



How to Cater a Roman Orgy

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As a very young caterer in the late 1970s, I learned lessons the hard way every day. I catered for people who knew their food, and so I tried to make things I hoped they'd not yet had, to avoid comparison. Cooking off their grid and mine often meant making dishes for the first time. I took on every challenge knowing I would inevitably curdle or burn or undercook. But taking on a Roman orgy was a whole different kettle of fermented anchovy sauce.

A Harvard University professor, who will remain nameless, asked me to cater a Roman dinner, hereafter known as the Orgy. Considering the money (and not, in my innocence, the potential for blackmail), I took the job. I went to the lowest level—of Harvard's Widener Library—and found Apicius (see page 7) and other texts giving clues to the foods of the Roman Empire.

Translations to 1970s Cambridge weren't always easy. Stuffed larks? No problem: frozen quail, stuffed with a parmesan herb stuffing. Anchovies in oil with herbs came straight from Boston's Little Italy. Nightingales' tongues? Nowhere in our most exotic butchery were there packets of these. The smallest tongues I could find were from calves. I thought, what would a nightingale's tongue resemble... little, slippery, wormy...snails! Periwinkles from Chinatown!

With a hatpin, I plucked each of the little buggers out of their chambers and stir-fried them with garlic and green herbs. A nightingale sang in Harvard Square, or might have, except I had its tongue.

With no orgy cookbook in front of me, I had to use my imagination. Honey cakes seemed to epitomize the evening, and I made them in buttocky shapes drenched in a nut-honey mixture.

I had thought about what to wear as costume, and summoning up dignity, decided to dress as a caterer in my long black apron. I carried the boxes of delicacies through the Doric columns of the host's Victorian Cambridge home. The neighborhood brings together quite different styles: Olde Englede Colonial and New England clapboard, both decorous to a fault, making the fantasy of an orgy all the more titillating. The house had been swept free of furniture, the floors laid with oriental carpets and strewn with pillows. Incense wafted from standing brass braziers in which little electric bulbs were hidden. I took the food into the kitchen. Our host said, "Oh, just leave directions for the servers," and I swore inwardly: surely you'll let me just watch? At that point, the doorbell rang, and I opened the door on a pair of perfectly matched and fetchingly attired

Above: The house in which the alleged orgy ostensibly occurred. Drawing by Nan Swift, Improbable Research staff.

male undergraduates, wearing tiny chitons that barely covered their toned bodies in draped cloth. They even sported *Demetrius and the Gladiator* sandals, trussed up the legs.

There was a guest list near the door and I caught a peek: they were all male faculty whose names I recognized from the Classics and English departments. I left soon afterwards with instructions to return by noon the next day to pick up my dishes. (Noon? What low expectations he had! Surely orgies go on for days!)

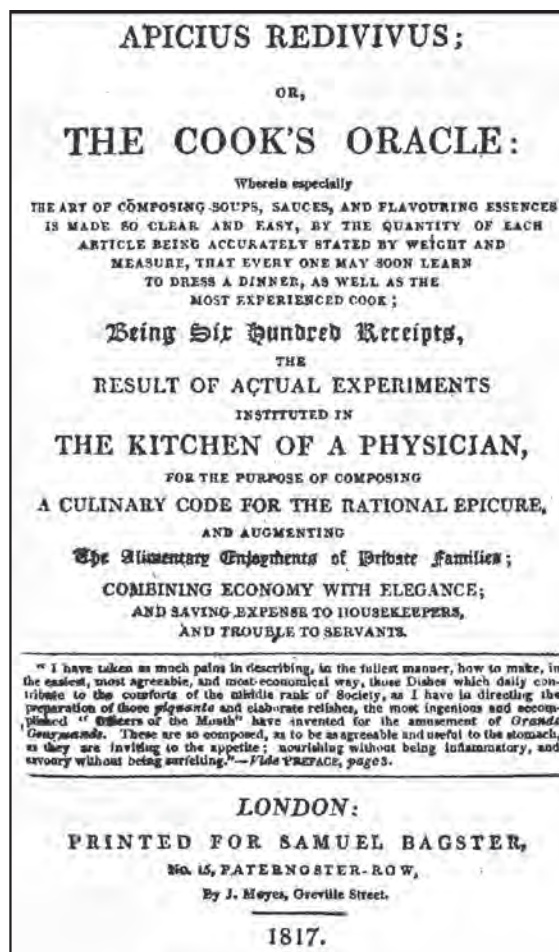
I came back at about 11 the following day, a tad early, expecting (or hoping) to find the floor littered with sated or expired bodies, spilled wine and pieces of clothing. It was disappointingly empty and clean, and our host, clad in monastic old-school pajamas and robe, had a bowl of Cheerios breakfast cereal in his hand.

Was the orgy a bust? Perhaps Cambridge was not ready for deeply researched classical debauchery. Perhaps I neglected to add some crucial ingredient to the nightingales' tongues. Come on, are Cheerios the tail of the dog in the Playboy Penthouse? Well, there's no meal you can't learn something from. Next time I'll leave out the salt peter.

A Note About Apicius

De re Coquinaria (*On the Subject of Cooking*) is a Roman cook-book from the late 4th or early 5th century C.E. The author is unknown, though the word "Apicius" which appears to be a made-up name, is associated with the text. The word "Apicius" has come to be associated with a decadent passion for food.

An 1817 edition of the source of the recipes. >



Recipe for Honeycakes

Syrup:

2 cups cane sugar, melted slowly in heavy pot with ½ cup water. Allow to come to a simmer, stir to dissolve all sugar, and simmer for five minutes. Take off flame and add ½ cup honey and 1 tsp rosewater. Add 1 cup roasted pistachios when the syrup has cooled. Set aside.

Cakes:

1 cup butter	1 tsp baking powder
¾ cup sugar	½ tsp ground cardamom
½ tsp baking soda	4 cups flour
½ cup light olive oil	1 egg white, beaten lightly
½ cup milk	cinnamon sugar for dusting

Cream butter and sugar until fluffy. Add olive oil and milk mixed with baking soda, gradually. Add baking powder, cardamom and flour. Shape into small balls. Brush egg white on one side of a ball and "glue" it to another, pressing them slightly to achieve "buttock" effect. Place on cookie sheet two inches apart. Bake at 350 degrees for about twenty minutes until slightly browned. Blush them with cinnamon sugar. Cool; serve dosed with syrup and pistachios. Eat messily and lick each other's fingers.

