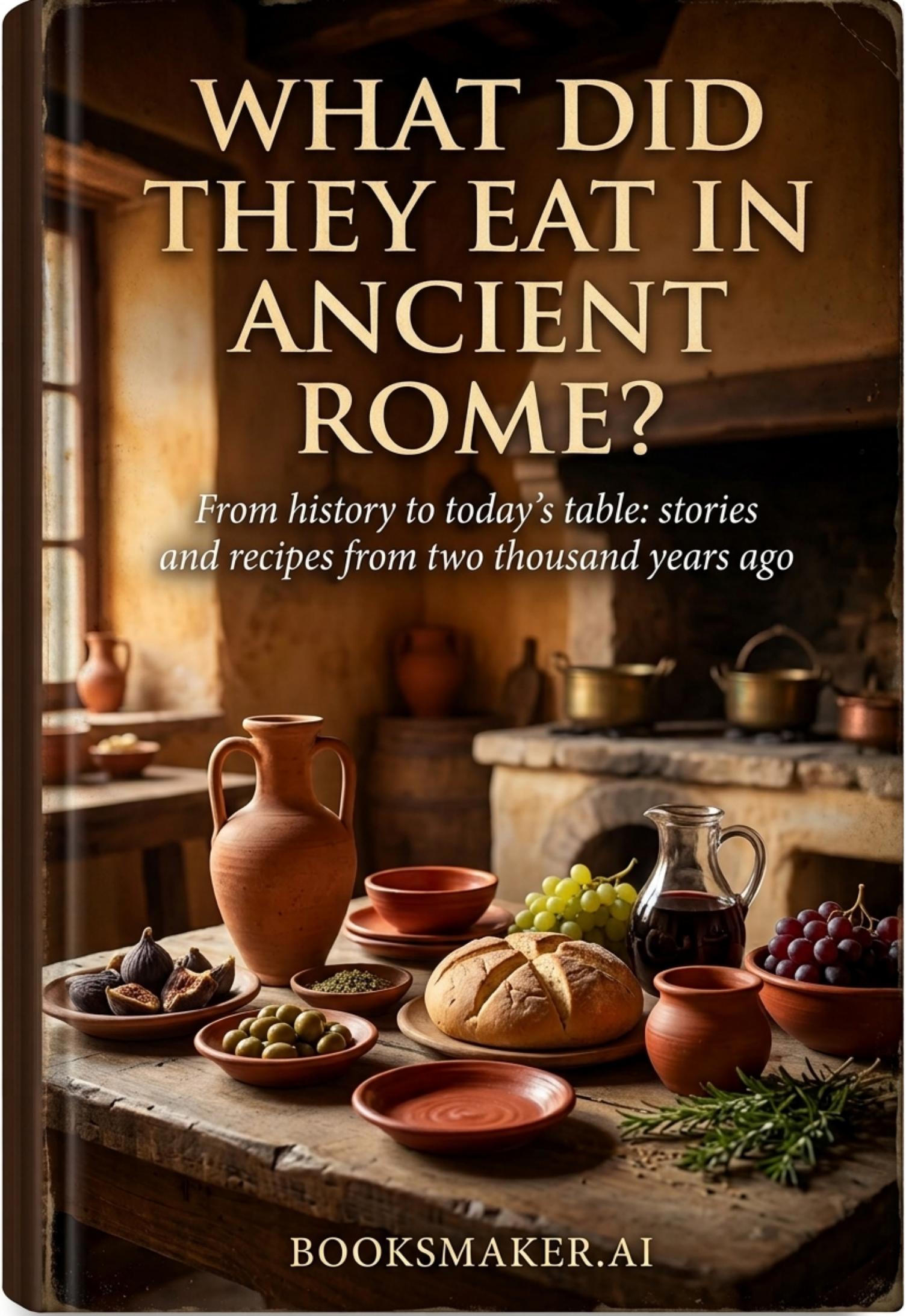

WHAT DID THEY EAT IN ANCIENT ROME?
From history to today's table: stories and recipes from two thousand years ago
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Contents

The Pantry of Rome 1

Bread, Puls, and the Everyday Table 10

The Banquet: The Cuisine of the Rich 18

Honey Sweets and Offerings to the Gods 26

Wine, Honey, and Spices: What Was Drunk 34

Rome at Home: The Complete Dinner 42

The Pantry of Rome

A Note to the Reader

This book is intended to inform and offers a journey through the cuisine of ancient Rome. The reconstructed scenes serve a narrative purpose; where the sources do not allow certainty, interpretations should not be considered established facts. The recipes are modern adaptations inspired by ancient ingredients and preparations, not exact reproductions of the originals.

The recipes have not been practically tested in a kitchen: quantities, times, temperatures, and results have not been validated. The instructions therefore require care and checking during preparation; the appearance of the food alone does not guarantee that it is safely cooked. For cooking, storage, and handling leftovers, follow the current recommendations of health authorities and the manufacturers' instructions. Do not improvise fish fermentations or other homemade preserves without validated procedures.

Always check ingredients and labels for allergies, intolerances, and personal needs: a substitution does not automatically make a recipe suitable for everyone. Children should cook under adult supervision, especially when using knives, stovetops, and ovens. Alcoholic beverages are for adults who are able to consume them; heating them does not guarantee that the alcohol will be eliminated. For minors and anyone who needs to avoid alcohol, choose genuinely non-alcoholic ingredients and alternatives, including in cooked dishes. Honey should not be given to children under twelve months, even in cooked preparations. Use herbs sold for culinary use: the historical mention of a plant, such as rue, is not an invitation to gather or use it in cooking.

At dawn, as the streets began to fill with footsteps and calls, the market offered a lesson in cooking even before anyone lit a fire. The stalls might hold grains, vegetables, fruit, cheeses, and fish; nearby, shops and vendors offered oil, wine, and preserved foods. No two people shopped in exactly the same way: what was available depended on the neighborhood, the season, and above all each family's means.

Let us imagine someone arriving with a small basket. We need not give them a name or pretend to know everything they bought: the scene serves to orient us, while the products and traces left by ancient writers and by excavations tell us what might have been in circulation. In a city as large as Rome, food arrived from many regions; some was produced nearby, while other food traveled

considerable distances by land and especially by sea.

The pantry, then, was not a storeroom full of exotic ingredients. For most people, simple and filling foods mattered, especially cereals. More expensive or rare goods were not within everyone's reach, and the lavish table described in texts should not be confused with that of every household. The market, too, reflected a divided society: the same city brought together people who could choose from many foods and people who had to reckon with the price and quantity of what they ate.

Our journey begins here. Before following the focaccia into the home oven, it is worth getting to know the ingredients that shaped Roman cuisine: wheat and spelt, oil, wine, sauces, honey, and herbs.

Of all the products at the market, cereals held a special place. Wheat provided flour for bread, while spelt—an ancient grain, hardy and suited to different preparations—could be cooked whole or ground. The Latin word *puls* referred to a cereal porridge, often made with water; for a long time it was an essential food, before bread became increasingly common in cities.

Not all flour was the same. The result depended on the grain, the grinding, and how much of the bran was sifted out. Finer flour required more work and could cost more; less-sifted flours retained parts of the grain and made a darker, more substantial bread. The differences were not merely a matter of taste: they also told us who could afford a more carefully processed product.

The wheat that reached Rome did not come from a single region. Routes and supplies changed over time, but the provinces of the empire played an important role in provisioning the capital. Transport by ship made it possible to move large quantities, although it depended on the seasons, the weather, and the organization of supply. The city needed food every day: behind a loaf were fields, harvests, mills, ovens, and many hands.

At home, meanwhile, flour could become bread, focaccia, or a softer preparation. Not every family had an oven; for baking, people could use communal ovens or buy bread ready-made. When we make our focaccia, we will use soft wheat flour and a domestic oven: a practical choice for today, not a claim that we are exactly recreating a Roman loaf.

Beside the sacks of grain, olive oil was a precious and versatile ingredient. It was used for seasoning, cooking, and making sauces; it could also be used outside the kitchen. Quality and price varied, and not every family used oil in equal abundance. In a modern recipe such as our focaccia, oil helps make the dough soft and adds flavor to the surface; the practical purpose is familiar, even if we do not know of a Roman recipe identical to ours.

Wine was widespread, but we should not always imagine it as the wine poured into a glass today. Different varieties were produced in antiquity, and storage could alter their taste. At the table, it was often mixed with water, in keeping with the customs and preferences of the time. For now, it is enough to note that wine and vinegar could be used in food preparation, while in the chapter devoted to beverages we will take a closer look at how people drank.

Garum, on the other hand, was a sauce made by fermenting fish with salt. The name refers to an ancient product, but not to one uniform recipe: ingredients, methods, and quality could vary. It was valued for its intense, salty flavor, which could add depth to many preparations. Ancient sources mention it, and the transport containers and production facilities help us understand how important the trade in this sauce was.

The fish sauce we will make later will be inspired by garum, not an authentic reconstruction of it. Historical garum required fermentation and controlled conditions; it is not prudent to improvise a fish fermentation at home without validated procedures. A commercial fish sauce, used in a small quantity and with attention to allergens, offers a simple way to approach that flavor without pretending it is the same thing.

Honey played an important role because sugar, so common in modern kitchens, was not a regular ingredient on the Roman table. Honey sweetened drinks and preparations, but could also accompany other flavors: sweet foods were not always kept separate from savory ones. Some ancient recipes paired honey with spices, vinegar, or fish sauce—combinations that may seem unusual today and that reflected a taste different from our own.

Cheeses were also part of the pantry. Fresh and aged varieties were made, with characteristics determined by the milk, the processing, and the place. Cheese could be eaten on its own, used in a dough, or pounded together with herbs. In the following chapters, we will encounter preparations in which cheese and cereals become a simple meal or the base of a dessert.

Aromatic herbs offered familiar fragrances and were easy to gather or buy. Mint, coriander, rue, fennel, and other plants appear in recipes and ancient texts, but their presence varied according to availability and preparation. Having a small space for herbs could make a kitchen more varied; one did not need to own a collection of expensive spices to give food character.

When we cook, rosemary will be our choice for the focaccia. It is an herb suited to a home-cooked recipe and easy to find today. We will not, however, present rosemary focaccia as a documented Roman recipe: it is a modern preparation that uses simple ingredients and methods to evoke an ancient pantry. This distinction does not diminish the dish; it helps us know what we are tasting

and what we are reconstructing.

Pepper came from very far away and could be expensive. Its presence in recipes and ancient texts shows just how much Roman trade connected distant regions. It was not, however, a spice that every family put into the pot every day: its price and availability made it more accessible to those with greater resources.

Cumin, with its strong aroma, was known and used in cooking. Spices were not used only to mask the taste of preserved foods, as is sometimes repeated: people could choose them for their aroma, according to their customs and the recipe. It is more useful to think in terms of a range of different flavors than a single rule for all of Rome.

Silphium deserves a note of its own. This plant, associated above all with Cyrenaica, was prized in antiquity and became rare; ancient sources recalled its value, but its precise botanical identification and the story of its disappearance are matters of debate. We cannot simply point to a modern spice and declare it identical. Some reconstructions suggest asafoetida as a possible substitute, because it has a pungent aroma, but it is an approximation and should be used sparingly.

The lesson of the pantry is also this: ingredients tell us about routes and trade, but they do not justify filling every dish with exotic flavors. Everyday cooking relied above all on accessible products; rare and expensive spices could enrich certain tables without representing everyone's experience.

Buying and storing food was part of daily life. Markets and shops offered fresh, dried, or already processed products; people might also receive food from others or grow some themselves, when they had space. A large city concentrated enormous demand and needed a network of transport and distribution. Not everyone shopped in the same way, however: the location of one's home, one's occupation, and the money available influenced choices.

Amphorae and other containers were used to transport and store liquids and food. Oil and wine often traveled in earthenware vessels; their shapes and inscriptions help us reconstruct where they came from and how they were traded. At home, cereals and legumes could be stored in dry containers, while fresh products had to be eaten sooner or preserved using different techniques. Salting, drying, and fermentation made it possible to extend the shelf life of some foods, but each method had its own context and did not make everything available in every season.

It is difficult to turn ancient life into a precise price list valid for everyone. Prices changed over time and across regions, and comparing them with a modern wage is complicated: wages, coins,

and the cost of living were not equivalent to ours. We can say that cereals and bread were essential and that rare or luxury products required more resources; to give an exact figure, we would need to specify the place, period, and source.

The household pantry was therefore a practical reserve, not a museum of ingredients. It held what was needed for meals and whatever could be bought or produced. This idea is the starting point for our cooking today: choose accessible ingredients, store them carefully, and present reconstructions honestly.

Roman cooking was not the same in every home. A wealthy household might have had a well-equipped space and staff assigned to prepare meals; in many homes, cooking was more difficult. Some urban buildings had little space and few ways to light a fire without smoke or risk. For this reason, there were ovens and sellers of ready-to-eat food to serve those who could not cook everything at home.

Among the utensils, the mortar was particularly useful. Pounding seeds, herbs, and other ingredients made it possible to create mixtures and sauces; the task required strength and patience, and changed the texture as well as the flavor. A sieve separated finer particles from coarser ones. Pots and pans, made from different materials, were chosen according to what had to be cooked and the means of the family.

The domed oven is one of the most immediate images that comes to mind when we think of ancient bread. Bread ovens could reach high temperatures and bake many loaves, but we should not imagine that every home had an identical one. Our kitchen has a modern oven: we will use it following practical instructions and checking the result by visual cues, not pretending that the cooking times are those of a Roman oven.

Every utensil tells us something about the organization of work. Grinding, kneading, lighting the fire, and watching over the cooking took time; the kitchen was made up of repeated actions and experience. When we knead the focaccia, we will revisit some ancient actions—mixing, working, waiting, and baking—with today's tools and conditions.

Bread was more than an accompaniment: for many people it was an essential part of the meal. Charred loaves have been found at Pompeii, including examples marked into wedges before baking. Those forms, preserved by the catastrophe, bring us for a moment closer to the actions of those who prepared and shared food, even if they do not tell us that every Roman bread looked the same.

Different flours made different breads; shapes, leavening, and ovens also varied from place to

place. We do not have a single recipe that describes all Roman bread. For this reason, the focaccia that follows is not a copy of an ancient formula: it is a contemporary home-cooked preparation, made with flour, water, oil, and rosemary, and designed for a domestic oven. The quantities and rising time are indicative and have not been verified through kitchen testing for this edition; observe the dough and use the cues described to guide you.

Rosemary Focaccia Inspired by the Roman Pantry

Makes: 4 servings · **Preparation:** 20 minutes · **Rising:** about 90 minutes, to be checked · **Baking:** about 20–25 minutes, to be checked · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 300 g soft wheat flour
- 190 g lukewarm water
- 4 g active dry yeast
- 6 g fine salt
- 25 g extra-virgin olive oil, plus a little for the pan
- 1 teaspoon chopped rosemary leaves

Method

1. Dissolve the yeast in the lukewarm water. The water should be just lukewarm, not hot.
2. Pour the flour into a bowl and gradually add the water and yeast. Mix until no dry flour remains.
3. Add the salt and oil. Knead for about 8 minutes, until the dough becomes smoother and more

elastic; if it remains sticky, work with lightly oiled hands instead of adding a lot of flour.
4. Cover the bowl and leave the dough to rise in a warm place. The dough is ready when it has visibly puffed up, ideally to nearly twice its volume; the time may vary depending on the room temperature.
5. Oil a small baking pan, transfer the dough, and gently stretch it out with your fingers. If it springs back, wait 10 minutes and try again.
6. Cover and leave to rest for another 20–30 minutes. Heat the oven to 220 °C.
7. Press the surface with your fingertips, scatter over the rosemary, and drizzle with a little oil. Bake for 20–25 minutes, checking as it cooks: the focaccia should be golden and cooked through on the bottom as well.
8. Let it cool slightly before cutting. If the center looks moist or raw, continue baking for a few minutes and check again.

Tips, variations, and storage. Contains gluten. You can omit the rosemary or replace it with another aromatic herb. Store leftovers covered and eat them within one day; reheat them thoroughly before serving. This recipe is a modern suggestion to try, not a verified ancient preparation.

Fish Sauce Inspired by Garum

Ancient garum was a fermented fish-and-salt sauce, not a modern sauce ready in a few minutes. This version is a homemade seasoning inspired by garum's umami saltiness: it is not fermented and is not a historical reconstruction. Use a safe commercial sauce, check the label, and do not improvise fish fermentations.

Makes: about 4 servings · **Preparation:** 5 minutes · **Cooking:** none · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 15 g commercial fish sauce
- 30 g water
- 10 g wine vinegar
- 5 g extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice, optional

Method

1. Pour the fish sauce into a small bowl. Check the label: it may contain fish and other allergens declared by the manufacturer.
2. Add the water and vinegar. Mix until the seasoning is uniform.
3. Add the oil and, if you like, the lemon juice. Taste a drop with a small piece of bread: if it is too intense, add more water; if it is mild, add a few drops of fish sauce.
4. Use it in small quantities to season vegetables or legumes, without adding more salt straight away.

Tips, variations, and storage. The sauce is salty and contains fish; it is not suitable for anyone allergic to fish. For a fish-free version, choose a commercial alternative seasoning, knowing that the taste will be different. Make it just before serving and store any leftovers in the refrigerator, in a clean, closed container, and use them within one day. Do not leave it at room temperature for extended periods.

The Roman pantry was not a fixed list of ingredients: it changed with the seasons, the routes, and the means of those doing the cooking. Spelt and bread fed many people; oil, wine, herbs, honey,

and sauces made dishes more varied; spices were a reminder that Rome was connected to distant regions. At home, we can approach those flavors with curiosity, as long as we always distinguish what we know from the modern recipes we invent in order to taste them. In the next chapter, we will enter the everyday dining room, among bread, *puls*, and legumes.

Bread, Puls, and the Everyday Table

At dawn, on a street in Rome, a shop was opening its shutters while the sky was still pale. A craftsman was getting ready for work; at home, someone had to decide what to put on the table with whatever was left in the pantry. We do not know those people's names: the scene is imagined to bring us closer to a practical problem, that of feeding a family in an enormous city.

For many inhabitants, food was not a succession of elegant courses. The availability of grain, the money to spend, and the time to cook all mattered. Those who worked outside the home could buy bread or something ready-made; those who had a hearth prepared soups and porridges, often starting with ingredients that could be stored. A meal could be simple without being identical to the one next door.

The word "common" should also be used with caution. Rome changed over the centuries and included people in very different circumstances: wealthy citizens, workers, enslaved people, soldiers, and newcomers. Habits depended on place, season, and means. In this chapter, we will follow some easily recognizable foods—bread, grains, and legumes—to understand what could sustain a day's work. Then we will bring them into today's kitchen with three modern recipes, identified as such.

Bread was one of the most recognizable foods on the Roman table, but "bread" did not mean one single product. The flour, the milling, and the way it was baked all varied. Flours made from different grains could yield doughs of different colors and textures; finer bread required processing and ingredients that were not within everyone's reach. For this reason, it is not accurate to imagine an entire city eating the same loaf every day.

There were bakers and bakeries in Rome, and bread could be bought ready-made. For those who lived in a dwelling without a suitable place for baking, buying bread was a practical solution. In other homes, dough was prepared or grains were cooked in different ways. A household oven was not necessarily present or usable in every dwelling: spaces and equipment varied.

The shape and quality of bread could also indicate social differences, but color alone does not tell the whole story. Dark bread was not automatically the bread of every poor person, just as light bread was not necessarily found on every wealthy table. Sources and archaeological finds provide clues, not a complete menu for every family. The most useful way to look at a loaf, then, is to start from what we know: bread was important, and its forms reflected different techniques and resources.

Carbonized loaves have been found in the area around Vesuvius, some marked into eight wedges. A famous example bearing a stamp comes from Herculaneum: it should not be confused with the loaves found in Pompeii, and the stamp does not necessarily identify the baker. The heat of the eruption made it unrecognizable as fresh food, but it was precisely the carbonization that preserved its shape. This find lets us look closely at a real loaf instead of relying only on written descriptions.

The wedges may have made the loaf easier to divide, but it would be too confident to say that every Roman loaf was marked in the same way or that we know for certain the precise reason for that shape. The Pompeian loaf is important evidence of one city at one specific moment. It does not automatically represent every region or every century of Roman history.

The loaf also reminds us that everyday life leaves different kinds of traces: words in texts, remains in ovens, objects in homes. Each trace answers part of the question. A preserved shape shows us what that bread looked like; on its own, however, it does not tell us who ate it, how much it cost, or what accompanied the meal. This is how it is best to read the history of food: with curiosity, and without asking a find to tell us more than it can.

Before bread became the most immediate image of a Roman meal, puls held an important place in the diet of the peninsula. In its simplest form, it was a preparation of grain or flour cooked in water, a thick porridge that could be enriched according to one's means and the ingredients available. There was no single puls that suited every home: the choice of grain and the consistency varied.

The word brings to mind an essential food, but essential should not be confused with insignificant. A pot of warm grains could be nourishing and easily adapted to different ingredients. Cheese, herbs, or a drizzle of oil transformed the base; the same preparation could be more or less rich. Ancient sources speak of grains and eating practices, but they do not provide the precise quantities for every variation that we would find in a modern cookbook.

The puls below is therefore a practical reconstruction: a cream of spelt and cheese intended for four servings. The ratio of water to spelt is a contemporary cooking choice and may need small adjustments, because grains and milling absorb liquids differently. This recipe has not been tested; observe the consistency as it cooks and add hot water if needed. The cheese is a modern choice to bring the preparation closer to home cooking, not evidence that every Roman puls was made this way.

Spelt Puls with Cheese

This modern version turns spelt into a rustic cream. The quantities do not come from a Roman source, and the recipe has not been tested: the result depends on the type of spelt and how it is milled. If you use whole grains, allow more cooking time and follow the package instructions.

Serves: 4 people · **Preparation:** 5 minutes · **Cooking:** about 35–45 minutes for cracked spelt · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 200 g cracked spelt
- 1.2 l water, plus more hot water if needed
- Up to 5 g salt, to be added only at the end if necessary
- 30 g extra-virgin olive oil
- 80 g grated pecorino

Method

1. Rinse the spelt in a colander under running water and drain it.
2. Pour the water into a large pot and bring it to a boil. Add the spelt and stir.
3. Lower the heat and simmer, stirring often to prevent it from sticking to the bottom. If the mixture becomes too thick while the grains are still hard, add a little hot water at a time.
4. After about 35 minutes, taste the spelt. Continue cooking until it is soft and the preparation is creamy; the actual cooking time varies depending on the product.
5. Turn off the heat. Stir in the oil and pecorino, then taste before adding salt, since the cheese is

already salty.
6. Serve hot, when the cream falls from the spoon without being watery or as firm as dough.

Tips, variations, and storage. Pecorino contains milk; for a lactose-free version, choose a suitable aged cheese according to the label, or omit it, knowing that the result will be different. The recipe contains gluten. Refrigerate leftovers within two hours in a closed container and eat them within two days; reheat them well, adding a little water. If using whole spelt, check the package to see whether it needs soaking and increase the cooking time according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Moretum was a preparation based on pounded cheese, often associated with herbs and other ingredients. The mortar was useful precisely because it allowed ingredients to be crushed and blended: the action changed the texture, turning a collection of elements into a flavorful cream to eat with bread.

A Latin poem entitled Moretum describes the preparation of a rustic cream with cheese, herbs, and garlic. The text has been handed down in the collection known as the Appendix Vergiliana, but its attribution to Virgil is uncertain. It is an interesting literary source, not a manual guaranteeing that every family prepared the dish in the same way. Quantities and flavors also depended on habits and resources.

The word moretum has become familiar to anyone interested in Roman cooking, but many modern versions can be found today. For the following recipe, we have chosen easily available herbs and a moderate amount of garlic. It is neither a definitive transcription of the poem nor an exact philological reconstruction: it is a homemade condiment inspired by that kind of preparation, intended to be eaten with bread. The recipe has not been tested, so taste it and adjust the herbs gradually.

Herb Moretum

A spread to serve with bread and vegetables. It is a modern recipe inspired by the preparation described in the Latin poem; it has not been tested, and the quantities are not ancient.

Serves: 4 people, as an accompaniment · **Preparation:** 15 minutes · **Cooking:** none · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 150 g soft pecorino or feta
- 40 g ricotta
- 10 g parsley
- 5 g fresh mint
- 1 small clove of garlic, about 3 g
- 15 g extra-virgin olive oil
- 10 g water, only if needed

Method

1. Wash and dry the parsley and mint thoroughly. Remove the leaves from the tougher stems.
2. Peel the garlic and chop it finely. For a milder flavor, use half a clove.
3. Crumble the cheese into a bowl or mortar. Add the herbs and garlic.
4. Pound with the pestle or mash with a fork, incorporating the oil a little at a time, until the mixture is even but still has a slightly grainy texture.
5. Add the ricotta and stir. If the cream is too firm, add the water a teaspoon at a time.
6. Taste before adding salt: pecorino and feta may already be very salty. Serve immediately with bread or vegetables.

Tips, variations, and storage. Contains milk. You can use ricotta alone and increase the herbs slightly, but the flavor will be sweeter and the texture softer. If you do not have a mortar, a fork will do; avoid blending for too long, because the cream may become too smooth. Cover and store in the refrigerator, and eat within one day. Do not leave it at room temperature for more than two

hours.

Dried legumes were valuable because they kept for a long time and could be turned into a substantial meal. Chickpeas, lentils, and fava beans were not merely pantry ingredients: they required water, time, and fuel to cook. In an ancient kitchen, as in today's, planning mattered. Soaking chickpeas in advance meant remembering the meal before it was time to eat.

We cannot reconstruct one schedule that applied to all Romans, or establish that every person ate three identical meals. Work, age, place, and social status all influenced habits. Bread and legumes could sustain a day; the available seasoning changed the dish. Drinks also varied: water was important, while wine and other beverages were consumed in different contexts. It is best not to turn literary descriptions or the customs of one group into a rule for the entire population.

Chickpea soup is a good way to understand how versatile a simple pantry can be. The following recipe uses onion, oil, and herbs that are common today; it does not claim to reproduce a specific Roman preparation. The quantities and timings are a modern, untested proposal. For safety and to get tender chickpeas, follow the package instructions: varieties and freshness can greatly affect cooking time.

Herbed Chickpea Soup

A modern homemade soup, inspired by the simplicity of pantry legumes. It is neither a documented ancient recipe nor a tested one; the cooking time depends on the chickpeas and should be adapted to the manufacturer's instructions.

Serves: 4 people · **Preparation:** 10 minutes, plus soaking · **Cooking:** about 1½–2½ hours · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 250 g dried chickpeas
- 1.5 l water for cooking, plus water for soaking
- 80 g onion
- 30 g extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 bay leaf
- 5 g salt, to adjust at the end
- 10 g chopped parsley

Method

1. Check the chickpeas and rinse them. Put them in a large bowl, cover with plenty of cold water, and leave to soak for 8–12 hours in the refrigerator.
2. Drain and rinse the chickpeas. Put them in a pot with 1.5 liters of water and the bay leaf; bring to a boil, then lower the heat.
3. Simmer with the lid slightly ajar. Skim if necessary and check that the chickpeas remain covered with water; add more hot water if the level drops.
4. After about an hour and a half, taste a chickpea. Continue until it is soft all the way through; it may take longer. Also follow the package instructions and do not taste chickpeas that are still hard.
5. In a pan, cook the chopped onion with the oil over low heat until soft and translucent. Add it to the pot when the chickpeas are almost cooked.
6. Add the salt toward the end and cook for a few more minutes. Remove the bay leaf, stir in the parsley, and serve hot.

Tips, variations, and storage. For a thicker soup, mash some of the cooked chickpeas with a fork and return them to the pot. Canned chickpeas shorten the cooking time: drain and rinse them, then cook with the onion and about 700 g of stock or water for 15–20 minutes, until the soup is piping hot. Refrigerate leftovers within two hours and eat them within three days; reheat until steaming hot. Gluten-free and dairy-free recipe, but check the labels of packaged ingredients.

Bread, puls, and legumes show us a table made up of different ingredients, but not an identical experience for everyone. Habits depended on resources, work, and place; archaeological finds and ancient texts offer us clues, each with its own limitations. The three preparations in this chapter translate those ingredients into home-cooking recipes: they are modern suggestions, not Roman formulas found intact.

In the next chapter, we will leave everyday cooking behind and enter a lavish dining room. We will see how a banquet could become a spectacle and a sign of prestige, and why the courses and sauces of that setting tell the story of a different Rome.

The Banquet: The Cuisine of the Rich

The room was ready before the guests arrived. Around a low table stood the reclining couches of the triclinium; cups and plates gleamed in the lamplight. Voices, quick footsteps, and the smell of freshly prepared dishes came from the kitchen. A servant entered with a tray, while the master of the house checked that every guest had a place.

This is a reconstructed scene, not a portrait of a dinner documented in every detail. It does, however, help us imagine what the sources describe: in a wealthy home, a meal could require space, staff, and a succession of dishes. Dinner was not merely a time to satisfy hunger. Sitting down together meant welcoming others, conversing, and showing what one could afford. To understand that world, we must first look at the room: with its couches arranged around the table, the triclinium gave the banquet a form different from that of a modern dinner.

The name triclinium comes from Greek and refers to the three couches around which people ate. Not every house had such a room, nor did every dinner follow the same pattern: wealth, available space, and the occasion all shaped the arrangements. The scene, then, is not a universal model. It is a way into a practice that images, the remains of houses, and ancient texts allow us to reconstruct only in part.

In the triclinium, guests reclined on couches arranged around the table, leaning on their left arms and keeping their right arms free to reach for food. The position might seem unusual to someone used to sitting on a chair, but it made it possible to eat at leisure and converse. The places were not necessarily all equal: on formal occasions, a seat could indicate closeness to the master of the house and the guest's prestige.

The arrangement required space and staff able to reach the diners without spilling plates or cups. We should not, however, imagine that every Roman house had a triclinium or that every dinner was a ceremony. Many meals were eaten in simpler circumstances. The triclinium tells us above all about the table of those who could turn eating together into an organized and visible occasion.

A banquet brought together people connected by family, friendship, business, or dependence. Offering food was a concrete gesture of hospitality, but also a way of presenting oneself to others. A well-stocked table could tell guests about the master of the house's wealth even before the conversation began: expensive ingredients, fine tableware, and numerous attendants all required resources.

This does not mean that every guest was impressed in the same way, or that every lavish dinner

was a competition in luxury. Ancient sources, often written by educated people, show particular interest in excesses and oddities. For this very reason, we must read them carefully: a vivid description may show us an ideal, a criticism, or an exceptional episode, not necessarily what was ordinary.

The main difference from an everyday meal lay in the range of choices available and the ability to devote time and labor to the occasion. A meat or fish dish prepared with several seasonings could become part of a feast, while bread, cereals, and legumes continued to be essential for very many people. The lavish banquet offers a window onto one part of Roman society, not a portrait of the whole city.

A dinner could unfold in different stages: the guests' arrival, the first dishes, more substantial courses, and finally sweet preparations or fruit. Latin sources mention practices and names that help us infer an order, but they do not provide a rigid program to apply to every banquet. The season, the occasion, and the household's means mattered as much as the master's taste.

Food might already have been cut up or served in portions to share. People talked and drank around the table and waited for the next course; the meal was a social activity that lasted longer than a quick stop. Today it seems natural to us for everyone to have an individual plate and for everything to arrive at once. At a lavish Roman banquet, by contrast, the sequence and the service contributed to the spectacle.

When describing this succession, we should avoid inventing a standard menu. The texts describe dishes and customs, but not a rule valid for every house, city, or century. It is more accurate to speak of possibilities: some tables offered many courses and a wide choice, while other occasions were more modest. The banquet we imagine in this chapter is therefore an explanatory model, not a universal dinner.

For dinner to reach the dining room at the right moment, many activities had to fit together. In the kitchen, someone chopped, pounded, mixed, and tended the fire; others carried trays, filled cups, and cleared the table. In wealthier homes, servants might be assigned the work, but the sources do not allow us to imagine the same arrangements in every household.

Roman cooking, like all cooking, depended on repeated tasks and suitable tools. A mortar made it possible to pound herbs and seasonings; vessels and pots were used to cook different dishes; the fire required constant attention. An experienced cook knew how to adjust textures and flavors even when a recipe did not specify exact quantities. For a dinner with several courses, they also had to coordinate timing and people, so that one dish did not grow cold while another was still on

the fire.

The presence of servants is an essential part of the social picture, but it should be described without turning it into a decorative detail. A master's banquet was made possible by the labor of others. The dining room looked orderly and welcoming precisely because, behind the scenes, someone had prepared, carried, and tidied things away. A lavish table, then, displayed not only ingredients and tableware: it also revealed who had the power to command other people's time and labor.

One of the best-known seasonings in Roman cooking was garum, a liquid sauce made by fermenting fish with salt. It came in different varieties and qualities; the term does not necessarily refer to an identical product in every place or period. Fish sauces added saltiness and depth to dishes, somewhat as a concentrated seasoning might today, although the flavor was not the same as that of a modern sauce.

The recipes in De re coquinaria also show the use of ingredients that might seem unfamiliar to us today: honey, vinegar, herbs, and spices were combined in ways that did not fit our clear-cut division between sweet and savory dishes. A sauce might contain savory, acidic, and sweet elements all at once. But we should not conclude from this that every dish was sweet-and-sour or that all Romans liked the same flavors.

There was great variety. An ingredient might be included because it was available, because it was liked, or because it suited a particular recipe. Sauces could greatly alter a dish's character and, at a banquet, gave the cook a way to display skill. Readers can try to imagine the contrast between honey and vinegar, but they will not find a perfect match for a contemporary flavor: the ingredients and techniques were different.

Meat and fish might appear at a lavish table, but their availability and frequency depended on means, markets, the season, and location. Finding a recipe is not enough to conclude that a dish was eaten every day or by the whole population. The culinary texts that have come down to us focus mainly on elaborate preparations and do not constitute a diary of every family's meals.

Fish might arrive fresh in cities near the coast or through transport and preservation networks; in other settings, preserved or salted products were also important. Meat, in turn, was not a single category: cuts, animals, and cooking methods varied. At a dinner meant to impress, the choice of ingredients also served to emphasize abundance, while bread and cereals remained essential for most tables.

This distinction sets the stage for the chapter's two recipes. The meatballs and the fish patina are

examples chosen to show how an ancient formula can inspire home cooking. They will not be presented as the typical menu of a Roman family or as reconstructions certain in every detail.

The name Apicius is associated with De re coquinaria, a collection of Latin recipes that has come down to us through a complex manuscript tradition. The text is valuable because it preserves ancient preparations, ingredients, and techniques; it is not, however, a modern book written to guide a beginner step by step. It often gives no exact quantities, cooking times, or temperatures, and assumes that the cook already knows how to make adjustments.

For this reason, an ancient recipe cannot be transferred automatically into a modern kitchen. We have to interpret words, tools, and ingredients, then decide on suitable proportions and timings. These modern decisions should be made clear: an exact quantity in grams is useful for cooking, but that does not make it a measurement attested in antiquity.

Apicius's name, too, calls for caution. The collection is traditionally associated with him, but the text we read should not be imagined as a single cook's autograph notebook, handed down intact. It is safer to speak of the cookbook attributed to Apicius and of the text as transmitted, distinguishing the ancient source from the explanations and reconstructions we add today.

Isicia omentata are meatballs associated with the cookbook attributed to Apicius. The name refers to a preparation wrapped in omentum, the fatty membrane that covers the internal organs. Omentum can be difficult to find and is not necessary for a home version inspired by the dish. Here we leave it out and bake the meatballs in the oven: these are two practical modern choices, not a literal reconstruction.

The following recipe is intended for four people and has not been tested in a professional kitchen. Quantities and timings are approximate; safety comes before historical similarity. Use fresh ground meat, keep it cold until you are ready to work with it, and cook it thoroughly. Whether the color is pink or not is not a reliable way to determine the safety of ground meat. Use a food thermometer at the center of the meatballs and check that they reach the temperature-and-time combination recommended by the health authorities for the meat used.

Isicia omentata, meatballs inspired by Roman cooking

Serves: 4 people, about 12 meatballs · **Preparation:** 20 minutes · **Cooking:** about 20–25 minutes · **Difficulty:** easy. Times are approximate and should be checked against your own oven.

This is a modern version inspired by a preparation described in the cookbook attributed to Apicius. It does not reproduce documented ancient quantities.



Ingredients

- 500 g ground beef or a beef-pork mixture
- 40 g bread crumb
- 60 g red wine or water
- 1 egg, about 50 g without shell
- 20 g pine nuts, optional
- 10 g modern garum or fish sauce, optional; alternatively, 5 g salt, adjusting according to the product chosen
- 1 g ground pepper
- 10 g olive oil for the baking tray

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 200 °C (390 °F), conventional setting. Line a baking tray with parchment paper and grease it lightly.
2. Crumble the bread into a bowl and moisten it with the wine or water. Wait a few minutes: it should soften without remaining immersed in liquid.
3. Add the meat, egg, pine nuts, pepper, and chosen seasoning. Mix with clean hands only until the ingredients are evenly distributed.
4. Shape 12 meatballs of similar size and place them on the tray, leaving a little space between them.
5. Bake for about 20–25 minutes, turning them once halfway through cooking. Times depend on the oven and the size of the meatballs: check that they are thoroughly cooked all the way through. Use a food thermometer at the center of the meatballs to check that they reach the

temperature-and-time combination recommended by the health authorities for the meat used; do not rely only on color and oven time.

6. Serve hot. Wash hands, utensils, and surfaces that have touched the raw meat.

Tips, variations, and storage. For a version without pine nuts, omit them; for a gluten-free preparation, use bread crumb certified as gluten-free. The recipe contains egg and, if using ordinary bread, wheat and gluten; fish sauce adds fish. Also mention the pine nuts and check the packages for other allergens, including possible traces. If you use wine, take declared sulfites into account and remember that cooking does not guarantee the removal of alcohol: choose water for anyone who needs to avoid it. Refrigerate leftovers within two hours and eat them within three days; reheat until steaming hot. The recipe has not been tested and the timings are approximate: do not serve undercooked meat.

Patina was a dish cooked in an ovenproof vessel; in ancient collections, the term appears for dishes made in different ways. The fish version proposed here is a home-cooking reconstruction, not a transcription with certain quantities. Use fresh fish or fish thawed in the refrigerator and check that it is cooked through to the center; fish is an allergen that should be disclosed.

Baked fish patina, modern version

Serves: 4 people · **Preparation:** 15 minutes · **Cooking:** about 25–35 minutes · **Difficulty:** easy. Times are approximate and vary according to the thickness of the fish and the dish used.



Ingredients

- 500 g skinless, boneless fish fillets, thawed in the refrigerator if frozen

- 3 eggs, about 150 g without shells
- 150 g milk
- 10 g olive oil
- 5 g chopped parsley
- 1 g pepper
- 2 g salt, to taste

Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180 °C (350 °F), conventional setting. Grease an ovenproof dish with the oil.
2. Carefully check the fillets and remove any bones. Cut the fish into similar-sized pieces and arrange them in the dish.
3. In a bowl, beat the eggs with the milk, parsley, pepper, and salt until the mixture is uniform.
4. Pour the mixture over the fish. Gently move the dish so the liquid spreads between the pieces.
5. Bake for about 25–35 minutes. A set center and fish that flakes apart are signs that cooking is progressing, not a guarantee of safety. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature, following health guidance for dishes containing both fish and eggs.
6. Let rest for a few minutes and serve hot, using clean utensils.

Tips, variations, and storage. You can use a mild white fish, fresh or thawed in the refrigerator. Do not wash raw fish in the sink: this prevents splashing, and clean surfaces thoroughly. The recipe contains eggs, fish, and milk. For anyone who is lactose intolerant, you can choose lactose-free milk if it is suitable for their needs. Lactose-free milk is not suitable for anyone allergic to milk proteins. A plant-based drink changes the recipe and may introduce other allergens: always check the label and your guest's needs. This recipe is an untested modern suggestion: check that it is cooked through to the center. Refrigerate leftovers within two hours and eat them within one day, reheating them thoroughly.

Good to know

A modern recipe tries to remove uncertainties: it specifies grams, minutes, and temperature. An ancient formula could leave many decisions to the cook, because whoever used it already knew the ingredients and techniques. When we add a precise quantity to make a dish feasible today, we are interpreting it. The precision of our scales does not prove that a Roman cook weighed things in the same way.

The banquet tells us a great deal about the wealth, hospitality, and labor that sustained the homes

of the well-to-do, but it does not sum up all of Roman cooking. The sources and surviving recipes shed light mainly on certain settings and leave other tables in the shadows. By preparing the meatballs and the patina, we have turned two ancient inspirations into home-cooked dishes, making clear which choices are modern and what precautions are necessary.

In the next chapter, the journey will take a different flavor. We will look at honey, fresh cheeses, and sweets that might accompany a meal or be offered to the gods: a way to discover that in Rome, cooking could also be part of rituals and festivals.

Honey Sweets and Offerings to the Gods

Let us imagine a Roman kitchen on a feast day. On the counter are flour, a bowl of fresh cheese, and a container of honey; near the hearth, someone is preparing a sweet to serve at the table or set aside as an offering. This is a reconstructed scene: we do not know that person's name, nor can we know what was in every kitchen. But the ingredients are familiar to us, and some ancient sources allow us to follow their traces.

Roman sweets did not necessarily resemble a modern cake, soft and rich in sugar. They could be a simple flatbread, a mixture of flour and cheese, or a preparation sweetened with honey. The texture and flavor depended on the ingredients available and the technique of the cook.

In this chapter, we will encounter three names handed down by the sources: libum, savillum, and mustacei. We will not treat them as ready-to-use modern recipes. Ancient instructions are often brief and do not always provide the quantities, times, or temperatures we would expect today. To prepare them at home, adaptations will therefore be needed: we will point them out without confusing them with words attributed to the ancients.

To sweeten their food, the Romans relied above all on honey. They produced it in various parts of the empire and used it in cooking, in preparing drinks, and for other domestic purposes. It was not, however, an ingredient identical to sugar: it has its own aroma, contains water, and changes the texture of doughs. When a modern recipe uses honey to provide a sweetness that an ancient formula leaves unspecified, the result is a present-day culinary choice, not proof that every Roman cook used that amount.

Honey, too, was not always the same. Its flavor depended on the flowers visited by the bees and on production practices; it could be milder or more intense. Literary sources mention its qualities and origins, but they do not authorize us to imagine a single Roman honey, identical in every home and every season.

For today's reader, there is one practical point: honey tends to color and brown quickly. In the recipes that follow, the times will be approximate, and the cooking should also be monitored by sight. The quantities are adapted for a modern home kitchen; where there is no verified test, we will say so clearly.

Flour and fresh cheese made a versatile pair. Mixed together, they could produce a firm dough to be baked as a flatbread or cake; with honey, they became a sweet preparation, though not necessarily a dessert in the modern sense. In ancient homes, the boundaries between everyday

food, a special dish, and a ritual offering did not always match the categories we use today.

Cheese, moreover, was not a single product. The milk, processing, freshness, and texture varied. An ancient recipe that names cheese does not always specify what a modern cook should buy. For home versions, you can choose a fresh cheese suitable for mixing into dough, but the modern name of the ingredient does not prove that the ancient one tasted exactly the same.

This difference matters especially for sweets. If we replace an ingredient with one available today, the dish becomes cookable, but the result also changes. The recipes here are therefore practical interpretations: they seek a balance between what the source suggests and what a home kitchen can make, without pretending to recreate a lost flavor perfectly.

One of the most useful sources for these sweets is Cato, a Roman author of the second century BC. In the agricultural treatise known as *De agri cultura*, he included instructions for preparations such as libum and savillum. These are valuable texts because they show ingredients and actions, but they are not illustrated modern cookbooks: some instructions are concise and presuppose experience.

When a source says to mix, cook, or check a dough, it does not always specify the size of the vessel, the oven temperature, or the exact duration. Translations may also differ in how they render a term. For this reason, it is more accurate to separate three levels: what the ancient text says; what scholars debate; and what we add to make the preparation feasible today.

The quantities in the recipes that follow are modern, untested formulations, not faithful conversions of ancient measures. Cato also provided quantities and proportions for libum, savillum, and mustacei (*De agri cultura*, §§75, 84, and 121): this does not automatically make the different formulations proposed here verified. The times, too, are approximate, because ovens and ingredients vary. If we have not reliably tested a formulation, we will say so: readers can use it as a suggestion, not as a guarantee of a result identical to one from a Roman kitchen.

Libum is often associated with ritual offerings. The name is connected with a flatbread or cake. Cato described its ingredients and baking in *De agri cultura*, §75, and mentioned a libum in the rite of offering to Jupiter in §134: these are two separate passages, not a single recipe accompanied by ritual instructions. The passage shows that food could be part of a domestic religious act: preparing and offering a dish meant placing it within a ritual practice, not merely choosing what to eat.

There is no need to imagine that every libum was identical or that all families followed a single formula. Practices varied over time and from place to place, and the source we have represents

one specific testimony. We can say that the preparation appears in a ritual context in Cato's text; we cannot automatically extend that instance to every Roman home.

For the home recipe, we will use ingredients available today and a simple shape. Modern oven baking does not claim to reproduce every detail of an ancient hearth. The result will be a firm flatbread, with cheese and flour, inspired by the description and adapted to modern equipment. Eggs, milk, and gluten are allergens to consider.

Modern Cheese Libum

This is a home-kitchen suggestion inspired by the preparation described by Cato, not a transcription with ancient quantities. The formulation has not been tested: it uses small portions and calls for close attention to the texture during baking.

Makes: 4 small flatbreads · **Preparation:** 15 minutes · **Baking:** about 25–35 minutes · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 200 g well-drained ricotta
- 120 g soft wheat flour, plus a little for the work surface
- 1 medium egg, about 50 g without the shell
- 10 g honey, optional, for serving

Method

1. Heat the oven to 180 °C and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

2. Put the ricotta in a bowl and mash it with a fork. It should be soft, without large lumps; if it is very watery, drain it first.
3. Add the egg and mix. Add the flour in two additions, until you have a soft dough that can be shaped with lightly floured hands.
4. Divide the dough into four portions and shape them into flatbreads about 2 cm thick. Arrange them on the baking sheet with space between them.
5. Bake until the surface is lightly golden and the center is cooked through. The time may vary depending on the oven and the moisture in the ricotta; do not rely on the minutes alone.
6. Leave to cool until warm. If you like, serve with a little honey.

Tips, variations, and storage. Ricotta, egg, and gluten are allergens. A drier ricotta may need less flour; a wetter one may need a little more, so add it gradually. As written, this is not a gluten-free or lactose-free recipe. Store the flatbreads covered in the refrigerator and eat them within two days; reheat them until thoroughly hot. Since the recipe has not been verified by testing, note the result and adjust the formulation only after checking that the dough cooks through in the center.

Savillum is another sweet that Cato describes in *De agri cultura*. The formula includes cheese, flour, honey, and egg; the text also mentions a topping of honey and poppy seeds. It is an interesting piece of evidence because it offers more details than many ancient recipes, but it is not the same as a modern recipe card: it does not give a measurable temperature and leaves the cook decisions that depend on experience.

The name and shape of savillum are often presented as those of a cake or sweet baked in a covered vessel. It is wise not to turn every reconstructed detail into a certainty. Modern recipes inspired by the passage choose proportions, molds, and cooking methods to obtain a repeatable result with a home oven.

Here honey does more than provide sweetness. Together with the cheese, it contributes a full flavor, different from that of a very sweet contemporary cake. Poppy seeds, if used, add a crisp note; their presence in the source is better supported than the idea that there was one obligatory form of the sweet. The following preparation is an untested modern reconstruction, to be assessed carefully according to your oven.

Modern Ricotta and Honey Savillum

This recipe translates the ingredients attributed to savillum into a home-kitchen version. The quantities and temperature are modern; this version has not been tested, so the oven and the center of the sweet should be checked carefully.

Makes: 6 servings · **Preparation:** 15 minutes · **Baking:** about 30–40 minutes · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 250 g well-drained ricotta
- 80 g soft wheat flour
- 1 medium egg, about 50 g without the shell
- 60 g honey
- 10 g poppy seeds, optional

Method

1. Heat the oven to 170 °C. Line a small ovenproof dish with parchment paper.
2. Drain the ricotta if it releases liquid, then work it with a fork until creamy.
3. Add the egg and honey. Mix until the mixture is uniform.
4. Gradually incorporate the flour. Pour the batter into the dish and level the surface.
5. Bake until the edges have set and the center no longer looks liquid. If the surface darkens too quickly, cover it loosely with a sheet of aluminum foil. Let it cool before cutting.
6. Add the poppy seeds, if using, on top of the sweet or when serving.

Tips, variations, and storage. Ricotta, egg, and gluten are allergens; poppy seeds are optional. Honey is not suitable for children under twelve months. Do not replace the flour with a gluten-free blend without revising the recipe: the texture and baking will change. Store the sweet covered in the refrigerator and eat it within two days. This is an untested suggestion: check that the center is cooked and that the sweet sets as it cools.

Mustacei were preparations made with flour and must, often rendered in modern reconstructions as small flatbreads; calling them biscuits describes our version, not an established ancient texture. Cato's recipe mentions must and aromatic ingredients, including cheese and fat, and names bay leaves for baking. The details are valuable, but translating ancient terms and techniques into a modern list requires choices; current versions are not all the same.

Must is freshly pressed grape juice, before fermentation turns it into wine. Today it can be difficult to find outside the grape harvest season. Replacing it with unfermented grape juice is a practical contemporary solution: it changes the sweetness and acidity and should not be attributed to the ancient source.

For our kitchen, we will choose a simple dough and state the substitutions. The result will be a soft biscuit or a small flatbread, depending on the shape and baking time. In this case, too, the recipe is an untested home-kitchen suggestion, inspired by the ingredients handed down to us, not a definitive reconstruction of Roman flavor.

Modern Mustacei with Grape Must

This home recipe is inspired by the ingredients mentioned by Cato, but it does not reproduce an ancient formula in certain proportions. It is an untested suggestion; grape juice is a modern substitute for fresh must.

Makes: 8 biscuits · **Preparation:** 20 minutes · **Baking:** about 18–25 minutes · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 250 g soft wheat flour
- 100 g unfermented grape juice, with no added sugar
- 40 g mild olive oil
- 30 g honey
- 5 g baking powder
- 1 g cinnamon, optional

Method

1. Heat the oven to 180 °C and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. Mix the grape juice, oil, and honey in a bowl.
3. In another bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, and cinnamon, if using.
4. Pour the liquids over the dry ingredients and mix until no dry flour remains. Make a soft dough; if it is too sticky, add a little flour, one tablespoon at a time.
5. Divide into eight pieces and shape into biscuits about 1.5 cm thick. Arrange them on the baking sheet.
6. Bake until the bottom is just golden and the surface looks dry. Let them cool on the baking sheet: they will be soft when hot.

Tips, variations, and storage. Check the labels on the baking powder and juice; flour contains gluten. For this version, choose pasteurized, unfermented grape juice. Untreated fresh must may present microbiological risks and may begin to ferment: do not automatically consider it equivalent or nonalcoholic, especially for children and people who need to avoid alcohol. Do not add bay leaves to the dough: the source associates them with the preparation, but handling the leaves on a home baking sheet requires a separate choice and is not necessary for this version. Store the cooled biscuits in a clean, closed container for no more than two days. Discard them if they show signs of spoilage, but remember that a normal smell and appearance do not guarantee safety or justify longer storage.

Good to Know

Honey was an important sweetener, but that does not mean every family often made sweets or that everyone had access to the same ingredients. Written sources chiefly preserve the voices and practices of certain settings; the daily lives of many people are less visible. The word “sweet” does not always match the modern category, either: a preparation could be food, an offering, or part of a festival.

We can say that Cato handed down formulas for libum and savillum and that his collection

connects libum with an offering. For mustacei, the text mentions must and aromatics. The exact quantities, equipment, and steps proposed here for home cooking are, instead, contemporary adaptations. This distinction does not diminish the value of the recipes: it makes the journey between an ancient source and today's oven more honest.

Honey and cheese sweets have shown us a cuisine in which flavor could meet ritual. An offered libum, a shared savillum, or biscuits made with must are not merely curious names: they are opportunities to ask who did the cooking, what could be found, and how much our reconstruction depends on the few traces that remain.

In the next chapter, we will move from the plate to the glass. We will see how the Romans drank wine, why they often mixed it with water, and what drinks such as mulsum and posca meant. There, too, as here, we will follow the sources and distinguish documented practices from versions we can prepare today.

Wine, Honey, and Spices: What Was Drunk

At sunset, in a tavern in a Roman city, the counter filled with cups and jugs. A customer asked for wine; the server poured water too, and the act of mixing changed the drink's flavor and strength. We can imagine the hubbub, the smell of bread, and the comings and goings in the street, but this opening is a narrative reconstruction: it does not describe a specific establishment or a documented evening.

The question, however, is a concrete one: what did drinking Roman-style mean? There was no single answer. Drinks varied according to resources, place, season, and occasion. Wine and water were important, but there were also tart drinks and preparations with honey or aromatics. In previous chapters, we followed food from the pantry to the banquet; now we enter the culture of the glass, taking care not to turn an attested practice into a rule that applied to everyone.

The grapevine was cultivated in many regions of the Roman world, and wine circulated through networks of production and trade. Amphorae, the remains of containers, and traces left at places of consumption help scholars reconstruct these movements; they do not, however, let us put the same glass in the hand of every inhabitant of the empire. Climate, local availability, income, and occasion made a difference.

Wine had different uses: it could accompany a meal, be offered at a gathering, or appear in ritual practices. But water remained essential, and in some situations people also drank beverages made by acidifying water or mixing it with other ingredients. Ancient sources speak above all of the people and settings that left written testimony; the lives of those who had no voice in the texts are more difficult to reconstruct.

That is why it is better to say "on many occasions" and not "always." Roman wine was not a single product, nor did it taste the same everywhere. Whenever a modern recipe tries to evoke it, it approaches a historical idea: it cannot reliably reproduce the taste of a drink prepared two thousand years ago.

For many readers today, the idea of watering down wine may seem unusual. In the Roman world, however, mixing it was a familiar and discussed practice. Wine could be stored and served in different ways, and dilution changed its intensity and flavor. We should not imagine a fixed ratio followed by everyone: choices depended on the drink, the situation, and whoever prepared it.

Mixing also had a social aspect. Serving a cup meant more than simply filling it: the vessel, the available ingredients, and the way the drink was shared all mattered. Ancient images and texts

show practices associated with banquets and public occasions, but they are partial testimonies, not photographs of life in every home.

We can therefore imagine diluted wine as a common possibility, not as a law. The useful lesson is that the Roman drink was also made at the moment it was served: water, wine, and sometimes aromatics were combined. In the recipes that follow, the quantities will be calculated for a modern kitchen and identified as such.

Wine could also reflect differences in status. Origin, quality, and reputation mattered to the choices of those who could afford more options; those with fewer resources relied on what was available. Literary sources, often written by educated and well-off people, sometimes describe wines and those who drank them with irony. For this very reason, they should be read with caution: a sharp remark is not a statistic about consumption.

On grand occasions, the drink could be part of the staging of hospitality. Cups were served, aromatics offered, and the ability to choose displayed. At a simpler table, on the other hand, wine did not necessarily become a spectacular luxury: it could accompany a frugal meal or be replaced by other drinks. The distance between these settings is one of the clearest ways to understand that there was no single Roman table.

We do not need to invent a complete ranking to grasp the point. Differences could be seen in access, quality, and occasion. When we read about mulsum or spiced wine, we will bear in mind that these were particular preparations, not what every family drank every day.

Amphorae were part of wine's journey. Their shape, markings, and the places where they have been found help reconstruct routes and exchanges. Some containers bear inscriptions or marks that can offer clues about production and transport. But an amphora is not a modern product label: it does not always reveal completely the grape variety, the process, or the taste of its contents.

Storing a drink before refrigerators existed required containers and precautions different from those used today. Practices varied with place and resources. Ancient sources mention additives and treatments, but it would not be prudent to derive a household procedure from them without reliable and precise instructions. For this reason, the recipes in this chapter do not ask you to imitate ancient preservation methods: they prepare small quantities to be consumed straight away.

Aromatics, too, can change over time. A drink we call "spiced wine" today is not automatically identical to a Roman preparation, because wine, honey, and spices are not always the same, and

ancient formulas may be incomplete. Finds offer a window onto trade; the exact glass a Roman brought to their lips is more difficult to reconstruct.

Roman cities had places where people could buy food and drinks that were ready to consume. In Campania, for example, excavations at Pompei have uncovered numerous spaces identified by archaeologists as establishments selling and serving drinks: counters, amphorae, and objects found there help reconstruct part of this activity. This is valuable evidence, but it should not automatically be extended to every city or every period.

An establishment could offer a meeting place as well as a drink. People might stop in to eat something, talk, or take a break, but the spaces and their patrons were not all alike. Images and inscriptions give us glimpses, not a complete list of customers. We do not always know who sat at a table, what they ordered, or how often they returned.

The tavern in the opening scene, then, is intended to help us imagine one possible setting, not to sum up all of Rome. Wine circulated in homes, at banquets, and in public places, each with different functions. This very variety prepares us to turn to a drink that seems simpler, the acidulated water that sources associate in particular with soldiers and travelers: posca.

Posca is often described as water mixed with vinegar or a similar acidic liquid. Ancient sources associate it above all with soldiers and travelers, but they do not give us a universal formula with ingredients and quantities that were always identical. The word brings together a practice that could vary, and it is not enough to tell us precisely what it tasted like each time.

It is useful to imagine it as a simple drink, prepared with what was available, not as a modern beverage with a standardized flavor. Its acidity may have made it different from plain water, but that does not justify calling it a remedy or a sports drink. Contemporary interpretations that present it as a way to replenish salts or treat ailments go beyond what we can claim on the basis of the sources considered here.

If you prepare it today, you are conducting a culinary experiment inspired by an ancient name. The following suggestion uses small quantities and common food ingredients. Wine vinegar may contain residual traces of alcohol: if strict avoidance is necessary, do not assume the drink is suitable and choose water or ingredients whose suitability has been verified. The flavor should be adjusted with care: vinegar is strong, and the drink does not need to be aggressively sour to evoke the idea of an acidic mixture.

A Posca Inspired by the Sources

This is a modern experiment, not a verified Roman recipe. Prepare a small amount and taste it cautiously: the proportion of vinegar can be reduced further to suit your taste.

Makes: 2 small glasses **Preparation:** 5 minutes · **Cooking:** none · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 400 ml cold drinking water
- 5 ml wine vinegar, then another 2–3 ml if desired; may contain traces of alcohol
- 5 g honey, optional
- a pinch of salt, optional

Method

1. Pour the water into a clean jug.
2. Add 5 ml of vinegar and stir. The liquid should taste only slightly acidic, not sharp; taste a teaspoonful and, only if you want a stronger flavor, add the remaining vinegar a little at a time.
3. If you want to soften the acidity, dissolve the honey in the water. Add salt only if you like, without considering the drink a solution for rehydrating or treating health problems.
4. Serve immediately, well chilled. Do not store it for long at room temperature.

The recipe has not been tested as a historical reconstruction and does not claim to reproduce a precise ancient drink. For anyone who does not like vinegar, the best choice is to drink plain water: there is no need to force the resemblance.

Mulsum combined wine and honey. Roman sources mention it, but a mention is not the same as a complete recipe: the type of wine, the amount of honey, and when it was served could vary. The

drink could appear in contexts of hospitality and convivial drinking; however, it should not be imagined as an identical daily habit in every home.

The word tells us about a combination of flavors, not a single formula preserved without variation. The following version is a modern adaptation: it is meant to explore the idea of sweetened wine, not to declare, “this was the exact taste.” It is an alcoholic drink. It should not be served to minors, anyone who is pregnant, anyone who must avoid alcohol, or anyone who does not wish to drink it. Do not drive after consuming alcohol.

To offer the same consideration to anyone who does not drink, prepare a separate nonalcoholic mixture of grape juice and water, without calling it historical mulsum. Avoid heating the wine: heat does not reliably remove the alcohol. The recipe for adults is designed to be served in small tastes, as part of a mindful tasting.

Modern Mulsum with Honey

A home preparation inspired by the Roman combination of wine and honey. The quantities do not come from an ancient formula and have not been verified as a historical reconstruction. Serve only to adults who choose to consume alcohol.

Makes: 4 small tastes **Preparation:** 5 minutes · **Cooking:** none · **Difficulty:** easy



Ingredients

- 300 ml red or white wine, as preferred
- 20 g honey

- 30 ml drinking water, optional, to make the flavor lighter

Method

1. Put the honey in a small bowl. If it is very thick, stir it with the water until dissolved.
2. Add the wine a little at a time, mixing with a whisk or spoon until the honey has dissolved completely and the drink is uniform.
3. Serve in four small glasses. The next time you make it, if you want a less sweet flavor, reduce the honey: there is no need to increase the amount of wine.

For an alcohol-free version, mix 200 ml grape juice with 100 ml water and dissolve 5 g honey in it only if the juice is not already sweet. This is a separate modern drink, suitable for anyone avoiding alcohol; there is no need to heat it. Store any leftovers covered in the refrigerator and consume them by the following day.

Spiced wine added aromatics such as spices and honey to the basic ingredients. One of the preparations mentioned in the sources is conditum, described in ancient texts with ingredients and methods that do not always correspond to a ready-to-use modern recipe. A reference to a spice does not necessarily tell us which variety the cook used, or how much they added.

The following recipe is inspired by this idea: wine, honey, and aromatics. We do not attribute the quantities to the Romans, nor do we try to recreate the original flavor with certainty. Honey and spices should be measured carefully, because they can overwhelm the character of the wine. The alcoholic version is only for adults who choose to drink. Heating a drink does not make it nonalcoholic: some alcohol may remain even after heating.

For a family table, prepare a separate nonalcoholic version based on apple or grape juice and water, flavored separately. Use food-grade spices and a clean saucepan; do not leave the drink simmering for a long time or store it for days. The historical idea can be shared with everyone, while wine remains reserved for those who can and want to consume it.

Modern Conditum, Spiced and Fragrant

This drink is a free, untested contemporary interpretation of the idea of flavored wine. Cinnamon, clove, and a brief cold infusion are choices made for this version: they do not reproduce the *conditum paradoxum* from the cookbook attributed to Apicius, which calls for different ingredients and a different method, including pepper, honey, and heating. The version with wine should be served exclusively to adults; prepare the nonalcoholic one separately.

Makes: 4 tastes **Preparation:** 10 minutes · **Cooking:** 5 minutes for the nonalcoholic version ·

Difficulty: easy



Ingredients for the alcoholic version

- 300 ml red wine
- 15 g honey
- 1 small cinnamon stick, about 2 g
- 1 clove

Method

1. Pour the wine into a heatproof jug. Stir to dissolve the honey.
2. Add the cinnamon and clove. Let it stand for 10 minutes, then taste: remove the aromatics when the scent is pleasant, before the clove becomes overpowering.
3. Serve in four small portions. Do not heat the alcoholic version in the belief that this will remove the alcohol: heating does not reliably remove it.

Nonalcoholic alternative: heat 200 ml apple juice and 100 ml water in a saucepan with the same amount of honey and spices for 5 minutes over low heat, without bringing it to a boil. Turn off the heat, let it stand for 5 minutes, and strain. The liquid is ready when it has a delicate aroma; cool it before offering it to children. The recipe has not been tested: taste cautiously and adjust the honey to the sweetness of the juice.

Good to Know

An amphora could travel a long way and leave traces of its route: its shape, inscriptions, and

findspot help us study the wine trade. But the vessel is not a complete modern label: even when it offers clues about origin, it cannot by itself reproduce the drink's flavor or the recipe used to prepare it. The artifact tells part of the story; the rest calls for caution.

The Roman glass does not tell the story of a single habit. Wine could be mixed with water and served in different settings; posca was an acidic mixture associated in particular with soldiers and travelers; mulsum combined wine and honey; conditum added aromatics and spices according to formulas that we cannot always reconstruct in full. In each case, the sources show possibilities and practices, not a drink that was identical in every home.

The recipes in this chapter turn those ideas into home experiments: modern quantities, small tastes, and nonalcoholic alternatives. They are not an invitation to drink, nor do they claim to reproduce the ancient taste exactly. They are a way to understand, through simple flavors, how much the glass depended on ingredients, occasions, and personal choices.

In the final chapter, we will bring together what we have learned and put together a complete Roman dinner for today's table. From bread to dessert, from preparation times to safe storage, history will become a practical menu: not a perfect copy of the past, but a meal thoughtfully inspired by the traces that have come down to us.

Rome at Home: The Complete Dinner

Imagine a home table, not a banquet hall reconstructed down to the smallest detail. On the kitchen counter there are a loaf of bread, a bowl of olives, a mortar with herbs and cheese, and a sheet of paper on which you have written the order of the courses. The dinner you prepare will not be "the quintessential Roman dinner": no single table could represent all the cities, families, and social conditions of the Roman world. Instead, it will be a journey inspired by the sources and recipes presented in the previous chapters.

This is a useful distinction. Ancient evidence does not always give us complete menus, precise quantities, and instructions like those in a modern cookbook. Some preparations are named or described in ancient texts; others are reconstructions that seek to translate ingredients and techniques for today's kitchen. For this reason, when you prepare a recipe, follow the quantities and steps given in its recipe entry, and explicitly regard as modern any proportions that the book identifies as such.

You do not have to cook everything. A successful dinner does not depend on the number of dishes, but on the time you have and the pleasure of sharing a meal. Choose a few preparations, organize the work, and leave room for stories: where an ingredient came from, how it was transformed, what we really know, and what we are cautiously imagining. In this final chapter, we bring together the thread of the book: learn about the past, then try its flavors using today's tools and precautions.

So the first decision is not which dish is "the most Roman," but what story you want to bring to the table: everyday bread, the sweet-and-sour taste of the banquet, a honey-based dessert, or an aromatic drink. Each choice can become a little journey, as long as you distinguish historical evidence from the version prepared at home.

One Possible Menu, Not the Only One

For a dinner for four, you can choose a simple, easy-to-follow progression: rosemary focaccia to share, olives, and moretum to start; a chickpea soup or a serving of puls as a substantial course; a fish dish or isicia omentata meatballs as the main course; and finally libum, savillum, or mustacei. You will find the complete recipes in the relevant chapters: use the quantities given there and do not automatically combine every preparation, or the menu will become too abundant.

This sequence is a modern way of organizing the evening. Ancient sources show meals and

banquets that varied according to occasion, availability, and wealth, not a fixed menu followed in the same way by every family. The word “appetizer,” too, belongs to our way of organizing dinner: olives, bread, and cheese make a practical start for guests, not proof of a Roman ritual identical to ours.

You can adapt your choices to the number of people. If there are only a few of you, prepare one main dish and a dessert, and serve focaccia on the side. If you want a more substantial dinner, choose just one legume dish and one meat or fish course: this way you can taste more flavors without turning the kitchen into a race. For those who do not eat meat, puls, chickpea soup, and moretum can make up the main part of the meal, provided you check the cheese ingredients and your guests’ needs.

Also consider that a historical recipe does not have to be reproduced in its entirety to be interesting. You can explain that ancient garum was a fermented fish sauce and serve a modern sauce inspired by that idea, if the recipe calls for it and your guests would like it. You can also leave the sauce out: the history remains true, and the meal can be adapted to the tastes of those at the table.

Today’s Pantry

Most of the ingredients in the recipes can be found in an ordinary supermarket: flour, olive oil, dried or cooked legumes, fresh cheeses, honey, aromatic herbs, and common spices. For grains, choose the type the recipe calls for. If you use wholemeal flour or spelt flour instead of the kind specified, the texture may change: the dough may absorb more or less liquid. Do not add flour or water at random; follow the recipe entry and adjust only if the recipe allows it.

Garum is the clearest example of an ingredient that should not be replaced as if the substitute were exactly the same. It was a fermented fish sauce, produced in antiquity using methods that are not something to improvise at home. A modern fish sauce or a salty condiment can evoke part of that flavor, but it is not the same product. If you choose a commercial substitute, read its label and take fish, soy, or other allergens into account; do not try to ferment fish at home by following improvised instructions.

Ancient herbs and aromatics also call for caution. Some plants used by the Romans are not readily available or cannot be identified with certainty. In a home recipe, you can use an available herb with a suitable aromatic profile, but it is better to call it a “modern substitute” rather than claim that it reproduces the ancient flavor. Pepper, cumin, coriander, and rosemary are easy to find today; use them in the quantities specified in each individual recipe, not as if every Roman

kitchen used them all the time.

Grape must can be difficult to find out of season or in some areas. If a recipe offers a contemporary alternative, follow it for that version, without changing the proportions of the ingredients on your own. For honey, choose a food-grade product and remember that its aroma varies according to the type: this choice will also affect the result. Honey is not neutral sugar, and it does not always behave the same way in doughs.

Before cooking, check every guest's allergies and preferences. Cheese and other dairy products, wheat and other gluten-containing grains, fish, eggs, and nuts may appear in the recipes or substitutions. A lactose-free or gluten-free version is possible only if the ingredients and method allow it; simply changing a product is not enough without checking that it is suitable and that there is no cross-contamination.

A Meal to Bring to the Table

Here is an example you can adapt to the season and the people you have invited. To start, place the focaccia prepared according to the recipe in Chapter 1 in the center of the table, along with olives and the moretum from Chapter 2. The bread lets you taste the herb sauce, and this opening does not require you to serve several hot dishes right away. If someone avoids dairy, keep the cheese separate and choose a suitable accompaniment for that person, checking the ingredients.

For a substantial course, choose chickpea soup or spelt puls, not necessarily both. The soup can be a good choice when you want to bring something hot and simple to the table; puls, on the other hand, tells the story of the role of grains in the pantry. If the dinner includes a meat or fish main course, a smaller serving of legumes may be enough, or you can leave them out. The amount to prepare depends on the portions specified in the individual recipes and your guests' appetites.

For the main course, you can choose isicia omentata or fish patina, both already discussed in Chapter 3. There is no need to serve both: a single recipe lets you focus on its history and manage cooking and serving more easily. If you prepare meat or fish, follow the recipe instructions and reliable food-safety guidance for the product. A browned surface alone does not guarantee that the center is safely cooked.

To finish, choose one dessert from libum, savillum, and mustacei. Honey adds a distinctive note and lets you return to the theme of offerings and festivals, but there is no need to serve all three desserts on the same evening. For drinks, you can serve water and, if you wish, the nonalcoholic version described in Chapter 5. Alcoholic mulsum and conditum are optional, intended

exclusively for adults, and should be offered without pressure: water must remain available to everyone.

This menu is not a single ancient recipe. It is an educational selection made up of dishes from the book, useful for tasting some ingredients and comparing the stories that accompany them. If an ingredient is not suitable for a guest, change the menu or leave out that dish: the goal is to share a safe dinner, not pass a test of archaeological fidelity.

Organizing the Work Without Rushing

Before shopping, choose the menu and write down every ingredient, including the quantities specified in the recipes you have selected. Check what you already have in the pantry and read the labels on packaged products, especially for allergens, storage, and expiration dates. If a recipe calls for an ingredient you cannot find, choose only a substitute explicitly suggested, or adapt it after checking that it is suitable for the preparation. Avoid changing several ingredients at once: otherwise it will be difficult to understand why the dough, texture, or flavor is different.

On the day of the dinner, read all the recipes before you begin. Note which preparations require resting, soaking, cooling, or cooking at the last minute. There is no single schedule that works for every kitchen and every oven: follow the times, temperatures, and signs described in the specific recipe. If your oven cooks unevenly or has different settings, check the food while it cooks and use reliable instructions from the manufacturer and the recipe, not a made-up temperature.

You can divide the tasks into three groups. First, get the groceries and equipment ready; then do any tasks the recipe allows you to do in advance, such as weighing ingredients or preparing an accompaniment for proper storage; finally, save delicate cooking and serving for the appropriate time. Do not leave cheese, meat, fish, eggs, or other perishable preparations out of the refrigerator for convenience. Keep them refrigerated according to the instructions on the package and take them out only when needed.

A basic checklist can note beside each dish: ingredients, equipment, steps to do ahead, cooking, and the correct way to store leftovers. Also add who will keep an eye on the oven and who will set the table. If you are cooking with children, give them safe, age-appropriate tasks, such as washing herbs under supervision or arranging bread on a plate; knives, stovetops, hot liquids, and baking trays are an adult's responsibility.

Leave some time between courses. If a preparation takes longer than expected, you can serve bread, olives, and a short story while you finish the hot dish. You do not have to bring everything

to the table at once. A dinner inspired by history works better when the person cooking can sit down and listen to the guests' questions.

Safety Before Reconstruction

History can wait a few minutes; safety cannot. Wash your hands before cooking and after handling meat, fish, eggs, or waste. Clean work surfaces, cutting boards, and utensils. Keep raw foods separate from cooked or ready-to-eat foods: use clean surfaces and tools, and do not put cooked food back on the plate that held the raw food unless it has been washed.

For meat, fish, and eggs, follow reliable food-safety guidance appropriate to the product, recipe, and your country. When necessary, check doneness with a food thermometer and compare the internal temperature with official guidelines: color and outward appearance are not always enough. Raw or undercooked eggs can pose risks; if a preparation does not cook the egg completely, choose pasteurized eggs and follow local health recommendations. Do not taste raw doughs containing uncooked flour or raw eggs.

Cooling is important, too. Do not leave perishable dishes at room temperature for a long time; refrigerate them as soon as possible in clean, suitable containers, following health-authority guidance and label instructions. If food has been left out too long or you do not know how it was stored, do not try to make it safe by reheating it: discard it. Follow specific instructions for leftovers and reheating, and do not rely on smell or taste to decide whether food is safe.

For alcoholic drinks, remember that heating does not guarantee that the alcohol will be eliminated. Alcoholic mulsum and conditum are exclusively for adults; do not serve them to children, anyone who does not drink, or anyone who needs to avoid alcohol. Prepare and offer a separate, clearly identified nonalcoholic drink, and water for everyone. Utensils and glasses should also be handled in a way that keeps the drinks from being confused.

If you follow a diet because of allergies, a simple substitution does not always eliminate the risk: check ingredients, possible traces, and cross-contamination during preparation. In the case of a serious allergy, choose a compatible menu and use clean utensils and surfaces, avoiding the problematic ingredients. It is better to skip a recipe than to put a guest at risk.

Serving and Telling the Story

When you bring a dish to the table, accompany it with a brief, precise sentence. You can explain that moretum is a preparation of pounded cheese and herbs, and that the quantities in your

version are modern; or you can mention that libum is associated with ancient evidence, while baking it in a home oven meets present-day needs. One tidbit per course is enough: let the food remain at the center of the evening.

Avoid presenting a scene as if every Roman ate in the same way. A lavish banquet does not describe the table of a modest family; a recipe passed down to us does not prove that it was prepared every day. If something is a hypothesis, say so. If a quantity is modern, say so. This transparency does not make the dish less fascinating: it makes the work of carefully imagining what the sources do not tell us more interesting.

You can invite your guests to compare flavors without looking for a right answer. Honey, herbs, acidity, or the intense flavor of a sauce may surprise them; ask which ingredient they recognize and which one intrigues them. For children, a small task could be to choose the tidbit to tell before the next course. In this way, the table becomes a place where history is not acted out, but explored together.

Serve the dishes with clean utensils and keep alternatives separate for people with allergies or different preferences. Clearly indicate which dishes contain fish, dairy, eggs, gluten, or alcohol. Do not pressure anyone to taste food they do not want: a successful dinner is also one where everyone can make their choices in peace.

The Cooking Goes On

A dinner inspired by Rome does not bring an ancient table back to life in every detail. It offers us something more tangible: a way to approach people through what they grew, bought, pounded, cooked, and shared. A loaf of bread, a bowl of legumes, or a honey cake cannot tell the whole story on its own, but each can open up a question and lead us toward the sources.

Throughout the book, we have encountered ingredients and recipes from different periods and contexts. Some details are attested by texts or artifacts; others are modern reconstructions, needed to turn brief descriptions into preparations that can be made at home. Keeping this distinction clear is part of the pleasure of cooking: the point is not to pretend that the past is identical to the present, but to understand what we know and honestly state what we are adapting.

Choose a dish, read its story, and prepare the recipe by following the quantities and instructions given. Change the menu when necessary, respect the needs of those at the table, and do not sacrifice safety to imitate an ancient custom. Then taste, ask questions, and keep your curiosity

alive. Roman cooking is not just a museum of Latin names: it is an encounter between traces of the past and hands of today. The journey ends here, but the next dinner can begin with a recipe.