

What was Roman kitchen equipment like-- and could you or I have cooked a meal in a kitchen like theirs, using their stoves and saucepans and spoons? Certainly we could produce a supper in the Roman kitchen though we should probably find some recipes and menus easier than others, as the Romans' methods of applying heat to their foods were a little different from ours. Their utensils, on the other hand, were mostly much like ours.

Country kitchens made use of wood fires on an open hearth. A cauldron (olla) suspended on a hook and chain over the flames, or a hook or spit at the side of the hearth made up most of the equipment needed for hearty farmers' meals. Smoke escaped through vents under the rafters rather than through the sort of chimneys we are used to. Hanging in the smoke to cure might be hams, sausages or even a whole suckling pig. Cooking in the cauldron might be a soup of lentils, leeks and various herbs, or even (on a feast day) a boned and trussed kid or lamb.

In city kitchens in rich men's houses the hearth was usually a raised platform with openings providing fuel storage space underneath. On the hearth a wood or charcoal fire was used, though quite commonly a portable charcoal stove (same principle as a hibachi) provided the heat. Over the hot coals or ashes saucepans and frying pans and threelegged soup-pots contained the highly seasoned, spiced and herbed meals which the Roman gourmets enjoyed. The frying pans (fretale, sartago) were made of bronze or iron in either round or oval shapes, often with a pouring lip or a folding handle. Our castiron frying pans are very similar to theirs. Saucepans

and casseroles (caccabus, patella, patina, cumana) might be of any needed size, made of metal, or of earthenware or pottery. These probably needed careful use over the hot charcoals to prevent cracking. They must also often have been hard to scour clean (even with the sand used for that purpose in kitchens until the nineteenth century) as they were made of quite coarse clay. So we find that Roman recipes frequently call not just for a clean pot, but for a new one: "lactis sextarium (=about a pint) et aquae modicum mittes

in caccabo novo et lento igni ferveat". This particular recipe goes on to make a sort of milk pudding by thickening the milk with crumbled pastry pieces and adding honey. The recipe reminds the cook "ne uratur, aquam miscendo agitabis", for nothing burns and 'sticks' so easily as a milk and starch mixture made a little too thick.

Another type of cooking device reminds us a little of the modern 'toaster-oven'. This was a small portable oven called a clibanus, made of pottery or of metal. It was made in a conical shape with an outer and an inner shell so that the hot fumes from the small fire-pan at the bottom could spread between the shells and out of the holes at the top of the outer one, thereby cooking whatever food was inside the oven. Small portable rectangular ovens might be used for baking or roasting, though the usual procedure was to make a fire inside the oven some time before the dish to be cooked was prepared. When the casserole or pan was ready, the ashes were usually cleared out, the food put into the pre-heated oven, and the door shut firmly. Since dishes of this type were often made of chopped or partly precooked ingredients started in a saucepan over the hearth-coals, no doubt a heavy pottery or metal box-oven would easily conserve enough heat to complete the baking process.

Baking of bread, large joints of meat, or dishes which needed longer cooking than these portable ovens could provide, was done in a furnus or large built-in oven, usually shaped like a beehive and often not standing in the kitchen at all, but in the back yard outside. As with the box-ovens, the fire was lit before baking began, and the ashes raked out when the bread was to be baked. Only large, rich private houses would have a furnus. Poorer people would buy their bread at the baker's, and would make do at home with covered pans, like our Dutch ovens, standing over the coals. One writer tells us of hot meals being carried home in some sort of container with a fire-box: the slave, poor soul, must run to make enough breeze to fan the charcoal that keeps the food warm!

Other kitchen utensils include knives of every type or size, spoons, ladles, strainers and funnels. Specialised blades such as cleavers and crescent shaped choppers, pestles and mortars, tiny spoons with pointed handles for use as snail-pickers, salt-cellars, a vacuum flask, meat-hooks, moulds for patés shaped like hares or piglets, and scalloped plates (perhaps to put halved hard-boiled eggs in neatly?) are all known from various town and villa sites.