



ROMAN ORGY

An Interactive Drama Scenario
by Adam Goodheart

FORGET WHAT YOU SAW IN ANIMAL House. There's a lot more to throwing a good old-fashioned Roman revel than just draping yourself in bedsheets and getting wild. The ancients took their fun seriously; dinnertime debauchery was an art refined over the course of centuries, from the relatively austere decadence of Tiberius in the first century A.D. (naked waitresses) to the boundlessly inventive frolics of certain third-century emperors (don't even ask).

Invitations Even the most lavish imperial banquets were usually quite intimate: Nine was the customary number of guests at a private dinner, with up to three diners reclining on each couch. Still, there's room for creativity. The emperor Elagabalus used to amuse himself by inviting eight bald men to dinner, eight one-eyed men or eight men with gout. If Caligula happens to be on the guest list, definitely don't bring your spouse. He used to lead his fellow diners' wives away between courses, then return to chat pleasantly about the good and bad points of their physique and performance.

Dining As soon as your guests seat themselves, ask them to remove their shoes, and have your slaves wash their feet before hors d'oeuvres are served. A full banquet should consist of at least seven courses. For starters, try dormice rolled in honey and poppy seeds, a favorite of Trimalchio, the unfrugal gourmet of Petronius's *Satyricon*. As an entree, you might offer the "Shield of Minerva the Protectress," invented to tickle the gluttony-dulled palate of Emperor Vitellius: The recipe calls for pike livers, pheasant and peacock brains, flamingo tongues and lamprey milt. (You'd better hope none of your guests asks what "milt" is.) Sow udders were another popular Roman delicacy, especially when the sow had been



fattened on figs. Next, dazzle your guests with a "Trojan pig": a roast pig stuffed as full of other creatures--live quail, in the case of Trimalchio's famous dinner--as the mythical horse was of Greeks.

Since the Romans ate mostly with their fingers, dinner will be pretty greasy. Good table manners called for diners to throw bones, shells and cores on the floor. You should, however, send servants around with ewers of perfumed water to wash guests' hands between courses; the very height of elegance was to use pretty slave boys from Asia Minor on whose long hair guests could dry their hands. (The emperor Lucius Verus bested even this by giving each guest his serving-boy as a party favor after dinner.)

Entertainment Once you've finished eating (and visiting the vomitorium, and eating some more, and so forth), it's time for the *comissatio*, or drinking and carousing part of the banquet. Slaves will give the signal by bringing out crowns of flowers to place on your guests' heads. Serve only the best Falernian wine; the vintage of 121 B.C. was particularly esteemed by connoisseurs. To amuse the company, first-century party animal Plutarch recommended discussing these "light-hearted topics": Why is fresh water better than salt water for washing clothes? Is wrestling the oldest sport? Why do Jews not eat pork? If you want your guests to stay awake, though, you might substitute a program of erotic dancing-girls from Cadiz, whose talents were prized by Plutarch's less sobersided contemporaries.

A Note on Sex at Dinner Sorry to burst your bubble, but most Romans actually didn't condone all-out fornication among the dessert plates. True, diners often kissed and exchanged erotic verses, and a thoughtful host provided attractive slaves of both sexes for his guests to fondle. But only a few of the more depraved emperors took things further than that. If you decide to emulate Caligula and Elagabalus, you won't find step-by-step instructions here. Chances are you won't need them, anyway: Some arts, after all, don't get lost so easily.

WARNING

Don't mix business with pleasure. At a dinner party in 184 B.C. Lucius Quinctius Flaminius, governor of Gaul, tried to impress his boyfriend (a noted Carthaginian hustler named Philippus) by slaughtering a Gallic noble who had surrendered to the Romans. Flaminius was expelled from the Senate --less for his sadism, Livy suggests, than for his lapse in table manners. So if you want to slaughter a Gaul, wait until after dessert.



