Christmas, the Roman way

Christmas dinner with roast turkey and all the trimmings has become a fixture of festivities up and down the land. But here Cornwall-based archaeologist Jacqui Wood talks to the WMN about why she believes it’s the Romans who held the first Yuletide feast.

**Food historian Jacqui Wood** with a selection of dishes the Romans would have had at their solstice and, inset, Marcus Apicius

**Scrambled eggs would have formed part of the feast**

There seems to be no end to accounts of Roman excess when it comes to dining. The excess of the emperors is legendary.

“The Emperor Elagablus served ostrich brains, mixed with peas and grains of gold at one of his feasts in the second century,” Ms Wood said.

She says British cuisine has fused with that of many civilisations through the centuries.

“We think British food is nothing special, but it has evolved over all these thousands of years,” she said.

“It’s serious fusion – we invented fusion food.”

“We have got 1,000 years of the Celtic food, the Roman food, Saxan, Viking, Norman food.”

Ms Wood’s book Tasting the Past – British food from the Stone Age to the Twentieth Century, is due to be published by The History Press, in time for Christmas next year.

**Making a perfect dinner date**

**For Roman style Dates Alexandrian**

Jacqui Wood recommends:

- 450g whole dates
- 200g whole blanched almonds
- 25g cinnamon
- 125g melted butter
- 200g honey
- Edible gold leaf.

**METHOD**

1. Brush the almonds with butter and roll immediately in cinnamon.

2. Stuff one almond in the cavity of a date.

3. Brush with warm honey

4. Bake in a moderate oven for 10 minutes till the skin of the dates is bubbling

5. If wished place a strip of edible gold on the dates for a festive look

6. Lay on a platter and serve with dates and soft cheese.

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**For more Roman Christmas Feast recipes go to www.thisiswesternmorningnews.co.uk**

IT’S the staple of many family dining tables on December 25, but the turkey dinner with all the trimmings is not as traditional as you might think.

According to food historian, writer and archaeologist Jacqui Wood it is a surprisingly modern development dating back only to the 16th century.

However, the first ever Christmas dinner dates back many centuries before that to Roman times and Ms Wood has revealed what it would have been like.

While the Romans are renowned for their opulence, and even decrepitude, the historian says the first Christmas feast is surprisingly easy and cheap to replicate.

It could even offer families a delicious, healthy and affordable alternative to the traditional turkey and Christmas pudding.

With recipes like mulled wine, baked ham, squash Alexandrian, and walnut and fig cakes, you can turn your oven into a time machine.

Ms Wood, a food historian, said such dishes would have been eaten at the very first Christmas dinner.

“The first Christmas feast would have been a Roman feast,” she said.

“The ancient Romans used to celebrate their solstice on December 25.

“The first reference to a nativity being celebrated on December 25 was found on an illuminated manuscript found in Rome in 354 AD.”

Using recipes penned by a famous first Century Roman aristocrat Marcus Apicius – Ms Wood has created a yuletide banquet with a difference.

Though Emperor Elagablus’ ostrich brain and gold started may not be to everyone’s tastes, the Romans used a surprising amount of familiar ingredients.

Among their favourite foods were olive oil, nuts, figs, eggs, vegetables and honey.

Apicius’ recipes were edited and made into a cookbook, which was published in the fourth century.

A millionaire by today’s standards, he spent his 100 million sesterctii fortune on lavish banquets.

When he was declared bankrupt he poisoned himself at his last feast rather than endure the prospect of eating like a peasant.

“He was a celebrated winer and dinnner from the first century,” Ms Wood said.

“He spent a hundred million sesterctii on elaborate dinnners, more and more amazing banquets, and he wrote this cook book.

“He is said to have become bankrupt from this.

“He had things like recipes for flamingo tongue and lark’s tongue.

“He was a seriously rich man – we are actually talking millions.

“Can you imagine deciding you want a dinner of lark’s tongues – you have got to get them!”

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