

Guide to Eat like the Romans for a Day

(NB: All the recipes need grown-up assistance!!!)

First of all: bake bread!

At some point of the day, you will want to experiment with **bread**. There are plenty of recipes online and you can also buy flour that is ready to knead. If you want to cook it (almost) from scratch, this is my go-to recipe:

Ingredients:

5gr fast action yeast

500 gr very strong white flour (or if you cannot find it, strong)

A very generous glug of olive oil

Around 10gr of salt

Enough water to make it a manageable dough (probably 250-300). You want the children to enjoy playing with it, so don't make it too sticky unless you are an experienced bread maker.

Method: mix the ingredients into a ball and then knead on a floured surface until the gluten forms and it gets stretchy. Leave it to rest in a bowl covered with clingfilm or a wet kitchen towel until it is double its size (at room temperature this should be around 2 hours), give it a nice Roman shape, let it rise for another hour and cook in the oven at 220 for 30 minutes, then cook it on for at least another 20 min at 200 until it sounds hollow when you tap the bottom and it looks nice and toasted. Let it rest for an hour and it is ready to eat!

A note about shaping the bread: it is unclear how the loaves from Pompeii got their shape with 8 wedges in it. My preferred method is to tie a string around it 4 times (hence the name panis quadratus) and then once around the circumference.

Breakfast

Breakfast would have been a simple affair. You could have bread with cheese and olives, and perhaps some seasonal fruit to go with it.

Lunch

Lunch would again have been mainly a matter of leftovers or simple food. If your family enjoys a hot meal, I suggest you cook a frittata with seasonal ingredients: asparagus, mushrooms, or whatever you have in the fridge which would have been around in the ancient garden or larder.

Dinner

You need to think of a fancy Roman dinner as a spread of the type you get in Korean or Japanese meals, with plenty of little dishes to try from. Here I present you just two of the many you could be doing. They are inspired on Apicius in the choice of ingredients and cooking method, but they do not match specifically one of the recipes:

Cuttlefish with seafood sauce

You can substitute the cuttlefish for any seafood you like. The recipe is inspired in the sort of sauce that Apicius' book suggests for products of the sea.

Ingredients:

Toasted pine nuts (100gr)

black pepper (2 tablespoons)

Cumin seeds (3 tablespoons) – it does not really work well with ground cumin, because it loses the crunch and the flavour is also quite different.

Dry mint (1 teaspoon)

beefstock (a dash to make the sauce more juicy)

fish sauce (2 teaspoons)

Oyster sauce (1 tablespoon)

balsamic vinegar (1 tablespoon)

Cuttlefish (1 or 2 per person depending on size)

Method:

Grind all the ingredients except the seafood with a pestle and mortar. You could also use a food mixer, but it would lose some of the great homemade texture – and it would not be as much fun! Grill or fry your seafood and just served with the sauce on the side. It is truly scrumptious!

About measures and substitutions: I put two tablespoons of black pepper because I like it very hot, but you could do anything from one teaspoon all the way up to a very fancy Roman 3 tablespoon. The same goes for the fish and oyster sauce, that you will need to use with much more moderation if you are feeding young children - to make sure they do not have too much salt. If you do not have homemade beef stock, a ¼ of a cube diluted in 100ml of hot water will do. As for the dry mint, you can use a couple of fresh leaves instead, but do take into account that the flavour of dry mint goes particularly well in this mix.

Lamb marinated in asafoetida

How to prepare the marinade: mix half a cup of yogurt with a couple of tablespoons of date syrup, plenty of pepper, fish sauce and asafoetida to taste.

I marinated a whole leg of lamb and cooked it in the oven following the usual recipe for a lamb kleftiko but with just carrots, dried figs and onions for accompaniments. It would also work very well with lamb chops that are going to be grilled in a bbq. Note that it has to be watched closely and cooked at not too high a temperature because the date syrup tends to burn easily.

Desserts

A great Roman inspired dessert is to get the children to arrange their own plates with ricotta cheese, honey or date syrup and toasted pine nuts, along with some dates and dried figs. It is absolutely gorgeous to eat and plenty of fun to arrange!

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