Master-Chef or glutton? The mystery of Apicius

Sally Grainger

There has been much debate and mystery surrounding the character of Marcus Gavius Apicius and his alleged authorship of the recipe text that has survived under the title *De re coquinaria.* It used to be assumed that he wrote the recipe book because his name was on the title page, but it is not that simple. There are many clues to the puzzle but there is also a great deal that we don't know. When you study ancient culture, it is as if you have a jigsaw puzzle with three quarters of the pieces missing; the fun comes when you try to guess what the picture looks like.

I was a mature student of Classics, taking my degree after 10 years of work as a chef, so my interest in Apicius and the recipes was very natural. I found the subject of Apicius and his book fascinating and set out to try to finish the puzzle for myself.

We will begin with what we do know: the recipe book was written down in its present form around the mid 4th century A.D. We can tell this by its style of Latin. It was one of many such books circulating at the time under the same title. Many of the recipes are named after famous figures, such as the Emperor Vitellius who reigned in A.D. 69, and the Emperor Commodus, who died in *AD.* 192. Marcus Gavius Apicius the man probably died some time between A.D. 35-40, so he cannot be responsible for these recipes. Some recipes recommend the use of the Cyrenaic form of silphium. We know that Cyrenaic silphium was extinct by around A.D. 50, which implies that the recipes in question were first committed to paper before this date. This is possibly within Apicius' lifetime. There are a number of recipes entitled Apiciana, which could mean that someone with that name conceived the recipe or that it was in his style or in his honour. In one manuscript a recipe has been written in the margin and in a later copy this has been incorporated into the text. This was a common way in which recipe books grew before printing.

It is possible to identify many different sources for these recipes. One group is clearly taken from a Greek book, as we are told that the Romans had a different name for a particular sauce. One group of recipes is more concerned with diet and health and seems to come from another book concerned with these things. Our book is therefore a compilation of recipes from many different places and times. We can also say that no one person created the recipes, only that an anonymous person collected them.

In praise of real cooks

There is a great difference between collecting recipes and actually creating them. This is an issue dear to my heart as I am a cook. Most cooks in the ancient world were slaves or freedmen, and we don't appear to hear from them directly at all, which is a great shame. Cooking was a menial task, dirty and sweaty and exhausting.

The master, no matter how interested in food, would not actually enter the kitchen and cook himself. He would read about it or talk about it with other like-minded people, but the theory and practice of food preparation were strangely disconnected. When we do hear about food and dining habits it is usually either indirectly, through poetry and letters, or through the literary works of people like Pliny the Elder, Columella, and Cato. These were wealthy, intelligent men of letters who wrote as consumers of food, not producers.

But the Apician recipe book is something different. The recipes are clearly written by the people who actually made the food – the cooks. The style is very simple, no more than lists in many cases, and there is very little by way of detailed instructions. It does not read well as a piece of literature, and I believe it was not originally intended to be read by anyone but the cooks themselves. The information that is missed out is the kind of detail that any good cook would not need to be told. In modem recipe books, written especially for chefs, we find the same kind of omissions.

The real Apicius

But what about Apicius the man? He is said to have lived in the time of Tiberius. There is a great deal of anecdotal information about him, and the reports that date from his lifetime or close to it tend to be very critical of his character. The most bizarre story involves his death. He had developed such a delicate palate for exotic and expensive food that, when he ran out of money and was destined to eat ordinary food, he chose rather to poison himself at his last banquet.

Seneca (1st c. A.D.) calls him wanton, boastful, a glutton. He flaunted his vices and defiled the age with his teaching. He was also a professor of the science of the cook shop! Pliny the Elder (1st c. A.D.) also said that Apicius taught many precepts for the 'good life'. Examples of such precepts are that the flamingo tongue had a fine flavour or that the fish mullet should be cooked in a sauce made of its own companions. Pliny also relates a very gruesome method for force-feeding pigs with figs and honey wine prior to slaughter in order not to have to stuff the animal when dead!

Gastronomic philosopher

These snippets of culinary theory are, I believe, the substance of Apicius' labours. He was a gastronomic philosopher and armchair cook, who pursued culinary knowledge for its own sake. He did write his theory down it did not survive. He apparently gathered around him a philosophical school of like-minded people including young people whose eating habits he influenced. We are told that he had influenced the eating habits of Tiberius' son Drusus. Tiberius complained that his son would not eat his cabbage because of Apicius! Cabbage, I should say, is the kind of food that ordinary people ate and also the kind of food that Apicius would rather die than eat.

Marcus Gavius Apicius was either condemned outright as a wasteful glutton by his contemporaries, or, more importantly, ignored entirely. There are a number of writers living during or shortly after his lifetime who write learned works on food- related topics, and none of them mention him as a writer on cooking. This silence amongst the 'respectable' culinary elite in Rome speaks volumes. There was no book that could be attributed to Apicius.

The process by which Apicius became associated with the recipe book is interesting. At the end of the first century A.D., Apicius as a name had become a common title for a gourmet, anyone who spends his time, energy, and wealth on food. The poet Juvenal highlights the popular attitude when he said: 'What tickles the ears of the people more than the sight of a poor Apicius?'

A marketable name

By the end of the second century A.D., the name had been associated with a cookery school in Rome. The emphasis has now switched from consumption to production. There is now a great gap in the literary evidence. It is not until the recipe book we have, or similar versions of it, are circulating in the ancient world that a book by Apicius is talked of in the sources. Numerous late Latin Christian writers begin to mention Apicius as an author. According to St Jerome he had written a book similar to that of Paxamus, a well-known writer on cookery.

We even hear that Apicius invented kitchen equipment and, from a commentary on Juvenal, we also hear about a little book of sauces. It is my belief that these writers are talking about different collections of recipes that have acquired the name Apicius in their title either because the compilers want to cash in on the kudos that the name brings, or because the recipes originate at the cookery schools that have used the name for the same reason.

Another version of the picture supposes that numerous cooks through the centuries take or are given the name Apicius and are responsible for the many recipes that have survived. The puzzle is by no means complete but you can see the recipe book in its context and have some idea of the unknown slave cooks behind the recipes. I am only grateful that the book survived at all. The recipes produce quite remarkable dishes, unique in the modem world for their flavour and well worth the effort.

I haven't actually told you anything about the food yet. In each future issue I will be giving you a recipe to try, with detailed instructions and information on the obscure ingredients as they come up. There are few recipes in the book that can be termed 'simple' but I will try to explain the more complicated issues. One piece of equipment that you will find invaluable if you want to experiment with Roman food is a pestle and mortar. Many of the sauce ingredients have to be pounded for them to work successfully. It is possible for your school to buy a replica *mortaria* (they are about £15) from 'History in evidence'-your teacher will know about this company. You can find a modem one relatively cheap in any good cook shop, or you might even find one in the chemistry lab!

Sally Grainger is a food historian and chef who specializes in Roman and Greek food. She spent twenty years as a chef before taking a degree in ancient history at Royal Holloway College, London. In 1996 she published, along with a colleague – Andrew Dalby – a recipe book of ancient food called The classical cook book *(British Museum Press).She is currently working on research into cooking techniques in the ancient world. Using replica equipment and wood and charcoal as the fuel, she prepares the food as a slave cook in the Roman world would actually work. These experiments can be seen at public displays at Roman English Heritage sites around the country. She can also give displays and talks on Roman food for schools, colleges, and private groups. Sally lives in Surrey with her husband Chris and their dog Winston.*