

# FOOD FOR RICH AND POOR



Above: Bread being sold at a bakery in Pompeii, a fresco of the 1st century AD. Note the flattened, circular shape of the baker's loaves.

Two things stand out about Roman attitudes towards food in general. The first is that they were almost omnivorous. "If it moves or grows, cook it and eat it" could have been their motto, for they lacked religious or sentimental dietary taboos (except against cannibalism, and they did not eat dogs or cats). A large type of dormouse was specially bred for eating and most song birds were considered fair game, or were bred in captivity. This catholic approach led to dishes of great variety and increasing complexity and richness on the tables of the rich in Rome and other great cities.

The other salient point is that meat was expensive and most people ate a simple diet, based on cereals, olive oil and vegetables with quite a lot of wine, and modest amounts of meat – principally pork, seldom beef or chicken – and seafood. Slaves and paupers ate often rancid cereals as a gruel or porridge and suffered chronic malnutrition, as modern analysis of skeletons at Pompeii has shown.

## THE CHANGING DIET OF ROME

The early Roman diet was simple, based on cereals, olive oil and locally grown vegetables. Later orators used to praise the ancient frugality of Curius Dentatus, who "gathered his scanty vegetables and cooked them himself in his little stove". This moderation did not long survive Rome's rise to wealth and power.

From 200BC on, Rome could no longer be supplied locally and soon foreign wars led to imports of entirely new foods. Lucullus, the great late Republican general, for example, introduced the cherry to Rome from Asia Minor. However, most of the bulk of the food sucked into Rome remained the essential supplies of wheat, which came from Egypt, Africa and Sicily, and olive oil which came from Africa and Spain.

There were many other dishes but, as the Romans had no refrigeration, most perishable foods tended to be produced and eaten locally. Martial's *Epigrams* list

Right: From 200BC on, Rome began to import food, metals, textiles and other goods from a growing range of countries around the Mediterranean both for their luxuries and as staple necessities.

