



Roman Food and Dining



The Art of Cooking by Apicius dates back to Roman times – like most early cookery books, no quantities were used so there is a lot of flexibility in balancing ingredients.

Pliny the Elder included quite a lot of information about the garden plants being grown for consumption. He regarded cabbage as the most important both for eating and as a medicine. He also mentioned the “*water plant*” from which laver bread is made – something which may have featured in the Welsh diet since prehistoric times.

By Roman times, the difference between white and brown bread had already become apparent and white bread had better status. There were granaries in Gelligaer.

Among the new foods introduced by the Romans were hens, guinea fowls, pheasants, partridges and peacocks. Geese were already kept and eaten. Other popular dishes included stuffed dormouse, venison, milk fed snails and honey omelette. In one Roman banquet, live pigs were driven in and the company invited to choose which they would eat. Other accounts of the most elaborate banquets included one where 200 ostrich brains were served and another where rose petals fell from the ceiling. There was also reference to an occasion when peas were served sprinkled with gold dust!

Fish was popular with the Romans. As well as what we consider as fish, this included whale, dolphin, sea horses, octopus, etc.. Also popular were sauces that were produced in huge quantities in factories – liquamen and garum. The chief ingredient was pressed and fermented fish guts.

The Romans favoured eating while reclining, resting on their left arm or elbow which was supported by a cushion. As for many generations to come, most of the eating was done with the fingers. Washing between courses was customary. Knives and spoons were also used but the eating fork was still a long way in the future. One of the most distinctive pieces of cutlery was the so called “*oyster spoon*”. As the name suggests, the pointed end was used for picking shellfish out of their shells; the rounded end was probably used for eating eggs. Digs in Wales show up large quantities of shellfish remains.