ARRANGING an old-fashioned Roman orgy is not easy. Aside from certain perhaps awkward moral considerations there are other complications worth considering in the realm of authenticity. Assuming that both spirit and flesh are willing, there still remain the problems of food and the types of table service. On the matter of food preparation great assistance may be found in the Roman cookbook ascribed to Apicius, a gourmet of the first century A.D. Unfortunately the text gives few specifications of quantity measurements and this presents an opportunity for some rather daring experimentation. Other ancient Latin authors provide menus of all varieties. But consideration should also be given to the proper plates, platters, bowls, goblets, and serving equipment. Modern stores are not very likely to stock these pieces, yet their forms do provide a good introduction to eating habits and popular taste of two thousand years ago.

First of all, to provide the setting, there must ordinarily be a dining room complete with furnishings. This particular room in a Roman house was known as the triclinium, from the usual arrangement of three couches or triclinia, each of which held three people reclining crossways on their left elbows. The couches were set to form three sides of a square with a table in the center and the fourth side left open for the convenience of the servants. In the Imperial palace and in mansions of the wealthy, large dinner parties required more than three couches and in time long couches were also manufactured in a curved rather than a rectangular form. Since servants passed around the serving platters and removed dirty bowls and plates, there was no need for a single large dinner table comparable to modern examples. Nevertheless a great deal of money could be spent on those tables which were used. The small square or rectangular type, ordinarily called a mensa, could be made of beechwood, maple burl, or citrus wood, with legs of ivory from India. Mensoae of citrus wood appeared first in the time of Cicero who paid 500,000 sestertii (about $20,000) for a specimen. Gallus Asinius bought one for a million sestertii (about $40,000). Citrus wood was considered especially appropriate for dinner tables where wine was to be served since it was not easily marred by the wine, either in drinks or in food sauces. In lieu of a solid citrus wood tabletop it was possible for ordinary wooden tables to be veneered with citrus.

Round tables were called orbis and often consisted of fine wooden tops standing on ivory legs. The largest orbis formed with a single slab of citrus wood for its top measured 3 feet 11 1/4 inches in diameter, had a thickness of 1 1/4 inches, and belonged to a freed slave of the emperor Tiberius. Not only does this speak well for the financial condition of a former slave but the measurements offer a good idea of the maximum size of a Roman dinner table. Of course, several of these could be scattered among the couch arrangements at a large affair.

**SCUTELLA, PATELLA, PATERA, PATINA**

A Study of Roman Dinnerware

By KENNETH D. MATTHEWS
At first, the triclinia or dining couches were generally simple wooden affairs but later, luxurious tastes encouraged the manufacture of more expensive pieces. From Delos the Romans copied the idea of couches in bronze and then later the style of plating them with silver. By 82 B.C. there were two triclinia in Rome plated with silver and several covered with gold. In the first century A.D. mention is made of a hexaclinium, a dining couch for six, covered with tortoise shell. The puds and cushions which made these items of furniture more comfortable were ornamented with colorful fabrics, and sometimes imported Babylonian covetels were added to make the display even more attractive.

In early days the tableware used for Roman meals was made of clay, decorated in many instances but not too expensive. From the Helenistic Greek world the Romans learned about silver service, and when the technique of glass blowing was developed in the first century B.C. this offered further scope for the creation of expensive wares. When a wealthy Roman acquired collections of such valuable pieces he was hardly satisfied with using them only on the table. They were well worth putting on regular display and so he purchased side tables and open cupboards on which they could be set out when not in actual use. The sideboards called portenae repositori were at first solidly enclosed round wooden stands. Some even called them tympana or drums. Then carpenters began to create them in square or box form, pieced together of small segments of wood and veneered with maple or citrus wood. Some were even inlaid with silver or tortoise shell. Another type was the abacae, which may have been an upright cabinet with shelves. When plates and goblets were placed on these shelves it may have reminded Romans of the counting board which bore the same name and so they called the cabinet an abacus.

The matter of Roman dinnerware is somewhat more complex a question than that of furniture in the dining room. Museums are filled with Roman plates and bowls, many broken but some complete—and they are identified simply as plates and bowls. They may be of clay, glass, bronze, or in some instances even silver. The Romans, too, had general terms for describing all of them. Vasa could mean any vase, bowl, cooking pot, or even chamber pot. Vasa erecta meant particularly a food plate or bowl. Fonsilla might indicate any dish, pot, cup, or jar made of clay. Argentum was often a casually abbreviated reference to silver plate, whether cups or dishes. Yet there were more precise words to use when the occasion required and it is here that the trouble begins. Today the meanings of these more precise terms are often unclear or even unknown. By studying the context of ancient references it may be possible to recover these meanings. Surveys have been made but another look at the material may well produce some new ideas. Modern impression of terms is a fact of life also to be found in Roman times. Today the word "bowl" could mean a soup bowl, a cereal bowl, a punch bowl, a salad bowl, or even a mixing bowl. Unfortunately the Romans could also be just as casual in mentioning a piece of kitchen or dining service.

In considering serving platters, brought in from the kitchen to be passed around by the servants, there occurs first the word lana. Pliny the Elder states that these were once called magistri but during the first century B.C. they came to be known as lances because of their similarity in shape to the pans used in a balance scale. The poet Martial refers to them as being hollowed out. They were certainly larger than ordinary eating plates since they were utilized for serving crabs, two-pound mullets, whole boiled calves, oysters and cockles, lobster and asparagus, or enough prepared vegetables for an entire dinner group. Potters shaped them of red clay and silversmiths created them of silver sometimes inlaid with gold. Silver examples weighing 100 pounds each were known in Rome during the first century B.C. and a slave of the emperor Claudius owned one weighing 500 pounds. This latter piece was part of a set with eight smaller ones weighing 250 pounds each. Clearly the lana was a fair-sized serving platter. It must have been perfectly flat or it would not have been compared to the typical flat Roman scale pans; besides, Petronius mentions one used as a tray to hold a drinking flag. Martial’s reference to its having an out appearance would mean simply that the lana had a low vertical rim. There do exist several flat silver trays with very low rims and numerous cypress examples with flat bottoms and low vertical rims. Surely these are lances.

Also intended for serving were the boletar, the gabatar, and the discus—the latter obviously being a round platter. The platte was another service platter used for turbot or, among other items, a fine mixed served of broccoli, sausage in white pease-pudding, pale beans, and red bacon. However, the word patea was also applied to a cooking pan in the kitchen where the chef would use it for preparing such delicacies as egg sponge in milk or chopped mushroom stalks. For ease in handling over the fire it must have had a handle, and the materials prepared in it suggest that the patea was not excessively deep. For the dining room it is certainly not have had a handle but certainly was fairly shallow for serving the foods mentioned. Turbot is very much like flounder and the Romans prized especially large ones reaching even to thirty and forty pounds. Thus the serving patea must often have been much larger than the kitchen utensil.

This word patea is actually the diminutive form of patera, a perfectly recognizable bowl often seen in the hands of Roman priests as they poured sacrificial wine from it onto the altar fire. It has an ornamental central knob, is often fluted in a petal or ray pattern, and generally shows no handle. Yet representations showing handles are to be found. A patera must obviously have the general form of a patera and the diminutive term is used not necessarily because it is smaller in size. Varro says that the patea was employed at home, at mealtimes, to make a food offering to the gods. The diminutive form was used because these everyday household offerings were minor compared to the important temple offerings, not because the household vessel was smaller. Yet Ovid does make mention of a patea containing an offering to the goddess Vesta. Here, however, it is a question of a deity whose small
temple services really represented those made in private homes.

The patella therefore is most likely to be identified with the many existing clay, bronze, and even silver bowls, broad and shallow with upward curving sides, a decorative boss in the center, and a long horizontal handle. The name should also be applied to the undecorated kitchenware with handles and to the handleless bowls of the same shape. These latter often appear in molded glassware with exterior ribs radiating upward from the bottom center.

The patina is an interesting piece of table service appearing in varying sizes and generally made either of clay or bronze. Aristotle had seventy clay patinae which his heirs later sold at auction. These surely must have been small, unpretentious, individual plates. Yet the Roman gentleman Aspernas served a course on one patina which poisoned 130 dinner guests. This was indeed a most impressive platter, in more ways than one. Vitellius, one of Rome’s profligate emperors, ordered a patina so large that a special furnace had to be built in the countryside for making it. The piece cost him one million sesterces (about $50,000). Patina was later described as being as broad as marshes. Knowing that the patina was generally intended for serving fish or lamprey, this comparison with a marsh not only suggests its connection with marine life but implies the appearance of food partially submerged in sauce. The patina had to be deep enough to hold sauces and it could be made in different sizes.

Apicius constantly refers to the patina as a cooking vessel in the kitchen, used evidently as a deep frying or boiling pan. In some of his recipes for extremely fabulous mixtures the food is actually to be served in a patina, the term even being applied to the whole food concoction. Here then is a cooking pan, necessarily made of bronze or clay to permit its being placed directly over a charcoal fire and it should have at least one handle. Doctors also melted lead in a patina. Yet it also appears in finer form on the dinner table.

Flat clay plates with low, inward-curving sides are known from Hellenistic times. Generally classified as “Pergamene” ware, they could qualify for Aristotle’s boast. Under Imperial Roman times they had probably developed into the shallow bowls of the same shape but with two broad, short, horizontal handles. In manufacturing the kitchenware one handle was evidently often eliminated, and the other one became a mere ornamentation in some instances for a longer, more practical, horizontal handle. In this case the result looked very much like a kitchen patella and indeed Apicius seems to use patella and patina interchangeably in his recipes. But he definitely singles out the patina as a substitute for cases in storing apples and pears. Here the fruit would be packed in wool in one two-handed patina, another similar patina turned upside down to form the lid and then both completely coated with a mixture of clay and chaff.

Another bowl, used evidently only at the table and not in the kitchen, was the catinus. There are no literary references to its ever having been decorated and it was considered essentially as a plain old-fashioned item, probably almost always made of clay. Varro, in the time of Augustus, indicates that the catinus was intended for porridge or anything with a lot of juice.

Juvénal says that in olden days a Roman soldier ate his spells from a catinus and Persius tells of cold cabbage or tunnies’ tail served in it. A smaller version, the ceceallas, could hold liver or forecart. The shape may well be that of the small stemless cup with slightly concave bottom, and sides rising outward at an angle toward the rim. In terra sigillata ware it could be the bowl shape with a well-defined concave lower section surmounted by a slightly outward-curving upper section.

The words securita and paropsis were also employed to describe special shapes of dinner plates. No such dish was ever intended to hold a large assortment of food as is the case today. Roman food courses were served one at a time and a serving platter was taken away only when the guests had finished with it. Then the next platter was brought in. With this method there was no piling up of food on the individual plates. From the fact that some Romans misspelled securita as scaturita, thus connecting it with scaturium, the word for a small shield, it is possible to imagine how this plate looked. The paropsis could have appeared somewhat like the securita but certain words of Martial suggest that it may have been deeper, more like a shallow bowl. In one of his satires he describes a happy servant girl who hurries in to her mistress with a paropsis of delicious fish sauce, only to see the elegant lout toss it down almost in one gulp. A thick liquid like this, mixed with chunks of fish, could hardly be carried safely on a flat plate. In addition the paropsis must ordinarily have been small since it was used as a side dish for delicacies.

Whatever the delicacy might be, however large the serving platter, and regardless of the proper dish name, no Roman considered a meal adequate unless there was wine to go with it. To say that Romans of Imperial times were wine drinkers is certainly an understatement. They were truly great wine drinkers with an occasional taste for vintage wines and a feeling for the proper association of certain wines with certain foods. This love of wine is very clearly evidenced in the variety of shapes they had for wine goblets—and each had its own descriptive name. Just casually speaking, the term posoria seems to have meant any drinking cup regardless of its shape, and the same may also be said of pocula. The caenobarus must certainly have been something like the Greek kantharos, with two tall, elongated, vertical handles often rising above the lip of the cup. This particular shape was associated with the Greek god Dionysos, who was often identified with Liber Pater. Pliny remarks that the general Marius, about 90 B.C., drank from one in the style of Liber Pater; and so the shape used by Marius must have been that of the kantharos. Though the caenobarus is only infrequently mentioned in Latin authors, it is probably to be identified with surviving cups of silver with a delicate stem and two vertical handles rising slightly above the bowl rim. The sides of these cups are beautifully decorated with relief figures.

The teryxion was even more common on Roman tables than it, too, was a form derived from the Greek skyphe. In earlier Greece this was a deep bowl-shaped cup with two horizontal handles below the rim. The suggestion is strong that by Roman times this had become the cup with two small vertical handles so often represented in archaeological collections of Roman
silver service and glassware. The handles are ornamented with thumb cushions and projecting elements under the handles. Stems may or may not be present. The shape is known, too, in pottery samples where the stem may not always appear but, instead, the bowl sits on a fairly high ring base. That the scyphus was appreciated as an antique form seems clear from references to the high prices paid by Romans for some old silver examples originally made by the artist Mentor about 350 B.C. The orator Lucius Crassus paid about 100 B.C. paid 100,000 sesterces (about $4000) for two of these. Silver scyphus made by Acrægas bore charming figures of centaurs andbacchantes in relief and were kept in a temple in Rhodes. Here, too, were similar pieces by Mys bearing raised figures of sileni and Erotes and made about 420 B.C. Typical of the scyphus was the use of ornamental figures or scenes in high relief around the sides, though glass examples are most often plain. It was definitely used especially for wine and an instance is recorded of a drinking bowl in which Cicero’s son heaved a scyphus at Marcus Agrippa, the friend of the future emperor Augustus. This was a rather daring deed inasmuch as the elder Cicero had already been done to death with Augustus’s permission.

The calyx, another form of wine cup, was ordinarily considered a cheap affair. Generally it was made of clay and might have some unspectacular relief ornamentation on it. Bowls without bases appear in red clay during the first century B.C. and carry designs of plant leaves on the outer surface, radiating upward from the bottom center. This does certainly resemble a flower calyx and strongly suggests a connection with the word calyx. Some of the best came from Surrientum in Italy, Sigeunum in Spain, and Perigamum in Asia Minor. It was the standard cup for drinking wine in the public baths. Since attendees in these establishments would have stored these cups in large quantity and could not have been concerned with extremely fragile forms that might break, it stands to reason that these calices would have neither handles nor stems but could certainly have been molded with flat or ring bases. Pliny remarks that a calix was used to boil medicines and Apepius indicates that it was also a liquid measure in the kitchen. For this laboratory or kitchen work the calix would surely have a handle, but as a piece of table ware it would be essentially a wine cup with no handles or stem. It could appear in clay work or in a more expensive form made of glass or even fluor spar, called myrrhinum or auratum in Latin. One ex-sentil of Rome paid 70,000 sesterces (about $2800) for a calix made of fluor spar which held three liquid pints. This is quite a far cry from the two-for-a-penny cost of the plain clay pieces.

A special glass calix form was created during the first century A.D. with projecting ornaments resembling noses. Someone remembered that the cocks and in thef from Beneventum looked like the noses of swans and so these were dubbed Vatian glass cups. Pliny states that Nero had several calices of rock crystal which he smashed when the news came that he was about to lose his throne. Suetonius apparently refers to the same incident but describes the cups as two scyphus with engravings of Homeric scenes. Perhaps Pliny is more correct in his identification since he was a contemporary of Nero and more inclined toward precision in such small matters.

Two very small calices of glass cost some one 6000 sesterces (about $240.) during Nero’s reign and the beautiful Helen is said to have given an emerald calix to the temple of Athena at Lindos which had the same measurement as her breast. “On your imaginary forces work,” as Shakespeare said. Evidently the calix, capable at times of holding three pints, was a deep bowl with sides swelling outward and upward sufficiently so as to permit some surface decoration and to suggest the form of a woman’s breast. In this connection it is worth noting that modern brassieres have been classified in terms of “cup” size.

In bronze kitchenware from Pompeii a shape similar to the terra sigillata calix is found but with a long horizontal handle attached to the rim. One example even has a slot for a slide with suspension chain attached and numerical markings. This is certainly a container for measuring or weighing kitchen foods and corresponds to Apicius’ use of the calix as a kitchen measure. Several lovely glass pieces of the same form have been found, minus of course the weighing arrangements, and these must surely be calices, not trullae as they have sometimes been classified. These glass pieces are too fine to have been relegated to the kitchen and they must be the form of calix in which potteries and hot liquids were served more elegantly according to Varro.

Silver calices with decorated horizontal handles have also been recovered. Some of these bear religious dedications, in which case they would have served the same function as the patera in making food offerings. Such a calix does indeed look like a small, very deep patella. Once a new basic form had been created it was typical of the Roman craftsmen, as with those
of any other period, to develop variations and embellishments which occasionally brought direct comparison with some container shape bearing a completely different name.

The phiale, another form taken from the Greeks, was a round bowl, fairly shallow but most typically formed with a low knob or ornamental figure rising in its center. Created of bronze, silver, or even gold, it was sometimes inlaid with amber and beryl. The artist Dido Verus made a silver one with the figure of a sleeping satyr inside. Another silver phiale weighing two ounces cost 10,000 drachmas (about $1600), and bore in its center a representation of Oedipus and Diomedes stealing the Palladium from Troy. A silver example by Mentor showed the form of a naiad within it. Examples of this shape have been found in metal with raised figures in the center of the interior. Ornamented phialae were certainly used only for wine.

The patera, another vessel for wine, is related quite closely to the phiale in shape. It, too, was a shallow bowl or deep saucer with a raised knob in the center of its interior but ordinarily there was no figure molded on this knob. However, a reference is made to a patera created by Nyxon on a serpent modeled inside. Dido is supposed to have drunk Amor’s health by a patera. Early in the third century B.C. Roman generals in the field were limited to one patera of silver and a salt container of the same metal; their other table service had to be of clay. And in the Palatine temple of Augustus there stood in the first century A.D., a gold patera catching the slow drippings of a cinnamon root. The patera was regularly intended as a sacrificial bowl for making wine offerings. In Augustan times, according to Varro, it was used by magistrates in making wine offerings to the gods and also in passing around the symbolic drink for a public banquet. At Thrace’s famous dinner party, Petronius mentions a servant who enters during the tumultuous meal and shouts the ceremonial words “Dii propitii” while holding a patera of wine.

The cinerarium seems to have been an inconsequential wine cup rather small in size, while the calathus must have derived its name from a similarity in shape to the Greek kalathos, a deep flaring basket employed by women for holding wool. The Romans believed that Priam of Troy used a calathus and this suggests some relationship with the typical Trojan two-handed dagger known through modern archaeological work. The calathus form occurs in Classical Greek pottery, and by the first century A.D. the Romans were reproducing it in clay or silver, with beautiful relief decorations and most typically with one small vertical handle. In glassware the name may have been applied to tall handleless beakers, some of which developed into what has been termed the “carchesium” shape.

The kyathos, it is mentioned as a wine cup, a measure of wine and a liquid measure in the kitchen. The earlier Greek kyathos was a wine ladle and an Attic liquid measure. It would seem that the Romans adapted as a wine cup the bowl of the ladle, minus its long vertical handle. What was more logical for a thirsty man? The Romans had to hold their wine ladles. The kyathus, then, was a small round-bottomed bowl which could be held in the palm of one hand.

The capis, too, originally derived from the form of a wine ladle. Varro states that its shape was still to be found among sacred vessels in his day. On temple ornaments and altar reliefs there is often included an object which looks like a dipper with a short vertical handle rising from its rim. The bowl sometimes even seems to have a short vertical rise or spout opposite the handle. This must be the shape of the capis or wine cup of murrina dedicated by Pompey in 61 B.C. Nero, never to be forgotten, bought a similar one for 1,000,000 sesterces (about $400,000).

The adaptation of wine ladles to be used as wine cups should not leave the impression that Romans happily abandoned wine ladles altogether. Though servants did pour out wine from pitchers, these pitchers were ordinarily filled by ladling from an amphora, and occasionally an expensive vintage wine would be served in the dining room directly from the amphora. The capis, the kyathus and the simpulum continued to exist as ladles although the simpulum and the capis were intended essentially for sacrifices. For the most distinctive domestic wine ladle was the trulla, and much modern scholarly attention has been given to the possible appearance of this item. Yet Varro is quite clear in saying that this piece is for wine and has a channelled projection or handle formed in the fashion of a kitchen drain (trusa) which carries waste water into the adjacent latrine. Perhaps this is not the most appetizing comparison but at least it is very specific. The clay, bronze, or glass bowls with single horizontal handles now often called trullae do not at all meet Varro’s requirements and are most likely calices, as suggested above. Existing trullae of Varro’s type are quite rare, but with their channelled spouts leave no doubt as to their proper identification.
Following the example of the Greeks, the Romans generally mixed water with the wine to be drunk at a banquet. Although the Greeks accomplished this mixing in a single large jar or krater, the Romans ordinarily blended the wine and water in the individual drinking cups. This one pitcher would be used for serving the wine and another for the water. In cold weather, when hot water might be preferred, it would be drawn from a spigot at the dining room water heater. This entire program of individual service, avoiding a common mixing bowl and depending on serving pitchers, is strongly suggested by occasional complaints that a host gives cheap wine to his guests and drinks the best himself. This sly trick could best be accomplished by filling pitchers in the kitchen from separate wine jugs.

While an investigation of the many names and shapes used for wine cups offers some idea of Roman tastes, still more is to be learned of Roman luxury from a study of the materials employed in the manufacture of these pieces. Clay, of course, is to be expected. But this inexpensive material is not to be brushed aside lightly, for some items were formed and decorated so elegantly that they were no better than similar examples made of semi-precious stones. Terra sigillata, made in Arretium in Italy but also in Gaul and the Greek islands, is the most typical pottery dinarum in Roman homes.

Silver service appears in increasing abundance on Roman tables after the early second century B.C. in knives, forks, and knives. The Romans had no forks and preferred to tear meat apart with their fingers or have it cut by servants rather than use individual knives. The silver generally were in drinking cups, and occasionally spoons. Catius Aenius, consul in 198 B.C., owned only two silver pocula given to him by his father-in-law. When Scipio Aemilianus, the destroyer of Carthage, died in 129 B.C. he left thirty-two pounds of silver plate to his heirs. His nephew, Quintus Fabius Maximus Abalbroclus, was the first in Rome to own one thousand pounds of silver. The martyr Livius Drusus, tribune or public defender in 91 B.C., possessed 10,000 pounds of silver service. Here is evident the developing use for silver, and the wealth of Imperial times multiplied the figures many times over.

Gold dinareums, either plain or enameled with gems, was also popular and Pompey the Great made quite a hit when he paraded his nine display cabinets (abaci) full of such pieces in his military triumph of 61 B.C.

Large pieces of semi-precious gem stones were also carved into cups. Among these were onyx, amethyst, rock crystal, and fluor spar. The latter stone was introduced to Rome by Pompey in that great celebration of 61 B.C. honoring his military conquest in the Near East. At that time he dedicated a cup and several pocula of murrina. Obviously his samples were not very numerous and the stone must have been fairly rare. By Nero's reign there was more of it available and the ex-consul who paid 70,000 sesterces for a cup of murrina owned numerous other pieces as well. Nero appeared all of them from the man's children and put them on display in his private little theater within the Imperial gardens on the other side of the Tiber. This emperor himself had paid three hundred talents for a piece of murrina ware but his own collection was evidently not sufficient for his desires. The courrier Titus Pompeius was well aware of Nero's acquisitive nature where murrina was concerned and, just before committing suicide, he smashed a chalices of murrina costing 300,000 sesterces (about $12,000) so that Nero would not have it.

The modern interpretation of the terms crystalum and murrina as used by ancient Latin authors is somewhat problematical. Pliny quite clearly indicates that both are stones and his descriptions have been interpreted as indicating rock crystal and fluor spar, respectively. The non-transparent variegated coloring of murrina, ranging from shades of purple to white, was very much appreciated and its plastically distinctive odor greatly enjoyed. Man took immense pleasure in chewing the rim of a cup made of murrina. However, the developments in glass-working technology led to the imitation of these stones in glass, and authors extended the terms crystalum and murrina to these imitations.

While the word crystalum actually meant rock crystal, crystallina was also used and could mean objects "of rock crystal" or "like rock crystals." Even today a refined person could "crystal" imply rock crystal or crystal glass. Pliny knew that the original material was rock crystal but he remarked that there were glass imitations remarkably like the true stoneware and each himself seems on occasion to have used the terms indiscriminately, regardless of whether the items were made of stone or glass. However, in the case of rock crystal cups Pliny warned that they could never be repaired if once broken. This suggests that glass crystal cups could be mended and there are references to the use of sulphur in this connection. The technique in general seems to have been one of softening the glass with heat and attempting to fuse the fragments together in a weak bond.

From the first century B.C. on through the early Roman empire, glassware played an increasingly important role on Roman dinner tables. Though many examples were quite expensive, nevertheless because of its widespread use some pretentious members of the upper class disinclined to use glassware because it was too common. Plates, bowls, and drinking cups were made of this material, either blown into free forms, blown into molds, or formed from colored straws or small glass sections which were placed around the insides of molds, then fused together. Imitations of murrina and onyx were created with this latter technique. Glass also was tinted black like obsidian or opaque blood red for bowls and dishes. Most of the shapes already mentioned could be made of glass, even smoothed goblets. Although different coloring agents were employed, the most highly prized glassware was that which looked most like rock crystal. Rock crystal ware was engraved with decorative designs and so was clear glassware.

But for the special thrill of using glass the artisans created a new most intricate and delicate form of cutting, which is evidenced in the forms of goblets known as diesare. Here an outside envelope of glass was formed around the glass bowl and uncentered to give the appearance of an almost free-standing net decoration. Indeed, a nervous hand could easily crush such a cup. It appears that the main center for this type of cut glass work was Alexandria, from which also came other forms of expensive glass.

With the increasing use of glassware certain Roman dining habits had to be taken into consideration. Cooked food might be served hot or cold and the water mixed with wine, according to ancient custom, could also be hot or cold. Since it appears that Roman glassware would easily crack if filled with a hot substance, the statement is often made that the Romans did not serve hot foods or liquids in glass containers. Yet the Romans themselves definitely indicate that they used glass for these services. Latin references do indicate the danger of glass containers being broken by boiling water but at the same time they mention glass which could withstand heat.

Until more to the point, there are recommendations given for measures to be taken when putting hot liquids into glassware. Pliny says quite clearly that in his day, the mid-first century A.D., glass had largely replaced silver and gold for drinking vessels. Nor does he mean that its use was restricted to cold wines since he adds, "but it is intolerable to heat unless a cold liquid precedes it." Here then was the protective step: first pour in the cool wine then add the hot water. On the other hand he warns that rock crystal cannot take heat at all and may be employed only in the case of cold drinks. This advice is not once mentioned in connection with glass.

The information on this problem given by Pliny may be extended for purposes other than drink. Added to his words, however, must be a proper understanding of Roman food preparation and serving practices. Solid foods were cooked in the kitchen over charcoal fires and then placed immediately on serving dishes which are of course mentioned as having been placed on the table. In reality, they are of clay or metal such as bronze or silver. Not only would glass be impractical for platters of such huge size but coming directly from the stove the hot food could well have cracked the glass. In the homes of the wealthy whose food and water were most likely to find delicate glass table service, kitchens were quite often some distance away from the dining area. Servants bore their great silverware through intervening rooms or corridors before reaching the table.
clinium. Then they passed among the diners who helped themselves. Certainly the food never reached the hands of the guests with the same degree of heat in which it had come from the kitchen stove. Nor was the food placed on a guest’s dish in the kitchen and then brought in to him. This form of platter service was unthinkable to a well-bred Roman. In poorer homes perhaps it was to be found, but then these were people who would not own fine table service in glass.

The fact that food in the dining room was colder than at the moment of its preparation in the kitchen is evidenced by the existence of food and water heaters of bronze found in Pompeii. One, in the shape of a fortress, has hinged roofs on its towers so that small food vessels could be placed not in but directly over the hot water which circulated within the hollow walls of the structure. The open center served as a brazier and was filled with burning charcoal. This example, as well as others designed for heating water to be served with wine, may suggest strongly that there was indeed a loss of heat in water and food as they passed from the stove to the serving trays and on to the dining room and the hands of the diners.

Plain soups and broths played an insignificant role in Roman menus and were prepared essentially for the ill. Cælius Aurelianus, in his translation of the second century A.D. treatise of Soranus of Ephesus, mentions simple strengthening broths made of goose, partridge, or chicken. He calls for soup made of rice, barley, or lentils and stews of hare or roe. All were generally served hot. Apicius lists among his dinner recipes several for vegetable or fruit stews. In the kitchen these were cooked in patinae or other cooking pots classified as caccabi, then turned out onto lancæ for serving. He mentions pottages of various sorts and several recipes for rissoles which were to be served hot in liquid or drunk or sipped. All of these special non-alcoholic liquids were to be consumed without the aid of soup spoons, inasmuch as the Romans not only had no such special utensil but probably would have considered it too restrictive. Being liquids, they would have been served in liquid containers such as the bowls or cups ordinarily utilized for wines. Certainly the most delicate wine cups, finely ornamented and stemmed, would not have been so employed, but those more simple in style were surely called into service. And these could have been of clay, glass, murrina, or any other material considered appropriate for dinner service. Again, these soups and stews would not have been served boiling hot in the triclinium.

From this examination of the details involved in setting up a Roman dinner service it becomes evident that the elite of the Roman world were no novices. Their elaborate and costly preparations of gourmet foods are another fascinating study; they certainly did not stint in securing the finest available tableware for these foods. Nor were they ever about to relegate their wine drinking to second place at the table. In their propensity for beautiful and expensive drinking vessels they encouraged fine craftsmanship in all of the usable materials. Of course, the taste for such things had come to them from the Hellenistic world. But they expanded this taste far beyond what they had been taught. Of the great wealth which once glittered in their festive triclinia only the pittance of a trace has been recovered to enliven museum display cases. The belching, vomiting, the ribald jokes and laughter, the music and the serious literary readings are all gone. Most Roman dinners were not orgies at all but the thought of wild evenings seems to be one way of making these people understandable. The remnants of their dinnerware may help as well.

SUGGESTED READING


VARRO, de lingua Latina.

PETRONIUS, Satyricon.

PLINY THE ELDER, Natural History, (Loeb ed.), 36.-190-199, 37.18-22.


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