

Dining with Empires: A Historical and Culinary Journey from Cleopatra to Apicius

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What we eat reveals who we are—but also who we wish to be. In ancient empires, food was not merely sustenance but a statement of power, status, and cultural identity. This paper follows the thread of elite dining from the court of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar to the kitchens of Renaissance Europe, using recipes, rituals, and recorded feasts to illuminate how empires ate and what those meals meant. From the likely spiced wines and roasted birds shared by Cleopatra and Caesar, to the exotic dormice and delicately stuffed snails of Rome's *Apicius*, food was both performance and persuasion. These meals, chronicled in ancient sources and reconstructed through culinary archaeology, offer insight into social hierarchy, medicinal beliefs, and cross-cultural exchange. The Renaissance revival of fruit pies, with their complex spicing and symbolic richness, further reflects how food evolves yet retains its function as cultural signal. In bridging centuries through the shared human act of eating, we discover a deeper historical continuity: that empires may rise and fall, but at the table, their values persist.

Keywords: Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Apicius, ancient Rome ,spiced wine, dormice, elite cuisine, historical gastronomy, renaissance pie, culinary history, food and power, roman recipes, dining rituals, empire and culture, roman banquets. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC4.0.

Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of culinary culture, political power, and historical documentation through the lens of ancient and early modern dining practices. It begins with the relationship between Julius Caesar and Cleopatra—not only as a union of political interests but as a shared cultural experience where food became a medium of intimacy, diplomacy, and spectacle. Drawing from primary historical sources such as Plutarch and Suetonius, the paper reconstructs the types of meals they likely shared, emphasizing the symbolic and material significance of dishes such as spiced wine and roasted meats. The analysis then turns to the Roman cookbook *Apicius*, a repository of elite recipes from the imperial period, highlighting how dishes like stuffed dormice and aromatic sauces reflected class distinction, ritualized excess, and medicinal belief. These culinary choices are contextualized within a broader framework of empire, where the act of dining signaled both power and refinement. Finally, the paper traces the evolution of these traditions into the Renaissance, focusing on the fruit pie as a transformed yet continuous expression of elite taste. Through this gastronomic journey, the paper reveals how food serves as both a mirror and a memory of empire.

1. Introduction: Food as Political Language

In every civilization, food has served not only to nourish the body but also to communicate power, cultivate identity, and structure relationships. This is especially true in ancient societies, where the staging of a meal could signal status, allegiance, and cosmological order. Among the ruling classes of Egypt, Rome, and later Renaissance Europe, the act of dining was deeply encoded with meaning. A well-curated feast could seal political alliances, seduce rivals, assert cultural superiority, or even mirror divine banquets. Unlike military conquests or written laws, meals were ephemeral acts—but in their transience, they revealed enduring truths about hierarchy, taste, and belief.

1.1 Why Ancient Meals Matter

Ancient meals mattered because they were performative—rituals of power enacted through ingredients, preparation, and presentation. To be invited to dine with a ruler was to be drawn into a symbolic world in which the table reflected the empire. The foods served, the order of courses, the vessels used, and the spatial arrangement of guests all conveyed a message. These meals were often the only space where private intimacy, political maneuvering, and sacred ceremony could overlap.

1.2 Dining as Diplomacy and Courtship

In the ancient world, diplomacy was often enacted through hospitality. To share bread and wine was to enter a covenant. Cleopatra's seduction of Caesar and later of Mark Antony was famously inseparable from the feasts she orchestrated—opulent displays of wealth, intellect, and enchantment. These meals were not casual; they were structured interactions in which each bite could advance a political agenda or soften a heart. For women like Cleopatra, who held power in a male-dominated world, the art of the table became a stage for influence.

1.3 Sources: Plutarch, Suetonius, Apicius, Renaissance Cookbooks

This study draws from a range of primary sources that illuminate the role of food in empire. Plutarch and Suetonius offer rich biographical sketches of Caesar, Cleopatra, and their courtly lives, often with subtle allusions to feasting. *Apicius*, the Roman cookbook compiled in late antiquity, provides direct insight into elite Roman culinary techniques and preferences. Renaissance cookbooks, such as Gervase Markham's *The English Huswife* and *A Proper Newe Booke of Cookery*, reveal how earlier traditions were revived, transformed, or moralized in Christian Europe. Taken together, these sources allow us to reconstruct not just what was eaten, but what was meant.

2. Caesar and Cleopatra: Historical Context of Shared Meals

The political and romantic relationship between Julius Caesar and Cleopatra VII was forged not only in war rooms and royal chambers but also across shared

meals. Dining together in both Alexandria and Rome, the two rulers bridged cultures through food, turning the table into a space where politics, seduction, and symbolism intermingled. Though we have no menus preserved from their time together, the historical context, combined with records of typical Roman and Egyptian elite cuisine, allows us to reconstruct a plausible picture of their shared culinary world. What emerges is not merely an account of flavors but of calculated hospitality, theatrical diplomacy, and cross-cultural power.

2.1 Alexandria (48–47 BCE): Co-habitation, Co-rule, and Cuisine

After Pompey's murder and Caesar's arrival in Egypt, he became embroiled in the Alexandrian civil war, siding with Cleopatra in her struggle against her brother Ptolemy XIII. During the months that followed, Caesar remained in Alexandria, where he lived with Cleopatra in what contemporary sources describe as an intimate arrangement. These months of co-habitation were also months of shared meals—perhaps in the palace at Alexandria, with its blend of Hellenistic and Egyptian opulence. Cleopatra would have used food both as a gesture of welcome and as a performance of power. Egyptian cuisine at the time featured richly spiced stews, honeyed breads, figs, lentils, and freshwater fish, often presented with symbolic religious significance. Shared meals would have been an opportunity not just for private bonding but for Caesar to become immersed in the aesthetic and ceremonial sophistication of the Ptolemaic court.

2.2 Rome (46–44 BCE): Cleopatra's Visit and Scandal in the Capital

Cleopatra's later visit to Rome—where she stayed in Caesar's villa beyond the Tiber—was more politically charged and publicly scrutinized. Despite not being Caesar's wife, Cleopatra was received with honor and guarded by Roman soldiers. Her presence caused discomfort among Roman senators and citizens alike, symbolizing the infiltration of eastern luxury, perceived decadence, and foreign influence. Nevertheless, Caesar's choice to host her suggests they continued to dine together privately, if not at state functions then within his household. Roman meals during this period were increasingly ostentatious among the elite, involving multiple courses, spiced wines, and dishes featuring game, shellfish, and imported fruits. Cleopatra's dining presence in Rome was scandalous precisely because it blurred domestic, diplomatic, and sexual categories. Each meal she shared with

Caesar was also a form of soft power—presenting herself not as a subordinate client queen but as an equal partner in empire.

2.3 Probable Meals: What Elite Romans and Egyptians Ate Together

Combining Roman culinary records (especially from *Apicius*) with known Egyptian ingredients, a probable menu for Caesar and Cleopatra might have included: spiced wine (with honey, saffron, and pepper), grilled Nile fish, roasted duck with date sauce, barley bread, figs, pomegranate seeds, and desserts made with cheese and honey. Meats such as lamb or pork may have been served Roman-style—roasted or stewed with garum (fermented fish sauce)—while Cleopatra may have introduced dishes from her native palette, using ingredients like coriander, cumin, and fenugreek. Their shared meals would likely have represented a deliberate fusion of Roman and Egyptian culinary identities, serving as a sensory metaphor for the political and personal alliance between their two worlds.

2.4 Dining as Intimacy and Propaganda

For Cleopatra, dining with Caesar was a calculated act of courtship—political and romantic. For Caesar, it was a demonstration of magnanimity and cultural reach. These meals functioned simultaneously as expressions of trust and as spectacles of power, where every choice—the wines served, the spices used, the guest list—was freighted with meaning. In the visual language of empire, the table became an extension of the throne. Plutarch reports that Cleopatra's feasts with Mark Antony years later were carefully staged, even theatrical, which suggests that her meals with Caesar were no less intentional. Shared dining blurred public and private, domestic and political, East and West. It was at the table that empires touched.

3. Spiced Wine: A Cross-Cultural Constant

Among the many culinary expressions that bridged ancient civilizations, spiced wine holds a unique position. It was not merely a beverage but a ritualized drink that carried with it layers of cultural, medicinal, and symbolic meaning. From the

Roman *conditum paradoxum* to Egyptian aromatic infusions, spiced wine transcended its ingredients to become a marker of status, a tool for seduction, and a form of ancient pharmacology. It was served at feasts, religious rites, and diplomatic encounters. Its longevity—from the palaces of Alexandria and Rome to medieval banquet halls and modern Christmas markets—speaks to its deep resonance across time and geography.

3.1 The Roman *Conditum Paradoxum*

One of the most elaborate and refined recipes preserved in the Roman cookbook *Apicius* is the *conditum paradoxum*—literally “surprising spiced wine.” This preparation involved simmering wine with honey, black pepper, saffron, bay leaves, mastic (a pine resin), and sometimes dates or raisins. The result was a sweet, warming, and highly aromatic drink that played to the Roman palate’s love of strong contrasts: sweet and sharp, smooth and fiery. Far from a casual drink, *conditum paradoxum* was served at elite banquets and private gatherings as both a digestif and a signal of wealth. The inclusion of imported and costly spices made it a luxury item, especially when served warm in silver cups. Roman diners often began or ended their meals with such wines, creating a sensory frame for the entire experience.

3.2 Egyptian Aromatic Wine Traditions

Egyptians, too, had a rich tradition of spiced and aromatic wines, dating back to the New Kingdom and preserved in tomb inscriptions and amphora labels. Wines were flavored with herbs like coriander, frankincense, juniper berries, and myrrh. These infusions were not only consumed for pleasure but were used in temple rituals and burial practices, believed to have protective or purifying properties. Cleopatra, inheriting a Hellenistic synthesis of Greek and Egyptian practices, would have been well-acquainted with aromatic wines as both a luxury and a sacred offering. It is plausible that during her time with Caesar, Egyptian and Roman styles of spiced wine were blended—creating a shared sensory vocabulary of taste and diplomacy.

3.3 Spiced Wine as Status Symbol and Medicinal Beverage

Beyond its taste, spiced wine was understood as a medicinal elixir. Ancient physicians like Galen and Dioscorides recommended various spiced wines for ailments ranging from indigestion to melancholy. Ingredients like saffron and pepper were thought to stimulate circulation and digestion, while honey acted as both a preservative and a therapeutic agent. Thus, offering a guest spiced wine was not only hospitable but medicinal—framed as care and sophistication. Because many of the key spices (such as cinnamon, saffron, and pepper) had to be imported from India or Arabia, spiced wine also became a way of displaying imperial reach and economic power. In this sense, drinking *conditum* was akin to wearing silk or commissioning imported marble—it was consumption with geopolitical implications.

3.4 Continuities into Medieval and Modern Mulled Wines

The tradition of spiced wine did not die with the fall of Rome. It continued robustly into the medieval period, particularly under the name *hypocras*—a sweetened, spiced wine often served at the end of a meal and believed to balance the humors. Recipes for *hypocras* appear in cookbooks from the 13th century onward, featuring ingredients like cinnamon, ginger, galangal, and cloves, strained through fine cloth. The Renaissance preserved and elaborated this tradition, particularly in courtly settings, where *vinum conditum* evolved into both ceremonial and festive drinks. Modern descendants include *glühwein* in Germany, *vin chaud* in France, and mulled wine in Anglo-American cultures, all of which echo the ancient belief that wine, sweetened and spiced, enhances both health and hospitality. The persistence of this beverage speaks to its deep cultural memory: to share warm spiced wine remains a gesture of welcome, warmth, and seasonal celebration—just as it did for emperors and queens.

4. The Dormouse and the Doctrine of Decadence

Among the many curiosities of Roman cuisine, none captures the imagination—or provokes revulsion—quite like the stuffed dormouse (*glires farciti*). This small, fat-tailed rodent, carefully fattened and stuffed with seasoned meat, nuts, and spices,

served as both a culinary delight and a cultural statement. To modern sensibilities, the idea of eating dormice may seem grotesque, but in ancient Rome, it represented the pinnacle of luxury, a kind of edible ornament to the performance of elite excess. The dormouse was not just food—it was decadence embodied, a morsel that invited both admiration and satire. Its consumption marked the convergence of culinary refinement and moral ambiguity, themes that resonate deeply in Roman literature and in later critiques of empire.

4.1 Description of *Glires Farciti* from *Apicius*

The recipe for *glires farciti* appears in *Apicius*, Rome's most famous surviving cookbook. The instructions are brief but evocative: dormice are to be cleaned and stuffed with a mixture of pork, dormouse trimmings, ground pepper, pine nuts, and garum (a fermented fish sauce). The bodies are then sewn shut and roasted or cooked in a clay pot. The combination of savory meats with aromatic spices and nuts reflects the Roman palate's love for complex, layered flavors. As with many Roman dishes, the sauce and the stuffing were where technique and artistry met. It was not enough to eat meat; it had to be transformed, concealed, and refined into a carefully structured bite. The dormouse, small and delicate, offered a compact canvas for culinary invention.

4.2 Dormice as Luxury Livestock: The *Glirarium*

The dormouse was so highly prized that the Romans developed specialized farming methods to raise them. The *glirarium* was a type of terracotta jar or cage used to fatten dormice in captivity. These containers were designed to restrict movement while allowing feeding, creating the ancient equivalent of foie gras production. Dormice were fed acorns, walnuts, and chestnuts to enhance their flavor and texture. They were kept in cool, dark environments to encourage hibernation and fat accumulation. This level of care—and cruelty—underscores the Roman elite's investment in culinary prestige. To serve dormouse was to demonstrate not only wealth but control over nature, refinement of taste, and participation in a shared culture of elite consumption.

4.3 Symbolism: Excess, Refinement, and Critique

The dormouse was both an edible object and a symbol. In Roman literature, the consumption of dormice often stood in for broader critiques of moral decay and aristocratic indulgence. Writers such as Juvenal and Seneca used such luxuries as shorthand for societal rot. The dormouse's dainty size and elaborate preparation contrasted sharply with the broader ideals of Roman virtue: simplicity, discipline, and moderation. In this sense, the dish became a symbol not of culinary excellence but of civilizational excess. Yet it is also clear that the same critics participated in the world they mocked. The dormouse thus embodied a tension at the heart of Roman elite culture: the simultaneous embrace and condemnation of luxury.

4.4 Comparative Analysis with Modern Delicacies

Though the idea of eating dormice might shock the modern diner, the logic behind it persists. Today's luxury foods—such as foie gras, ortolan, caviar, and white truffles—also rely on exclusivity, intensive labor, and symbolic capital. Like *glires farciti*, these delicacies are often controversial, sometimes banned, and always expensive. They serve as social signals more than sustenance, communicating wealth, discernment, and access. The dormouse thus finds its modern equivalents not only in rare ingredients but in the broader cultural practices of elite dining: the performative consumption of rarity, the moral ambiguity of pleasure, and the culinary theater of refinement. What has changed is not the impulse but the species. The Roman dormouse is gone, but its role endures—replaced by ever-new objects of decadent desire.

5. Other Fascinating Dishes from *Apicius*

The *Apicius* collection offers far more than dormice. It opens a window onto an entire worldview in which food was not merely sustenance but an arena of art, philosophy, medicine, and theater. The dishes within its pages span the lavish and the bizarre, the refined and the grotesque. They present a culture in which taste was not an idle indulgence but a serious pursuit, governed by principles of sensation, balance, and even metaphysics. These recipes—whether designed to

impress guests, treat ailments, or display Roman control over nature—tell us what the Roman elite valued, feared, and hoped to master. To read *Apicius* is to enter a civilization where the kitchen rivaled the forum in importance.

5.1 Overview of Unusual or Refined Recipes

The diversity of recipes in *Apicius* defies modern expectations of ancient simplicity. Beyond everyday staples, we find dishes like flamingo stew, roasted parrot, sea urchins in broth, and jellyfish prepared with vinegar and mustard. Meats are often presented in disguised forms—fish shaped into sausages, or meats molded to look like other animals—reflecting the Roman love of culinary illusion. Even common ingredients such as eggs or cheese are subjected to complex treatments, including poaching in pine nut sauce or baking with bay leaves for aromatic effect. This culinary playfulness reflects a sophisticated palate not bound by necessity, but by aesthetic curiosity and theatrical intent.

5.2 Sow's Womb Stew, Snails Fattened in Milk, and Duck in Wine Sauce

Three recipes from *Apicius* stand out for their uniqueness and cultural resonance. The first is sow's womb stew, which involves boiling the organ, slicing it into strips, and finishing it with spices, garum, and sometimes wine or vinegar. This dish, prized for its texture and rarity, was served to demonstrate both anatomical knowledge and refinement in taste.

Second is the recipe for snails fattened in milk, a Roman delicacy that involved keeping live snails in jars, feeding them milk and wine until they became plump. Once harvested, they were cooked with herbs or dipped in sauces, offering a soft, buttery texture that rivaled the modern oyster.

Third is duck in peppered wine sauce, a more familiar yet no less impressive dish, prepared by boiling or roasting the bird, then bathing it in a reduced wine sauce thickened with honey and spiced with black pepper, lovage, and sometimes cumin. This dish exemplifies the Roman mastery of sweet-sour profiles and their preference for sauces that dazzled both the nose and the tongue.

5.3 Sauces, Spice Profiles, and Cooking Techniques

Sauces in Roman cuisine were not afterthoughts—they were the centerpiece. The foundational flavor was garum, a fermented fish sauce used much like modern soy

sauce or anchovy paste: as a base for umami depth. Roman sauces often blended garum with honey, vinegar, wine, and a mixture of spices such as pepper, cumin, lovage, mint, rue, coriander, and asafoetida. This complex layering created a palate that was sharp, aromatic, and multidimensional.

Cooking techniques varied from boiling and roasting to poaching, baking in clay, and smoking. Meat was often marinated or parboiled first to infuse it with spice and aroma before final preparation. Baking vessels were sometimes sealed with dough or leaves to trap vapor and flavor, a precursor to modern steaming and en papillote techniques. The emphasis was always on transformation—turning the raw into the refined, the animal into the artifact.

5.4 What These Dishes Reveal About Roman Thought: Sensation, Health, Spectacle

At their core, Roman recipes reflect a philosophical orientation toward food as both experience and statement. Sensation was prized—not only taste, but texture, aroma, color, and presentation. Romans sought contrast and surprise, layering sweet with salty, smooth with crisp, aromatic with pungent. These combinations were not merely aesthetic; they were thought to balance the bodily humors and promote health. A spicy, acidic sauce was not just flavorful—it was therapeutic.

Moreover, these dishes were deeply performative. They were meant to astonish, amuse, and flatter. Food was part of the spectacle of Roman life, no less than gladiatorial combat or theatrical oratory. To host a banquet featuring rare meats, elaborately disguised courses, and multi-spiced wines was to assert one's cultural mastery and political stature. In this context, *Apicius* becomes more than a cookbook; it is a manual for navigating the intertwined realms of pleasure, health, status, and power in imperial Rome.

6. Renaissance Revival: The Early Fruit Pie

By the Renaissance, culinary practices in Europe had begun to evolve dramatically from their medieval roots, absorbing influences from classical antiquity while responding to the changing economies, tastes, and technologies of the early

modern world. Among the clearest signs of this transformation is the emergence of the fruit pie—what had once been a crude, savory pastry evolved into a delicately spiced, sweetened dish served at noble tables and later in middle-class homes. The Renaissance pie is both a continuation of ancient forms and a departure into new culinary territory. Its rise illustrates not just changes in taste, but also shifts in trade, agriculture, and the epistemology of cooking itself.

6.1 From Meat-Filled *Coffyns* to Spiced Apple Pastries

The earliest European pies were not sweet, and they were not designed for delight—they were utilitarian. Known as *coffyns*, these early medieval pastries were thick, inedible crusts made from flour and water, designed primarily as cooking vessels for meat, fish, or offal. The crust acted as insulation against the flames of a hearth oven, preserving the filling. Over time, as cooking techniques improved and access to finer wheat flour and butter became more widespread, the crust itself became edible and even prized.

By the Renaissance, fruit pies—especially those made with apples, pears, quinces, or cherries—began to appear in courtly and gentry cuisine. These new pies retained the structural logic of the medieval *coffyn* but transformed it into a platform for flavor, refinement, and seasonal abundance. Spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and ginger—once rare and precious—became more available through trade with the East, and were used to perfume fruit fillings in ways that echoed Roman combinations of sweet, tart, and aromatic.

6.2 Typical Ingredients and Preparation Methods

A typical Renaissance fruit pie would begin with a shortcrust pastry, made from flour, lard or butter, and water, sometimes enriched with egg yolk or a bit of sugar. The filling consisted of sliced apples or pears, often cooked down slightly or macerated with sugar, spices, and sometimes wine or verjuice (the acidic juice of unripe grapes or crabapples). Pine nuts, currants, or raisins were sometimes added for texture and depth. Butter was dotted on top before sealing the pie with a top crust.

The pie was baked in a moderate oven (by Renaissance standards), which meant managing hearth temperatures with careful attention and rotating the pie during cooking. The crusts were often quite thick, not just for structure but to signify

richness—white flour being more expensive and desirable than coarse grain. Once baked, the pie could be served hot or cold, sometimes dusted with sugar or accompanied by a small vessel of spiced wine.

6.3 Culinary Knowledge Transition: From Rome to Medieval Courts to Renaissance Kitchens

The culinary tradition that produced the Renaissance fruit pie did not emerge in isolation. It represents a long arc of cultural transmission from ancient Rome, through monastic preservation in the early Middle Ages, to the elaboration of cookery in courtly households during the high medieval and Renaissance periods. Roman texts like *Apicius* were known and copied in Latin, influencing medieval recipe collections such as the *Liber de Coquina* and later household manuals. The use of spiced wine, complex sauces, and sweet-sour profiles in fruit dishes is a direct echo of classical taste.

By the late 15th and early 16th centuries, cookbooks began to circulate more widely due to the printing press, and culinary knowledge became both more standardized and more accessible. Gervase Markham's *The English Huswife* (1615) was one such book: a comprehensive guide to domestic management that included recipes for pies, tarts, and pasties. His work shows the integration of old techniques with new expectations—pies had become not just preservative vessels, but refined desserts served at the conclusion of a meal, often to impress.

6.4 Recipe Reconstruction Based on *The English Huswife* and Others

Based on *The English Huswife* and other contemporary sources, a reconstructed Renaissance apple pie might include the following:

- Peeled, sliced apples (ideally tart varieties)
- Sugar, modestly applied
- Cinnamon, nutmeg, and perhaps a hint of clove
- A splash of white wine or verjuice
- A few raisins or currants
- Butter, dotted over the filling

- A shortcrust pastry made with butter or lard
- Baked until the crust is golden and the fruit bubbling gently

The resulting pie would have been more subtly sweet than modern counterparts, with the spices taking center stage. It was a dish that balanced the practical with the elegant, and the rustic with the refined—a fitting emblem of the Renaissance ethos itself. In this humble but evocative dish, the tastes of empire, the memory of antiquity, and the aesthetics of modernity converged.

7. Culinary Continuities and Shifts

Culinary history is not a smooth curve of progress but a landscape marked by both continuity and disruption. Recipes and ingredients may survive for centuries, yet the meanings attached to them—their cultural, religious, and social significance—shift dramatically. Nowhere is this more evident than in the trajectory from ancient Rome to Renaissance Europe, a span in which food remained a theater of power and pleasure, yet was continually re-scripted by new ideologies, technologies, and class structures. This section explores the overarching movements in culinary thought and practice across three civilizational epochs—Rome, medieval Christendom, and Renaissance Europe—while interrogating how spice, sweetness, and social structure mediated the act of dining. By comparing what was served, to whom, and in what context, we begin to see how empire, belief, and economy shape not only who eats but what food means.

7.1 From Empire to Empire: Rome, Medieval Christendom, and Renaissance Europe

Ancient Rome, as a polytheistic and cosmopolitan empire, approached food as both an indulgence and a form of civic display. The elite banquet was a site of social choreography, and cookbooks like *Apicius* reflected a culture invested in sensation, novelty, and spectacle. Food was meant to awe the senses and affirm the imperial reach of Roman civilization.

Medieval Christendom inherited many Roman ingredients and techniques, but reframed them within a different cosmology. The body was often seen as sinful,

and gluttony as a spiritual danger. Food was increasingly categorized along moral lines: fast days versus feast days, sacred versus profane, flesh versus abstinence. Yet the symbolic use of food persisted, particularly in monastic and courtly contexts, where feasting retained liturgical, hierarchical, and even eschatological meanings.

Renaissance Europe, while still rooted in Christian thought, rediscovered classical sources and with them, a revalorization of taste, beauty, and human pleasure. This period saw the revival of Roman-style sauces, the increased documentation of recipes, and the rise of a literate culinary discourse. Pies, wines, and stews now served to express both nostalgic connection to the past and the newfound sophistication of modern courts.

7.2 Shifts in Spice Use, Sweeteners, and Symbolism

Spices in antiquity were exotic and medicinal—used to signify wealth and global reach. In Rome, pepper, cumin, saffron, and lovage were common in elite recipes. The use of garum—a pungent fermented fish sauce—dominated Roman flavor profiles, emphasizing sharp, umami-laden compositions.

In the medieval period, spice use became even more widespread among elites, especially as trade routes expanded. Cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, and ginger appeared in both sweet and savory dishes, their inclusion serving as a status marker. Sugar was extremely expensive, sourced through Muslim Spain and later via colonial trade, and often reserved for medicinal or ceremonial use.

By the Renaissance, sugar began to overtake honey as the primary sweetener in elite cuisine, and spices became increasingly codified in their applications—sweet with fruit, savory with meat—reflecting emerging culinary norms. The symbolic role of spices also changed. No longer just exotic markers of empire, they became tools of artistry and refinement, ingredients that displayed the cook's precision and the diner's elevated taste.

7.3 Dining Practices as Mirrors of Cultural Values

The architecture of dining—from the banquet hall to the arrangement of guests—mirrored the organization of society. In Rome, the triclinium (three-couch dining room) reinforced social hierarchy through spatial positioning. Who reclined closest to the host mattered. Elaborate courses demonstrated not just wealth but an

ability to participate in refined cultural rituals.

Medieval monastic dining was characterized by silence, order, and communal identity, while feasts in noble courts emphasized vertical distinction—lords served first, retainers second, peasants not at all. Food was also aligned with spiritual values: bread and wine became sacramental, and fasting was a form of penance and purification.

Renaissance dining grew increasingly theatrical. Banquets featured sculpted sugarwork, multi-tiered pies, and colored sauces that delighted and surprised. The rising importance of printed cookbooks mirrored the humanist emphasis on knowledge and systematization. Meals were no longer just events—they were occasions for performance, reflection, and prestige. At every stage, the way people ate reflected what they believed about hierarchy, the body, the divine, and the self.

7.4 Luxury and Accessibility: Who Eats What, and Why

Throughout this entire historical arc, one constant remains: food was, and is, a primary vector of inequality. The Roman dormouse, the medieval roast swan, and the Renaissance fruit pie were all delicacies that required time, labor, and money—resources concentrated in elite households. Even ingredients like sugar and spice, which today are common, were once reserved for the very few.

Yet as trade routes expanded and economies grew more interconnected, certain luxuries became accessible to broader segments of society. Middle-class households in Renaissance England, for example, could afford a modest pie on feast days, even if it lacked the complexity or richness of a courtly version. The printing press, too, helped democratize knowledge about cooking, though not necessarily access to its ingredients.

Luxury, in all periods, was not only defined by what could be eaten but by how much of it others could not. The exclusivity of certain dishes gave them their symbolic value. This remains true today. The trajectory from Apicius to *The English Huswife* is not just a story of changing tastes—it is a chronicle of how food encodes power, desire, and the boundaries of civilization itself.

8. Conclusion: A Table Across Time

To examine ancient and early modern meals is to explore more than recipes; it is to enter a world of encoded power, cultural transmission, and sensory ritual. From the gilded halls of Alexandria to the hearths of Renaissance England, dining has remained a symbolic act—an intersection of body and culture, of appetite and identity. The table, across centuries and civilizations, is where politics became personal, where empires spoke not only through laws and armies but through flavor, texture, and arrangement. In retracing these culinary legacies, we uncover a deeper continuity: that food, more than almost any other human artifact, holds the capacity to embody civilization itself.

8.1 Revisiting Caesar and Cleopatra's Likely Meals

The shared meals of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra—though unrecorded in any menu—can be partially reconstructed through cultural and textual inference. Their time together likely featured Egyptian dishes adorned with honey, lentils, and fish from the Nile, as well as Roman fare such as meats served with garum and roasted game birds. These were not mere dinners; they were performative rituals of alliance and seduction, layered with symbolism. The consumption of exotic spices, sweetened wines, and ornate dishes functioned not only as personal indulgence but as political signaling. To dine together was to rule together—and to shape how future generations would remember them.

8.2 The Persistence of Ritualized Dining

From antiquity to the Renaissance, meals maintained a persistent ritual form. Whether the triclinium of Roman aristocrats, the monastic refectories of the medieval Church, or the banquet halls of early modern courts, dining was more than nourishment—it was social ceremony. The order of courses, the hierarchy of seating, and the composition of dishes were expressions of larger cosmologies. Meals affirmed social status, celebrated religious observance, and reflected prevailing philosophies of the body and soul. Even as ingredients and techniques changed, the symbolic role of the meal remained constant: to define who belonged, who led, and who feasted.

8.3 Historical Gastronomy as a Bridge to Understanding Power, Pleasure, and Civilization

Studying ancient and Renaissance cuisine offers more than culinary curiosity—it provides a lens through which we can better understand the power structures, aspirations, and anxieties of past societies. Dishes like *glires farciti* or spiced wine served at diplomatic feasts reveal how intimately power and pleasure were linked. Elite taste was never just about food; it was about mastery—over nature, over others, over one’s body and image. By following the movement of ingredients, the evolution of dishes, and the shifts in dining practice, we gain insight into how cultures define refinement, and how empires encode their authority through the senses.

8.4 Future Directions: Reconstructive Archaeology and Edible Historiography

The future of this field lies in the marriage of scholarship and material practice. Reconstructive archaeology—cooking ancient recipes using authentic techniques and tools—offers a powerful method of experiential inquiry. By tasting what ancient elites might have eaten, we do more than theorize the past; we make it tangible. Alongside this, the development of “edible historiography”—interpreting texts through the palate and reconstructing historical meaning through foodways—can deepen our understanding of lost worlds. Such approaches invite interdisciplinary collaboration between historians, chefs, scientists, and curators, transforming the archive into a kitchen, and the meal into a method. In doing so, we do not merely study civilization—we taste it.

References

Primary Classical Sources:

- Plutarch. *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, specifically *Life of Caesar* and *Life of Antony*. Translated by John Dryden, edited by Arthur Hugh Clough. These biographies offer detailed narrative accounts of Julius Caesar's relationship with Cleopatra and the cultural interplay surrounding their time together, including allusions to feasts, displays of wealth, and courtly practices.
 - Suetonius. *The Twelve Caesars*. Translated by Robert Graves. Particularly relevant are the sections on Julius Caesar, which discuss his domestic arrangements, foreign liaisons, and the Roman elite's reaction to Cleopatra's presence in Rome, indirectly illuminating their shared dining customs.
 - Apicius. *De Re Coquinaria* (On the Subject of Cooking). Edited and translated by Christopher Grocock and Sally Grainger. Prospect Books, 2006. This late Roman cookbook, attributed to the culinary tradition surrounding Marcus Gavius Apicius, contains recipes for elite Roman dishes including *glires farciti* (stuffed dormice), *conditum paradoxum* (spiced wine), and a range of sauces, roasts, and stews.
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Renaissance Culinary Texts:

- Markham, Gervase. *The English Huswife*. First published in 1615. Modern edition by Michael R. Best (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986). This domestic manual provides detailed instructions for fruit pies, sauces, and household management, reflecting Renaissance culinary practices rooted in medieval and classical traditions.
- *A Proper Newe Booke of Cookery* (1545). Facsimile editions published by the Early English Text Society. This early printed cookbook offers simple,

vernacular English recipes for pies, meats, and spiced dishes, demonstrating the transition from medieval to Renaissance gastronomy.

Modern Historical and Gastronomic Analysis:

- Dalby, Andrew. *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*. Routledge, 2003. A detailed reference work on ingredients, methods, and cultural meanings of ancient food, including extensive material on Roman spices, feasting customs, and elite culinary practices.
 - Wilkins, John and Shaun Hill. *Roman Food Poems: Apicius and the Roman Gourmet*. Duckworth, 1994. Examines the literary and cultural dimensions of Roman cuisine with commentary on the symbolic and performative aspects of elite Roman banquets.
 - Grant, Mark. *Roman Cookery: Ancient Recipes for Modern Kitchens*. Serif, 1999. A modernized approach to Apician recipes, with commentary on historical context and ingredient substitutions for contemporary kitchens.
 - Albala, Ken. *Eating Right in the Renaissance*. University of California Press, 2002. Explores early modern theories of dietetics, food preparation, and humoral medicine, providing crucial background for understanding the symbolic role of food in Renaissance Europe.
 - Woolgar, C.M. *The Culture of Food in England, 1200–1500*. Yale University Press, 2016. A key study of late medieval and early Renaissance foodways, including courtly feasting, monastic regulation, and domestic preparation.
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Journal Articles and Additional Scholarship:

- Curtis, Robert I. "Garum and Salsamenta: Production and Commerce in Materia Medica." *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 85, 1995, pp. 202–213. A detailed analysis of garum, the quintessential Roman condiment, and its implications for taste and trade.

- Vehling, Joseph Dommers. Introduction to *Apicius: Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome*. Dover Publications, 1977. One of the earliest English translations of Apicius, with commentary on Roman dining habits and ingredient sourcing.
- Kiple, Kenneth F., and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas, eds. *The Cambridge World History of Food*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. Provides interdisciplinary perspectives on food's historical evolution, including relevant chapters on ancient Mediterranean and Renaissance European cuisines.

This reference list integrates literary, archaeological, culinary, and historiographical sources to reconstruct the cultural significance of ancient and Renaissance dining, enabling a scholarly yet tangible understanding of meals that once bound together empire, identity, and power.

