Photography — Ash Naylor

Ancient Eats

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"Food is relatable, it's a central and defining part of every culture," says archaeologist, chef and author Farrell Monaco. "It tells us many things about people and about civilisations. It is also something that conveys preference, beauty, access, status, and identity."

The experimental archaeologist is an internationally-renowned authority on ancient gastrostomy and founder of award-winning blog, Tavola Mediterranea ('The Mediterranean Table'), that recreates Mediterranean—especially Roman—recipes from antiquity. On the back of the blog's success, Farrell recently launched The Old-School Kitchen to enable the public to watch presentations and take part in culinary workshops—essentially a live action version of her blog.

"I have been presenting in museums in the United States and Italy this year and also held a week-long live-in master class in a castle in Tuscany this [northern hemisphere] summer which was a smashing success," beams Farrell. "Participants flew in from all over the globe to roll up their sleeves, meet new friends, and cook it old-school from the Etruscan period through to the end of the Roman Empire. Almost 1,000 years of edible archaeology in six days!"

Why do you think that your work has been so embraced?

"It sits at a pretty interesting cross-disciplinary juncture between food-related archaeology, and modern culinary-food culture. Foodies and chefs are beginning to explore food history and archaeology as they want to know more about food origins and ancient food preparation practices; archaeologists are beginning to explore experimental food archaeology—cooking, baking, food preparation—as they now want to expand the interpretive process by exploring the experimental and sensory aspects of the archaeological data instead of just assessing an object or a context using visual or statistical analyses alone."

Farrell has also noticed a wider yearning to connect with our "food-roots". She uses the term "edible archaeology" to introduce her work to a wider audience that may not have otherwise either had the interest or opportunity to explore the significance of food, not just in terms of its history, but how it is produced, from where, and by whom.

"I don't think we need elitist food TV programming to do this for us, to continue to make food culture something that is shown to us by only a select few of the celebrity chefs-du-jour," she says. "Nor do I think we need food game shows to dumb it all down for us either. We can reconnect to food, cook, bake, and eat together in our own homes, in our schools, community centres, and museums."

Farrell's love of food developed through her love of archaeology—a path that was pursued in no small part thanks to none other than Indiana Jones: "I saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and my entire world changed in an afternoon!"

As a self-confessed tom-boy, Farrell spent her childhood in Canada climbing trees and "hunting for fossils, arrowheads, bones and coins". "My dad continued to foster my curiosity by buying me replicas of Peruvian icons, arrowheads, and museum-shop fossils when he was travelling on business," she reveals. "I had a small museum going in the corner of my bedroom for a few years. I think I may have even tried to charge admission a few times but it failed!"

The reality of real-life archaeology, however, is far removed from searching for the Staff of Ra or fighting the Nazis for the Ark of the Covenant. The most beautiful thing about it,

Farrell Monaco at Castello di Potentin.
Photography — Ash Naylor

Prosphoro Bread. Photography — Farrell Monaco

says Farrell, is that "it gives us insight into the every day lives of average, normal people who lived before us and food is the best avenue with which to do this". I ask what can be learnt from such civilisations.

"Never waste food. There was no food waste in Ancient Rome because Rome was continually under threat of famine. One of the themes that is repeated a lot in the Roman archaeological and historical records is the preservation of food and the use of food by-products for secondary food products, religious purposes, and the use of every part of the animal as food. And I mean, every single part of the animal. We could learn a great deal from this as we take food for granted in the modern era—I am positive that most of us would not know how to survive as many of us in the first world have not been connected to our food-supply for many generations."

As for the treatment of animals, Farrell laments that today's mass production means little has been learnt from the Roman times. "For a civilisation that didn't eat meat on a regular basis, Rome was terrible to animals, particularly when it came to food preparation," she says. "I cannot say that much has changed since then except the fact that this blatant type of animal cruelty has simply been removed from view and is hidden from us, in daily life, in the factory farming setting, 'out of sight and out of mind'."

Was vegetarianism common among the ancients?

"Meat consumption in the daily lives of Ancient Romans was low and quite uncommon for the average plebeian

Farrell Monaco making ancient Roman bread at Castello di Potentino. Photography — Ash Naylor

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Farrell Monaco teaching at Castello di Potentino. Photography — Ash Naylor

Roman as meat was costly in ancient Rome and most animals served other more valuable purposes other than a source of protein. It was expensive; it was laborious to kill an animal or to catch fish; and meat was, more often than not, procured for feasting or for wealthier households. Romans consumed a lot of beans, legumes, and dairy products for protein instead of meat. This, in my opinion, is a lot healthier (and wiser) than eating meat every day."

It is often theorised that an astonishing 70 percent of the calories content of the average Roman diet came from grain by way of porridge or bread. "Interestingly, however, thrice-bolted, refined white breads were deemed of a higher-quality," says Farrell. "The poor were only able to access the bran-breads, or the unrefined—whole grain—breads. So, while the poor may have felt they were getting the short end of the stick in this deal, they in fact had the better product and likely had healthier colons and higher fibre, folate, vitamin B, niacin, and calcium levels than white-bread-eating Roman patricians had."

Also common was defrutum, a reduction syrup created using the grape skins and pulp left over from winemaking. "This syrup tastes incredible," says Farrell, "and we know that Romans liked to use it as a preservative, a wine additive, as well as a dressing or sauce in some of their meals." However, the Romans also boiled down the reduction in lead-lined pots, even though they knew, though clearly underestimated, the health hazard of the metal ("this is one experiment that I do not care to replicate myself!").

One of the things that has most fascinated Farrell is the Romans' "resourcefulness and sophistication" in the kitchen. She cites their cheesemaking techniques of using fig-tree sap that results in a ricotta-like flavour with a bitter under-taste ("we do not appreciate bitter flavours in our cheese varieties, but the Ancient Romans did!"); and the use of garum, a "notoriously stinky fermented fish sauce": "They put it in their main dishes as well as their desserts, and it works beautifully. If you were to tell a modern pastry chef in Paris to add a dash of a musky, fishy brown condiment into his delicate flan or his pear custard, he'd throw you out into the street!"

Some ingredients, such as the spice, silphium, is no longer around, being "much sought after by the Romans and picked to extinction". Farrell compares its status to truffles in the modern era, "but much more expensive and harder to find": "There was even a poor-man's silphium which is still in use today in Indian and Chinese cooking. It's called *hing* in China, and *asafoetida* in India."

The foods we eat today often define our cultures, uniting us not just with our immediate kin, but as nations as a whole, "giving us a sense of family and of belonging". As with all aspects of the past, we may learn much about ourselves from the history of our food.

"The way that Ancient Romans ate, for example, be it around their tables at home, at a bar counter, sitting on a bench, or reclining on a triclinium, says something about them and the societies they lived in," says Farrell. "We still practise similar eating styles in the modern era and these styles still say some of the same things about who we are."

Next year, Farrell plans to publish a book as well as establish more archaeology cooking retreats in Italy and hopefully take The Old-School Kitchen beyond its borders. In the meantime, she will be hosting further lectures and workshops both in Europe and the US, including "a large, lavish sit-down dinner at the Frontline Club in London in December of this year".

"My hope is to see more of us put our phones down, get back into the kitchens with our families and friends," says Farrell, "to connect to our culinary pasts, our food-roots, and make food together once again."

The Roman Sweet Tooth

Apicius' Hypotrimma *with* Defrutum Glazed Spelt Biscuits

PREPARATION TIME: 2 HOURS | COOK TIME: 30 MINUTES

INGREDIENTS

Hypotrimma

- 1 tsp of pepper
- ½ tsp of ajwain (Bishop's weed), celery seed, or a handful of fresh lovage leaf
- 1 tsp of dried mint
- ½ cup of pine nuts
- ½ cup of raisins
- ½ cup of pitted dates
- 3 cups of unsalted fresh or aged, soft mild cheese (eg. cow's ricotta, sheep cheese, or goat cheese)
- 1 tbsp of honey
- 1 tbsp of red wine vinegar
- 1 tsp of garum/liquamen or Thai/Vietnamese fish sauce (Red Boat or Flor di Garum, for example)
- 1 tbsp of olive oil
- 1 tbsp of defrutum or grape molasses

Spelt Biscuits

- 4 cups coarse-ground spelt flour
- 1 tsp of salt
- 1+1/2 cup of honey
- 1+1/2 cup of ricotta
- 2 tsp baking soda
- 1/2 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp cardamom
- 1 clam-shaped cookie cutter or any other decorative cutter of your liking

METHOD

1. Begin preparing the spelt biscuits as they'll take a bit longer to prepare and bake and the hypotrimma will go much faster. Preheat your oven to 175°C.

2. Mix your biscuit dough by hand or in a mixer.

3. Dust a large cutting board with flour. Roll the spelt biscuit dough out, using a rolling pin, to as thin as you can. You are trying to achieve something to the effect of a Roman digestive biscuit. We want it to be as thin as a digestive biscuit so it's soft but also a bit crisp once they bake. If your pin sticks to the dough, flour the surface of the dough with more flour.

4. Using your cutter, cut out as many biscuit shapes as you can and place them onto a baking sheet. Hint: If your cutter sticks to the dough and you can't get the biscuit out of the cutter.... use more flour on the dough surface!

5. Once you cut all of the dough into the cutter shape, take a basting brush and brush the top of the biscuits with defrutum or grape molasses. If the cutter you're using is a ridged cutter, like mine is, brush against the ridges as it creates more of a dramatic shadow effect that makes the biscuit rather beautiful.

6. Bake these little beauties for 30 minutes. Time to make the hypotrimma!

7. If you're going to use a mortar, keep a large mixing bowl on the side to move processed ingredients into once they're fully pulverised. If you're using a food processor, dice up all of the ingredients together but the cheese to begin with. Add the cheese in last either as soft cheese, broken into bits, or smashed. If you're using a mortar, pulverise each dry ingredient individually using your pestle and then transfer it into the large mixing bowl to be mixed together once all of the ingredients have been mulched. Add the cheese in last either as soft cheese, broken into bits, or smashed. Mix it evenly.

8. Serve the hypotrimma in a serving bowl by piping it into the bowl (if it's too wet) or by shaping it into a ball (use a bit of olive oil on your hands) if you've chosen to use a drier aged cheese and the mix is of a firmer consistency. Garnish the hypotrimma by sprinkling some dried mint on top.

9. Once the biscuits are done, remove them from the oven and let them cool. You can place the biscuits around the hypotrimma in the serving bowl, or use them as a garnish on the hypotrimma and serve the surplus biscuits on the side. The choice is yours! There's so much room for presentation creativity here, coqui! Let's do Apicius proud!