

# CHAPTER 5: DOMESTIC LIFE

## FOOD AND MEALS



Fig. 20.  
The exterior of a Roman house had little decoration, just a simple doorway, small windows, and an additional security window for the janitor.



Fig. 21.  
This *triclinium*, or dining room, is decorated with a brightly colored scene located just behind the base of the left-hand couch from where the guest of honor could best admire it.

As we learned in the last chapter, Romans drew a sharp line between their public and private lives, and extended that division to the layout of the *domus* as well. All but the smallest apartment had some space reserved for receiving guests or clients. In extravagant homes, these spaces were usually large and lavishly decorated, designed to impress and even intimidate a visitor. In humbler dwellings, reception areas mainly served to keep outsiders apart from the private living space of the family.

Although not all Roman houses and apartments had a *triclinium*, a formal dining room, some of the grandest had several. And they could be designated for either public or private use. But whether *triclinia* were indoor or outdoor, lavish or simple, public or private, the basic design was the same. A *triclinium* consisted of three large, three-person couches arranged in a U-shape around a small table. Women, if present at all at a dinner party, normally sat in chairs, at least during the time of the Republic.

Sometimes the couches were permanently installed and sometimes they were movable pieces of furniture. A table, or even several tables, could be placed in the open area in front of the three dining couches. Each couch, from left to right as you faced the room, had a name: *imus* (lowest), *medius* (middle), and *summus* (highest). And the three places for diners to recline on each couch were also called, from left to right, *imus*, *medius*, and *summus*. And so, the person placed in the first position on the first couch on the left was

said to be *imus in imo* or the lowest place on the lowest couch. This was the least desirable spot in the room. Since diners reclined on their left side, the person dining *imus in imo* had little opportunity to carry on a conversation during dinner. In fact, this position was so inferior that it was called the *locus libertini* or the freedman's place, since a freedman client, grateful merely to be invited to his patron's house, usually occupied it.

The host traditionally reclined at the highest place on the lowest couch (*summus in imo*). This position enabled him to converse more easily with the guest of honor, who was usually seated at the lowest place on the middle couch (*imus in medio*). This position was referred to as the *locus consularis* or the consul's place, since a person who held the office of *consul* was at the top of the political and social scale. Not surprisingly, Romans paid scrupulous attention to a person's class and rank when assigning places for a banquet in the *triclinium*.

Unfortunately, not enough information survives to inform us where family members were placed when Romans dined privately. Most of our information about dining practices comes from writers who related humorous tales about excessively grand dinner parties. The writer Petronius, for example, tells a story about Trimalchio, a newly wealthy man with little knowledge of customary dining practices, who hosted a party. Trimalchio wrongly but understandably concluded that *summus in summo* (the highest place on the highest couch) must be the best position and therefore took it for himself!

The food served at a formal, three-course meal was often quite sumptuous. But all guests were not necessarily served the same fare. Romans were accustomed to being treated according to their social standing in other areas of life, and dining was no exception. Patrons often differentiated between their guests and served their clients cheaper wine, less expensive meat, and fewer delicacies than their social equals. It was not, however, considered good manners for the host of a dinner party to call attention to the difference in the food served to his guests.

The first course or appetizer (*gustus*) was meant to spur the appetite. It often consisted of eggs, lettuce and other raw vegetables, and/or various shellfish and seafood in sauces. The *cena* was the main course of meats and cooked vegetables, accompanied with wine. Since the appetizer was not considered a true course, the final course, dessert, was called the *secunda mensa* or second table. It included pastries and especially fruits. Thus the expression "from the egg to the apples" (*ab ovo usque ad mala*) describes a complete formal meal from *gustus* to *secunda mensa*. Roman authors, most notably Apicius, recorded many Roman recipes. These recipes, adapted and modified for the modern kitchen, can be found in several excellent cookbooks.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 22.  
Raw foods, such as the mushrooms shown in this mosaic and vegetables, were served as an appetizer or *gustus*.

Despite the surviving accounts of extravagant and exotic Roman dining practices, it is quite likely that most Romans ate very simple food and not a great deal of it. The large number of mills and bakeries in Pompeii indicates that bread was rarely baked at home. Of course olives and grapes were plentiful and, when they were processed into oil and wine, could be kept indefinitely. Olive oil was the primary source of dietary fat. Wine, which was stored in concentrated form, was diluted with

water before it was consumed. Preserved, dried, and smoked meat from domesticated animals, game, and seafood were readily available, but lack of refrigeration made these a risky and expensive source of protein. Dormice were a prized delicacy, and these small rodents were bred on farms. Milk from all types of livestock was consumed, but most of the milk was processed into cheese, which had a longer shelf life. Cheeses and legumes were a more common and accessible source of protein than meat.

*Garum*, a salty and savory sauce made from fermented fish parts, was the condiment of choice and was liberally used in Roman cooking. Since foods such as olive oil, wine, vinegar, grains, cheeses, *garum*, honey, some nuts, and dried legumes and fruits could be stored for relatively long periods of time, the average Roman ate healthily and well even during the winter months. Some foods not available to the ancient Roman were: pasta, oranges, peanuts, potatoes, rice, tomatoes, tea, coffee, butter, and sugar. Honey was used as a sweetener.



Fig. 23.  
At a meal in an old-fashioned household, men reclined while women sat in chairs; the food was brought in on small tables.

Romans ate three meals a day. The main meal (*cena*) was usually consumed at midday, although it was sometimes eaten in the evening. The other two meals were light. Breakfast was called *ientaculum* and consisted of bread, perhaps softened with wine or garnished with salt, *garum*, olives, or cheese and washed down with milk, wine or *mulsum*, a beverage consisting of equal parts of wine and honey. If the second light meal of the day was eaten at noon, it was called the *prandium*; if it was consumed in the evening, it was called the *vesperinum*. No matter when it was served, this meal was likely to include cold meats, vegetables, and fruits left over from the previous *cena* or hot food purchased from a *thermopolium* or fast-food vendor. The *cena* was always the largest meal of the day, but the menu for a family meal would not have been as elaborate as one prepared for guests.

## MEN'S AND CHILDREN'S CLOTHING

The basic garment of Roman dress was the simple *tunica*, a short sleeved or sleeveless ankle-length shift woven from wool or course fibers such as flax or cheap linen. The *tunica* could be worn in several ways. Usually it was belted and bloused at the waist to about knee length for men. The extra material at the waist could be folded to form a convenient carrying pouch. A sleeveless *tunica* was more comfortable for a person engaged in manual labor. A loincloth called a *subligaculum* was sometimes worn instead of a tunic, but it was not, as a rule, worn as an undergarment. A simple *tunica* and a pair of sandals (*soleae*) or shoes (*calcei*) were sufficient to serve the clothing needs of men, women, children, and slaves for most of the year in the temperate Mediterranean climate. In cold weather, several layers of *tunicae* and leg and arm wrappings were added.

The *toga* was a garment reserved exclusively for citizens. Stripes on both *tunica* and *toga* indicated the rank of the wearer, narrow for a member of the class of *equites* and broad for nobles or patricians. The wealthy, predictably, indulged in more expensive fabrics with finer weaves and more embroidery