

THE  
*D*ECADENT  
COOKBOOK



MEDLAR LUCAN & DURLAN GRAY

## A few comments on *The Decadent Cookbook*:

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“If meat is the hard-core-of-food-as-sex, *The Decadent Cookbook* is a walk on the wild side, a boon for those who scorn not only the Prohibitions of Leviticus but also the dictates of common sense, good health and kindness to animals.”

*John Ryle’s City of Words Column in The Guardian*

“Lucan and Gray, whose fruity monikers may strike some as being suspiciously apt, have concocted a fabulous and shocking assemblage.”

*Christopher Hirst in The Independent*

“Arresting, too, is *The Decadent Cookbook* (including a recipe for cat in tomato sauce).

*Nigella Lawson in The Times Books of the Year*

“Fancy boiled ostrich? Cat in tomato sauce? Or virgin’s breasts? The droll compilers trawl ancient Rome and other OTT times for kitchen oddities, mixed with literary off-cuts and pungent commentary. Delia Smith it ain’t.”

*New Stateman & Sociologist*

“Start with a glass of blood, to set you up: recipe given in Jean Lorrain’s short story, helpfully included.”

*John Bayley in The Standard’s Books of the Year*

“An extravagant, shameless and highly entertaining book that could change the course of contemporary cuisine.”

*The International Cookbook Review*

“Get these decadent boys out of my kitchen.”

*Katie Puckrick on Granada Television’s Pyjama Party*

“A scholarly work, cleverly disguised as a very amusing read, from Medlar Lucan and Durian Gray. 223 pages of about every kind of weird or simply repugnant food from the Romans to the 19th century, with intriguing recipes for boiled ostrich, roast testicles, boneless frog soup and other obscure delicacies. There’s even a whole section on cooking with blood. The perfect gift for posh friends: it’s the kind of book they always have in their loo.”

*Richard Cawley in Attitude Magazine*

“Forget Prue Leith and Delia Smith the cookery manual that every Venue reader needs is *The Decadent Cookbook*. If your palate is a little jaded, if you thought you’d tried everything, then this is the book to make your smart dinner parties go with a bang (and several yech!s). The pseudonymous authors have trawled through the world’s great works of history and literature to assemble a truly sumptuous feast of decadent dishes and ghastly gastronomy.”

*Eugene Byrne in Venue*

“I point blankly refuse to eat some food called Virgin’s Breasts.”

*Sean Hughes in The Observer*





*Edited by Alex Martin & Jerome Fletcher*



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## INTRODUCTION

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For three brief but memorable years, Medlar Lucan and Durian Gray ran their own restaurant - The Decadent - on the first floor of a house in Edinburgh. It was a small, dark, luxurious place with a décor and atmosphere all its own. There were two dining-rooms: the first, as you walked in, panelled in ebony, the second hung with crimson and bottle-green silk. Deeper inside were three *cabinets particuliers*. These were snug little rooms, each about the size of a railway compartment, with a table that would seat up to six. *Cabinet N°1* was a monastic wooden box, bare, ascetic, penitential, with pale cream candles and pewter plates. *N°2* was the opposite - a sybarite's paradise upholstered in Fortuny silks and velvets, richly coloured, heavily perfumed. *N°3* was known as the Chart Room. It had a nautical theme (inspired by a passage in Huysmans' *A Rebours*) with portholes looking 'out' into tanks full of fish and lobsters, a ceiling hung with navigational equipment (sextants, dividers, compasses, etc.), coils of tarred rope, posters of transatlantic liners, and a speaking tube for sending out orders.

If you took one of these *cabinets* it was yours for the night - with no questions asked. Cushions, incense, musicians, liqueurs - any stimulants you cared to name - would be brought at any hour. The *cabinets* made very wonderful couchettes. Sound did not travel between them, and they welcomed conspirators of every kind - artistic, political, amorous, or simply friends determined to shut out the world for a night.

The waiters were all young, male and very good-looking. Most were 'resting' actors. Their standard outfit was the long white apron, black trousers and bow tie of Renoir's café paintings, but you might equally see them as servants from Longhi's 18th century Venetian suppers, with powdered wigs, breeches and silk stockings; or costumed *à la turque* with *shalwar* and embroidered waistcoats. They could be Renaissance courtiers, Swiss guards, marshals of Napoleon's Grande Armée, hospital porters, airmen of the Second World War... Once, by special request, they blacked up, oiled their bodies, and wore nothing but white satin tangas. They were often thought - wrongly - to be available for 'rent' and more than one lecherous alderman was presented with his bill earlier than he had bargained for after presuming too freely on this account.

A taste for the theatrical was also evident in the accoutrements of the place. Strange relics of gastronomic history would appear: food was served in a rare surviving example of Soyer's Magic Stove, birds were flamboyantly roasted on spits turned by a vastly complicated array of cogwork, clockwork and chains; they had a replica of Rossini's famous silver syringe for injecting *pâté de foie gras* into macaroni; and the cutlery, napkins, pepper and salt came to the table in a *cadenas* - a boat-shaped vessel, made of gold, silver and enamelled copper, used by medieval French kings... They were the fruit of afternoons in antique-shops and auction-rooms, where Medlar's expert eye could pick out a single fine item from heaps of undistinguished junk.

Everything at The Decadent was idiosyncratic, but nothing more so than the food. Durian and Medlar poured all their turbulent energy, fantasy, playfulness and aesthetic extremism into a series of menus which managed simultaneously to make your mouth water and your hair stand on end. As well as being outrageous and unfailingly bizarre, the food was always exquisitely cooked. Even when you were eating cat in tomato sauce, stewed bull's genitalia, or armadillo sausages, you felt you were in safe hands.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the food was its provenance. Very little - apart from occasional details - came from the imagination. Almost everything was historical. Peasant cooking, *cuisine bourgeoise*, feasts for the rich and the royal - it was all equal to them, and they mixed it with a rare

and delicate hand.

The guiding principles were simple: if anyone was likely to have tasted a dish before, they would not cook it; if it sounded shocking, improbable or just extravagant, they thought it worth a try. An odd colour, an unusual name, a quirky shape or historical connection was sometimes enough.

The wine list was also remarkable. As well as an excellent cellar they had an intriguing repertoire of cocktails that changed from week to week. One list went like this:

THUNDERCLAP  
CINNAMON LIQUEUR  
SNAKE IN THE GRASS  
ABSINTHE  
AURUM POTABILE  
WHITE CURAÇOA (WYNAND FOCKINK 1961)  
MILK PUNCH  
KRUPNIK

They once made a working *piano cocktail* - the instrument for mixing drinks described by Boris Vian in *L'Ecume des Jours*, which squirted a different alcohol into your glass for every note played. It was a complicated and magnificent structure, literally a 'piano-bar' with 88 different bottles suspended precariously above it - but the results were disastrous - or perhaps too successful. A customer drank a large *Saint Louis Blues* followed by a *Chattanooga Choo-Choo*, then danced the boogie-woogie with such reckless exuberance that he crashed into the nest of supply pipes that fed the piano cocktail and destroyed its delicate mechanism.

The Decadent was, of course, too good to last. Despite a cult following, the business side never really held up, and Durian and Medlar were forced into ever more difficult choices between lowering their fastidious standards and raising their prices. The enmity of certain influential figures in the city didn't help. After three years of struggling to break even, The Decadent closed. Durian and Medlar vanished - some said to New York, others to Tasmania, others to the Far East.

Nothing was heard of them for over a year. Then one day a parcel arrived at the Dedalus office in Sawtry, wrapped in grey recycled paper and roughly tied with brown string. It was postmarked Calcutta. A brief covering letter from Medlar Lucan - written in his usual purple ink - offered the contents for publication: it was a collection of Decadent recipes together with "notes and readings from our favourite authors". The text was clearly a joint effort, with chapters in somewhat different styles by the two of them - Medlar inclining to the theoretical, the literary and the morbid, while Durian indulged his taste for the festive, the spectacular, the grotesque. What follows is the content of that parcel - The Decadent Cookbook - all that remains of a wicked and exciting place.

J.F.  
A.M.





He built tall sailing-ships of cedarwood, their poops and sterns set with precious stones, their sails many colours, and within them baths, great galleries, promenades, and dining-chambers of vast capacity, containing vines and apple-trees and many other fruits; and here he would sit feasting all day among choirs of musicians and melodious singers, and so sail along the coasts of Campania.

This was Caius, also known as Caligula - one of a series of emperors who turned Rome in the 1st century AD from a city of strait-laced farmers and soldiers into a seething cosmopolis of aesthetes, gluttons and perverts. Thanks to the fabulous wealth of the empire, the patricians of Rome had little need to work. Taking their lead from the emperor, they indulged in lust, cruelty, violence and sensuality on a daily basis. Despite two thousand years of atrocities (politely known as 'history') that have passed since then, their excesses still send shivers along the spine.

The Decadents of 19th-century France loved the unashamed filth and self-indulgence of it all - the sadism of Tiberius, the insanity of Caligula, the joky viciousness of Nero. They could all have come straight from the pages of Huysmans or Gautier. Edward Gibbon, in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, tells us that the emperor Heliogabalus 'abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury, and soon found disgust and satiety in the midst of his enjoyments... To confound the order of seasons and climates, to sport with the passions and prejudices of his subjects, and to subvert every law of nature and decency, were in the number of his most delicious amusements'. In other words, he was the perfect Decadent.

Eating was one of the great pleasures of the age. Murder was its great vice. Claudius was killed by a dish of his favourite mushrooms laced with poison. Heliogabalus was stabbed by his own guards, his body dragged through the streets and thrown into the River Tiber. Caligula, before being murdered himself, liked a good dose of death mixed with his meals. He watched his grandmother's funeral pyre burn from his dining-room, and had suspected criminals tortured and beheaded in front of him while he ate. His love of luxury was all-engulfing: he once gave dinner-guests an entire banquet made of gold, saying 'a man must either be frugal or else Caesar'.

While the poor of Rome ate porridge, bruised olives and sheep's lips, the rich feasted on the produce and spices of every known land - from Spain to China. Exotic foods, disguised foods, unlike other foods - these were all the rage. Sweet and sour sauces were an obsession. Heliogabalus ordered an elephant trunk and roast camel from his kitchens, and spent a whole summer throwing parties where all the food was a single colour. The emperor Vitellius, who reigned from April to December 69 AD, was given a banquet by his brother where 2,000 of the most costly fish and 7,000 birds were served. His favourite dish, a monstrosity named 'The Shield of Minerva, Guardian of the City', included pheasants' and peacocks' brains, flamingoes' tongues, livers of wrasse and the roes of moray eels.

The only surviving Roman cookbook was written by Apicius, who liked nothing better than clashing flavours and the use of rare, improbable beasts. Dormice, flamingoes, sea-urchins, cranes - practically everything that moved was slaughtered and cooked and served up as wittily and elegantly as possible. 'They will not know what they are eating,' he boasted - 'anchovy stew without anchovies'! Apicius himself feasted his way through a huge fortune and then took poison rather than live a more moderate life.

Dinner parties were a favourite entertainment. In fact they were the only entertainment (apart from sex in front of the slaves) available after dark. They began at the ninth hour (i.e. the ninth hour after daylight, between about 4 and 5 pm), usually after a workout at the baths. They were long and sometimes very wild. There was music, dancing, flirting, petting, and of course sex. Suetonius says that Mark Antony 'took the wife of an ex-consul from her husband's dining-room, right before his

eyes, and led her into a bedroom; he brought her back to the dinner party with her ears glowing and her hair dishevelled.' Caligula often did the same, adding a cynical commentary on the woman's performance when he came back to the table.

## APICIAN NIGHTS

Roman banquets are fun to do, but however hard you try the food is unlikely to be completely authentic. (It may also turn out insipid or even disgusting - read the passage from Smollett's *Peregrine Pickle* as a warning). Apicius's cookbook, *De Re Coquinaria*, is still available, but the ancient methods of cooking and presenting food are lost for ever. Apicius gives no idea of quantities or cooking times, and there's even doubt about the identity of some ingredients.

Still, there's nothing to stop you having a go, so here's a simple checklist for a Do-It Yourself Dinner With Caligula:

- Hire plenty of slaves for the evening
- Serve three courses: *gustatio* (hors d'oeuvres)
  - fercula* (entrées)
  - mensae secundae* (dessert)
- Lay on some entertainment (naughty friends, a good poet willing to read from his works, musician and dancing girls from Cadiz)
- Provide guests with couches, finger bowls, vomit buckets, and large linen napkins
- Philosophy of the hour [declaimed by Trimalchio in *Satyricon*, as a slave dangled a silver skeleton before his guests]:

*'Look! Man is just a bag of bones.  
He's here, and gone tomorrow!  
We'll soon be like this fellow, so  
let's live! Let's drown our sorrow!'*

## AN INVITATION

The poet Martial (c. 40-104 AD) issued dinner invitations to his friends in the form of very short 'Epigrams'. Perfectionists who know the difference between a hexameter and a place to park the car might like to try it too. This is one of Martial's best-known, *Cenabis bene*:

*You shall eat well, Julius Cerialis, at my house;  
if you've nothing better to do, come round.  
Your eighth hour routine is safe: we can bathe together:  
you know the baths of Stephanus are just next door.  
First I shall give you lettuce, useful for stirring the bowels,  
and tender shoots of leek,*

*pickled young tuna larger than a lizard,*

---

*layered with eggs and leaves of rue;*

*more eggs will follow, cooked gently on a low flame,*

*with cheese from Velabrum Street*

*and olives that have felt the Picenum frosts.*

*That's the first course. Are you curious about the rest?*

*I'll lie, to make sure you come: fish, oysters, sow's udders,*

*stuffed fowl and marsh birds*

*that not even Stella would serve at her rarest dinner.*

*One more promise: I shall recite nothing,*

*even if you read out your entire Gigantas*

*or your pastorals, which are nearly as good as immortal Virgil's.*

*(Epigrams, 11.52)*

*Now it's time for some food.*

We begin with the *gustatio* or

## HORS D'OEUVRES

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The classic opener was eggs, which Martial smuggled in with tuna and rue, and then again (he obviously loved them) with cheese and olives. Apicius recommends serving them boiled with a garnish of pepper, lovage, nuts, honey, vinegar and fish-pickle.

A more decadent alternative is sea-urchins. These should be cooked in fish-stock, olive oil, sweet wine and pepper - and are best enjoyed, says Apicius, 'as one comes out of the bath.'

But enough of this coy stuff. Let's go for broke here, with one of the greatest of all Roman delicacies:

## GLIRES (ROAST DORMICE)

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The dormouse, says Larousse, 'is a small rodent that nests in the branches of trees and feeds on nuts, berries, and seeds. In ancient times it was considered to be a delicacy.' The Romans bred them for the table in mud hutches and fed them on acorns through little holes. Unfortunately this is no longer done, so you must either find a very well-stocked butcher or take evening-classes in rodent-trapping. (Dormice can be tempted to use a hunting rifle, because the recipe calls for whole dormice.) If all else fails, you

could go to a pet shop where they don't ask too many questions.

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This is the recipe from Apicius:

Slit open and gut four dormice and stuff them with a mixture of minced pork and dormouse (all parts), pepper, nuts, stock, and laser (i.e. wild African fennel). Stitch up and roast on a tile or in a small clay oven.

Serve as they are, or as described in *Satyricon*, with honey and poppy-seeds.

If you can't get dormice, ask your butcher to do you a few ounces of minced pork or veal and some calf's brains; then, with squid from the fishmonger, you can cook this amphibian appetizer:

## SIC FARCIES EAM SEPIAM COCTAM

(SQUID STUFFED WITH BRAINS)

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Remove the membranes from a calf's brains, fry them and mash with pepper. Mix with raw egg, peppercorns, and minced meat. Then stuff the mixture into the squid, stitch up and cook in boiling water until the stuffing is firm.

Still hungry? Then it's time for *fercula* or

## ENTRÉES

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### LUMBULI

(SMALL ROAST TESTICLES)

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Slice each testicle in two and sprinkle with pepper, nuts, finely chopped coriander and powdered fennel seed. Sew the halves together, wrap each one in a caul (i.e. the external membrane of stomach) and fry them in olive oil and fish-pickle until brown. Then grill or roast in the oven.

## IN STRUTHIONE ELIXO

(BOILED OSTRICH)

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Boil an ostrich [easier if you do it in pieces] and set aside. In a pan make a sauce of pepper, mint, rosmarin, cumin, celery seed, dates, honey, vinegar, sweet wine, fish-stock and olive oil. Bring to the boil and thicken with starch. Lay out the boiled ostrich pieces on a dish and pour the sauce over them. Alternatively, boil the ostrich in the sauce, adding some spelt.

# PORCELLUMHORTULANUM

(SUCKING PIG WITH VEGETABLES AND GARDEN PESTS)



Have the pig boned from the neck down so that it resembles a bag. Make a stuffing of minced chickens, thrushes, fig-peckers, pork, Lucanian sausages, dates, bulbs, snails, mallows, beetroot, celery, leek, cabbage, coriander, peppercorns, walnuts, 15 eggs and stock with pepper sauce. Truss, sear and roast in the oven. When cooked, split open the back and serve with a sauce of pepper, rue, stock, wine, honey, and oil, thickened with starch.

## FLAMINGO STEW



Another dish for the intrepid. Flamingoes are not easy to find outside Africa, except in zoos. But guests will appreciate the effort, and you can do all sorts of exciting things with the plumage.

Pluck and gut a flamingo. Place in a pan with water, aniseed, salt and a little vinegar, and boil. When half cooked, add a bunch of chives and coriander leaves tied in a bundle. Towards the end of cooking add some boiled wine to give it colour.

Take a pestle and mortar and grind up pepper, cumin, coriander, laser root, mint and rue. Add vinegar, dates and some of the cooking broth, then pour the lot into the pan. Thicken the sauce with starch, then serve.

You can use the same recipe for parrot.

## SAUCE FOR ROAST FLAMINGO



Grind pepper, lovage, celery seed, parsley, mint, dried onion, fried sesame seeds and dates with pestle and mortar. Pour in wine, honey, stock, olive oil, vinegar and boiled wine. Mix well.

## TURDOS

(STEWED THRUSHES)



A less spectacular dish, showing that the Romans could use everyday ingredients in interesting ways. The Latin name also makes a certain splash.

Make a stuffing for the thrushes as follows: grind pepper, laser and laurel berries, then add cumin and fish-pickle. Insert this through the bird's throat then stitch up the hole. Stew the thrushes in wine and water seasoned with salt, aniseed and leeks.

## HAEDUS SIVE AGNUS SYRINGATUS ID EST MAMMOTESTIS

(KID OR LAMB HOLLOWED OUT LIKE A PIPE)



The preparation of this dish calls for a strong stomach and a powerful pair of lungs. As few Decadent will be equipped with either of these, they may prefer to have the ‘emptying’ as well as the ‘bagging’ done by a butcher.

Have the animal boned from the neck down so that it resembles a bag. Empty the intestines by blowing into the head, forcing the contents out of the lower end; then wash them very carefully with water. Stuff the intestines with a mixture of your choosing. Sew up the body at the shoulder and roast in the oven, or boil in a basket lowered into a cauldron of salted water. Serve in a sauce made of milk, pepper, stock, wine and olive oil, thickened with starch.

## **MENSAE FECUNDAE**

(DESSERTS)



## **PATINAM DE ROSIS**

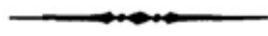
(ROSE-HIP AND CALF’S BRAIN CUSTARD)



Pound some rose hips with a little stock in a mortar. Add  $\frac{1}{8}$  pint stock, strain through a colander, and set aside. Take 4 calves’ brains (membranes removed), then grind them up with 8 scruples ( $\frac{1}{3}$  oz.) black pepper. Mix with the rose hip stock. Break 8 eggs, and mix them with  $\frac{1}{8}$  pint wine,  $\frac{1}{12}$  pint raisin wine and a little olive oil. Combine this with the brains and stock, pour into a greased dish and cook on hot ashes. Serve with finely ground black pepper.

## **COCHLEAS LACTE PASTAS**

(MILK-FED SNAILS)



Gather some snails, wipe them clean, and remove the membrane that seals the opening of their shells. Put them in a bowl of milk with a little salt for a day, then for a few days in plain milk. Dredge with their droppings every hour. When the snails are too fat to get back into their shells, fry them in olive oil. Serve with wine sauce.

## **OVA SPONGIA EX LACTE**

(OMELETTE WITH HONEY)



Beat four eggs with half a pint of milk. Heat some olive oil in a pan, add the eggs and milk and cook until they form a sponge. Serve on a round dish with honey and pepper.

# WINE

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No Roman banquet would be complete without wine - although you may prefer not to be too authentic about this as the Romans drank their wine very sweet - 3 parts golden syrup to 4 parts Liebfraumilch will give you an idea. Sweetening was the usual method of preserving wine from the attentions of vinegar bacteria (another was mixing it with sea-water, which must have been extremely unpleasant). Wine was often flavoured with herbs and watered down before drinking. It probably tasted like sweet Martini or Cinzano.

As to the Roman manner of drinking wine, here's Juvenal in his Sixth Satire:

*She arrives from the baths, red-faced; she is so thirsty that she would drink the entire contents of a wine-urn placed at her feet. Before she eats, she takes a second sextarius - this will give her a frenzied appetite once she has thrown up on the floor and her stomach is well washed. Streams run along the marble; the golden bowl exhales the aroma of Falernian wine. Like a long snake that has fallen to the bottom of a barrel she drinks and vomits.*

Roman men, of course, were far less delicate in their drinking habits.

Here are two recipes for flavoured wines from Apicius:

## CONDITUM PARADOXUM

(WINE STRANGELY SPICED)



Pour 2 pints of wine and 15 lb of honey into a bronze pot. The wine will be boiled off as the honey melts. Heat on a slow fire, using dry wood, and stir with a wooden stick. Pour in more wine if it starts to boil over. Remove the fire and let the contents of the pot settle and grow cold. Then light another fire under the pot, boil it up again, let it cool. Repeat a third time. After this you can move the pot off the hearth. Next day, skim the wine, add 4 oz of ground pepper, 3 scruples (half a teaspoon) of mastic, a handful of saffron, the same of spikenard (or bay) leaves, and five dried dates soaked in wine until soft. Then pour in 18 pints of mild wine, mix, and serve hot or cold.

## ROSATUM ET VIOLACIUM

(ROSE OR VIOLET WINE)



Take a large quantity of rose or violet petals, sew them into a linen bag, and soak them in wine for seven days. Then remove the petals and replace them with fresh ones. Leave these in the wine for another seven days. Repeat a third time. Then filter the wine and mix with honey before serving. Take care to use only the best and freshest petals, gathered after the dew has dried.

## A CARTHAGINIAN FEAST

By Gustave Flaubert



Men of all nations were there, Ligurians and Lusitanians, Balearic Islanders, Negroes, and fugitives from Rome ...

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They lay upon cushions; they squatted around huge trays, and so ate; others, lying upon the bellies, reached out for lumps of meat and gorged themselves, leaning on their elbows in the placid posture of lions dismembering their prey. Late-comers, leaning against the trees, watched the loaves on tables half hidden under the scarlet coverings, and awaited their turn.

Since Hamilcar's kitchens were inadequate, the Council had provided slaves, dishes and couches. Oxen were roasting at great clear fires in the middle of the garden, which thus looked like a battlefield when the dead are being burned. Loaves dusted with aniseed vied with huge cheeses heavier than the disks, and great bowls of wine with mighty water tankards, set close to gold filigree baskets full of flowers. Their eyes gleamed wide in delight at being at last free to gorge to their hearts' content; and here and there they were beginning to sing.

First they were served with birds in green sauce upon plates of red clay, decorated in black relief; then with every kind of shellfish that is found on the Punic coasts, with broths thickened with wheat and beans and barley, and with cumin-spiced snails upon yellow amber dishes.

After this the tables were loaded with meats: antelopes still with their horns, peacocks still with their feathers, whole sheep cooked in sweet wine, camels' and buffaloes' haunches, hedgehogs in garum sauce, fried grasshoppers, and pickled dormice. Great pieces of fat were floating amid saffron in bowls of Tamrapanni wood. Everywhere was a lavish abundance of pickles, truffles, and asafoetida. There were pyramids of fruit tumbling upon honeycombs; and they had not forgotten to serve some of those silky-coated, red, fat-paunched little dogs, fattened on olive lees: a Carthaginian dish which was an abomination to other peoples. Their stomachs' greed was titillated by the excitement and wonder of such novel fare. The Gauls, with their long hair coiled upon the top of their heads, snatched at water-melons and lemons, and crunched them peel and all. Negroes who had never seen a crawfish, tore the faces on its red spines. The Greeks, who were smooth-shaven and whiter than marble, threw the leavings of their plates behind them; while herdsmen from Brutium, clad in wolf-skins, ate in silence with their faces buried in their plates.

Night fell. The awning over the cypress avenue was drawn back, and torches were brought.

G. Flaubert, *Salammbô* (transl. by Powys Mathers)

## A ROMAN BANQUET

by T. G. Smollett

The doctor ... with an air of infinite satisfaction, ... began: - "This here, gentlemen, is a boiled goose served up in a sauce composed of pepper, lovage, coriander, mint, rue, anchovies, and oil! I wish for your sakes, gentlemen, it was one of the geese of Ferrara, so much celebrated among the ancients for the magnitude of their livers, one of which is said to have weighed upwards of two pounds; with this food, exquisite as it was, did the tyrant Heliogabalus regale his hounds. But I beg pardon. I had almost forgot the soup, which I hear is so necessary an article at all tables in France. At each end there are dishes of the *falacacabia* of the Romans; one is made of parsley, penny-royal, cheese, pine-top, honey, vinegar, brine, eggs, cucumbers, onions, and hen-livers; the other is much the same as the *soup-maigre* of this country. Then there is a loin of veal boiled with fennel and caraway seed, on a pottage composed of pickle, oil, honey and flour, and a curious *hachis* of the lights, liver and blood

an hare, together with a dish of roasted pigeons. Monsieur le Baron shall I help you to a plate of the soup?" The German, who did not all approve of the ingredients, assented to the proposal, and seemed to relish the composition; while the marquis ... was in consequence of his desire accommodated with a portion of the *soup-maigre*; and the count ... supplied himself with a pigeon ...

The Frenchman, having swallowed the first spoonful, made a pause; his throat swelled as if an egg had stuck in his gullet, his eyes rolled, and his mouth underwent a series of involuntary contractions and dilations. Pallet, who looked steadfastly at this connoisseur, with a view of consulting his taste before he himself would venture upon the soup, began to be disturbed at these emotions, and observed with some concern, that the poor gentleman seemed to be going into a fit; when Peregrine assured him that these were symptoms of ecstasy, and for further confirmation, asked the marquis how he found the soup. It was with infinite difficulty that his complaisance could so far master his disgust, as to enable him to answer, "Altogether excellent, upon my honour!" And the painter, being certified of his approbation, lifted the spoon to his mouth without scruple; but far from justifying the eulogium of his taster, when this precious composition diffused itself upon his palate, he seemed to be deprived of all sense and motion, and sat like the leaded statue of some river god, with the liquor flowing out at both sides of his mouth.

The doctor, alarmed at this indecent phenomenon, earnestly inquired into the cause of it; and when Pallet recovered his recollection, and swore that he would rather swallow porridge made of burning brimstone, than such an infernal mess as that which he had tasted; the physician, in his own vindication, assured the company, that, except the usual ingredients, he had mixed nothing in the soup but some sal-armoniac instead of the ancient nitrum, which could not now be procured; and appealed to the marquis, whether such a succedaneum was not an improvement of the whole. The unfortunate *petit-mâitre*, driven to the extremity of his condescension, acknowledged it to be a master-piece of refinement; and deeming himself obliged, in point of honour, to evince his sentiments by his practice, forced a few more mouthfuls of this disagreeable potion down his throat, till his stomach was so much offended that he was compelled to start up of a sudden; and, in the hurry of his elevation, overturned his plate into the bosom of the baron. The emergency of his occasions would not permit him to start and make apologies for this abrupt behaviour; so that he flew into another apartment, where Pickens found him puking, and crossing himself with great devotion; and a chair, at his desire, being brought to the door, he slipped into it, more dead than alive ... When our hero returned to the dining-room ... the places were filled with two pies, one of dormice liquored with syrup of white poppies which the doctor had substituted in the room of toasted poppy-seed, formerly eaten with honey, as a dessert; and the other composed of a hock of pork baked in honey.

Pallet hearing the first of these dishes described, lifting up his hands and eyes, and with signs of loathing and amazement pronounced, "A pye made of dormice and syrup of poppies; Lord in heaven what beastly fellows those Romans were!" ... All the doctor's invitations and assurances could not prevail upon his guest to honour the *hachis* and the goose; and that course was succeeded by another ... "That which smoaks in the middle," said he, "is a sow's stomach, filled with a composition of minced pork, hogs brains, eggs, pepper, cloves, garlick, aniseed, rue, oil, wine, and pickle. On the right-hand side are the teats and belly of a sow, just farrowed, fried with sweet wine, oil, flour, lovage and pepper. On the left is a fricassee of snails, fed, or rather purged, with milk. At that end next Mr. Pallet are fritters of pompions, lovage, origanum, and oil; and here are a couple of pullets, roasted and stuffed in the manner of Apicius."

The painter, who had by wry faces testified his abhorrence of the sow's stomach, which he compared to a bagpipe, and the snails which had undergone purgation, no sooner heard him mention

the roasted pullets, than he eagerly solicited the wing of a fowl; ... but scarce were they set down before him, when the tears ran down his cheeks, and he called aloud in a manifest disorder, “Z—ds! this is the essence of a whole bed of garlic!” That he might not, however, disappoint or disgrace the entertainer, he applied his instruments to one of the birds; and when he opened up the cavity, was assaulted by such an irruption of intolerable smells, that, without staying to disengage himself from the cloth, he sprung away, with an exclamation of “Lord Jesus!” and involved the whole table in havoc, ruin, and confusion.

Before Pickle could accomplish his escape, he was sauced with the syrup of the dormouse-py which went to pieces in the general wreck; and as for the Italian count, he was overwhelmed by the sow’s stomach, which bursting in the fall, discharged its contents upon his leg and thigh, and scalded him so miserably, that he shrieked with anguish, and grinned with a most ghastly and horrible aspect ...

The doctor was confounded with shame and vexation ... he expressed his sorrow for the misadventure ... and protested there was nothing in the fowls which could give offence to a sensible nose, the stuffing being a mixture of pepper, lovage, and assafoetida, and the sauce consisting of wine and herring-pickle, which he had used instead of the celebrated garum of the Romans.

T. G. Smollett, *Peregrine Pickle*

## CHAPTER 2

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### THE GRAND INQUISITOR'S BREAKFAST

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We stay in Rome - city of eternal Decadence - to visit the kitchens of a much craftier set of prince the Renaissance popes. These were men who had read Machiavelli, absorbed his lessons, and instead of being knifed and chucked into the Tiber at the age of 30 were allowed to die of old age, given magnificent funerals, and then canonized.

One of these was Antonio Ghislieri (better known as Pius V), remembered now as an ‘ascetic reformer, and relentless persecutor of heretics, whose papacy marked one of the most austere periods in Roman Catholic Church history.’ He was born into a poor family in 1504, worked as a shepherd, became a monk, then joined the Inquisition. He was so keen on his job of rooting out error that he worried even the man who had appointed him, Pius IV. He became Grand Inquisitor in 1558, and Pope in 1566. On his election he introduced immediate reforms to church practices, and harsh new punishments for Sunday desecration, animal baiting and other profane activities. A decree published in Rome on 2 October 1566 says, “To prevent many evil customs and vices, both of the mouth and of gaming, lust, blasphemy, thieving and other unspeakable crimes, which are born from the abuse of inns and taverns, to the dishonour of our Lord God, to the harm of the inhabitants of this Holy City and the scandal of other peoples and nations... all persons residing in Rome or Borghi, and all prostitutes and dishonest women are forbidden to frequent inns and taverns in Rome and Borghi, to eat, drink, play cards, dice or other games, or do other illicit and dishonest things either openly or in secret. The penalty will be 25 golden scudi and three lashes; prostitutes and dishonest women will be whipped and imprisoned, with further punishments according to our judgement... Anyone informing on innkeepers or other prohibited persons guilty of infringement of this ban will be rewarded with one scudo per person accused.”

The good times were definitely over. But not just for gamblers, innkeepers and prostitutes: priests had to spend more time in their parishes, and monks and nuns who took vows of seclusion were forced to stop going to parties and actually shut themselves away from the world. Nepotism was outlawed, corrupt monastic orders suppressed, and dissident intellectuals driven into exile or burnt at the stake. In March 1571, Pius published a list of books which he regarded as morally degrading or un-Christian, and hundreds of printers fled to Switzerland and Germany. He forced Jews to live in ghettos, and encouraged tyranny, ruthlessness and intolerance in Catholic rulers, threatening them with the wrath of God if they spared the lives of heretics. “Let them perish,” he wrote, “in the agony they deserve.” He died regretting only one thing: that he had been too lenient.

How did this merciless patron of prosecutors eat? Was he a dry bread and water man, or did he sleep down after a hard day at the Inquisition and wallow in papal troughs of gluttony?

His portrait on a medallion shows a cunning, weaselish face, hollow-cheeked and sharp-nosed, buried in thought. It’s impossible to guess what’s on his mind. But a cookbook published in 1570 by his chef, Bartolomeo Scappi, suggests that Pius was no stranger to the pleasures of the table. Among many fine dishes proposed by Scappi are fried birds’ tongues (first tasted at Cardinal Grimano’s in Venice), pig’s blood omelette, stuffed squid, boneless frog soup, barbecued bear, spitted calf’s head, baked dormice, roast hedgehog, and a range of interesting pies: snail pie, tortoise-innard pie, frog liver pie, and a puff-pastry *crostata* made with the sweetbreads, eyes, ears and testicles of a young goat. We could still be in ancient Rome.

Scappi has lots of useful ideas for Decadent cooks: his black broth makes an excellent starter, with its lush blend of quinces, raisins, prunes, black cherries, grape juice, red wine, pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, crushed fruit-cakes, Seville orange juice, and sugar. Menus are given for every month

of the year, including Lent and fast-days, and what to serve if the Emperor Charles V comes to lunch (he expected at least 400 dishes). There's also a handy appendix: *Il Trinciante* (the Carver) by Vincenzo Cervio, which tells you how to cut up everything, including peacocks, cranes, oysters, wild pig's heads, crabs, thrushes, melons and eggs.

Scappi knew how to furnish a table, and the Decadent faced with entertaining a party of dandies, bishops or chief constables for breakfast could do worse than use this menu - originally served after Vespers in a garden in Trastevere on a May morning.



*The table was laid with three table-cloths and decorated with a variety of flowers and leafy boughs; the wines were various, both sweet and dry, the sideboard furnished with cups of gold, silver, majolica and glass. A large bun made with milk, eggs, sugar and butter was placed under each napkin, and scented water was offered for the guests' hands. There were eight stewards and four carvers. Fresh white napkins were given with every change of the table-cloth. Gold and silver knives and forks were used for the savouries and spoons for the sweets. Each course was accompanied by six statues: the first made of sugar, the second of butter, the third of sweet almond pastry. Music, played on a variety of instruments, accompanied the meal.*

# FIRST COURSE

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WITH SUGAR STATUES

DIANA WITH THE MOON, BOW AND ARROWS,

DOGS ON A LEASH, AND FIVE NYMPHS.

FIRST NYMPH HOLDING A SPEAR.

SECOND NYMPH WITH A BOW AND QUIVER.

THIRD WITH A VIOLA.

FOURTH WITH A BUGLE.

FIFTH WITH A CYMBAL.

*8 plates of each of the following:*

Preserved yellow cherries, strawberries with sugar, candied grapes, sweet oranges with sugar, Neapolitan fruit cakes, marzipan lozenges, miniature almond pastries, sweet pine-seed cakes, butter cream cheeses with sugar, syringed butter sprinkled with sugar, junkets served in leaves with sugar and flowers, sliced fish-roe with lemon juice and sugar, pickled sturgeon and herrings, tuna fish, charcuterie, pickled anchovies, asparagus salad, sugared caper and raisin salad, salad of sliced citrus with sugar and rose-water, lettuce and borage flower salad, cold trout pies, butter tartlets, Spanish olives, mushrooms stuffed with rice à la turque.

*The first table-cloth was removed and perfumed water offered for the guests' hands.*

## SECOND COURSE

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WITH SIX BUTTER STATUES

AN ELEPHANT WITH A CASTLE ON ITS BACK,  
HERCULES STRANGLING THE LION,  
A LARGE CAMPIDOGGIO RUSTIC,  
A CAMEL RIDDEN BY A MOORISH KING,  
A UNICORN WITH ITS HORN IN A SERPENT'S MOUTH,  
MELEAGER'S BOAR WITH AN ARROW IN ITS BREAST.

*8 plates of each of the following:*

Tender peas boiled in their pods with vinegar and pepper dressing; cooked artichoke hearts in vinegar, salt and pepper; truffles cooked in oil, Seville orange juice and pepper; artichokes fried in butter, served with Seville orange juice and pepper; raw truffles served with salt and pepper; small Neapolitan palms; pear tarts; pears in wine and sugar; fresh musk-pears; yellow morello cherries; Florentine raviggiolo cheeses; sliced Parmesan cheese; March cheeses served in halves; fresh almonds on vine leaves; preserved grapes; cream cheeses with sugar; wafer rolls; small circular buns; roasted chestnuts stewed in rose-water and served with sugar, salt and pepper; turnip compôte, carrot compôte, cucumber compôte, samphire compôte.

*The table-cloth was removed and water offered for the guests' hands. Change of spoons, forks and napkins.*



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