

Cenabis Bene: A Culinary Odyssey through Apicius

*Apicius, Recipe 161: A Dish of Pears. Stew the pears, clean out the center, crush them with pepper, cumin, honey, raisin wine, broth and a little oil; mix with eggs, make a pie of this, sprinkle with pepper and serve.*¹

It's a simple recipe; merely eight ingredients, and yet it is the bane of my existence. Nearly five years ago, I managed to screw this *Dish of Pears* up so much that even my own Latin teacher wouldn't try a slice—and merely a few minutes before, he had willingly bit down on rock-solid Roman hardtack. I do not blame him; my pear patina looked both soggy and overdone, a gruel-like mixture of pale pears and glutinous egg, studded with far too many cumin seeds to be even slightly visually appealing. As horrid as it sounds, this recipe nested itself in my subconscious, slowly evolving into a project of epic proportions—an odyssey through *Apicius*.

Undeterred by my failed *Dish of Pears*, I began anew my senior year, attempting a recipe much more repulsive and incredibly controversial amongst my classmates. Garum, or “wet cat food” as one such *amicus* so eloquently put it, is prepared by salting, herbing, and jarring a fatty fish, letting it sit in the hot sun to ferment, and then burying it for an indeterminate amount of time (Appendices, Fig. 1 & 2). I cracked open the now three-year-old jar a bit ago and found it to be mushy and smelling faintly of chamomile tea, for some ungodly reason. In ancient Rome, garum was considered an expensive delicacy, purported to have medicinal powers. Yet in my modern classroom, garum was very much *not* desired. Why? A fear of the unknown, perhaps; consider how foods we may deem edible are considered inedible by others. I, for example, do not eat chocolate because I do not like it, and my roommate does not eat gluten for health reasons. As a

more extreme example, human meat would not be considered edible to a large majority of the population, but there *are* indeed exceptions in the form of cannibalism and in survival situations, and even the latter scenario begs the question: is it better to starve or to eat a fellow human being? Returning to the garum, one must consider *why* my fellow classmates did not eat what was considered a delicacy in ancient Rome—and one reserved for upper-class citizens, at that. In doing so, we may begin to understand that while food has significance as an item of consumption—i.e., as something that provides us energy—food is also crucial for understanding various contexts of human existence.

I am currently pursuing a double major in Nutritional Sciences and Food Studies, the latter being an Individualized Major. I am also minoring in Classics & Ancient Mediterranean Studies with a focus on the Latin language. The culmination of these academic paths inspired this project; through an independent study in Food Studies this semester, I have come to recognize cookbooks as incredibly historically significant. Not only do they provide historians with direct evidence of meal trends at the point of publication, but they also allow us to develop an empathetic understanding of past communities.² A recipe card passed down through generations is not just a set of instructions, it demonstrates human connection through food—that recipe is beloved enough to be preserved, and it must be prepared *just so* and served with a specific ritual, or otherwise it is not special at all! A birthday cake, for example, has meaning because it is traditionally served on a special day by loved ones, not because it is a cake. Thus, it is imperative to look *beyond* food and consider the context in which it exists—doing so provides anthropologists with a better understanding of human interrelationships.

Apicius, or *De re culinaria*, is a collection of recipes from ancient Rome, dated to around the 1st century AD.¹ It is the only such collection in existence,¹ making it the primary source for information about ancient Roman dining practices. Interestingly, it is also one of the world's oldest cookbooks.¹ While it is invaluable in these regards, *Apicius* is not without fault, for it primarily reveals information about the dining habits of the upper class. Yet it is still useful in an anthropological sense—one cannot discount the information it *does* contain. The *Dish of Pears* appears to be a simple (and rather unpleasant) dish. In a deeper context, however, one might consider when this recipe would be prepared—perhaps at a wedding, a birth, or *Saturnalia*. We might consider whether this recipe had regional variations or whether it has any parallels in modern times—perhaps quiches! *Apicius* is invaluable as a historic resource—it is the *only surviving Roman cookbook*—and yet it remains largely unstudied by anthropologists.

Everything nowadays must have a purpose, and the field of classical studies is no exception. It is a real predicament—how does one modernize a field dedicated to the past? Fading are the days of dull grammar exercises; instead, academics have turned to food studies, a topic that is central to human existence and invaluable for advancing scholarly discussion. While my fellow classmates and I recreated ancient recipes for a grade, it has become a trend to recreate historic recipes, from Depression-era “sawdust bread” to aspic jellies. While entertaining at a surface level, these projects are important when considered at a scholarly level. In the context of food anthropology, these projects offer modern populations a rare glimpse into the culture and food patterns of the past. Recreating the recipes provides information that examining the written text does not—considering *Apicius*, one can put themselves in a seat at the Roman dinner table,

feasting with the citizens of a bygone era. Through my exploration of the recipes in *Apicius*, I will not only be extensively developing my culinary skills through recipe recreation, but I will also be viewing the cookbook through a process directly relevant to my major in Food Studies—considering the cultural, social, historical, and even economic contexts that have influenced the recipes’ creation, and juxtaposing them against modern diets. In doing so, I will add to the current academic dialogue about historical feasting customs, a topic that is relatively unresearched yet growing in popularity in recent years, especially as food continues to be recognized as invaluable for understanding human existence on earth.

Learning Plan and Long-Term Goals:

During the rest of my time here as an undergraduate, I intend to explore food in a multitude of contexts, examining topics from religious food customs to the obesity epidemic. I am a scholar before all else, and while at UConn, my central goal is to deepen my understanding of food’s central role in human existence. In finishing my degrees, I will take a wide range of courses, including Sociology of Food, The Origins of Agriculture, and, excitingly, Italy’s Mediterranean Food and The History and Culture of Food in the Mediterranean, both of which are part of a study abroad program in Italy. In these, I will have the opportunity to experience firsthand how the recipes in *Apicius* have evolved into modern day cuisine, as the program introduces students to the unique components of the Mediterranean diet. Outside of academics, I intend to continue my employment with a plant-based dietitian, which has provided me with experience in nutrient analysis. I have also discovered a series of cooking classes specifically focused on ancient recipe recreation.

After UConn, I intend to pursue a graduate degree in either Food Studies or Gastronomy. I then will complete my dietetic internship and earn my Registered Dietitian credential. I plan to then return to academia for my PhD in Food Studies and continue to explore how crucial food is to our existence—a recent topic I have been interested in as of late is food ritual; the beautiful thing is that *everyone* has rules and traditions about food. *Apicius* will be the first large-scale project in the field of Food Studies that I will undertake, and it will be invaluable in terms of the skills it will provide me, from hard skills in culinary expertise, nutritional analysis, and cookbook creation to the soft skills of anthropological research and academic thought. I am truly fortunate to have found my path; in simplest terms, I hope to always have the opportunity to study food's complex relationship with humanity.

Project Proposal

Field of Interest and General Outline: *Cenabis Bene: A Culinary Odyssey through Apicius* can be divided into four sections that combine historical research, culinary skills, and scientific analysis in a multifaceted and interdisciplinary project. I hope to personally develop an understanding of Roman feasting customs and relate the recipes and associated ingredients to modern day food patterns. I then intend to share this knowledge with other scholars of food and anthropology, as the information I learn will be valuable in furthering academic discussions about human existence. Project steps are as follows: (1) the creation of a small clay oven, (2) the preparation and nutritional analysis of selected recipes in *Apicius*, (3) the documentation of the cooking process in an updated cookbook, and (4) the in-depth analysis of anthropological contexts surrounding *Apicius*. The project will culminate in the production of a modernized

Apicius and a presentation thereof to various academic groups, inserting myself into the dialogue of food history and providing fellow scholars with in-depth and multidisciplinary research on ancient eating customs and their modern parallels.

Review of the Literature: While relatively new fields, culinary archaeology and food studies are increasingly being recognized as valuable in the overarching discipline of anthropology.³ Recent research has examined a wide range of previously unstudied topics, such as sensory experiences associated with ancient Roman *tabernae*⁴ to the concept of culinary skills as a source of identity and power.⁵ Surviving texts concerning food and everyday eating habits in ancient Rome are rare. Though fictional texts do include depictions of feasting, such as Petronius's *Satyricon*, which mentions "dormice rolled in honey and poppy-seed,"⁶ these may be exaggerated for comedic purpose.

Apicius is the only surviving cookbook, making it invaluable for examining food customs of this era. At a surface level, *Apicius* (and other cookbooks) may only appear to provide information about ingredients and flavor preferences. Yet examining some of the recipes—such as [404], for *Boiled Ray*,¹ or [409], for *Polypus*,¹ the latter of which is better known to us as "octopus," we may begin to consider just *who* could afford to be eating such creatures! Additionally, the prevalence of certain ingredients reveals information about Roman diets—the primary macronutrients in Greek and Roman diets were carbohydrates and fats in the form of cereals and olive oil,⁷ and as expected, olive oil appears hundreds of times as an ingredient in *Apicius*. Delving deeper into *Apicius*, we may consider the ethics of food, an issue that is certainly relevant today, but was not of great consideration to the Romans. Recipe [259], a sauce for fig-fed pork, may seem innocuous at first. Yet the pigs, in the process of becoming "fig-fed," are starved and

then stuffed with dry figs and mead until they die.¹ A modern example of this is pate, wherein geese are force-fed to fatten their livers. Dormice, which were also a common food source in ancient Rome, were similarly fattened^{8,9} and stored in special jars, or *dolia*, nine of which have been uncovered and utilized as evidence in culinary archaeology.⁹ Thus, it is possible to glean a vast amount of information from *Apicius* solely by examining the recipes through a critical lens, considering the influence of social, historical, and anthropological contexts.

Methods and Feasibility: In terms of feasibility, I anticipate the most difficult section of this project to be the recipe recreation. Creating a clay oven, while complex-sounding, can actually be completed within a day or two.¹⁰ While *Apicius* does include 499 recipes, this number can be greatly reduced. The first six recipes all concern preparations of wines and oils; the next 24 “recipes” are all on the proper storage of ingredients, on methods of improving a broth [9], or testing spoiled honey [18].¹ Nearly a quarter of each chapter is allocated to various sauces, many of which are very similar; recipes [476] and [477], for example, are entitled “[Sauce for] *Any kind of fish*” and “[Sauce for] *Same fried fish*.”¹ The same is true for main dishes and sides: Recipes [62]–[65] all concern preparation of sausage, [73]–[80] involve pumpkin, and [115]–[124] all involve carrots and parsnips cooked “another way.”¹ Thus, it is entirely possible to complete five or six recipes within one day—i.e., preparing two fillets of fish and serving it with three or four sauces. While I considered attempting to recreate every recipe in *Apicius*, I understand that this is simply not possible and as such, have elected to omit several recipes. Food ethics plays a small role in this choice, as several recipes involve animal products (i.e., flamingo meat, dormice, etc.) that are illegal to either own or consume in the United

States.¹¹ Other recipes are impossible to cook in a standard college apartment, such as those requiring an entire pig. Despite such legal, financial, and logistical constraints, I will still be attempting to recreate a majority of the recipes in *Apicius*; as mentioned prior, physically tasting the meal provides further information that cannot be learned simply from reading an ingredient list.

Cataloguing the process of recreating the recipes, analyzing them, and compiling the material in a modernized *Apicius* will likely require a significant amount of effort. However, I have over a thousand hours of food service experience as well as extensive marketing & design experience through my involvement with the American Society for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition; Sharon Palmer, the Plant-Powered Dietitian, where I am currently employed; and Incarnation Camps. Thus, I am not concerned about the feasibility of this portion of the project. Lastly, as for presentation of the materials, I am a member of several academic groups, including the Society for the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition, the Facebook group *Apicius*, the National Association of Student Anthropologists, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. I intend to submit my findings to these groups for consideration, optimally to promote further academic discussion on the topic of feasting in ancient and modern societies.

Yet again, we consider the *garum*, and examining it critically, we see that it was a labor of love. I did not spend six months repeatedly digging up and burying a jar of fish in my yard just for fun—through this project, my class was able to closely examine the feast described in Ovid's *Baucis and Philemon*. Through my exploration of *Apicius*, I hope to uncover the plethora of information hidden within each recipe, from the *polypus* to the *harmless salad* [111].¹ Quite simply, *food is never just food*.

Citations:

1. Apicius, Vehling, J, & Starr, F. *Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome: A Bibliography, Critical Review, and Translation*, New York: Dover Publications, 1977.
2. Brien, D. L., & Wessell, A. *Cookbook: A New Scholarly View*. *M/C Journal*, 16(3), 2013. <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.688>
3. Graff, S. *Archaeology of Cuisine and Cooking*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 49:337-54, 2020.
4. Rowan, E. *The sensory experiences of food consumption*, the *Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology*, pp. 293–314. London: Routledge, 2019.
5. Crown, P. *Women and Men in the Prehispanic Southwest: Labor, Power, & Prestige*, School of American Research Press, 2000.
6. Petronius, transl. by Heinemann, W. *Satyricon*, 31, Perseus Tufts, first published 1st century AD, translation 1913.
7. Harrison AP, Bartels EM. *A Comparison of Ancient Greek and Roman Sports Diets with Modern Day Practices*, *Sports Nutr Ther* 1: 104. 2016. doi: 10.4172/2473-6449.1000104
8. Beerden, K. *Moderation, refined luxury, or extravagance? Fattened animals and ancient Roman norms and values*, *Food, Culture & Society*, 21:4, 505-520, 2018. DOI: 10.1080/15528014.2018.1480641
9. Beerden, K. *Roman dolia and the Fattening of Dormice*, *The Classical World*, Vol. 105, No. 2, pp. 227-235, The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States, 2012.
10. Townsends, *How to Build an Earthen Oven*, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0foHjPVbP4>
11. Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies. Title 26. Fisheries and Game. Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (1). Importation, Possession or Liberation of Wild Birds, Mammals, Reptiles, Amphibians and Invertebrates. Sec. 26-55-6. Importation, Possession or Liberation of Wild Birds, Mammals, Reptiles, Amphibians and Invertebrates.” *Animal Law Legal Center*, 1970, <https://www.animallaw.info/administrative/ct-exotic-sec-26-55-6-importation-possession-or-liberation-wild-birds-mammals>.

Appendices:



Figure 1. Ancient depiction of garum.



Figure 2. Recreation of garum, circa 2019.

Learning and Project Plan

Student Name:

Spring __ 2022 ____

Courses

<i>Dept & Course#</i>	<i>Course Title</i>	<i>Credits</i>
ANTH 3202W	Illness and Curing	3
ANTH 3703	Zooarchaeology	3
CAMS 3245	Ancient World in Cinema	3
CAMS 3326	Ancient Rome: Emperors/Barbarians	3
NUSC 3291	Nutritional Sciences Internship	1
NUSC 4237W	Writing in Nutritional Sciences	1
SOCI 2705E	Sociology of Food	3
WGSS 2217	Women, Gender and Film	3

Other Learning Opportunities

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>Location/Date</i>
Internship at CLiCK (Co-Operative Kitchen) for NUSC 3291	Spring Semester, Willimantic
Food Service/Management Experience	Spring Semester, Subway
Nutrition Writing/Social Media Marketing Internship	Spring Semester, Virtual with Sharon Palmer, the Plant-Powered Dietitian
Nutrition Writing	<i>Today's Dietitian</i> , Per Diem
CT State Latin Day 2022	Holiday Hill, April/May 2022

Project Milestones

<i>Key Tasks</i>
Gather materials and create clay oven.
Begin cooking recipes. Recreate 1/3 of <i>Apicius</i> .
Analyze and update recipes.

Summer __ 2022 ____ (optional)

Courses

<i>Dept & Course#</i>	<i>Course Title</i>	<i>Credits</i>
AH 2330	Italy's Mediterranean Diet	3
HIST 3993	Foreign Study: The History and Culture of Food in the Mediterranean	3

Other Learning Opportunities

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>Location/Date</i>
Study Abroad in Italy	May-June, Italy
Food Service Experience	Incarnation Camp, Deep River, Post-Italy Study Abroad
Attend annual food studies conference hosted by the	Summer (date not determined yet).

Association for the Study of Food and Society	Likely virtual, but location has not been determined yet.
Attend virtual conference hosted by the Oxford Food Symposium	8-10 July, though July 31, virtual.

Project Milestones

<i>Key Tasks</i>
Continue creating and cataloguing recipes. Complete 1/3 of cookbook.
Continue analyzing and updating recipes.

Fall_2022_____

Courses

<i>Dept & Course#</i>	<i>Course Title</i>	<i>Credits</i>
HDFS 3425	Food and the American Family	3
SPSS 3610	Organic and Sustainable Vegetable Production	4
GEOG 3240	Health Geography: Connecting People, Place, and Health	3
NUSC 3150	Medical Nutrition Therapy I	3
NUSC 3513	Near Eastern Prehistory	3
NUSC 4280	US Food Laws and Regulations: Product Concept through Launch	3

Other Learning Opportunities

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>Location/Date</i>
Nutrition Writing/Social Media Marketing Internship	Fall Semester, Virtual with Sharon Palmer, the Plant-Powered Dietitian

Project Milestones

<i>Key Tasks</i>
Finish recipes in <i>Apicius</i> .
Compile updated recipes and complete modern cookbook.

Winter Intersession____2022_____ (optional)

Courses

<i>Dept & Course#</i>	<i>Course Title</i>	<i>Credits</i>
N/A	N/A	

Other Learning Opportunities

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>Location/Date</i>
Nutrition Writing/Social Media Marketing Internship	Winter Semester, Virtual with Sharon Palmer, the Plant-Powered Dietitian

Project Milestones

<i>Key Tasks</i>
Finish updating cookbook. Submit to publisher.

Spring__2023_____

Courses

<i>Dept & Course#</i>	<i>Course Title</i>	<i>Credits</i>
NUSC 3250	Medical Nutrition Therapy II	3
NUSC 3271	Food Service Systems Lab	2
ANTH 3523	The Origins of Agriculture	3
AH 4243	Current Issues in Health	3
ANTH 3704W	Experimental Archaeology	3
CAMS 3213	Ovid and Mythology	3

Other Learning Opportunities

<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>Location/Date</i>
Nutrition Writing/Social Media Marketing Internship	Spring Semester, Virtual with Sharon Palmer, the Plant-Powered Dietitian
CT State Latin Day 2023	Holiday Hill, CT, Spring

Project Milestones

<i>Key Tasks</i>
Present findings at CT State Latin Day
Submit updated cookbook to various societies/professional groups related to Food Studies.