

What the Romans did for us... in the kitchen

Bonnie Yuill investigates the herbs the Romans brought over with them and how they used them in cooking

Fish with parsley sauce may not sound exotic if it appears at the next dinner party you go to, but to our ancestors in Roman-occupied Britain, it was as unusual as sushi seems today. In fact, many items on the menu considered 'British' today were brought here by the conquering Roman legions. They not only brought their favourite vegetables such as marrow, cabbage, leek and asparagus, but more importantly they brought tasty and life-saving herbs like parsley, bay, chervil, chives, fennel, basil, rosemary, sage, thyme, lavender and mint. Imagine life without mint – what would toothpaste, chewing gum, mint julep and even chocolate be like without it? Imagine onion stuffing without sage or cream cheese without chives.

From the Roman point of view the British tribes were very backward. The historian, Tacitus, reported that the Celts: 'satisfy their hunger without elaborate preparation and without delicacies.' But help was at hand. Many Roman recipes were strange to the natives, who discovered that their conquerors enjoyed lots of herbs and flavourings in their food, for instance, they marinated meat in calendula vinegar as well as adding the petals to salads; coriander was extensively used to preserve meat and lamb was usually accompanied by mint.

Some Mediterranean herbs and spices may already have been known to the British barbarians, possibly brought in by traders from the east in exchange for surplus grain and metals. And then there was the steady stream of refugees from Roman-dominated lands bringing some of the new plants and herbs. Native Britons (and poor Romans) at that time, existed on boring and very basic meals consisting of flat bread and a bean stew or porridge, sometimes containing meat, cooked over an open fire, and would have experienced only a very gradual change in this diet after the occupation started.

The typical Roman kitchen, on the other hand, consisted of a raised hearth, stone or wooden tables for food preparation, and cooking pots on iron tripods as well as a range of skillets, colanders and saucepans. A beehive shaped oven was used



for baking and roasting, or there were portable ovens made of earthenware, iron or bronze. The frying pan, known as a '*fretale*' was made of bronze and fashioned with a lip for pouring. They even had oven-to-tableware, known as *patellae* or *patinae*.

Roman recipes also often mentioned thyme, bay leaf, basil, fennel, dill, parsley, coriander, mint and saffron, and these herbs swiftly found their way into the native British cooking pot and herb garden. Spices such as cardamom, cinnamon and saffron also became popular under the Roman influence.

Roman cookery was often crammed full of rich highly flavoured and seasoned sauces. The host would try to show off the large amounts of costly herbs and spices used in each course making up the meal – Roman entertainment was all about impressing others with your wealth and getting more supporters for your next political move. Sometimes so many flavours were used in a sauce that it was impossible to pick out the individual ones, and digestive aids such as fennel, mint and cumin were essential ingredients at most dinner

parties. Unfortunately, as well as the herbs we recognise today, many of the herbs familiar to the Romans have been lost. Among those listed by the Roman celebrity chef, Apicius, are strange sounding herbs such as 'ammi', a type of cumin (in Morocco it is still used as a gargle for toothache); laurel berry; pulegium; Indian spikenard; hazelwort and mastix.

'Their food is of a simple kind,' Tacitus noted condescendingly of the tribal Celts. But it wasn't just the strange time-consuming recipes that caused a stir: the new herbs brought exciting new flavours and they also had medicinal uses. The Celts already knew the power of plants and had been using them for so long that they had become entrenched in legends such as the Welsh myths of Nelferch, the lady of the Lake, who shows trainee doctors where to find herbs and how to use them for healing.

Many standardised herbals were common in Rome and the most famous, *De Materia Medica* was written by the Greek physician, Dioscorides. A botanist who travelled with Nero's armies, he had Roman citizenship, and his 5-volume masterpiece remained a standard work for the next 16 centuries, right across the Roman Empire and beyond.

The Romans were able to preserve medicinal herbs in wine and send them in from Italy along with the other supplies. Horehound, for instance, was widely used to cure bronchial problems and a fragment of a huge clay amphora or wine container, was found at the Roman Fort on the river Tay, around the 1960s. This was originally filled with Roman cough mixture, which consisted of a wine/horehound mixture. Another of the herbs they brought was dill, (named locally from the Anglo-Saxon *dillan*, 'to lull'), which was used to make a mild soothing drink. Just like the men of the later British Navy who had a daily ration of rum, Roman soldiers had the slightly more unpleasant daily ration of garlic as an all round tonic, which was a general antibiotic, lowered blood pressure and was good for their hearts. There is evidence that celery was used as a diuretic and fenugreek to treat pneumonia. Fennel was supposed to calm the nerves, and mustard had many uses - the writer and naturalist Pliny the Elder listed forty different types of mustard remedies, and was also the first herbalist to record mint.

Rosemary was often used as a general nerve tonic. Sage in particular was considered a sacred herb with powerful healing properties. The phrase 'Why should a man die when he has sage in his garden?' is an indication of how valued sage was in Roman

times. Used as a sacred ceremonial herb, it was associated with immortality and used as an aid to memory.

Many of the new Roman herbs were put to good use in the military hospital built at Housesteads Fort, part of Hadrian's Wall. When it was realised that many more soldiers were dying of disease than were killed in battle, a magnificent state of the art hospital was built to care for the legions and auxiliaries. At the very centre of the hospital was a courtyard planted with all the herbs needed to look after the patients.

But the end of an era was near. After a long period of attack by Picts and Scots as well as Saxons, the Emperor Honorius, who was more interested in feeding his beloved pigeons than the fate of the Empire, recalled his troops from Britain. But even before the Fall of Rome, most of the herbs had already found sanctuary in the herb gardens of the great monasteries up and down the country. Here they were lovingly tended by the monks while the anarchy of the Dark Ages began to rage outside the monastery walls.

More from Bonnie Yull on what the Romans did for us in the house on page 29.

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WHAT THE NEW ROMAN CELEBRITY CHEFS WERE COOKING

The food of new Roman masters was definitely something to aspire to. Dishes to die for included:

fresh ricotta dressed with spring onions, fresh mint, cumin, fennel, green and black olives and olive oil, served with broad beans, endives and fennel salad

milk fattened snails

battery produced nut-fattened dormice

sweet wine cakes served on bay leaves; sardines stuffed with almonds, walnuts, honey, cumin and mint, then grilled wrapped in vine leaves with a fish sauce flavoured with caraway seeds, rosemary and mint

fresh artichokes stuffed with egg, basil, bread, garlic and wine with fresh mint, coriander, fennel, honey and pepper sauce

chicken baked with roast pumpkin and peaches served with a sauce of black truffles, coriander, fresh mint, dates, honey and vinegar

WHERE TO GET ANCIENT VARIETIES OF SEEDS

Seeds of Italy specialises in supplying hundreds of ancient Roman varieties of vegetables and herbs including: a large flat leaf variety of parsley from Naples; lettuce leaf basil and rosmarino - real Italian rosemary. Seeds of Italy, 260 West Hendon Broadway, London NW9 6AG. Tel: 020 8930 2516; Fax: 020 8202 0582; e-mail: grow@italianingredients.com