The Satyricon is the finest novel in Latin literature. Narrated in the first person, it is the story of Encolpius (educated, cynical, feckless, and amoral); his friends and lovers, male and female; and his enemies, human and divine. Encolpius’s odyssey had begun in the seaport of Massilia (now Marseille in France), where in some way he offended the Roman god of male sexual potency, Priapus. His attempts to placate this powerful deity, involving the priestess Quartilla, are interwoven with other comic and tragic adventures.

All complete manuscripts of the Satyricon are lost. No one since the early Middle Ages has been able to read the story from beginning to end. This astonishing work, apparently written c. A.D. 60 by Petronius, the emperor Nero’s famous “Arbiter of Elegance,” is now nothing more than a fragment, which opens at the point where Encolpius happens to watch a public lecture, a clever piece of self-advertisement, by a professor of rhetoric named Agamemnon. In subsequent scenes Encolpius, with his boyfriend Giton, his rival Asculius, his new acquaintance Agamemnon, and others, makes a picaresque progress through Campania and southern Italy, always in poverty, sometimes at risk of arrest or death. Accompanied by Giton and the poet Eumolpus, Encolpius finally arrives at Crotona, where they plan to engage in the lucrative local pastime of legacy-hunting. The surviving text breaks off there.

The longest surviving scene, Cena Trimalchionis or the “Feast of Trimalchio,” set in an unnamed city near Pompeii and written just twenty years before the eruption of Vesuvius, is the world’s first landmark of gastronomic fiction. An extended satire on the new rich of the early Roman Empire, the “Feast” is a rich source of information on Roman food, foodways, and etiquette; but how can the historian put it to use? We need to know where the naturalism stops and the fantasy begins.

Here, in an epilogue to the Satyricon, are answers to some of those long-standing questions. The narrator is now Agamemnon, who had rejoined Encolpius and his friends at Crotona.1

Any reader of the memoirs of my dear friend Encolpius knows that the story can end only in one way. It falls to me—fine poet, matchless orator, artless and unpracticed historian—to tell of the last day on which Encolpius partook of the despicable food of this temporary world, the honeyed fritters and sesame loaves that save us hapless mortals from starvation.2

After a narrow escape from crucifixion, and following an exciting episode during which we were stoned by our creditors at the cheese market, Encolpius and I returned from Crotona poorer than either of us had arrived there. Not one legacy had come our way, and the poet Eumolpus had run off with young Giton. We had not the price of a passage by sea, still less the wherewithal to pay the innkeeper. Before the second cockcrow, on a certain dark and rainy day, we squeezed through a window and set out in all haste, with no glance backward and no thought for breakfast, on the long road to Campania. We had recalled that there might still be one man rich and foolish enough to keep us alive, and that man lived on the Bay of Naples.

Trimalchio (yes, it was he) shouldered the burden of fate without complaint. He appointed Encolpius as dancing master to his wife, Fortunata, while I took the post of tutor to his fancy boy, Croesus.3 Now, I say nothing of my own thankless task. Any pleasure I took in beating Greek grammar into the lad was counterweighed by the pain of hearing him sing. I gave up taking him to bed: he insisted on smuggling a grotesquely overfed puppy under the sheets with him, a cause of endless confusion. As for Encolpius, he afterwards regarded these years as an integral part of the penance imposed on him by the phallic god Priapus. After that painful journey in search of his lost potency, how the poor fellow chafed at expending his recovered powers, day after day, somewhere among the folds of Fortunata’s enveloping flesh, whether the service was required of him...
on the floor of the music room or in the perfumed recesses of her bedchamber.

We never offended Trimalchio. All praise to you, honored Priapus, Encolpius never disappointed Fortunata. We spent nothing in that earthy Hell except our time—but Saturn knows that we spent plenty of that, listening to vulgar and uneducated people around overloaded tables. After five years our conjoined professional salaries, added to the continual little gifts of silver, gold, and jewelry with which Fortunata encouraged her gigolo, had made us rich. Meanwhile, we had befriended Trimalchio’s accountant, a feckless, disgraced Roman knight who had been well known, before his bankruptcy, for his utter immorality and immeasurable greed: a typical accountant. Thus, when we came to leave, it was once again our shameful fate to leave through a window. In the dark hour before dawn, in the deeper gloom cast by an altar of Juno, the three of us pooled our earnings and the stolen contents of Trimalchio’s strong box and went our separate ways.

Every year thereafter, on a certain day in May, Encolpius religiously renewed his vows to Priapus at a quiet dinner party at his house in Marseille to which several friends from his earlier life were welcomed on one occasion or another. It is of such a day that I must now tell you.

As we emerged into the evening sunlight of the inner courtyard, I saw that we were not the first: there was already a group beside the rainwater pool. A lady of a certain age, seated on the stone rim, very upright; why, it was Quartilla, the priestess of Priapus. I had not seen her for many years. Beside her was a muscular, middle-aged man who caught sight of me and shouted: “By Jove, it’s Agamemnon!”

Sure enough, here was Ascyltus again, with whom Encolpius had had such an explosive friendship. The lucky Ascyltus, this hunch even now appearing to precede him by a few inches as he stepped forward. “Well, Ascyltus,” I said, “I see one can’t keep a good man down.”

“Agamemnon, haven’t you learned by now to raise your eyes above waist level when contemplating your fellow mortals?”

The most ethereal of aromas, that of roasted poppy seeds, distracted us. I turned absently to a very beautiful woman: tall, fiery-eyed, black haired, and a face like Venus. She smiled at me. I was transfixed and fished out a handful of olives, green and black, from the golden dishes on her silver tray.

“You see the slave?” Ascyltus spoke in my ear. He was following her with his eyes as she receded, and I fear he had forgotten the advice he had just given me. “What a body!”

“Yes, and notice these green olives,” I said. “Conserved in brine, these halmodes are ‘as firm fleshed as an almost virgin girl,’ so Aristophanes believed, and possibly tastier. Could we ask for a finer appetizer?”

“Greek comedy is all very well in its place,” said Ascyltus. “What about the historical reference, professor?”

I watched the slave as she accosted each group of guests, coming in due course to Quartilla. “I have it!” I said suddenly. “She’s the donkey!”

“Yes, you’re exactly right, she corresponds to Trimalchio’s bronze donkey. At his dinner we had black and green olives served in the donkey’s two panniers; across its back there were roasted dormice, glazed in honey and rolled in poppy seeds. This time you helped yourself only to olives, I notice. If you hadn’t been distracted by those eyes you would certainly have taken a dormouse from the tray. They are farm fattened, you know. They spent their whole lives in a dark glirarium, poor creatures, only to be rejected by you at the end.”

A sweet-looking slave boy was now circulating with a tray laden with silver cups. Ascyltus raised one to his lips and paused to savor the bouquet. “No spices. No honey. Is Encolpius giving us the ‘poor man’s apéritif’?”

I tasted it. “We who live in Provence know how misleading that phrase can be. Spices are expensive; the spiced wine that we serve as apéritif is expensive. Therefore a naturally sweet wine is a cheaper alternative, yet it may be a better
choice. I love this wine, and so will you. It has matured for two years in its barrels, baking under the Galush sun.”

“Without your instruction,” said Ascytus dryly, “I would have called it rancid. I taste smoke, not sun.” Now here come Encolpius and Quattilia to join us: you have met her here before, I suppose?”

As I kissed Quattilia, Encolpius began to explain his intention: “Our dinner tonight, my friends, will remind you of Quattilia’s and Trimalchio’s—those occasions twenty years ago that we still remember.”

“I was not with you at Quattilia’s,” I said nervously.

“Don’t worry. You won’t be given an oil massage by wrestling trainers before dinner, as our priestess of Priapus prescribed to her captives,” and he smiled at Quattilia.

“Since I’m not rich, there are no seductive Alexandrian boys to cut your fingernails as you recline, and since I don’t take things as far as Trimalchio, no one will try to cut your toenails.” And no one will rub perfume into your feet unless you wish.”

“I hope no one will pour any leftover perfume into the oil lamps or into the wine,” I added. “Feet, lamps, and wine may all be aromatized, but they need not all smell the same.”

“Agamemnon was not present at our vigil of Priapus,” Quattilia interposed, “but he seems to have heard something of our activities. I, of course, did not accompany you to Trimalchio’s.”

“You would never have been invited,” said Ascytus.

“Trimalchio and his crowd were as conservative as Cato. No unaccompanied women at dinner, no slave girls even. Only his fat wife, Fortunata, bustling up and down.”

“And she smelt of the kitchen,” said Encolpius, “which is where she really longed to be. But you can’t have forgotten that a woman named Scintilla finally arrived, plastered in cosmetics and jangling with jewels, along with her husband, Habinnas. That’s right: she was the only woman guest. By that time I was so used to life at Trimalchio’s that I was a little shocked to see her recline among all us men! And even then Fortunata wouldn’t lie down. The most she would do, when Habinnas insisted, was to sit on the edge of Scintilla’s couch. Well, we laughed at all their vulgarities, and I must admit that we were properly rebuked for it. We laughed at Fortunata more than the rest. Perhaps, after all, she was behaving like a simple, strait-laced Roman lady?”

“That’s a myth,” I said. “Never mind what the antiquarians say. Go back as far as you can—go back to Plautus’s plays, two hundred years ago—go back four hundred years, to the Etruscans, who taught Rome to be civilized. In all that time you won’t find a lady who sits at dinner when her man’s reclining.” And yet, when you go among slave households, tenant farmers, peasants, shepherds, that’s exactly what you’ll find. Fortunata could teach your ‘strait-laced Roman lady’ something. Never mind that she started her career as a maeseuse in a brothel; never mind that she was worth millions, and her gold jewelry weighed more than she did; she ran a proper, old-fashioned peasant household.”

“And Trimalchio was proud of her,” said Encolpius.

“That man wanted the best. He wanted it for his guests as well. Let me give you an example, Quattilia. The nicest water is snow cooled, as we know, so at Trimalchio’s before dinner, we had to wash our hands in snow-cooled water. Just imagine: he carted snow from the Apennines in winter and kept it in his icehouse through the summer—and then, instead of serving drinking water chilled with snow, or indeed chilling his fine wines before serving them, he chills the water that we have to wash our hands in!”

“Another example,” Ascytus said. “He knew that wine is better than water. Admittedly the poet Pindar disagreed with Trimalchio, saying, ‘Water is best,’ but I’m with Trimalchio on this point. But, because wine’s better, between courses at Trimalchio’s you were compelled to wash your hands in wine. No one even offered water.”

“I’ll give you a third case study,” I interrupted. “Did you overhear what my table companion, Hermocrates, told me about Trimalchio? He said that Trimalchio ‘won’t even own a mule unless it was sired by a wild ass.’ Now, why did he make that rule? Because the nutritionists tell us that domesticated donkey is not worth eating and that wild ass is best—a gourmet food in fact. Trimalchio’s working mules had to be the best. Therefore, they had to have wild ass in their ancestry: it didn’t matter that no one was going to eat them. Mind you, he sometimes had his own special ways of getting the best. Corinthian bronze is the finest bronze, as we know. Can you remember how Trimalchio got his Corinthian bronze?”

“Easy,” said Ascytus. “He owned a bronzesmith’s shop, and he’d bought a skilled artisan to do the work. He simply renamed the slave Corinthus. All his bronze was Corinthian after that.”

“Here’s your second question,” I continued. “Mount Hymettus honey, from Athens, is the best in the world. Can you remember how he got his Mount Hymettus honey? No? I’ll remind you. He bought swarms of bees in Athens, shipped them from Corinth, and set them to work in Italy.” Maybe he should have loaded some real Corinthian bronze at the same time.”

“If he really did that,” said Quattilia, “he would have had to do it in winter, when the bees were dormant. The seamen would have charged an enormous price for risking a voyage
from Corinth to Naples in winter. And all wasted, because, as he would have found, it isn’t the bees that give Athenian honey its flavor—it’s the wild thyme of Mount Hymettus.”

“...all we know, he may have planted a whole hillside of Hymettus thyme as well. Let me give you an example of the man’s attention to detail,” Encolpius added. “We all know that it gives good luck to step into a room with your right foot. Most of us carelessly leave the matter to our guests’ discretion. Trimalchio, on the other hand, makes quite sure of his luck by posting a slave at the door to shout ‘Right feet first!’” No wonder he’s the richest man in Campania. Now come and recline, and consider whether a Feast of Encolpius can ever rival the well-remembered Feast of Trimalchio.”

As I lay down to dinner, allowing a pretty girl to trim my fingernails and remove my sandals, I silently awarded two marks of favor to Encolpius. First, the girl was not singing. I hate that current fashion for continuous music almost as much as I hated Trimalchio’s clever variation on it (his slaves were even expected to intone their replies to his guests’ commands and questions). Second, the sweet-looking boy, who might have been her brother, filled my cup with the aperitif I preferred without waiting for me to ask. Trimalchio, at his dinner, had announced that refills were available, which sounded very generous—and then had his slaves clear the tables before any of us could take up the offer.

I noticed that a young man was meanwhile supplying Ascyltus with some different beverage.

“That’s that you’re drinking?”

“Asclepiades noticed I didn’t like your Gaulish muck. This is proper muslum, made just the way I like it. White wine, a little honey, anise for early summer, and he’s added a few drops of attar of roses, just for me, to cool my constitution and prevent headache. Oh, it’s quite safe: he’s a medical student.”

I found, to my surprise, that I was lying next to the young woman who had served the appetizers. “You think I’m a slave, don’t you?” she said in reply to my unspoken question. “My name is Lachesis and I’m studying medicine alongside Asclepiades. Our teacher lives across the street from here.”

On a silver tray now offered to us lay tender green shoots of asparagus, very lightly cooked yet melting in the mouth. There was a dip of green olive oil and a little heap of sea salt. Alongside these things, in a small cane basket placed on the tray, were thin segments of fine white loaves on whose crust sesame seeds, poppy seeds, and linseed had been sprinkled.

“The basket’s a neat idea,” Ascyltus said to Encolpius, “very Homeric. Trimalchio, if I remember, served his bread in a silver clibanus.”

“That’s laughable,” said Asclepiades. “Nutritionists know that bread baked in a clibanus, an earthenware baking crock with burning coals heaped over it, is the best of all. A silver clibanus is just a plaything: it’s a contradiction in terms. To serve bread in it is like serving your wine from a toy barrel.”

“And the three seeds?” Encolpius challenged us.

We paused, for at that moment a fat middle-aged poet, wreathed in olive leaves and in close embrace with a music girl, had stumbled into the dining room. “What an Alcibiades will die in you, Eumolpus!” said our host, recovering from his surprise.

“The answer to the previous question is Alkman,” Eumolpus announced firmly. “Only the poet Alkman lists these three seeds as sprinkled on bread.” I congratulated my old rival on his wide reading, and he took the vacant place on our upper couch. The musician squeezed in between Ganymedes and Ascyltus.

“Now, doctor,” I demanded, turning to Lachesis, “tell me whether our host’s choice of hors d’oeuvres is a good one. At Trimalchio’s dinner we began with baby beccafici, wrapped in pastry to disguise them as peahen’s eggs; you know, the dish that the Greeks call thrymmatis. I had to laugh, because Encolpius nearly discarded his, thinking it was a bad egg. And then we were presented with twelve dishes representing the twelve signs of the zodiac—beef for Taurus, a lobster for Capricorn, that kind of thing.”

“I’m not a doctor yet,” she said seriously. “I’ve studied diet, though. Your Trimalchio took the stars seriously, but in showing off his knowledge he missed the real connection between food and the seasons. In late spring one should eat the meat of young animals—lamb and kid especially; certainly not beef, which produces bad humors. Nothing that’s too heating. Lobster won’t do at all: it’s a winter food.”

“And the beccafici?”

She looked at me as if I were stupid. “If you can get baby beccafici, you must, of course. Like this nice green asparagus, and those little fish—picarel, I think—that are coming round now. Always eat what’s in season, but don’t forget your spices. In May, for meat sauces, you should use green coriander and spikenard, if you can afford spikenard…”

If I could afford spikenard? Was this a put-down? “I wish you were a slave,” I retorted. “I’d buy you so that you could teach me what to eat.” I chewed the crunchy head of a picarel.

“In fact I am a slave, but I suspect you can’t afford me. My master has spent a long time teaching me. I’ll buy my freedom from him when I am practicing. Now look, here comes a dish of bulbi. You don’t need me to tell you whether to eat these. Everyone knows about these and their powers. How many you take depends not on your
Ascyltus had been listening to our conversation. “But what about this asparagus and its effect on my urine, doctor?” he interrupted.

“Quite harmless,” she said at once. “So you want to talk about excretion? Some people talk about little else.” I appreciated her put-downs when not directed at me. “The emperor Claudius must have been just like you and your Trimalchio. Claudius wanted to decree that if one felt the urge to pass wind during dinner, one should do so. He was right, of course. And everyone else was right when they laughed at him for raising the topic in public.”

“Our Trimalchio was right, then, to talk about his constipation? His doctors were at a loss, he told us. Was he right to tell us all to call for a pisspot if we needed it, and ‘if it’s anything more’ we’d find all that we needed just outside?”

“So many questions,” Asclepiades interrupted. “He wasn’t wrong to say it, but if his guests were really at ease, he wouldn’t have had to. As for his doctors, they were clearly afraid of him. They should have made him work out and eat wholemeal bread.”

“You’ve guessed wrong, Asclepiades,” Eumolpus put in. “It was Trimalchio who was afraid of the doctors: he said they were always making him diet. And Habinnas, his best friend and one of the guests at that dinner, knew all about wholemeal bread. He said: ‘With wholemeal, when I want to do my business, I can do it and it doesn’t hurt.’”

“It’s astonishing how many different ways people find to talk about that uninteresting human function,” said Quartilla, who was reclining on the lower couch between Encolpius and Asclepiades. “Now what’s this wine, Encolpius?”

“Not as venerable as Trimalchio’s. My cellar can’t compete with his. Do you recall what happened as we went in,
Agamemnon? Trimalchio’s cellarman, stark naked, fell at our feet and begged us to save him from a whipping. Apparently, he had lost a suit of clothes belonging to the accountant. We interceded for him, as one does, and in a whisper he promised to reward us with a special vintage. It was only later that I put two and two together and realized that the whole scene was staged to build up our expectations of the wine. When it arrived, it was labeled ‘Opimian Falernian. One hundred years old.’

“It’s said among physicians that not all the ‘Falernian’ in which our empire is swimming can possibly have come from Falernian vineyards.”

“Good point, Asclepiades. Still, you must admit it’s conceivable that the cellarman gave us real Falernian: quite possibly Trimalchio owned a vineyard there himself. What about the other two details?”

“They conflict,” said Lachesis. “The consulship of Opimius fell 633 years after the City was founded. It is the most famous of all vintages. Trimalchio’s dinner, the one you can’t forget, was held in the year 800. Am I right? Opimian wines were nearly 170 years old by then.”

“And would scarcely have been drinkable,” Eumolpus added. “They have an astonishing bouquet—I have been lucky enough to smell a just-opened amphora of Opimian—but they are used now only to add age to other wines. There’s no vintage even a hundred years old whose wines are still worth drinking. Good Falernian, people say, is at its best when fifteen to twenty years old.”

“Was Trimalchio deceiving us, then, or was he deceived by a wine dealer?”

“Both,” I said. “Here’s my reconstruction. It was a modest wine, five or ten years old, from somewhere near the Falernian slopes—Calene, perhaps, or Statan. The dealer had added a small dose of real Opimian to some of his stock; it was his lucky day when he sold it all to Trimalchio as ‘guaranteed Opimian Falernian.’ Back in 653, Italian wines were not being labeled with district names at all, so Trimalchio or anyone else who buys such a wine is entirely at the dealer’s mercy. Anyway, having bought it, Trimalchio then labeled the wine himself. He knew that ‘Opimian’ was good; he had no idea that his One hundred years’ conflict with it. He was no good at history. He told us Corinthian bronze was invented by Hannibal at the Fall of Troy.”

“As regards the wine, you were lucky to be deceived,” said Quartilla dryly. “The last time that real Opimian Falernian was served, so I’ve heard, was at a dinner given for the emperor Caligula in the year 793. He went mad shortly afterwards. So what’s this wine, Encolpius?”

“I admire your persistence, Quartilla, as much as I admired it on the night you first compelled me to honor Priapus. Now I’ll answer your question. It’s local: the fat, fleshy wine of Marseille itself. You will seldom encounter it in Italy. Will it do?”

“Don’t drink too much of it,” she replied severely.

The main course, when it arrived, offered only a gentle allusion to the skills of Trimalchio’s head cook, whose pièces de résistance had been a wild boar stuffed with live thrushes, followed by a pig stuffed with pork sausages. To put us in a receptive frame of mind for that second main dish, three live pigs were driven into the dining room, and we were invited to choose which one we would eat. The pig that was served, after an incredibly short interval, seemed somehow different from the one we had chosen, but we were not supposed to notice the switch. Instead, Trimalchio suddenly shouted that the pig had not been gutted. This time it was the cook who was threatened with a whipping, but finally Trimalchio made him gut the pig in front of all of us. With a slash of the cook’s sharpest blade the animal’s intestines began to spill out, and poor Encolpius was about to make for the exit—till I pointed out to him that in reality the pig had been stuffed with sausages. It was cleverly done, but gastronomically boring—pork stuffed with pork.

On the present occasion, I would say, Encolpius’s cook registered a triumph. A fine, fat bustard, which, as the work of carving continued, revealed a pheasant (and this pheasant, I may say, had reached exactly the correct degree of decomposition). It contained a chicken, which in its turn enveloped a small guinea-fowl, which was wrapped around a woodcock, at whose center was a tender quail, in the middle of which was—yes!—a nest of beccafici, each one of which had been stuffed with a plum olive, and the olives had each been stoned and stuffed with a caper. The triumph, let me add, consisted not so much in the skill of building this remarkable structure as in the nicety with which each element had been selected and prepared for cooking. Each had its own flavor, and each contributed to the whole. Our applause for the carver and the cook (who modestly put in an appearance) was unfeigned.

“Not bad, Encolpius. But where was the cap of freedom?” I demanded.

“Don’t remind me of that moment,” said Encolpius. “It’s true,” he went on, observing the puzzled glances around the tables. “Trimalchio’s theatricality usually let him down. That cap of freedom on the wild boar’s head! Yes, of course, it symbolized the fact that yesterday’s guests had refused the boar, liberated it, sent it away uneaten;
therefore, it told us that the centerpiece of our banquet was a leftover from the day before! Given that little hint, he didn’t need to say that ‘my guests yesterday were much better class.’ But he said it anyway.”

“That cap of freedom was another reminder of the topic that Trimalchio couldn’t get away from,” I added. “With him, everything was about slavery and liberation. Remember the wall painting that we saw as we went in: Trimalchio’s whole history, from slave auction to millionaire. Most men would have said nothing about the first part of that. Remember his talk of having been his master’s fancy boy—‘There’s nothing wrong if your master tells you to do it?’”

“Why should a man conceal his origin?” said Ganymedes hotly. “My father was a slave, a prisoner of war from northern Britain. Lachesis is a slave, and her master probably sleeps with her. Ought we really to be ashamed? But forgive me, professor, forgive me, Lachesis, I must not make this personal.”

“It is personal,” I said mildly. I saw that there were tears in Lachesis’s eyes, and I went on: “Hadn’t I told you yet, Ganymedes, that I myself was born a slave? You’re quite right, young man: We laugh at Trimalchio because he couldn’t keep off the subject. We laughed behind our hands when he said that he had allowed us a table each so that ‘we won’t be bothered by these smelly slaves.’ We raised our eyebrows when he wanted us to toast the ‘first beard’ of one of his slaves. We laughed at him because he invited his own slaves to join us at our wine after dinner—we had to make room for them, like it or not. We have made fun teasingly, for the twin bulbs of the satyrion orchid must be carefully separated: the larger bulb is, of course, an aphrodisiac to be taken by men, but men must not touch the smaller bulb, which renders one effeminate. Quartilla watched me and did not answer. You cannot tease a priestess of Priapus. Like most of the Greek wines that travel westwards, this one was dark, strong, and sweet. I sipped it slowly as I watched the two performers. I recognized them (and neither was from Cadiz): they came from a house near the harbor, a house that Encolpius and I had occasionally visited. At a break in the music, Quartilla produced a small flask and gave it to the dancer with a whispered instruction; sure enough, the girl was soon offering to each of us men little phials of a potion that was perhaps intended to remain mysterious, though she gave a hint of its nature by asking us quietly if we had chewed hemp seeds today. In any case, knowing Quartilla of old, I felt certain what this potion was. “I trust that the active ingredient was carefully chosen?” I asked teasingly, for the twin bulbs of the satyrion orchid must be carefully separated: the larger bulb is, of course, an aphrodisiac to be taken by men, but men must not touch the smaller bulb, which renders one effeminate. Quartilla watched me and did not answer. You cannot tease a priestess of Priapus.

After the music had recommenced, I turned back to Lachesis; our conversation was gradually becoming more intimate. I felt certain now what Encolpius had planned for this twentieth anniversary of Quartilla’s and Trimalchio’s feasts: the satyrion, when added to the bulbs that had been served as hors d’oeuvres, left me little room for doubt. I was not at all surprised to see, from the corner of my eye, that the flute girl had found a place beside Asclepiades, while the dancing girl was soon reclining on our couch next to Eumolpus. Lachesis and I returned to a deep discussion of Eumolpus. ‘This must be rex ipse Phanaeus, ‘King Phanaeus himself! I admit I’ve wondered whether Vergil made some mistake over that Phanaean wine. I’ve never encountered it till now.”

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After the music had recommenced, I turned back to Lachesis; our conversation was gradually becoming more intimate. I felt certain now what Encolpius had planned for this twentieth anniversary of Quartilla’s and Trimalchio’s feasts: the satyrion, when added to the bulbs that had been served as hors d’oeuvres, left me little room for doubt. I was not at all surprised to see, from the corner of my eye, that the flute girl had found a place beside Asclepiades, while the dancing girl was soon reclining on our couch next to Eumolpus. Lachesis and I returned to a deep discussion of her love life, past and future, a discussion that led us gradually into real intimacies that I had certainly not foreseen when we first reclined. When I next surfaced, I was amused to see Encolpius in the very position he most enjoyed—supine, with Quartilla riding high upon him. She seemed to be pouring a copious additional dose of satyrion, from a
second flask, between his open lips. A definite apprehension intruded upon my mind. Were my friend's intentions for the night ahead too ambitious? A man must learn to accept the advance of age and must not overdose on aphrodisiacs. Surely he was not planning to complete his sacred pilgrimage tonight—to die a martyr to the pleasures of Priapus?

At that moment the door opened and three Praetorian Guards entered. They appeared bemused by the scene, and no wonder. Taking us from *summus in summo* to *imus in imo*, I was by now closely entwined with Lachesis. Eumolpus was sitting on the edge of our couch with the dancing girl astride his lap. Eumolpus's musician, a welcome and hard-working member of the group, was on her knees between Ganymedes and Ascyltus. Encolpius's position I have already described. Asclepiades, bent protectively over the flute girl, was feeding her with honeyed fritters, and both of them were rather sticky. It was a warm spring evening, and the few remaining items of clothing did nothing to conceal what we were all engaged in.

"I have here an instruction from the emperor concerning a certain Encolpius," said the officer, attempting not to smile. "I can't get up at the moment," said Encolpius. Quartilla laughed, continuing to pin him down. "You'll have to read it to me."

The officer had possibly never delivered a death warrant to a man in such a position, but he pressed on bravely. Encolpius, we learned, had written a scurrilous work of imaginary history whose secret aim was to bring the emperor Nero himself into contempt. The principal figure of this disgusting fiction was said to keep the shavings of his first beard in a golden casket, as the emperor does; although, when that first beard was shaved, the person described was a slave subjected to the most degrading of tasks. The same figure is said to have suffered injury when an acrobat fell on him, as did the emperor; and to have offered, for his guests to wash their hands, the finest snow-cooled water, which was the emperor's own invention. His very slaves discarded clothes once washed, as does the emperor. In one mocking scene his effigy was mingled with those of the gods, and was kissed as if divine, as might occasionally happen in the case of images of the emperor. The author of this work was self-evidently guilty of treason. If he or the book were
second flask had done its work. Encolpius was dead. His eyes gave us the same message as his absolute stillness. The movements of her lower body suggested to us that she was lovingly. During this long embrace, certain convulsive movements of her lower body suggested to us that she was experiencing once more the climax of pleasure; he, too, perceived this. Thus, she bent down, held his head in her hands, and kissed him me—and Priapus—well. “On your last day on this earth, Encolpius, you have served your dear friend has already made the necessary arrangements. I had warning of your arrival, and this is easily carried out. I had warning of your arrival, and this necessary arrangements. Have I drunk enough from flask two, Quartilla?”

“And on this occasion from flask one also,” said Quartilla. “On your last day on this earth, Encolpius, you have served me—and Priapus—well.” Still seated firmly astride him, she bent down, held his head in her hands, and kissed him lovingly. During this long embrace, certain convulsive movements of her lower body suggested to us that she was experiencing once more the climax of pleasure; he, too, perhaps. But when she raised her head again, the tears in her eyes gave us the same message as his absolute stillness. The second flask had done its work. Encolpius was dead.

Having carefully assured himself of this fact, the officer and his two subordinates left us to our thoughts. Naturally, we finished the amphora of Greek wine in Encolpius’s memory. We were all somewhat ill during the night. Personally, I believed, and still believe, that this Phanaean was as delusive as the famous hundred-year-old Opimian Falernian; but was our friend deceived by his wine dealer, or was he—in modest homage to the great Trimalchio—deceiving us? Anyway, I said nothing.

I also kept silence on another small matter. Encolpius, a diffident author, had in fact given a copy of his memoir not only to the treacherous Seneca but also to one other person, who was indeed a natural choice in the circumstances: a fine poet, matchless orator, artless and unpracticed historian (this last trait, at least, I share with Encolpius himself). Faced with my own imminent death, I must now fulfill my last duty to my dearest friend, as happy in his death as he was in his life. I bequeath his memoir, accompanied by this coda in my own hand, to the select few who will find it amusing.

The philosopher Seneca had held a powerful position at Nero’s court for several years. Soon after the dramatic date of this “Feast of Encolpius,” Nero ceased to favor Seneca, who was forced to commit suicide. In A.D. 66, not long after Seneca’s death, the same fate was decreed for Petronius, author of the Satyricon.

It was rumored that instead of writing a will, Petronius compiled a list of Nero’s sexual partners, giving details of his activities with each, and sent it to the emperor. Later historians speculated that this so-called list was, in fact, a copy of the Satyricon; in turn this hypothesis fed into the view of some modern critics that Nero is intentionally satirized in the figure of Trimalchio. Others believe that “the novelist’s impulse in Petronius was greater than the satirist’s”; to build the character of Trimalchio, Petronius drew on various real people without focusing on any particular one. This may well be correct; after all, since Nero was a scion of an ancient Roman family, a freed slave and newly rich, Trimalchio would make an unlikely fictional alter ego for him. But any contemporaries (including Nero himself, if he saw Petronius’s book) might easily have leaped to the conclusion that satire was intended.

Whether or not such an event contributed to his fall from favor, Petronius was, it seems, not surprised when he himself finally received a visit from an officer of the Praetorian Guard. In this fictional person was made to resemble the emperor’s already-deified ancestors, Augustus and Claudius. At least, I hope he was nothing like the emperor….At least, I hope so. As the officer of the Praetorian Guard, it appears to me, Nero said coolly, “I do not know, but I believe that Petronius was, it seems, not surprised when he himself finally received a visit from an officer of the Praetorian Guard. In turn this hypothesis fed into the view of some modern critics that Nero is intentionally satirized in the figure of Trimalchio. Others believe that “the novelist’s impulse in Petronius was greater than the satirist’s”; to build the character of Trimalchio, Petronius drew on various real people without focusing on any particular one. This may well be correct; after all, since Nero was a scion of an ancient Roman family, a freed slave and newly rich, Trimalchio would make an unlikely fictional alter ego for him. But any contemporaries (including Nero himself, if he saw Petronius’s book) might easily have leaped to the conclusion that satire was intended.

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Mulsum
Spiced honeyed wine

This version of mulsum may be served as a sweet apéritif in late spring. The recipe is based on several originals, with different combinations of spices, recorded c. A.D. 350 by the Roman imperial physician Oribasios in his Medical Collections, book 5, section 33. In ancient dietary tradition, the optional addition of rosewater will make this apéritif especially suitable to those with a hot constitution or who are prone to headaches.

1 bottle dry white wine
6 ounces or ¼ cup clear honey
½ teaspoon anise seeds
½ teaspoon mastic
½ teaspoon rosewater (optional)

Add one-quarter of the bottle of wine to the honey in a saucepan. Heat gently, stirring at first, to near boiling point. Skim any scum that rises to the surface. Bruise the anise seeds and mastic (or any other chosen spices) in a mortar, stir them into the wine-honey mixture, and allow to cool. Add the remainder of the wine; add the rosewater (or any other essences) and chill overnight. Just before serving, strain through a fine sieve or muslin.

NOTES

1. “The Satyrica Concluded” was written as a way of exploring what was going on at Trimalchio’s Feast and in the mind of Petronius. Some of my suggestions are new, and occasionally I have corrected statements by earlier commentators. I want to record here my admiration for their work, on which I have frequently relied. Only those who have tried to translate the Satyrica into English know how difficult a task it is, and how well William Arrowsmith, John Sullivan, Bracht Branham, and Daniel Kinney succeeded. For these translations and some other recent work on Petronius, see the bibliography.

2. The honeyed fritters and the bread sprinkled with poppy and sesame seeds are images that Agamemnon had already employed metaphorically in his lecture at the beginning of the Satyrica. Translators have misunderstood those honey-coated fritters, Latin mellite globuli: Branham and Kinney, for example (1966, p. 31), call them “sticky gobs,” a less attractive metaphor. The second word is a popular variant of globi, one of whose meanings is “ball-shaped fritters.” This was a delicacy for which Cato provides a recipe (see recipe section).

3. The “Feast of Trimalchio” is narrated in the Satyrica (26–78; Fortunata 17, 32, 66–76) and Cossus (64) appear in the same scene. In this and the following footnotes, numbers in parentheses refer to the standard numbered sections of the Satyrica.

4. Not used elsewhere by Petronius, this word, umbra (shadow), is familiar from Horace’s poems and indicates a guest brought along by another (Horace, Satires, 2.8.22, Epistles, 1.5.28).

5. (24) A mosaic of a guard dog accompanied by the words cave canem (beeware of the dog) was a kitchy accessory in Roman homes; several can be seen at Pompeii.


7. Quoted from a now-lost Greek play by Aristophanes (see Athenaios, Deipnosophistai, 1372a). The appetizer, Latin promusus, was served before the apéritif or mulsum.

8. (31) This dormouse is not the “European field mouse,” Sylvaemus, as Sullivan says (1965, p. 87), note 10: even cats won’t eat that species. It is the edible dormouse, Glis glis. Romans fattened their dormice in a darkened pen, glarium (Varro, On Farming, 3.15).

9. To say that sweet wine was “the poor man’s mulsum” was commonplace, recorded c. A.D. 100 in Martial’s Epigrams (15.26).

10. The strong, sweet, oxidized wines of Mediterranean France (such as the tunic of Maury and Banyuls) descend from types that were already familiar in the first century a.d. In those days they were not liked by Italians or Spaniards, if we may judge by the opinions of Pliny (Natural History, 14.68) and Martial (Epigrams, 3.28, 10.36, 13.123, 14.418), both of whom remarked on the smoky aroma.

11. Quattuor compiled Encolpius and his companions to honor Priapus; in preparation for this, as for any wrestling bout, oil massage was essential (21). Since diners took food with their fingers, a wise and fastidious host would order a slave to trim and clean guests’ fingernails as they reclined before dinner. Trimalchio had their toenails cut (31), a typical reduce ad absurdum.

12. Perfuming the feet of diners was, it is said, an idea devised by the young Otho, eventually one of the four emperors of the year A.D. 69, while he was still a courier of Nero (Pliny, Natural History, 13.22; Branham and Kinney, 1966, p. 64, note 70.1). By having his guests’ feet perfumed, and afterwards adding the same perfume to his wine and to the oil used in his lamps (70), Trimalchio betrays ineptitude equal to that of a provincial host who hoped to impress Caesar by serving perfumed oil as a dressing for asparagus (Plutarch, Life of Caesar, 17.9–17.10; Dalby, 2001, pp. 82–85).

13. “You can’t work in a kitchen and smell good,” said Agamemnon smoothly (22), whether he was thinking chiefly of the onions, the garlic, the fish sauce, the wood smoke, the spitting oil, or the lack of deodorants is unknown. Encolpius agreed with him (70).

14. Asyltus and Giton are roundly condemned by another guest, Hermeros, for their snickering. Trimalchio himself has to put an end to the quarrel (57–59).

15. “There’s a real dignity in Hermeros’s angry tirade, as well as social regret against Asyltus and his friends” (Arrowsmith, 1959, p. 176).

16. Trimalchio himself taunts Fortunata with her beginnings as a slave prostitute. A guest at his dinner tells Encolpius that “you wouldn’t have taken bread from her hand—Forgive me for saying so” (74–77).

17. Dining with Trimalchio was like living in a brand-name novel. Slave boys had to be Alexandrian (31, 37). Wood had to be Boxwood (74) or Terebinth (33). Water had to be Snow-Cooled (31).

18. (54). The Greek poet Pindar began a famous ode with those words (Olympian Odes, 1).


20. (50).

21. (58).

22. (50).


24. (54).

25. The spicing of mulsum and its later variant, conditum, ought to vary depending on the season. See recipe section.

26. (55). On bread baked in a real elbanus, a large shallow earthenware dome, see Diphilos of Syrano quoted by Athenaios in Deipnosophistai, 35e. In the type-scene of a Homeric feast, in early Greek epic, bread had been served in “baskets” (Odyssey, 1.47).

27. A similar expression was soon to be used by the emperor Nero in his dying words (“What artist did I use?”) Statius, Nemes, 49. Encolpius alludes to Alcibiades because this famous and florid Athenian politician burst into a drinking party in just the same way in Plato’s Symposium (212e).

28. These seeds were listed in a lost poem by the early Greek author Alkman: “Seven couches and as many tables crowned with poppy-seed bread, with linseed and sesame bread, and, for the girls, bowls full of linseed-and-honey sweets” (see Athenaios, Deipnosophistai, 110f.).
29. At a Roman dinner the gustatio was a series of hors d’oeuvres or entrées preceding the main courses. The dish of beccafico (faggeci, birds of the waterfowl family) wrapped in pastry was a traditional one (Pollux, Onomasticon, 6.77), but what it was called in Latin is not known; Petronius describes it without naming it (35).

30. In the Satyricon the zodiac display warns the reader that astrology was a serious matter for Trimalchio, just as it was for most other Romans. The display was out of place at dinner, if only because diners were left wondering whether to eat from it or not (35).

31. Spikenard (Nardostachys jatamansi), now rarely used as a food spice, reached Rome from the southern Himalayas via a port at the Ganges mouth. Scarcely any Romans knew this; they were aware only of its high price.

32. Bulb (bulbs of the grape-lycacinth, Muscaria esuomsam) were among the “strengthening foods” once selected by Encelus to aid his sexual recovery (150). They are still familiar as an appetizer in Greece and southern Italy, though their aphrodisiac reputation has faded.


34. (47).

35. (49).

36. (66).

37. (50). Within the fiction of the Satyricon, this sketch also achieved another of Trimalchio’s aims: It displayed the almost royal power and wealth of his account, who was persuaded to overlook the loss: “It hardly matters. I’ve already won the suit once.”

38. All dates in this text are in the normal Roman era (anno Urbs condita or a.u.), counted from the foundation of Rome by Romulus and Remus in 753 B.C. Converting to the modern era, the consulship of Oppianus was 121 B.C. Caligula tacted Opian Eufemian (see below) in A.D. 39; the present text assumes that Trimalchio’s dinner took place in A.D. 46.


40. Sullivan concludes his discussion of the “Opian Eufemian” with the same two options: Trimalchio “is either lying or he has been cheated” (1965, p.187; note 11).


42. Pliny, Natural History, 14.96.

43. Pliny, writing in Latin, calls the wine of Marseille fat and sappy (Natural History, 14.66), an understated Greek source quoted in the Epitome of Athenaios (27e) says “thick and heavy.” See also Galen, To Glandon on Therapeutic Method, u.87. The nearest well-characterized wine districts to modern Marseille are those of Casis and Pallete. The reds of Pallete, “dense and austere at first, have a predominately vegetal aroma. They are full bodied, but not heavy [and] keep astonishingly well” (Anglaud, 1990, p.457). Perhaps Quartilla would have approved of them.

44. On the boar and its cap of freedom (40), see below.

45. (47). The sketch allowed Trimalchio to boast that the aewoozous cooking style, normally used for chicken (see 74, and Apicius, 5.12, 8.7.11, 8.7.16) could be applied to a full-grown pig in his kitchen.

46. “Here’s one I prepared earlier,” as television chefs used to say.

47. (49–50).

48. Although it seems quite in accordance with Roman gastronomic enthusiasm, I must admit that no classical description of such a dish exists. A slightly more elaborate version, in which a total of sixteen different birds are placed one inside the next, was devised in France in the early nineteenth century by Grimod de la Reynière; he called it “Rôtis des gourmands et des belles.” His recipe appeared in the Almanach des gourmands (1807–1812).

49. (40–41) and (54).

50. Roman males traditionally made little moral distinction between homosexual and heterosexual sex but thought it degrading to submit to penetration. The fictional Trimalchio, having become a Roman, felt the need to justify only this chapter of his sexual history (79).

51. (34). At Roman dinners among wealthy people, slaves were needed continually to pass around duxes of food and wine. The reclining diners had no individual plates and would not easily have been able to reach the central table. There are many illustrations of such scenes in Dunbabin, 2003.

52. (73).

53. (70).

54. Like other great novelists, Petronius forces his readers to think about issues that he himself has not sorted out. His portrait of Trimalchio, a devastating but touching creation, forces us to think about slavery; his complex attitude is certainly intended to appear ridiculous, but it rings true in many details. Trimalchio has outgrown his creator. John Sullivan explores the same issue in his introduction: “Petronius’ original intentions [concerning Trimalchio] are naturally irrelevant—his initial aim may easily have been transcended” (Sullivan, 1965, p.177).

55. (68). Tables were portable; it was the custom to remove the tables on which the main courses had been served and to bring in clean tables with the desserts.

56. Dessert wines were drunk “in small cups” (as first recorded c. 390 B.C. by Hippolochus, quoted by Athenaios, Deipnosophistai, 70c) because they were stronger, had a more concentrated flavor, and were more expensive.

57. Dancing girls from Carthage were a popular sideshow in first-century Rome, seen both in street performances and at private parties (Pliny, Letters, 1.15, Dalby, 2000, pp.102, 230, with notes).

58. Artesian wine is not mentioned in the Satyricon, but in the first and second centuries A.D., it was regarded as the best of all Greek wines and therefore, many would say, as the best wine in the world (Strabo, Geography, 14.17.5; Pliny, Natural History, 14.73; Plutarch, Living Like Epicurus, 192; Galen, On Retaining Health, 6.574–575).

59. Phainai was a small harbor in southern Chios (Strabo, Geography, 14.1.35), but the Latin poet Vergil is the only author who alludes to its wine (Vergil, Georgics, 2.98). Onopion, son of the wine god Dionysos or Bacchus, was said in legend to have founded Chios and taught its people to make wine.

60. In the view of Romans in Julius Caesar’s time and afterwards, Greece produced the most fashionable dessert wines (Pliny, Natural History, 14.95–97). They were not fortified wines in the modern sense, which are made by adding spirits to partly fermented wine; in ancient times, since alcoholic distillation was not practiced, spirits were not available. Instead, cooked (and therefore very sweet) must was added to fresh must or to newly fermented wine: after any further fermentation ceased, the result was a wine strong in alcohol, with residual sugar, which was relatively stable during transport.

61. Cannabis seeds were used by Greeks and Romans as a sexual sedative, needed by those who had to abstain from sex as part of a religious ritual or vow (Pliny, Natural History, 19.173–174, 20.259; Galen, On the Properties of Foods, 6.494–500).

62. The same potion was served by Quartilla at her ceremonies in the Satyricon (20). The active ingredient was what is now known as salp, the powdered bulb of Orchis mascula (Dalby, 2003, p.212). Salp is now usually consumed as a hot milky drink or in ice cream.


64. These are the rightmost and the leftmost of the traditional nine places at a three-couch Roman banquet.

65. (29). Brantham and Kinney (1996, p.26, note 29) believe that this detail of Trimalchio’s behavior is intended as satire on Nero (who is recorded as having a gold box stuffed with pearls for this purpose: Suetonius, Nero, 12). By contrast, Sullivan (1965, p.186, note 4) guesses that keeping one’s first heard was “probably not customary and seems here a part of Trimalchio’s self-importance.” Both comments are slightly off the mark; we have no reason to believe that keeping one’s first hearing was a rare thing to do, thus the fictional Trimalchio is not meant to imitate Nero here. Petronius was commenting on the vulgarity of anyone who, like Trimalchio, would display such a personal and revealing item to strangers on their first visit to his house.


67. In the Satyricon the phrase aqua nivata (snow-cooled water) is used (73). This may be intended as a reference to Nero’s great invention, though Nero himself is reported to have called it deocta (Pliny, Natural History, 3.40; Suetonius, Nero, 48; Dalby, 2003, p.147).


69. (60).

70. Trimalchio used to apportion gifts at parties by distributing allusive verses (56); so did Augustus (Suetonius, Augustus, 75; Sullivan, 1965, p.39); along with
many others. Books 13 and 14 of Martial’s Epigrams consist entirely of verses to use on similar occasions.

71. See above for Claudius’s views on flatulence, which resemble those of the fictional Trimalchio.

72. The art of poisoning was brought to a high level of perfection under the early emperors, according to historical sources that must on this point be considered extremely unreliable (Suetonius, Claudius, 44 and Nero, 35; Dio Cassius, History, 60.34.2–3; Dalby, 2001, pp. 76–78).

73. Tacitus, Annals, 15.60–15.64.

74. Tacitus, Annals, 16.17–16.20; Pliny, Natural History, 37.20–37.22.

75. The notes of Branham and Kinney, 1996, already cited above, helpfully identify the specific passages (according to various scholars) that refer to the emperor.


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