

Christmas, the Roman way

Christmas dinner with roast turkey and all the trimmings has become a fixture of festivities up and down the land. But here Cornwall-based archaeologist **Jacqui Wood** talks to the WMN about why she believes it's the Romans who held the first Yuletide feast

IT'S the staple of many family dining tables on December 25, but the turkey dinner with all the trimmings is not as traditional as you might think.

According to food historian, writer and archaeologist Jacqui Wood it is a surprisingly modern development dating back only to the 16th century.

However, the first ever Christmas dinner dates back many centuries before that to Roman times and Ms Wood has revealed what it would have been like.

While the Romans are renowned for their opulence, and even decadence, the historian says the first Christmas feast is surprisingly easy and cheap to replicate.

It could even offer families a delicious, healthy and affordable alternative to the traditional turkey and Christmas pudding.

With recipes like mulled white wine, baked ham, squash Alexandrian, and walnut and fig cakes, you can turn your oven into a time machine.

Ms Wood, a food historian, said such dishes would have been eaten at the very first Christmas dinner.

"The first Christmas feast would have been a Roman feast," she said.

"The ancient Romans used to celebrate their solstice on December 25.

"The first reference to a nativity being celebrated on December 25 was found on an illuminated manuscript found in Rome in 354 AD."

Using recipes penned by a famous first Century Roman aristocrat – Marcus Apicius – Ms Wood has created a yuletide banquet with a difference.

Though Emperor Elagabalus' Ostrich brain and gold starter may not be to everyone's tastes, the Romans used a surprising amount of familiar ingredients.

Among their favourite foods were olive oil, nuts, figs, eggs, vegetables and honey.

Apicius' recipes were edited and made into a cookbook, which was published in the fourth century.

A millionaire by today's standards, he spent his 100 million sesterii fortune on lavish banquets.

When he was declared bankrupt he poisoned himself at his last feast rather than endure the prospect of eating like a peasant.

"He was a celebrated winer and diner from the first century," Ms Wood said.

"He spent a hundred million sesterii on elaborate dinners, more and more amazing banquets, and he wrote this cook book.

"He is said to have become bankrupt from this.

"He had things like recipes for flamingo tongue and lark's tongue.

"He was a seriously rich man – we are actually talking millions.

"Can you imagine deciding you want a dinner of lark's tongues – you have got to get them?"



Food historian Jacqui Wood with a selection of dishes the Romans would have had at their solstice and, inset, Marcus Apicius

"You have to have enough wealth.

"He had a villa in the South of Italy where they had the best shrimps.

"Apparently, a fisherman said to him, there are better prawns off the coast of Libya and he set sail that day.

"When he eventually got there they weren't any better than the ones at home.

"When his wealth eventually dwindles he realised that he would have to eat modestly and he had one last banquet and poisoned himself."



Scrambled eggs would have formed part of the feast

There seems to be no end to accounts of Roman excess when it comes to dining.

The excess of the emperors is legendary.

"The Emperor Elagabalus served 600 ostrich brains, mixed with peas and grains of gold at one of his feasts in the second century," Ms Wood said.

"He used to have holes in the top of his dining room and servants would sprinkle rose petals on the guests while dining.

"But on one particular incident they used too many rose petals and some of the guests were so drunk they suffocated on them and died."

Though Apicius the gourmand may have met a grisly end, his recipes live on.

"He was a food nut, but because of him we have these recipes," Ms Wood said. "We can look at things in his book, and there's a good chance they were used in the first Christmas feast.

"They are seriously the oldest Christmas recipes.

"These have got to be the earliest Christmas dinner recipes, and they are really nice.

"Most of the recipes are nuts, vegetables and dates, and spices and cheese and eggs, so it's not expensive.

"It's very healthy, there is very little fat – it's all olive oil, fresh herbs and dates. It's really healthy stuff.

"The Romans thought that sprinkling salt on food as seasoning was too basic.

"They used a fermented fish and salt. It's almost identical to fish sauce used in Thai dishes."

And the good news is the recipes are relatively cheap to create – and some are so simple that children can join in the fun.

Ms Wood recommends the Dates Alexandrian as a great cook-along recipe for younger family members.

She added: "If you want to make it really elaborate you can finish them with some edible gold and can serve it on a platter with green grapes.

Far from existing in isolation, Ms Wood said that Roman cooking has had an effect on modern UK cuisine.

Making a perfect dinner date



For Roman style Dates Alexandrian Jacqui Wood recommends:

450g whole dates
200g whole blanched almonds
25g cinnamon
125g melted butter
200g honey
Edible gold leaf.

METHOD

1. Brush the almonds with butter and roll immediately in cinnamon.

2. Stuff one almond in the cavity of the date after the stone is removed
3. Brush with warm honey
4. Bake in a moderate oven for 10 minutes till the skin of the dates is bubbling
5. If wished place a strip of edible gold on the dates for a festive look
6. Lay on a platter and serve with quarters of fresh figs or green grapes

She says British cuisine has fused with that of many civilisations through the centuries.

"We think British food is nothing special, but it has evolved over all these thousands of years," she said.

"It's serious fusion – we invented fusion food.

"We have got 1,000 years of the Celtic food, the Roman food, Saxon, Viking, Norman food."

■ Ms Wood's book *Tasting the Past – British food from the Stone Age to the Twentieth Century*, is due to be published by The History Press, in time for Christmas next year.

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