

A resolutely valetudinarian attorney recently came for my opinion of lecithin, which he was convinced caused his queasiness. However, avoiding lecithin, which is ubiquitous, meant forgoing so many foods that he was quite hungry—or forlorn—as a result. He was typical of many people with chronic dyspepsia of unknown, and presumably psychosocial, origin, who progressively restrict what they eat, indicting food for problems that lie elsewhere.

Leviticus instructed the Israelites about what combinations of food would please the Creator, but my colleagues and I show far more enthusiasm about the structure of the gut rather than the order in which foods go into it. In our contemplation of the prevalence of disease, we pay almost no attention to the kinds of food different people eat.

Take the current hubbub about fat and carbohydrates in the daily diet. Appropriate mixtures and sequences are said to permit rapid weight loss without hunger. But nobody considers the placebo effect in all this: if you are convinced that a high-fat diet will diminish your appetite and keep you feeling full, that's what will happen.

The rhetoric accompanying diet fads emphasizes the first rapid weight loss (of fluid) convincingly enough to raise expectations to engender a placebo effect. That loss lasts a short while, until the diet fails from lack of continuing reinforcement, when the dieter no longer loses weight at the first accelerated speed. New diet books keep selling like proverbial hotcakes for that reason.

A course about ancient Roman foods with Veronica Grimm, an instructor at Yale whose manner and habits belie her surname, made me wonder whether we should take

more notice of what our patients think about food and what they eat. Digestive disease specialists rarely consider the manifold functions of food: as metaphor, aesthetic object, and just plain fuel.

Historians have turned from preoccupation with kings and emperors to inspection of the habits of their more lowly subjects. Studies of ancient food habits have multiplied, like the loaves and fishes, over the past few years. Where the feast of Trimalchio engendered envious discussion of Roman excess in exuberant college students (who does not remember the “vomitorium?”), nowadays attention is directed to the humble, while the orgies of the rich are slighted.

The “plowman’s lunch” of bread and cheese, once a classic of the old British pub, was first described in an ancient account called the *Mor-etum*, associated with the estimable Virgil. The poor ate much grain and cereals, because that was all they had. The habit has endured in the widespread use of pasta, which their descendants—and everybody else—so much enjoy.

Wheat of various varieties was ground into bread, often unleavened, until the days of the Empire when yeast from wine gave it a lighter texture. There was no shortage of roughage in the early diet, owing to the rather crude milling techniques, but I know nothing about the bowel habits of ancient Romans, except that their sewers and *cloacas* are widely famed and still admired.

Grimm’s course gave me much to think about: for example, that prohibition of pork to the Jews, and later to the Muslims, has been ascribed to unclean porcine habits. But all around ancient Rome, pigs were treasured for converting offal and garbage, not to mention stray

feces, into clean if fatty food thanks to the magic of intermediary metabolism.

The sequence of parties, sex, and intermarriage was as obvious to the ancients as to us. Dietary restrictions may have kept the Jews from associating freely, or at least convivially, with other peoples, but the Christians were attentive to what digestive specialists have forgotten, that “it’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a man.” Somewhere, I read that only chicken is freely eaten by members of every religion, universally available except maybe to vegetarians.

Food serves important cultural and moral values: what people eat and drink, or do not eat and drink, tells us much about them. Off and on, but increasingly in the 21st century, food has once more become medicine, *nutriceuticals* as they are called. We should not be surprised to learn that the provision of supplemental and nutriceuticals has very quickly become a \$6 billion industry.

More often, by those who take their body to be an engine to be tuned up, food is regarded as fuel, not nourishment. To others, it may become an enemy, as in anorexia nervosa. Most often, food has become a metaphor. Functional dyspepsia should be evaluated as much by psychologists as by the physiologists who study the body’s reaction to such matters. It is a problem for the mind/brain (placebos).

Appetite is an affection that endures into old age, as anyone who visits a condominium complex dedicated to the elderly will quickly hear in conversation about “early bird specials” and whether it is time to have a drink. We aged act as if we live to eat, however short the pleasure from lips to pharynx. The other preoccupation of the

elderly, constipation, gets somewhat more closeted attention.

The produce of a far-flung empire was available in Rome, but preservation was less advanced, so strong flavors were very important to mask the odor of meats less than fresh and to enhance the daily porridge and cereals that made up the diet of the average Roman citizen. To do that, sauces, especially strong ones, found an important place in Roman cooking. Almost 1000 entries in the extant writings deal with sauces, still the mark of the Italian cook today. In New Haven at least, “sauce” invar-

Food serves important cultural and moral values: what people eat and drink, or do not eat and drink, tells us much about them.

ably means a tomato-based concoction, but of course in Roman times the tomato was unknown.

It is surprising how much ancient Roman food resembled our own, if you pick and choose the right era. One curious example comes in *garum*, so important to ancient Roman sauces, an essential ingredient that delighted the upper classes. *Garum* was dignified in Rome by the term *liquamen*. It was called *oenogarum* when mixed with wine, *oxygarum* when diluted with vinegar, and *hydrogarum* when diluted with water, and so forth.

Garum is much like the Thai fish sauce, now so familiar in East Asian food. Fish sauce or *garum* is made by salting anchovy-like fish, leaving them out to dry in the sun in jars, and then collecting the juices that exude. *Garum* acts as a flavor enhancer, I think much like MSG, without adding much flavor itself (unless you use too much). Indeed, holding my nose because of its smell, I add it to stews and other

comestibles when my wife isn't looking, but not too much lest she detect my subterfuge.

Garum-making died out with the fall of the Roman Empire, but its enhancement of flavor was retained by sophisticated chefs in the habit of adding salted anchovies to many different dishes. Worcestershire sauce is also made from anchovies, which may account for its former popularity.

Roman cooks had an extraordinary profusion of food, according to the few cookbooks that have survived but mainly from a text written by Apicius. The orange, such a part of American life, was unknown to the classical world, though it was cultivated in China in 2400 B.C.E. Lemons appearing in the 4th century B.C.E. in Europe, it was the citron, important to the Biblical Jews, that was the classical citrus of the time. Later, it was spread throughout Europe by the Jewish diaspora after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Wine was drunk in the Roman world, usually diluted with water, as so many sketches on Greek pottery make clear. To drink it straight was considered barbarian. Conjecture has it that the first alcoholic beverages came from the odd jar of honey or fruit left forgotten outside. Warmed by the effect of that liquid, the adventurous learned to make wine from grapes and beer from cereal. Indeed, beer is the most ancient of beverages, even widely available in Pharaonic Egypt.

The Greeks are said to have introduced wine and viticulture into southern Italy, which they colonized extensively in the 8th century B.C.E., as anyone who has been to Sicily or south Italy knows. Italy proving an ideal terrain and climate, the Romans swiftly turned to wine and became enthusiastic adherents.

Wine had different functions in Greece and Rome. The Greeks had their *sumposion*, the “drinking in” of wine and words, as Plato's writings have made so widely known. But in Rome, the symposium was

replaced by the *convivium* (literally “living together”)—in actuality, an eating together, or in our terms, a dinner party.

Excess was suspect in Rome just as in 20th century America, before the popularity of the Great Chefs and the Food Channel. As Rome's empire expanded, more and more foods from foreign lands brought so great an interest in food that ultimately sumptuary laws restricting too great luxury were introduced. Just as today, a certain suspicion of foreign goods as excess arose, with a resulting revulsion.

There is an inherent tendency to a parochialism that elevates the simplicity of old ways over new. That's what many high Romans tried to do by disdaining overly delicate foods too fancifully prepared, in a manner not entirely distasteful to those of us who wonder at the tortuous modern preparation of architectural food skyscrapers, so difficult to disassemble.

Roman laws also restricted too lavish funerals and the consumption of too exotic foods. It was taken as emblematically aristocratic and an indication of high culture to prefer the ancient cereals and simple foods rather than to indulge in such delicacies as lark's tongues. Emily Gowers, author on Roman foods, points out how this translated into the consumption of words not food, so that the words and arguments of Plato's symposium were preserved, but not the food and drink that accompanied them.

The pendulum provides a good metaphor for history. Food fads come and go as rapidly as empires, and so we may agree with Vico, who wrote of the eternal return, or with Pope John XXIII who, in praise of progress, wrote that God writes straight with crooked lines. Modern America still has much to learn from ancient Rome.

HOWARD M. SPIRO
Program for Humanities in Medicine
Yale University School of Medicine
howard.spiro@yale.edu