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Roman Food Poems: A Modern Translation
Alistair Elliot

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All those with an enthusiasm for Latin poetry or an interest in food will welcome the fact that noted translator Alistair Elliot has in this new volume turned his attention to “Roman food poems.” It should be said from the outset, though, that the title of this collection is somewhat misleading. These are not, with a few exceptions, poems about food. Rather they are poems, or excerpts from poems, in which food or food-related activity (covering the whole spectrum from gardening to defecation) happen to feature. This should put nobody off. Indeed, one of the pleasures of this volume lies precisely in the incidental nature of the references to food or drink, references that occur in a remarkable variety of contexts. The Roman preoccupation with what they put into their stomachs was such that food was never too far from their minds. As a result, this collection’s focus on food offers an interesting way into Latin poetry in general, and the poems selected here make up a pleasing anthology and provide a good indication of the varied nature of Latin literature. The general reader with an interest in Latin poetry will find much to enjoy in this volume. The translations are set next to the original Latin, so those with some rusty recollections of college Latin will have the opportunity to relive old memories and at the same time discover that Latin literature is more interesting than Wheelock’s rather limited range of practice sentences might have suggested.

But this collection is equally aimed at people with a serious interest in food. Elliot’s brief introduction suggests that the audience he has in mind will want to learn about the concrete aspects of Roman eating rather than the cultural significance of food. However, the reader of the poems in this collection will finish the book with a good idea of some of the things that food meant to the Romans, although, as we will see, gaps inevitably remain.
The poems are in general well chosen, covering a broad spectrum of Roman life and avoiding the easy temptation of including too many poems about elite banquets or drinking parties. The translations are very fine indeed. Elliot takes a few liberties here and there, but these are in general eminently forgivable. To give an idea of the flavor, beets, which in the Latin are said to be “not without use to a sick stomach,” become in Elliot’s rendition “so good for blocked up pipes” (pp. 16–17). Only on occasion does Elliot go far beyond what we find in the Latin, in particular in his entertaining rendition of the inscription on page 97, which is more of a version than a translation.

The collection is in three parts. The first assembles “ingredients, sources, taste, morality, gifts and mythology.” This is a bit of a mishmash, perhaps, but the poems are nevertheless arranged with some thought. For instance, Seneca on the simple life is followed by Petronius on luxury, and Lucan’s account of Cato’s manic journey through the desert is followed by Horace’s more leisurely journey to Brundisium. Part two looks at Roman meals, not simply the meals themselves but also the etiquette surrounding dining, from invitations to the use of napkins, bringing out the importance of cultivated behavior to Roman aristocrats. The final section is entitled “Making the Day’s Food.” This section consists of only two poems, and the second of these, a delightful excerpt from Ovid, has nothing to do with this topic (although it makes a fine envoi for the collection). The other poem is a welcome translation of the long Moretum, a relatively neglected poem from the Virgilian appendix.

Given that the main readership for this book is likely to lie outside those who specialize in ancient studies, it does seem a shame the notes to this volume are not really adequate to give general readers the help they need to understand these poems. We learn virtually nothing about the poets represented, often not even their dates or any information about the poetry with which they are associated. I completely sympathize with the wish for the poems to stand on their own, and few things are worse than when the experience of reading a poem is spoiled because of a perceived need to check unnecessary footnotes. Nevertheless, it would be helpful for a reader unfamiliar with the Latin poets to be able to place them in some historical context and to have some idea of the kinds of poetry they wrote (especially when the excerpts fail to make this clear). We also need more background information. One of the selections is from Lucan’s brilliant account of Cato’s march across the North African desert with his soldiers. But readers would better understand what was going on here if they were offered a sentence or two explaining the Stoic background to this passage, which is fundamental to our understanding. This is also one of the more egregious instances where Elliot’s excerpts have the feeling of being “bleeding chunks.” One can only hope that Elliot’s vigorous translation will inspire an enthused reader to find a complete translation of Lucan, and it would have been nice if the notes offered some help in this direction (for what it is worth, one need look no further than the wonderful translation by Jane Wilson Joyce). Finally, Elliot’s brief remarks on meter will be meaningless to someone unacquainted with the mechanics of Latin verse, and it is perhaps unfair to expect a general reader to go off and consult textbooks on the subject (p. 153). Once more, one sympathizes with the presumed desire to let the poems speak for themselves, but anyone who has experience teaching will know even the brightest and most enthusiastic students need to be given a certain amount of background to understand the often strange literature of the Roman world.

The introduction is brief and offers some concise information concerning the pragmatics of Roman eating (or, at any rate, Roman upper-class eating). This material will doubtless interest many of the food enthusiasts who will pick up this volume. However, I would suggest that some brief background information about broader Roman attitudes to food might have helped readers to place some of the poems in their cultural context. For instance, the politics of food seems to have intensified under the emperors. For the upper classes, culinary extravagance came to be seen as a symptom of a general decline in aristocratic morality, a decline various members of the Roman elite were, at times, conscious of the need to correct. This increased politicization of food consumption came from the very top of society. The emperor Augustus himself told off an equestrian for eating in public at the games, pointing out that when he wanted to take his lunch, he went home to eat it. And, lest this be thought to be a whim of the first emperor, we should note we also find, in the fourth century A.D., the urban prefect Ampelius attempting to ban the upper classes from chewing in public. How the aristocracy behaved (and was seen to behave) was a matter of crucial concern in the hierarchical world of the Roman empire, and consumption of food was one aspect of this. Against such a background, various poems in Elliot’s collection take on extra light, for instance Thyestes’ great speech in favor of simplicity in Seneca’s play (where a note would be welcome pointing out that shortly after this excerpt Thyestes will be tempted, all too easily, to reenter the world of luxury, with disastrous results).

When an anthology offers so many delights, it is unfair to criticize it for poems that are not included. However, I
think it is reasonable to point out that this collection does contain one important omission: poems treating the popular eating houses (popinae) that were such an important part of Roman popular culture. Roman aristocrats, for whom eating in public was, as we have seen, frowned upon, would have had nothing to do with such places. A famous poem by no less a figure than the emperor Hadrian states he does not want to be like Florus and wander around the taverns and eating houses. And Horace, in one of his finest Epistles, attacks his bailiff for longing for the city and finding beauty in aspects of the urban world that the poet hates, including brothels, the “greasy eating house,” and the neighborhood tavern. The popinae served a crucial function in Roman food consumption. And, during the Empire, they proved to be a source of deep concern for the Roman elite, which, on several occasions, passed legislation banning popinae from selling cooked meats or baked foods, with Nero, for example, allowing such establishments to sell only beans and peas. The most likely reason for this prohibition was a desire to make these places less attractive locations for the urban populace to gather (such gatherings were always associated with potentially seditious activity), and the success of this legislation can be seen in the archaeological record, with surviving food counters in eating houses at Ostia lacking the counters with built-in food jars we see in the inns and cafés from an earlier period at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Two poems would have thrown light on this world of eating houses and bars. Above all, Juvenal in his eighth satire offers an extraordinarily interesting account of a popina frequented by the shameless noble Lateranus. But it would also be useful to have an easily accessible translation of the poem in the Virgilian appendix known as the Copa (“Barmaid”), a poem in which the hostess of the inn ironically uses the conventions of aristocratic poetry and philosophy to tempt the reader inside to take part in the pleasures from which the Roman upper classes, in their desire to display their superiority over the rest of the city, had debarred themselves.

I should say, however, Elliot is by no means blind to nonelite dining and food consumption, although the nature of Latin literature inevitably means most of the material here deals with the upper classes. For instance, there is the welcome inclusion of some graffiti from Pompeii (which may or may not be lower class), although it must be said that the delightful warning to the “dung-producers” to keep their distance is only indirectly related to the topic at hand. Another treat is the welcome complete translation of the so-called Moretum from the Virgilian appendix, an important text for elite representations of poverty and labor.

In short, those who are enthusiastic about food and interested in or intrigued by Latin poetry will find much to entertain and interest them in this volume. But I suspect the general reader would take more away from these poems if the notes were fuller and written with more sympathy for those without a background in classics.

—Peter O’Neill, University of Exeter

Food in the Ancient World, from A to Z.
Andrew Dalby
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“His uncomb’d, hoary locks, wild-starting, thatch’d / A head for thought profound and clear unmatch’d,” wrote Scottish poet Robert Burns of his good friend William Smellie, “compiler” of the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica—a fitting description for the son of a stonemason who spent six years (1765–1771) composing the 2,391 pages of the editio princeps with a “pair of scissars” [sic] in hand (or so the legend goes).

Legends and truth aside, it takes great courage—and a dash of folly—to embark on any encyclopedic adventure. Fortunately, Andrew Dalby willingly undertakes the voyage in Food in the Ancient World, from A to Z. As a linguist, historian, foodie, and classicist, equally conversant in ancient history and gastronomy, he deserves our greatest praise for mustering his experience and expertise in a wide range of disciplines to deliver this fine book.

Dalby, a polymath and author of numerous works on antiquity and food, has produced a surprisingly readable trésor of ancient gastronomy. Over four hundred pages long, his encyclopedia contains entries on an expansive gamut of subjects: the great food writers and chroniclers of antiquity; the taxonomy of grape varietals and fishes in the ancient world; and a seemingly comprehensive survey of nuts, fruits, herbs, cereals, grains, and vegetables in ancient Greece and Rome and beyond.

Dalby rightly warns us we must approach classical texts and even their modern redactors with a highly critical—and often skeptical—eye. “Translators,” he writes, “take different views over all sorts of questions; sometimes they take a demonstrably wrong view. You have to try to be independent of them” (p.x). He also points out how easy it is to misinterpret the ancient writers unless you read them closely and with an analytical approach, keeping in mind sarcasm in the ancient texts is frequently misread.