

SUGAR, SPICE, AND EVERYTHING NICE

# ROME SWEET ROME

We often lament the sugar addiction that seems to be such a big part of modern food culture. However, the Romans had quite a sweet tooth as well. But how sweet was sweet in ancient Rome? The answer to this question isn't as easy as it seems: while today we tend to divide foods by basic flavour profile—sweet, salty, sour, and so on—these lines were much more blurred in antiquity.

*By Manon Henzen*



**T**he sugar that we eat today is mostly beet sugar; in the ancient world this form was unknown. But ancients did know of cane sugar, both as a juice and in granulated form. The first known mention of granulated sugar is by Dioscorides who wrote in his *De Materia Medica* of “a sort of crystallised honey... not unlike salt in its texture and it can be crunched between the teeth like salt”.

There are hardly any recipes from classical antiquity that contain sugar. It must have been expensive. Sugar is only found in recipes for medicine, such as the one from Galen for *Garon tou loachou* which is “beneficial for everyone”. This was a strange fermented concoction with breadcrumbs, dried fruits, sugar, honey, and plenty of herbs and spices, all mixed together with water. It doesn't sound like a nice drink. So, in antiquity sugar remained in the medicine cabinet.

## Sweeteners

What then did the Romans use to sweeten their dishes? There were three main ingredients used for this purpose: honey, (dried) fruits, and grape must or wine. Honey was the most frequently used. In the first century AD Roman cookbook, *Apicius*, honey was used in 219 out of 459 recipes – that's almost 50%!

Fruits, and especially dried fruits, were also used to give dishes a sweet flavour. Fresh apples or peaches in a pork stew, elderberries in an oven casserole, and myrtle berries in meat faggots are good examples of dishes in which fruits

gave the food a subtle sweet flavour. Dried fruits gave an even sweeter taste. In the *Apicius* text, dates, raisins, dried figs, and dried apricots often fill this role.

The most interesting sweeteners are the ones made from grape juice: there was a whole range of them: *sapa*, *caroenum*, *defrutum*, and also real wines such as *passum* and *mulsum*. The latter was a wine that was sweetened with honey, and *passum* was made from dried grapes and therefore sweet on its own.

It is not entirely clear what the exact difference is between *sapa*, *caroenum*, and *defrutum*. *Sapa* was possibly a more general term for a cooked grape must syrup. *Caroenum* and *defrutum* must have been specific kinds of *sapa*. *Caroenum* was clearly used to add liquid to a dish in the *Apicius* text, almost the same way as when wine was added. The writer Palladius (late fourth/early fifth century AD) said that *caroenum* is reduced must that has been cooked down to a third of its volume. This would have been quite sweet. *Defrutum* was used the most in *Apicius* and probably was the sweetest and thickest of all these syrups. When added to a recipe it was more like a seasoning than a liquid. Sometimes a recipe says “add *defrutum* to add colour” or “so that it is sweet”. We will probably never know the exact difference, but we do know that these ingredients gave a sweet flavour to the dish.

## Sweet dishes... or not?

While the Romans may have had a sweet tooth, there aren't many recipes

for desserts or pastries handed down to us from history. You may sporadically find mentions of dishes with fruit or (sweet, soft) cheese that were eaten at the end of a meal, or as a snack in between meals, and sometimes as an appetizer. However, *Apicius* hardly describes any real sweet dishes or desserts that fit our modern definition.

Recipes that we *might* think would be sweet, often aren't. How about a fruit custard with pepper, cumin, and *garum*, roasted sweet peaches with a cumin sauce, or an oven dish with nuts, honey, milk, and fish sauce for dessert?

On the other hand, many dishes that we think of as savoury contained the sweet ingredients mentioned above. Most of the 459 recipes in the cookbook had one of the sweeteners as an ingredient! Recipes with meat, fowl, grains, fruits, and eggs were the sweetest. In these, honey, dried fruits, and often one of the syrups or sweet wines were used. Recipes with vegetables, legumes, and fish were less sweet, although a sweet wine or syrup was often used in these dishes, too.

Today there is a fairly strict line between savoury and sweet dishes. This was totally different in antiquity, where sweet and savoury made a good marriage. According to our modern palettes, Roman savoury dishes are quite sweet, and most of their sweet dishes are strangely savoury. **AH**

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## A cold dessert from *Apicius*

**I wanted to make you a sweet Roman dessert. I had to look hard for one without *garum*, but here it is: a lovely semolina pudding... with pepper!**

### Ingredients (4 people)

- » 2 tbsp white almonds
- » 2 tbsp pine nuts
- » 400 ml/13.5 oz sweet dessert wine\*
- » 100 ml/3.4 oz water
- » 50 g/1.8 oz semolina (durum wheat)
- » 2 tbsp raisins
- » 1 tsp ground long pepper (or black pepper)

Roast the almonds in the oven or in a dry frying pan on the stove until golden brown. Chop finely.

Dry fry the pine nuts in a pan until golden brown.

Put wine and water in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Add the semolina. Stir until smooth. Add pine nuts, almonds, raisins, and pepper. Let the semolina cook for about 3 minutes. Be sure to stir regularly, or it will stick to the bottom of the pan. In the end, you will have a thick porridge.

Rinse four small moulds or individual ramekins with cold water. Pour the pudding into the moulds and let them cool in the refrigerator for about an hour.

Turn the moulds out onto four small dessert plates and sprinkle with ground pepper. If you want, you can garnish them with more chopped roasted nuts and a drizzle of honey poured over the top.

\*The wine has to be **sweet!** I used the Roman sweet and spiced wine conditum – see my favourite recipe in issue 27 of Ancient History.