

So you've been asked out to dinner ...  
Roman style

by: S.B.P. Haag

Almost the only form of social get-together for many people in Rome, at least of the "better sort", was the dinner party. From menus in Martial's Epigrams to the disgusting details of food served to the poor hangers-on in Juvenal's Satire Five or the amazing minutiae of Trimalchio's banquet-dishes in Petronius' Satiricon, we know the general pattern of the cena from soup to nuts, or as the Romans said, ab ovo ad mala, "from eggs to apples."

But what about getting that all-important invitation to dine out at the great man's house? What sort of dinner invitations did the Romans send around to each other, on their wax tablets or their deckle-edged and tasteful pieces of parchment or papyrus? Let's have a look at a few accounts of invitations out to dinner. First, here's Horace, whose guest Fundanius seems to be too much in demand elsewhere to fill last minute invitations from his friends:

Ut Nasidieni iuvit te cena beati?  
nam mihi quaerenti convivam dictus here illic  
de medio potare die. Satires 2.8 (1-3)

How did you enjoy dinner, Fundanius,  
With well-heeled Nasidienus?  
When I asked you yesterday to my house  
They told me you'd been gone since noon,  
Drinking over there at his place ...

Here's how Horace invites another friend, Torquatus. He's a patron and seems to need an excuse to avoid his over-eager clients:

Si potes Archiacis conviva recumbere lectis  
nec modica cenare times holus omne patella  
supremo te sole domi, Torquate, manebo ...  
tu quotus esse velis rescribe et rebus omissis  
atria servantem postico falle clientem. Epistles 1.5. (1-3, 30-1)

Can you face pine furniture and pottery,  
And salad for supper, Torquatus? If so,  
I'll expect you at my place as the sun sets.  
Send me a note about how many people to ask,  
Then drop everything. Give your client the slip  
And leave by the back door - his business can wait!

Martial describes himself as puzzled by the hidden reluctance of Dento to

accept his dinner invitations:

Quid factum est, rogo, quid repente factum,  
ad cenam mihi, Dento, quod vocanti  
(quis credat?) quater ausus es negare?  
sed nec respicis et fugis sequentem,  
quem thermis modo quaerere et theatris  
et conclavibus omnibus solebas.

What's up, I wonder? I've asked you out to dinner  
No less than four times and suddenly -  
You can't come. You look away, avoid me,  
Though just last week you used to hunt  
For me in theatres, baths and banquet halls. Epigrams 5.44

But Martial knows very well the reason why Dento doesn't want to come to dinner these days:

Sic est, captus es unctiore mensa  
et maior rapuit canem culina.

I know what it is! You've been snared  
You greedy hound, you! A grander menu  
And a greasier spread has got you!

Here's Younger Pliny's reproach, not for failure to accept an invitation, but for accepting and then never turning up at all (surely just as much bad manners in Rome as it would be nowadays?):

Heus tu! promittis ad cenam, nec venis ... paratae erant  
lactucae singulae, cochleae ternae, ova bina, halica cum  
mulso ... olivae, betacei, cucurbitae, bulbi, alia mille  
non minus lauta. audisses comoedum vel lectorem vel lyr-  
isten vel, quae mea liberalitas, omnes. At tu apud nescio  
quem ostrea, vulvas, echinos, Gaditanas maluisti. dabis  
poenas, non dico quas! Letters, 1.15

Hey there, Clarus! You promise to have dinner but you don't come!  
Everything was ready, one lettuce, three snails and two eggs each, a  
drink of barley water (and some sweet wine), olives, beets, cucum-  
bers, green onions and dozens of other equally delightful items. You  
could have listened to a comedian, an actor doing readings, a lyre-  
player - or all three, because I'm a really good host. But no, not  
you! You'd rather have oysters and pork and seafood and dancing-  
girls from Cadiz at God knows whose house! You'll pay for this some-  
how, see if you don't!

There seem to have been certain social expectations, to judge from Martial,  
that accepting dinner invitations demanded invitations in return:

Numquam me revocas, venias cum saepe vocatus.  
ignosco, nullum si modo, Galle, vocas.  
invitas alios. vitium est utriusque. "Quod?" inquis?  
et mihi cor non est et tibi, Galle, pudor. Epigrams 3.27

You never ask me back, but you  
Come over every time I ask!  
You're forgiven, Gallus, if you never invite  
Anyone. But you do! So we're both at fault.  
You want to know how? Well, I have  
No sense and you, Gallus, no sense of shame!

As for refusing invitations out to dinner, few could be as rude as this blunt rejection by Martial:

Felicem fieri credis me, Zoile, cena?  
felicem cena, Zoile, deinde tua?  
debet Aricino conviva recumbere clivo  
quem tua felicem, Zoile, cena facit. Epigrams, 2.19

You really think a dinner keeps me happy, Zoilus?  
And one of yours at that?  
Anyone should better dine with beggars, Zoilus,  
And be satisfied with that!

Dining out in Rome, then, had its drawbacks and its social pitfalls. Nevertheless, it remained the commonest way to entertain one's friends, so much so that the most popular guests seem seldom to have dined at home at all. Here to conclude is a portrait of Horace changing his mind about a quiet supper at home as soon as a message arrives from Maecenas, as his slave Davus slyly points out:

Si nusquam es forte vocatus  
ad cenam, laudas securum holus ac, velut usquam  
vinctus eas, ita te felicem dicis amasque,  
quod nusquam tibi sit potandum. iusserit ad se  
Maecenas serum sub lumina prima venire  
convivam. "nemon oleum feret ocius? ecquis  
audit?" cum magno blateras clamore fugisque. Satires 2.7 (29-35)

Maybe you've not been asked out anywhere?  
Then it's salad for supper, peace and quiet at home.  
You're lucky, you say, you like to stay in, on the wagon.  
(Just as though you have to be dragged out in chains!)  
Then if Maecenas sends a late order: "Come and dine  
With me when the lamps are lit!" "Where's my lamp?  
Where's the oil? Won't you hurry? Isn't anyone listening?"  
And off you fly in a cloud of shouting and fuss!

