

Roman cooking on the whole provides us with recipes which, with a little adaptation, we can easily reproduce and enjoy. But there are plenty of recipes which we would hardly want to try, even if we could collect the ingredients for them. First of all, here are a couple of the less appealing dishes which Apicius, the gourmet cook who became the Julia Child of the Roman Empire, proposed:

"Stuffed sow's udder. Pound pepper, caraway seeds, and salted sea-urchin. Stuff the udder, sew it up, and thus cook. It is eaten with allec and mustard." The only unusual ingredients here, provided that you can persuade your butcher to sell you a sow's udder, are salted sea-urchin, for which we can perhaps substitute anchovies, and allec. Luckily we have exact instructions in the Geoponica, an ancient book on agriculture, for making allec: "Take small fish, either small red mullet, or sprats, or anchovy, or any other small fish, and salt all this together and leave to dry in the sun, shaking it frequently. When it has become dry from the heat extract the garum from it as follows: take a long fine-meshed basket and place it in the middle of the vessel with the above-mentioned fish, and in this way the garum, put through the basket, can be taken up. The residue is allec." Garum, incidentally, is the normal Roman substitute for salt in cooking procedures. Presumably most Roman food would have had a faint flavour of fish as a result. Here is Apicius' suggestion for a sauce for boiled ostrich, should you have an ostrich to spare: "Take pepper, mint, grilled cumin, celery-seed, dates or Jericho dates, honey, vinegar, passum (a sweet winey syrup used for cooking), garum and a little oil, and bring to the boil in a saucepan. Thicken with wheat starch, pour the sauce over the pieces of ostrich in the serving-dish, and sprinkle with pepper."

Recipes for sauces to promote digestion are quite common. Apicius gives one of these:

"Oxygarum, to promote the digestion. 1/2 oz. pepper, 2 scruples (1/24 of an ounce) of seseli from Gaul, 6 scruples cardamom, 6 scruples cumin, 1 scruple aromatic leaf, 6 scruples dry mint; pound and powder all this and then bind with honey. When needed add garum and vinegar." Apicius suggests mixing your prepared oxygarum with half a dozen more herbs and using the resulting sauce for "all kinds of venison, boiled and roast."

Cato the Elder wrote an instructive book on agriculture in about 160 B.C. In it he included many recipes for household remedies:

"Recipe for a purgative. Take a pot and pour into it six pints of water and add the hock of a ham. Just as it comes to a boil, add two cabbage leaves, two beet plants with the roots, a shoot of fern, a bit of the mercury-plant, two pounds of mussels, a capito fish (kind unknown) and one scorpion, six snails and a handful of lentils. Boil all together down to three pints of liquid without adding oil. Take one pint of this while warm, and a jigger of Coan wine, drink, and rest. Take a second and third dose in the same way and you will be well purged."

"Remedy for oxen. If you have reason to fear sickness, give the oxen before they get sick the following remedy: 3 grains of salt, 3 laurel leaves, 3 leek leaves, 3 spikes of leek, 3 of garlic, 3 grains of incense, 3 plants of Sabine herb, 3 leaves of rue, 3 stalks of bryony, 3 white beans, 3 live coals, and 3 pints of wine. You must gather, macerate and administer all these while standing and he who administers the remedy must be fasting." This remedy is immediately followed by one to be used "if an ox begins to sicken". It looks as though Cato's remedies may have been effective at bringing a healthy ox to its knees in a very short space of time!

(Translation adapted from Apicius: The Roman Cookery Book by B. Flower and E. Rosenbaum, publ. Peter Nevill, 1958, and from Cato and Varro: De Re Rustica by W. D. Hooper and H. B. Ash, publ. by Heinemann, 1967, in the Loeb edition).