

The ancient Romans were similar to today's generations in their eating habits but never ate three hearty meals a day. Ientaculum and prandium were merely appetizers that filled their stomachs until the large cena, the event they look forward to since awakening. They had names for their meals similar to ours, breakfast (ientaculum), lunch (prandium), and dinner (cena).

Breakfast, ientaculum was usually taken about nine o'clock and consisted of merely a few pieces of bread sprinkled in salt or dipped in wine, and with a few raisins and olives, and a little cheese added. The poorest Romans ate little other than wheat either crushed to make a porridge or ground into flour for bread.

Lunch, or prandium was usually taken at noon. It was usually nothing more than a piece of bread accompanied by cold meat, vegetables, and fruit washed down with a glass of wine. Both ientaculum and prandium were so short there was no need to set the table or wash one's hands.

The only serious meal was the evening dinner or cena. Dinner time was practically the same for all Romans due to the lack of artificial light. Dinner was after the bath at the end of the eighth hour in winter and at the ninth in summer. The food is mostly cold, -breads, salads, olives, cheeses, and meats remaining from last night's dinner. Occasionally, hot dishes such as ham and pig's heads are feasted upon. Some wealthy Romans would have as many as seven courses to feed on.

Trimalchio, a wealthy Roman would have a bronzed donkey with appetizer dishes of olives, stuffed dormice rolled in honey and poppy seed, hot sausages were laid on a silver grill next to pomegranate and damson seeds. The guests were still busy with the hors d'oeuvres when a tray would be brought in with a basket on it, in which there was a wooden hen spreading her wings. Under the straw were Peahen eggs that would base passed out. Each egg contained a fat becafico rolled up in spiced egg yolk. There were plates with the twelve signs of Zodiac on them that had food matas ching the symbol, ram, bull, crab, figs, lion, etc. Some hosts would heat a wfishole pig and then entertain his guests by having skilled swordmen carve the pa fig like he was killing it. After eating, many guests would entertain each othered sfr in belching. It was considered polite to belch and release wind after a ni sce meal. Guests would simply snap their fingers and servants would come running with vases to contain urine. Spitting was also allowed on the floors of the triclinium.

It is hard to imagine eating after a large dinner but dessert was next. In rich homes, dessert would be served after a bath and then led into a second dining room where wine flowed like water. Dessert consisted of every kind of fruit imaginable. Poppy-seed mixed with honey is a standard dish for dessert

The majority of the common Romans baked bread in public bakeries. The standard loaves are made very flat, about two inches thick, and marked with notches on the top. There were three kinds of grains used to make bread. Coarse grain (panis sordidus) for the common people. Panis secundus for the higher class and the very white and sweet siligincus for the rich. At feasts there will be wonderful pastry castles and sweet cakes truly amazing with the use of honey, chopped fruits, and nuts.

Vegetables and fruits were plentiful in Rome. For many miles one could see gardens that send artichokes, asparagus, beans, beets, cucumber, lentils, melons, onions, peas, and pumpkins into the city. Garlic is also very popular in Roman dishes. Italy was an excellent fruit country and apples, pears, plums, grapes, and quinces were common in the markets. A wide selection of nuts including walnuts, filberts, and almonds were used in cooking and just plain eating. Peaches,

apricots, cherries, and pomegranates were found in Rome but were not as abundant. Salad greens were in great demand in Rome.

The demand for meat in Rome was constantly increasing as the years went by. Butcher shops became more popular which allowed poor people the opportunity to get meat. The poor people would buy goat's flesh which was completely ignored by finniky eaters. Beef was never really popular in Rome. Common people never tasted beef unless it was presented at a sacrifice or great public festival. Even for the rich, beef was no real treat. Pork was always popular. Pork in all forms especially bacon and sausage was a treat to all Romans. Poultry was in greater demand than meat. Coops full of common fowl, ducks, and geese were on sale on every street corner. Hares, rabbits, venison, and wild boar were also available. The butcher shops were far less important than the fish dealer shops. Poor people would eat salt fish or pickled fish, from little sardines to slices of the big fish. Fresh fish was very hard to get in Rome. There are few eels and good pike available in Rome. The majority of the fish supply must be brought from afar. Some sea-food would be transported still alive in small tanks.

Olive oil was not only food but also served the purpose of bathroom soap. It was a complete substitute for butter and made dry and moldy bread edible. It also was the basis for most perfumes and ointments. Practically every Roman household had wine available. Beer and other drinks made from wheat and barley were available and so were distilled liquors but they would never appear at Italian banquets like wine. Enormous vineyards were common in Rome.

Guests were invited for dinner parties by the master during baths or by slave messenger. Out of pride, the master of the house would invite as many as possible to dine with him and plenty of distinguished Roman citizens would have been happy to join in a family meal. Some hosts would invite many people but only serve utensils and fine dishes to a select few. Some hosts would serve wine to individuals based upon ones social status. This kind of discrimination made some feel cheap and paltry. The standard size for a dinner party was nine. Three couches, three guests to a couch meant for a single set of serving tables and easy conversation. For larger parties, one must have more triclinia (couches). Rich Romans always served cena in a special room called a triclinium whose length was twice its width. Before the guests arrived, the master cook was ordering his slaves in the kitchen and a chamberlain (upper slave) would shout cleaning orders to lower slaves and whip them if they weren't cleaning fast enough. A few signs of dirt before a party was a sign of disrespect to ones guests. The Romans ate lying down resting on the left elbow. The eating couches had three reclining places. The reclining position was considered indispensable to dining comfort. The Roman women took their place next to their man on the triclinia. The children ate sitting on stools in front of their parents couches. Slaves reclined like their masters only on holidays and would usually eat in another room.

Three sloping couches were placed around a square table with one side left open for serving. Blankets and pillows were arranged also on the couches. The couch of honor was that opposite the empty side of the table, (lectus medius) and on it the most honorable position was the right hand one called the consular. Next in honor came the couch to the left of the central couch called the lectus summus and the last couch on the right lectus imus. The guest reclined crosswise on their left elbow, their feet, which were without shoes had been washed upon entrance.

An usher (nomenclator) announced the guests and pointed them to their assigned couch. Waiters (ministratores) brought in the dishes and the bowls and placed them on the tables. The tables were very plain. No tableclothes but very shiny surfaces. A preliminary course of gustatio was served to stimulate the appetite. On silver dishes came eggs, crabs, salads, and mushrooms. Wine was served in embossed silver cups. Depending on how many courses were served the

dinner would come out to the sweet sounds of a live flute band and a slave would cut meat off the whole boar and serve it to the guests. Between each course, water was passed and the guests washed their hands and put on a light scented perfume on their hands. It was customary for guests to take a large napkin and fill it with scraps for later. Finally, dessert came and the guests were treated to beautiful pastries, artificial oysters, dried grapes and almonds, and fruits.

After the conclusion of the regular dinner, the guests would stay and share stories around the drinking bowl. The guests would customarily take a bath and then mix water with pure wine to dilute it. Spanish dancing girls would then perform acrobatics, tumbling, and act out plays. The male guests also have the option of having orgy with the dancers. Drinking is done to allow the tongue to loosen and give wisdom and advice. An offering was also given to the gods. While servants were distributing wine, other servants were passing out flowered wreaths and perfume. The fragrant flowers were supposed to ward off drunkenness. During all this talk and excitement, flute and harp players played behind a curtain.

Many banquets lasted eight or ten hours. They were divided into acts. After each main course, dancers and musicians performed while riddles were told, lotteries held, and tricks performed. Roman cooks spent much time and effort cooking for banquets and would even disguise one food as another. Cooks showed their skill by trying to fool the eye by making fish out of a sow's belly, chicken out of pork, cakes made to look like boiled eggs, and doves out of ham. The presentation and display of the food was just as important as the taste.