NO PREP

Roman Food and Feasting

What Archaeology Tells Us About Diet

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Roman Food and Feasting: What Archaeology Tells Us About Diet

Evidence on the Plate: How Archaeologists Study Ancient Food

Reconstructing what ancient people ate requires piecing together multiple types of evidence. Archaeobotanists study preserved plant remains — seeds, pits, charred grain, pollen — found in excavation deposits. Zooarchaeologists analyze animal bones, looking at species composition, butchery marks, and which parts of an animal were consumed. Organic residue analysis uses chemical techniques to identify what liquids and fats were once stored in ceramic vessels. Isotope analysis of human bones reveals diet patterns at a population level. And at Pompeii, uniquely, the eruption froze food in place — loaves in ovens, amphorae on shelves, ingredients in pots still sitting on braziers when the mountain exploded. The result of all this

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The Roman Street: Fast Food and Food Shops

Most Romans did not cook at home. Apartment buildings (insulae) typically had no kitchens; fire was too dangerous in densely packed multi-story structures, and fuel for private cooking was expensive. The solution was a dense network of food stalls and thermopolia (fast-food counters) that lined Roman streets. At Pompeii, archaeologists have identified at least 150 thermopolia, roughly one for every 75 residents, a density comparable to modern fast-food districts in busy cities. Thermopolia were simple structures: a counter faced with marble or stone, with circular holes cut to hold large ceramic vessels (dolia) containing hot food and drink. Recent excavation in Regio V at Pompeii uncovered a thermopolium with vivid painted

decorations on the counter front and, inside the dolia, the preserved remains of food: fragments of duck bone, pig and goat bone, fish, snails, and eggs. A D-shaped drinking cup was still on the counter. This single food stand tells us more about what ordinary Romans actually ate daily than most ancient cookbooks, which were written for elite audiences and describe elaborate dishes that most people would never encounter.

Garum: The Condiment That Ran an Empire

No Roman food ingredient appears more frequently in ancient sources (and more confusingly to modern readers) than garum. This was a fermented fish sauce made by layering fish (often small fish like anchovies or mackerel) with salt and allowing them to liquefy over months in large vats in the sun. The resulting liquid was filtered off and used as a universal condiment and flavoring agent, added to dishes ranging from vegetables to desserts. Ancient sources describe dozens of varieties: some cheap, some extraordinarily expensive. The finest garum could cost as much per volume as perfume. Garum was not just a condiment but the basis of a massive industry. Amphorae (large ceramic transport vessels) stamped with the producer's name and origin have been found across the Roman world, from Britain to the Black Sea, allowing archaeologists to trace the garum trade routes and identify major production centers. The largest known garum factory in the Roman world was at Lixus in modern Morocco. Archaeological analysis of the trade amphora distribution maps shows garum moving from production centers in Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and the Black Sea into the heart of the empire through a sophisticated commercial distribution system.

Dining with the Rich: The Roman Triclinium

For the wealthy, eating was theater. The formal Roman dining room — the triclinium — was named for the three couches (klinai) arranged in a U-shape around a central table. Diners reclined on these couches, typically with three per couch and nine per dining room, propping themselves on their left elbows while eating with their right hands. Slaves stood by to pour wine, bring dishes, and provide entertainment. The meal itself (cena) proceeded through multiple courses, with dishes designed to display the host's wealth and connections — imported spices, exotic meats, out-of-season delicacies. Roman cookbooks, particularly the one attributed to Apicius, give us specific recipes: stuffed dormice rolled in poppy seeds, flamingo boiled with

dates and vinegar, sea urchins with vegetables and eggs, sow's womb with herbs. These dishes were designed to astonish guests with the range of the host's access to luxury ingredients and the skill of his kitchen slaves. But ancient satirists also mock the pretensions of hosts who serve fake exotic dishes — cheap fish disguised as expensive fish, local ingredients presented as imports. The gap between what wealthy Romans aspired to serve and what they could actually afford was apparently a constant source of social anxiety.

What the Poor Actually Ate

For the majority of Romans, diet was significantly simpler and less varied. Grain — consumed as bread, porridge, or flatbread — was the primary caloric source for most people. The Roman grain dole (annona), which by the imperial period distributed subsidized or free grain to hundreds of thousands of citizens in Rome, ensured basic caloric survival but not nutritional variety. Vegetables, legumes, olive oil, and cheap wine (or garum-flavored water) rounded out the ordinary diet. Meat was a luxury for most people, consumed occasionally rather than daily. Isotope analysis of skeletal remains from Pompeii and other Roman sites confirms this: the population shows isotopic signatures consistent with a mostly grain and legume diet, with the wealthier individuals showing more protein from animal sources.

Key Information: Roman Food and Diet

Detail	Information
Mediterranean Triad	Grain, olive oil, and wine — base of all Roman diets
Thermopolium	Roman fast-food counter with dolia (vessels) holding hot food
Thermopolia Count at Pompeii	At least 150 identified — about 1 per 75 residents
Garum	Fermented fish sauce, universal condiment from cheap to luxury grades
Triclinium	Formal Roman dining room with three couches for reclining guests

Detail	Information
Apicius Cookbook	Roman recipe collection featuring dormice, flamingo, sow's womb
Grain Dole (Annona)	Subsidized or free grain distributed to hundreds of thousands in Rome
Isotope Analysis	Confirms poorer Romans ate mainly grain/legumes; wealthier ate more protein

Case Study: Sextus and the Smell

Sextus Pompeius has worked in the garum factory at the edge of Pompeii for four years. He is seventeen years old. The factory is not near the city center, and this is not accidental — the ancient sources confirm that garum production was kept at the margins of town, downwind whenever possible, because nothing in the Roman world smells quite like several thousand pounds of liquefying fish fermenting in the summer heat. Sextus's job is to check the vats. Each large stone container holds layers of fish and salt, sealed with a board. His task is to remove the boards daily, stir the contents with a long wooden paddle, and replace the board. He does not gag anymore when the smell hits him. This is either a sign of habituation or, as his mother suggests, permanent damage. The factory produces three grades. The cheapest — muria — goes to the local market. The mid-grade — liquamen — gets shipped in amphorae to cities across Italy. The finest product, reserved from the first clear liquid that rises to the top of the best vats, gets poured into small glazed flasks worth more than Sextus earns in a month. He has never tasted it. A buyer from Rome is expected this week to inspect the premium batch. Sextus has been told to wear clean clothes and stand near the door looking respectable. He is not sure he can make himself smell respectable. He is part of the supply chain for something that ends up on the tables of senators.

1. How does Sextus's story illustrate the connection between ordinary workers and elite Roman dining culture?

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2. What can archaeology tell us about the garum trade that ancient written sources cannot, based on the reading?

Multiple Choice

1. Why did most Romans eat at thermopolia rather than cooking at home?

    a) Thermopolia food was considered ritually purified and therefore safer

    b) Romans considered home cooking to be socially shameful and below their social dignity

    c) Roman apartment buildings typically had no kitchens, and private fuel was expensive

    d) Roman law prohibited open fires in private homes after 50 CE

2. What is garum?

    a) A fermented fish sauce used as a universal condiment across all Roman cooking

    b) A type of spiced wine served only at formal Roman dinner parties

    c) An expensive imported spice from the distant eastern provinces of Rome's empire

    d) A grain-based porridge that formed the staple food of poor Romans

3. What does isotope analysis of Roman skeletal remains confirm about diet inequality?

a) All Romans had essentially the same diet regardless of their personal wealth

b) Poorer Romans ate more meat than wealthier Romans

c) Wealthier Romans showed more protein from animal sources than poorer Romans

d) Roman diet was healthier in rural areas than in cities

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Garum	A) Roman fast-food counter with circular holes for heated ceramic food vessels
2. ___ Thermopolium	B) Formal Roman dining room with three couches arranged around a central table
3. ___ Triclinium	C) Fermented Roman fish sauce traded across the empire from Morocco to Britain
4. ___ Annona	D) Large ceramic vessels embedded in thermopolium counters holding hot food and drink
5. ___ Dolia	E) Roman grain dole that distributed subsidized food to hundreds of thousands in the city

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Archaeologists have identified at least _____ thermopolia at Pompeii, roughly one for every 75 residents.

2. The formal Roman dining room was called the _____, named for the three couches where guests reclined to eat.

3. The Roman cookbook attributed to _____ describes elaborate recipes including stuffed dormice and flamingo.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How do multiple types of archaeological evidence combine to reconstruct Roman diet? Give at least three methods from the reading.

2. What does the distribution of garum amphorae across the empire tell archaeologists about Roman trade?

3. How did formal Roman dining serve social functions beyond simply eating, and what does this tell us about Roman values?