum

The identification of this particular liquor is difficult. It is likely to have been a grape must reduced by one-third and therefore similar to *defrutum* but thinner. Alternatively, it might also have been a sweet wine, some of which may or may not have been reduced to a similar degree before fermentation. A way out of this dilemma may be to find an inexpensive substitute, for example there are modern sweet wines which have cooked grape must added such as 'Ambrato di Comiso' from Sicily. However, I believe *caroenum* was a cooked syrup made at home. If a *caroenum* is made from a must taken from fresh grapes such as would normally be used to make a *passum* (i.e. a raisin wine, see below) then the must would be sweeter than usual. And when one-third of its volume has been boiled away with two-thirds remaining it would be a thin yet flavoursome syrup. This is in contrast to the excessive sweetness, thickness and colour normally associated with *defrutum*. *Caroenum* was used in the recipes as a bulk ingredient rather than to flavour or colour; that was often the role of *passum* and *defrutum*. There are numerous sauces called *oenogarum* (see below) that contain no other form of 'wine' but *caroenum* and it could not therefore have been too thick or too rich. Andrew Dalby has pointed out that the original Greek term *karyinos* refers to a nut-brown colour, and this suggests to me that a white grape rather than a black one would have been the norm. To make a basic *caroenum* that will suffice for reconstructing these recipes, simmer a carton of white grape juice in a pan until you have lost one-third of its volume. Cool, return to the bottle and store. Alternatively, you can use the grape juice which you boiled to half its volume in order to adjust your fish sauce (see page 29 above) as a substitute for *caroenum* if you have made plenty. All these diverse wines and syrups – heavy raisin wine, rich and thick to add colour, and sweet thin syrups – were added to fish sauce and formed the basis of the ready-made sauce *oenogarum*.

Wines

Passum

This was a dessert or raisin wine made with grapes that were either allowed to shrivel on the vine or dried on rush mats. More sweet must, from other grapes that had not been dried, was used to aid the pressing of the fruit. The result was then fermented and aged. It is not a process we can duplicate but there are modern varieties of sweet wine that correspond to this. The one that I currently use and that most closely resembles dark *passum* is called 'Malaga Dulce'. 'Malaga Virgen' and 'Malaga Moscatel' are broadly similar. It is relatively cheap to purchase in the Malaga region of Spain, although, unfortunately, it is quite expensive in Britain, as are many of the other varieties of sweet wine that might suit. Candidates, all made from white grapes, might be 'Rivesaltes' from southern France, 'Amavrodaphne' from Cyprus, 'Muscat of Samos' and 'Muscat of Lemnos', these last two from Greece. Any very sweet dessert wines such as a heavy muscat or a heavier Sauternes will also do. *Passum* could be either dark or pale as long as it has that raisin flavour. In the recipes here, I sometimes suggest a lighter raisin wine, particularly if the sauce in question is described as white.

Date syrup

Roman sauce recipes regularly include dates but it is unclear whether they used the whole fruit, fresh or dried, or made a paste in advance to make life easier. Most recipes list the dates among the other liquids rather than with the nuts etc. and I feel that a pre-ground thick syrup would have been used. You can find thick date syrup in health-food shops in Britain.

Ready-made sauces

Oenogarum/hydrogarum

Oenogarum was a common component of a Roman meal and in many respects it would resemble a simple salad dressing such as vinaigrette. Pepper, and occasionally other spices, are mixed with fish sauce and oil and then sweetened with wine and sometimes one or more of the syrups described above. Again like vinaigrette, a sauce like this is unstable and needs to be beaten frequently to maintain an emulsion which can be poured over food or used for dipping. It will separate if left to stand for any time. We find surprising evidence from wear-marks in the small Samian-ware bowls that were used at table that diners often did whisk their sauces themselves. Other *oenogarums* can be thickened with starch to form a stable emulsion for pouring over a finished dish. A number of recipes in the original text have precise quantities, yet the ratio of fish sauce to wine and oil is often quite varied. There is no definitive set of proportions that will make a Roman sauce to suit all conditions. However, a basic all-purpose sweet sauce might be as follows:

1 part fish sauce

1 part medium white wine

1 part passum

1 part oil

generous freshly ground pepper

Combine all the ingredients at the last minute to pour over the salad, vegetable, etc., or use as a dipping sauce. Beat before use.

You will also find a sauce called *hydrogarum* in this book. This is a cooking sauce that resembles the French cooking liquor ‘*court bouillon*’. Fish sauce, water and a few herbs and pepper are combined, and various meats poached in the boiling sauce. Some times the sauce is then used as a digestive.

Wheat products

The Romans served a starch component to their meals just as we do: this was predominantly bread, the staple food and main ingredient of the meal for many people, though they would often eat it with some form of relish such as meat, cheese, or vegetables. Even at the elaborate dinners of the wealthy bread was served, though it would have been white and aerated as opposed to the dense, brown loaves of the lower classes. ‘White’ was the most desirable form of bread; sometimes chalk was added in order to bleach the flour and give it a whiter appearance. In everyday meals, flat bread was common and may have been the means by which certain foods were picked up with the fingers. Small pieces of bread are certainly a very efficient way of picking up food and keeping the fingers clean. These flatbreads were called *lagana* and a simple whole-wheat Indian bread recipe such as chapatti or roti is ideal (see below). *Lagana* were used to make the dish *Apician Patina* which is a tower of flat bread layered with meat and fish in a sauce (page 64).

Bread was leavened with either a sourdough or an ale-barm. The first is a process whereby day after day a percentage of the dough is saved and used to leaven the next day’s baking. It contains a living culture of wild yeast cells which can leaven a large batch of dough. Sourdough bread can be bought in many bakeries today, or you might like to make your own. Learn more about it at <http://www.sourdo.com> (see also *World Sourdoughs from Antiquity: Authentic Recipes for Modern Bakers*, Ed Wood, Berkeley, 1996). The alternative form of leaven in the ancient world involved using the froth from the top of the barrel in which you made beer. This was a process common only in countries where beer was the staple drink, namely most of northern Europe. You will find some artisanal bakeries offer ale-barm breads.

Other starches served with Roman food included rice. We find rice used to thicken sauces and so we might conclude that it was also available on its own. Boiled cracked wheat and even plain porridge

made with fine semolina or wheat starch that probably resembled a thick white sauce were served as separate items in feast menus.

A further item for the store cupboard you will find useful to make in advance is the dried pastry sheets known as *tracta*. These are not pasta – there is no evidence that they were cooked in water or that they held their shape when they were used in stews. Rather they are sheets of dried pastry similar in appearance to a coarse filo. The only Roman recipe for *tracta* is found in Cato's farming manual *De agricultura* (76), dating from the second century BC. Here the sheets of pastry are layered with goat's cheese and honey to make a baked cake called *placenta*. We don't find these cakes or *tracta* used this way in *Apicius*. Here we find them dried, crumbled and used to thicken meat stews. The dough is made with *alica*; a fine semolina soaked with water and kneaded with flour into a dough which is rolled out into discs and dried. The discs are friable and easily crumbled into very small pieces. In this state they act as a very efficient thickener.

Lagana (chapatti/roti)

300 g whole wheat flour
100 g strong plain flour
250 ml water

Sieve the two flours together and discard the largest flakes of chaff. Add the water and begin to knead the dough with your hands until it forms a single ball. Flour has different absorbency rates and so more or less water may be necessary. Continue to knead for 5–10 minutes until smooth and pliable. Put in a bowl and cover the dough with cling-film or a damp towel. Leave to rest for one hour. Bring it out on to a floured surface and divide in half. Return one half to the covered bowl and roll the other into a sausage. Divide this into ten parts. Put all the pieces back in the bowl, dust with flour, cover in

cling-film. (At all times the raw dough needs to be kept under cover so that it doesn't dry out.)

Prepare the area for rolling in advance. Dust the surface with flour and have a pile of flour to one side. Use a small cake-decorating rolling pin about 16 cm long and 2.5 cm thick. Take a griddle or heavy frying-pan and heat over a medium flame or setting. Take one ball and pat it into the flour all over and roll it out to a disc roughly 20 cm in diameter. Do not push from the centre but use a brisk back-and-forth motion at the edges, and use plenty of flour to stop it sticking. After each motion, ensure the dough has not stuck by moving it around and then roll again. You might want to trim the edges or use a flan ring or cutter to make a neat circle (do this particularly if you are using them to make the *patina Apiciana* on page 64). When you have a few discs ready you can begin cooking. Place each one on the hot, dry frying-pan and leave for roughly 20–30 seconds, at which point the base should have brown patches. Ensure the pan is not too hot, as it will burn before it cooks, or too cool, when the bread will dry out. Turn it over and cook for a further 10–12 seconds and remove with tongs. If you are serving them as bread, pile them up in a basket lined with a napkin. Leave them covered until ready for service. Alternatively, re-heat in an oven wrapped in tin foil.

This recipe is based on the one in *Classic Indian Cookery* by Julie Sahni (Grub Street, 1997), p. 331.

Tracta (dried pastry)

100 g fine semolina

200 ml water

150 g plain flour

Make these *tracta* when you are cooking other things such as bread or when the oven is in constant use, so that you can keep the kitchen warm while they are drying.

Pour the water over the semolina and allow to stand for 30 minutes. Tip the mixture into a fine sieve and allow the water to drain away. Stir it a little to ensure most has passed through, but do not push the softened semolina through the sieve. Tip into the bowl and add 100 g of the flour and mix until a soft dough is formed. Turn on to a table and continue to knead while adding finger-fulls of flour each time the dough becomes sticky again. You may use more or less than the stated amount. Knead until the dough is firm and smooth. Cover with cling-film or a damp cloth and leave to stand for 1 hour. Divide the dough into two and return one half to the bowl. Roll the other into a sausage and cut into 8 pieces. Return all the pieces to the bowl and sprinkle with flour so they don't stick together. At all times the raw dough needs to be kept under cover so that it doesn't dry out. Take one ball and pat it into the flour all over and roll it out to a disc. Roll a few times and then turn it over, roll a few times more and turn again and repeat constantly so that it never sticks to the table. Do not push from the centre but use a brisk back-and-forth motion at the edges and use plenty of flour to stop it sticking. When a large rolling pin ceases to work, switch to a small one (used for cake decorating) and continue to roll and then stretch the dough into a fine sheet. The shape doesn't matter, all that does is that the disc is as thin as possible. Eventually you will not be able to get it any thinner without it beginning to pull apart and sticking so completely to the table that you won't be able to release it. That is the time to stop. As long as the edges are all equally thin, place the sheet to one side on a

floured tray and begin the next one. You will make 16 in total and it will be difficult to keep them all separate while they dry. It may take some time to dry the sheets fully, but once a skin or crust has formed they can be stacked a little closer together. It may take overnight or even longer, depending on the temperature and the weather. You may wish to put them in a warm but cooling oven after it has been used for another purpose. Do not use direct heat. The texture should be very friable and easily crumbled. When you are sure they are fully dry, store in an air-tight tin until you need them. If you have failed to dry them fully, they will go mouldy in the tin so be careful. It is a lot of labour to repeat.