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How Did the Romans Raise Hell?

Investigating the Roman eating behavior

Were the Romans the incorrigible gluttons as they are described over millennia? We can just mention some famous gluttons: Vitellius or Nero; they sat at the table drinking and eating from afternoon till dawn, and we are tempted to believe that Romans spent their life as such. But actually, most Romans sat at the table just in the evening, so the truth is a little bit different. Indeed, at some banquets, they could eat double, to make up for the lost time. Related to the event, a daily meal (cena) could turn into a vulgar drinking bout or a feast full of distinction and delicacy. Normally, the Romans had three meals daily: jentaculum (breakfast), prandium (lunch) and cena (dinner). Neither breakfast nor lunch were very copious. Usually, breakfast included bread and cheese while the lunch consisted of bread completed with a piece of cold meat, vegetables and fruits, with a little wine. They lasted so little that the table did not have to be set beforehand. Both were quick meals ingested hastily. The only real meal worthy of this name was the "cena". It lasted up to certain hours, depending of whether it was a regular one or a celebration, if the host received a guest who preferred a frugal meal or was a glutton. When Pliny the Elder left the "cena" table it was daylight in the summer, and just one hour past sunset in winter. But these were exceptions: Nero's cenas prolonged after midnight or that of Trimalchion till dawn, while that of the "rioters", present for disapproval, till the morning star rose. But no matter how long it lasted, the cena always took place, in the case of the rich men, in a room called triclinium, with a double length compared to its width. The name of the room came from triclinia, beds with three seats on which the guests and the host lay. The bed, in the Roman concept, was an element that couldn't have missed if they wanted to "feel good", more of a probe of elegance and a sign of high social rank. Around a square table, with one side free for the service, three descending beds were placed; each bed had fluffy mattresses and luxurious coverlets, marking three seats, divided by pillows, reserved for both men and women. The seats were occupied following a rigorous etiquette: the honor bed was that which does not look to another eater, in the so-called locus consularis (the consuls were two magistrates which represented for one year the authority in the Roman Republic). Around a table there was enough space for about 8 people, but in large feasts they were modified to make place for over 36 persons. A type of majordomo (nomenclator) announced the guests and showed them the bed and the seat reserved for them, while many servants (ministratoris) brought the dishes and took care of maintaining the glasses full all the time. The Roman cutlery was made of toothpicks (dentiscalpium), knives and spoons (ladle "trulla", common spoon "lingula" and sharp spoon "cochlea" for eating eggs and clams). The Romans did not use forks, they ate with their hands, fact that required repeated hand washings, starting before eating, during the meal, and before every dish was served. Slaves with ewers or basins circulated near the beds, pouring over the hands of the guests a fresh and perfumed water, wiping them with a towel worn over their shoulder. A banquet was made of at least seven dishes: snacks, three cooked meals, two roasts, and the desert. Sometimes, the banquet competed in overabundance, ridiculousness and stupidity, like in a banquet given by Trimalchion: "On the snacks dish there was a donkey statuette made of Corint bronze, with on one side a knapsack filled with "white" olives, and on the other side with "black" olives. On a silver grill browned sausages were fuming, while bellow, as coal were dry plumes of Damascus and pomegranate pulp."Of course, the wine was in great abundance in such feasts. Any Roman feast started with a copious libation, when wine was poured in the honor of some divinity. After a snack, the "mulsum" - wine with honey - was tasted. After that, the cups were filled with the most famous wines (Marsala, Falerno, and others).The first dish: hens browned on straw fire, filled each one with a quail in well-spiced yolk.The second dish: on a discus representing the horoscope, a food was served for each sign: for the Leo African figs, for Gemini pig kidneys, for Taurus big chunks of grilled beef, for the Capricorn spiny lobster and so on. The others roasts were of fattened hens, sow udder, browned wild boar filled with thrushes, sausages and fish in spiced sauce (garum). Extremely appreciated was the goose liver or pheasants filled with earth nuts (which is still today the most expensive fungus) and from fish the mullets. The desert was a richly adorned cake and all the guests received a pastry Priap (the god of the orchids and vineyards) charged with cakes, dry fruits and fresh fruits, especially grapes. The principle of the Roman chefs'

culinary art was not to reveal the ingredients the dishes were was of. Most of the banquets lasted 8-10 hours, with some pauses for a concert or a representation with clowns, circus and funambulists. Sometimes, in between, the guests were allowed to take hot baths. Before the desert, riddle contests and lotteries were organized. Sometimes the pantagruelic feasts also ended in sexual orgies. This was the menu at a banquet given by Lady Livia Augusta, wife of the emperor Octavian: Gustatio (snacks): Jellyfish and eggs Sow's udders stuffed with milk and eggs Boiled tree fungi with peppered fish-fat sauce Sea urchins with spices, oil and egg sauce Milk fed snails, fried in oil Prima Mensae: Fallow deer roasted with onion sauce, rue Jericho dates, raisins oil and honey Boiled ostrich with sweet sauce Turtle dove boiled in its feathers Roast parrot Dormice stuffed with pork and pine kernels Ham boiled with figs and bay leaves, rubbed with honey, baked in pastry crust Flamingo boiled with dates Roast hare, stuffed with boiled chicken liver and brains Secundae (desert) Fricassee of roses with pastry Stoned dates stuffed with nuts and pine kernels, fired in honey Hot African sweet-wine cakes with honey But this case was not a common one, and not all the healthy people indulged in such drinking and eating sessions. The emperor Trajan was known for his moderation: his dinners had no other entertainment than music and comedy representations, and the conversations were cult. It is said that the emperor accepted to take part at the dinner in the house of the consul Catilius Severus only if the cena lacked fast and much preparation and he only engaged in Socratic conversations. The frugal cena of Trajan was made of one lettuce, three snails, two eggs, olives, onion and a cake made of durum wheat, all doused with mulsum and as entertainment between the dishes, a rhapsodist, a joker or a lyre singer. Sobriety also dominated the middle and low strata of the Roman society. A cena offered by the poet Martial, as described by himself, was made of mallow, lattice, leek, mint; tiny chopped eggs mixed with fish paste, grilled cutlets, cabbage and tick bean, ripe fruits and finally ... a bottle of good wine for seven guests! As entertainment: innocent jokes that did not cause discomfort to anybody. This is what the poet and satiric Juvenal wrote to a friend: "My friend, lesson the menu I prepared for you! I won't buy anything from the market, all will come from my farm: a fat lamb, the most tender of my herd, which has not begun to eat the buds of the yellow willows; the mountain asparagus; large eggs and the hen that laid them; grapes so fresh like on the vine, pears and apples with fresh perfume".