

# COOKING

## *APICIUS*

ROMAN RECIPES FOR TODAY

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDRAS KALDOR



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## *A note on the illustrations*

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

## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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