

# Reconstructing a Roman Dish



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## Identifying a Source

There are several works from the Roman era that give us a glimpse of Roman Cuisine, and these works provide us some of our earliest written recipes. Cato's *De Agri Cultura* is our earliest reference dating from 160 BCE. (Cato & Dalby 1998) We also have *Naturalis Historia* by Pliny the Elder. This encyclopedic work is comprised of thirty-seven books arranged into ten volumes covering a vast array of topics including agriculture, horticulture, botany, and of course, cooking. (Pliny the Elder & Holland 2012) Additionally, we have *de Re Rustica* by Columella, which includes among its topics recipes, viticulture, gardening, animal husbandry, and bee keeping. (Columella & Ash 2007) These three works serve as primary textual evidence of the crops and livestock grown and available for the Roman table as well as recipes for a few of the dishes that were being cooked during this time period.

The largest collection of Roman recipes we have is from the *De Re Coquinaria*. This massive collection of recipes has been attributed to Apicius, and it is from this collection that we have our most extensive knowledge of Roman cooking. *De Re Coquinaria* is attributed to Marcus Gavius Apicius. (Apicius & Vehling 1977) He was a famous epicurean from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE. Apicius considered to have been a contemporary of both Columella and Pliny the Elder, and he is even mentioned in the works of Pliny. However, the recipes that form the *De Re Coquinaria* were not compiled into a single volume until sometime in the late 4<sup>th</sup> or early 5<sup>th</sup> Century. While the nearly five hundred recipes contained within the volume are derived from several sources, approximately three-fifths of them are believed to be Apicius' own. (Horgan 2017)

Because of the large quantity of material available for the *De Re Coquinaria*, it was to this recipe collection that I turned when I began to experiment with Roman cooking.

## The Dish

With so many dishes to choose from, picking a single dish to experiment with was a difficult choice. I wanted to try something that relied on some of the most quintessential elements of Roman cuisine. I settled on a dish that combined the elements of sweet, sour, and salty, as it seemed to me from my reading that these elements formed the basis of Roman taste.

The dish I selected for my experiment was *Aliter Pisam Sive Fabam* (Apicius V, iii, 7).

**Original Recipe:** Aliter pisam sive fabam: despumatam subtrito lasare Parthico, liquamen et caroeno condies. Oleum modice superfundis et inferes.

**Translation:** Beans another way. When skimmed flavor them with crushed Parthian laser, some liquamen, and some caroenum. Pour a little olive oil over these, then serve.

The translation formed my jumping off point for redacting the recipe, but before I could begin, I first had to identify all of the ingredients. Beans are the first ingredient that are listed, but ‘beans’ are a pretty vague description for a broad category of pulses. So, the first question that I had to ask was “what kind of ‘beans’ were available in the Roman era?” I went back to the agricultural treatises from the era. From Pliny the Elder, I found that Romans had access to a number of pulses, among them lentils, peas, lupins, chickpeas, and fava beans. (Pliny the Elder & Holland 2012) From this list, I chose to recreate the dish with chickpeas. I know from my own experience that chickpeas are a very versatile legume which can be cooked in a variety of ways, and while they are flavorful on their own, they are also able to absorb the flavors of the other ingredients that they are prepared with. I did test the eventual final recipe with fava beans, lentils, and peas. The fava beans would be my second choice as they did absorb some of the flavors from the other ingredients. The lentils did not take on much of the flavors at all, and the peas, while flavorful, ended up as more of a pea mash.



**Figure 1. Dried chickpeas.**

From reading Apicius, I knew that the terms ‘laser’ and ‘Parthian laser’ appeared in several recipes. My first thought was that these were just perhaps interchangeable terms for the same spice. However, I discovered upon conducting further research that my first inclination was incorrect. The term ‘laser’ referred to the powder that was created for from “the resin from the

stalk, the dried and ground root and the leaves” of the Silphium plant. (Grimm 2007) Silphium was a fennel-like plant from North Africa. This wild plant was so popular as a spice and was used so extensively in Roman cuisine that it appears to have been harvested to extinction sometime around the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE. (Grimm 2007)



**Figure 2. Asafetida plant**

‘Parthian laser’, on the other hand, is created from a plant belonging to the fennel family from Asia. It was available contemporaneously with laser although it was considered to be slightly inferior to it. The plant still exists to this day, and the resulting spice created from it is known as Asafoetida. Food historians believe that it has much the same flavor as the laser created from the now extinct silphium plant. (Grimm 2007) It is possible that the extinction of the silphium may be what led Apicius to start specifically identifying the ingredient as ‘Parthian laser’ rather than just ‘laser’. Like silphium, the parts of the plant from which asafetida is derived are reduced to a resin which is later ground into a powder for use in cooking.



**Figure 3. Asafetida resin**

There has been much debate as to what liquamen really is, and how it has been defined in the past has largely depended on the person translating the work. Joseph Vehling translates the word 'liquamen' as 'broth' in his 1938 translation of Apicius. (Apicius & Vehling 1977) This translation of the word seems rather imprecise if not downright inaccurate given the records which are available to us. Others who have translated Apicius describe it as a sauce made from fermented fish. (Apicius, Flowers, & Rosenbaum 2012) This second interpretation seems to be borne out by medical and veterinary texts of the period where the term 'liquamen' is used to describe a liquid made by fermenting small fish with salt. (Grainger 2018) Additionally, archaeological remains from Pompeii attest to the production of this ingredient in the form of amphora with *tituli picti* (commercial labels) bearing the appellation of liquamen and containing the remains of a fermented fish sauce. (Grainger 2006)

The most detailed account of how liquamen was produced comes from a 10<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantine text entitled the Geoponika. (Dalby et al 2011) Although this text was written much later than Apicius, it contains "material from much earlier in the Roman period and is therefore a valuable source". (Grainger 2018) Contained in it are three different methods for producing fish sauce. One of these is to pack small fish in layers of salt in a clay pot which is then left in the sun to ferment. Once the fish has properly fermented, the resulting liquid is strained off for use. (Dalby et al 2011)

In effort to be authentic, I attempted to produce my own liquamen following this recipe. I found that the process took about three months to produce the desired liquamen. I also found the process to be a rather smelly one, particularly on the days when I would remove the cover of the pot to stir its contents. This had an unfortunate consequence of not making me very popular with my neighbors for a few months. They asked me to kindly never repeat the experiment again. Wishing to remain on good terms with my neighbors, I began exploring other methods to attain the same flavor without subjecting anyone to the aroma that accompanied the production process. From reading the works of Sally Grainger, I learned that she had been

experimenting with a number of Asian fish sauces to compare them to her own experiments with liquamen. I set out to do my own taste comparisons with the liquamen I had created. I purchased several varieties and tasted them. From my taste tests, I learned that Thai fish sauces made with sardines and/or anchovies most closely approximated the flavor of the liquamen produced from the period recipe although the Thai fish sauce is just slightly sweeter in flavor. I determined that this would be acceptable substitute.

The last ingredient I had to identify was caroenum. A text from the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century provided my answer. It described caroenum as ‘must’ which has been boiled down so that one-third of its volume is lost. (Palladius 1879) The term ‘must’ is derived from the Latin ‘vinum mustum’ which translates to ‘new wine’. Being familiar with the wine making process, I understood this to mean the juice that is produced from the first crushing of the grapes before fermentation has begun to take place. I could not find in Palladius’ text a definitive answer to what type of grapes were used to produce the caroenum. It has been postulated by some food historians that caroenum was made from the juice of white grapes due to the existence of a sweet wine from Provence which bears a similar name, but I was eager to test the varieties for myself. I created caroenum from the juice of both white and red grapes. I found that both reduced well and that while both were about the same level of sweetness, the red grapes added a more complex flavor to the dish. For this reason, I chose to use caroenum produced from red grapes for this particular dish. There are dishes where I prefer to use caroenum produced from white grapes.



**Figure 4. Reducing grape must to caroenum.**

## **The Redaction**

With my ingredients identified, I went about my experiment of recreating the dish. I chose to create the dish as an accompaniment to a small family meal, and I based my determination of how much of my main ingredient I would need

on this proportion. I began with just cooking the chickpeas. Then as now it seemed likely that chickpeas would need to be dried for long term storage. So, I began by soaking the beans overnight to soften them. I then drained them and covered them with fresh water before starting to cook them. I brought the liquid up to a boil and boiled the chickpeas until they were tender enough to eat, and then I drained off the cooking liquid. During the cooking process, I also used a spoon to skim off any foam that rose to the top of the cooking vessel. This seemed to me consistent with Apicius' direction to "skim" the beans. Once I was sure of my cooking times, I began to experiment with the flavors.



**Figure 5. Boiling chickpeas in a replica Roman pot.**

My first question was this meant to be a sauce or a dressing. As there is no mention of the ingredients being cooked together, I determined that it was meant to be a dressing to the dish. This led me to the idea that smaller increments of the ingredients were used as it would not require a great quantity to dress the chickpeas. Using a notebook to record my variations, I began to test this portion of the recipe. Some iterations proved entirely too salty when liquamen was the largest component. Too much asafoetida produced a dish that was both overly sour and a little bit stinky. Caroenum, on the other hand, could produced a dish that was entirely too sweet when it was used too liberally. After several iterations, and many taste tests by my friends and family, I could create a recipe that I believe reflects a balance of the three competing flavors. I tested the recipe many times to make sure that the recipe was reproducible, and I asked a friend to test it as well to make sure that my results could be recreated by someone other than myself. I also tested the recipe using entirely period cooking methods as well as modern ones. I achieved the same results using both methods, though I will note that the period method took slightly longer than the modern method. The recipe below represents my best approximation of how I believe the dish was prepared in period.



**Figure 6. Mixing the liquamen, caroenum, and asafetida.**

**Ingredients:**

1 cup dried chickpeas  
½ tsp asafetida  
2 tbsp liquamen

1 1/3 tbsp caroenum  
Olive oil

Soak chickpeas overnight in cold water. Drain and place in pan. Cover with twice the amount of water and bring to a boil. Cover and simmer for 1 hour or until tender. Drain. In separate bowl mix liquamen, caroenum, and asafetida. Pour mixture over chickpeas in serving bowl and mix well. Add olive oil and mix well.



**Figure 7. Finished dish.**



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