

Sequoreme: a culinary and theatrical journey to ancient Rome during the Classic Theatre Festival of Mérida

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During the past five years a parallel event to the Classic Theatre Festival of Mérida has taken place, where dinner and theatre intermingle. A roman *cena*, together with a performance of a play, unfold before the eyes of the spectators, who, at the same time become table companions. Originally, this event was designed to take place in a Roman portico (*portico de foro*) but as the capacity of the place was limited, the organizers transferred it to a vast open space of a hotel in town.

Last year, this event was entitled *Sequoreme*, from the Latin phrase "follow me" - a reference to inscriptions written on the sandals of prostitutes, in Roman times, to allow prospective clients to distinguish them. It consisted of Terence's play *La suegra* (*The Mother-in-law*) and a dinner whose menu was inspired by Apicius' cookbook *De re coquinaria*. This unique event is a mixture of live spectacle and food consumption, in other words, two arts: the art of theatre and the culinary art which, in our times, usually stay separated.

The interest in this specific event lies in that particular coexistence of theatre and banquet. Moreover, according to its organizer, Eduardo Acedo, *Sequoreme* takes us on a journey in time to the Roman epoch. This journey induces an awakening of all of our senses at once: sight and hearing - in experiencing the play - touch, smell, and taste - in consuming the food.

In this article we are going to examine the function, in practical terms, of actually "feeding" spectators during a show. What are the changes that spectators undergo with the introduction of food and eating during a theatre performance? What is the sensory effect on them? How are spectators' perceptions altered, since two of their senses (touch and taste) are activated, that are not conventionally used when watching a show?

Beyond these questions concerning the interaction between actors and audience, we also have an historical interest regarding the composition and tastes of the *cena romana*. This contemporary experience is leading us towards studying the cookery of the past and the way in which a Roman banquet unfolded at that time.

The Roman *cena*: the banqueters' pleasure

The *cena* was, before anything else, a banquet shared among the participants whose aim was the pleasure of eating, as well as conviviality, and the awakening of the senses. It was an opportunity for men to gather and share the table pleasures during the times of peace, and an occasion for feast, beyond everyday life. Besides, the word *cena* is linked to the meaning of sharing and conviviality, since it refers to the Greek term *koinon* signifying "in common".

When indoors, the Romans used to lie on couches, which were placed forming a U around the *mensa* (large table where plates were set). At the edge of each couch was a thick bolster, helping to support the diners. During the meal, they could, as Plutarch's fictional guests describe, lie broadly on their front, allowing them ready access to the *mensa*, (*Moralia* V. 6, 679- 680) while later they would recline on their left side, holding their wine cup in their right hand. They did not use cutlery, with the exception of a knife, with which they would sometimes cut the food.

Meat, after being sacrificed, constituted the dish consumed *par excellence* during a *cena*, signifying the sharing between men and gods. The Romans claimed to possess the *gula*, a special organ between the throat and the oesophagus, functioning as a detector of the pleasure of eating. Nevertheless, the pleasure was not only related to eating but also to the general ambience of the banquet. Abundance, beauty and luxury would be found in table-service, plates and dishes, and the couches upon which the banqueters would lie. It was present even in the beauty of the slaves.

Another characteristic of the *cena* was the three services it included. First of all, the *gustatio* was the tasting of starters, which mainly consisted of eggs and olives, accompanied by bread. Wine boiled with honey, the *mulsum*, was served simultaneously. Then, the *primae mensae*, represented what we call today the main course, and contained a variety of meat and fish. As regards meat, the Romans preferred pork, or "wild" meats, like the wild boar. Big fish, like moray or turbot, were served at the same time, accompanied by a sauce. Finally, the *secundae mensae* made up the dessert. Fruit was the protagonist in this course, even though oysters and shells in sauce, as well as small fish, snails and liver were also served. (Corbier 1996, p.228)

The dramatization of supper

A dinner party was expected to include entertainments, which might include, in addition to music and dance, readings or performances of drama. Performed mostly by slaves, these could occur during dinner, or afterwards while banqueters still drank. But the Roman *cena* contained in itself a spectacular dimension. Florence Dupont explains in her article "*De l'œuf à la pomme - la cena romaine*" ("From the Egg to the Apple – the Roman Cena") the way in which the dramatization of supper was brought about by using the strategy of astonishment:

In order to arouse the desire and stimulate the *gula*, and at the same time to avoid disgust and satiety, the host practices the strategy of astonishment, aiming at turning his banquet into an event. The dramatization of the ceremonial stems out of this, starting with the invitation notes and continuing with the invention of unheard dishes and the banquet's *mise-en-scene*. The host expects, in return, the positive consequences of publicity: the guests will tell about the banquet to the rest of the town and its culinary innovations will defray the chronicle. He will be the first one to serve a mule of three pounds [= one kilo] or to bring to the table an entire wild boar. (1999, p.84)

Four types of strategy are revealed in this article. First the host, in offering rare types of meat, like stork (Horace *Satires* II.8.49-51) or a bear's paw (Petronius *Satyricon* 66) is arousing their curiosity. The second strategy is the presentation of enigmatic dishes that are impossible to guess. For example, "*porcus troianus*" (Trojan pork) is the most well-known dish: the pork's head is ornamented with a Phrygian bonnet, evoking the Trojan horse, stuffed with soldiers. This indicates that the pork is stuffed with other animals, like birds.

The gustatory surprise is another type of the strategy of the astonishment. The cook prepares various imitations: when, for instance, table-companions believe themselves to be eating fish, they discover that in reality they are eating pork. Finally, the fourth means of astonishing regards the provocation of disgust, which concludes with a pleasant surprise. The diners believe that they are eating some repugnant dish, like fish entrails or pork intestines that look as if they have not been emptied. To their surprise, they discover that it is pork-meat, or black pudding.

All this *mise-en-scene* aimed at the success of the *cena*, which was brought about with the pleasure of sharing, alimentary pleasure and conviviality, uniting, in that manner, the banqueters between them. To meet this end, everything should be properly moderated: satisfaction should not be excessive and lead to disgust; neither should it be insufficiently present and thus bore the diners. For this reason, the ceremonial of the *cena* was a complex and delicate art. Its failure meant that sociability was broken: table-partners could leave the table before the end of supper. Worst of all, they could ridicule their host by making fun of him. All this would be the main subject of gossip the following day at the forum. On the contrary, diners that left the table feeling satisfied would then describe it to people who had not been present. In this way, everybody in town would talk about the event with joyful surprise. In this way, guests played the role of spectators, recounting the "spectacle" that they witnessed the previous night.



Plate 1



Plate 2

Food and spectacle, past and present

In antiquity, artistic genres which are separate today existed in fused forms; eating during a theatre performance was very common in early times. The ancient Greeks brought their food in the theatre during the drama contests, which lasted all day. *Opera Gastronomica*, the musical banquet of the Renaissance was conceived to have an effect on all senses. In Spain, during the Golden Age (*siglo de oro*) spectators ate and drank just before the performance in a spirit of feasting. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, since that period:

it has taken considerable cultural work to isolate the senses, create genres of art specific to each, insist on their autonomy and cultivate modes of attentiveness that give some senses priority to others. To produce the separate and independent arts that we know today, it was necessary to break apart fused forms such as the banquet and to disarticulate the sensory modalities associated to them. Not until the various components of such events (music, dance, drama, food, sculpture, painting) were separated and specialized did they become sense-specific art forms in dedicated spaces (theatre, auditorium, museum, gallery), with distinct protocols for structuring attention and perception. It was at this point that food disappeared from musical and theatrical performances. No food or drink is allowed in the theater, concert hall, museum, or library. In the process, new kinds of sociality supported sensory discernment specific to gustation, the literary practice of gastronomy, and increasing culinary refinement. Food became a sense-specific art in its own right. (1999, p.25-6)

This observation stresses the breaking up of the monolithic function of all the arts mixed together and the gradual separation of different artistic genres in order to create independent arts. This inevitably generates a change in the spectators' perception, who must cease to use all their senses at a time. In other words, senses like hearing and sight, have become tools for experiencing a performance, whereas senses like smell, taste and touch, became remote. Thus, they were used only for everyday actions for which their biological function was needed: to eat, to detect an odour, to examine a texture, etc. These three senses have lost their role in the perception of a work of art. For centuries, they have been "forgotten" by artists who did not conceive any artistic products that would awaken all five senses at the same time.

Today, theatre and food are still linked, though in a different way. Jean-Marie Pradier, in his article "*Le public et son corps*" ("The Audience and Its Body") notes that "in our culture eating while watching a show still maintains its worth, even though living conditions have profoundly modified our habits." (1994, p.30) He offers examples of "the link between the oral and the spectacular" in our times, with the consumption of popcorn in the cinema and the idea of dining before or after attending a theatre production. However, the idea of eating while watching a show is still rare. For this reason, there is little questioning about the relation between food and theatre. Pradier underlines the lack of study on this subject, while referring to the unquestionable bond between taking food and watching a show:

The question on food consumption linked to the participation at a show is neglected most of the time by research, while anthropological observation has stressed the links that might exist between traditional performances and nourishing practices. (1994, p.30)

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet insists on the importance of the senses in the theatre and proposes a new perception of theatre history:

A history of the theater in relation to the senses – and specifically the interplay of table and stage, the staging of food as theatre, and the theatrical uses of food – remains to be written. (1999, p.25)

"Sequoreme": A journey of the senses through time and its effects on the spectator

The idea of this banquet/performance originated with Eduardo Acedo, a member of the organizing team of the Classical Theatre Festival of Merida, in Spain. Initially, he conceived of the revival of a Roman open market, which afterwards turned to an enormous banquet. The theatre performance was added later. When I asked him whether this type of event could take place without the play, he answered that in that case, the awakening of all the senses would not be complete, since the spoken text and the actors' presence gave life to the banquet. (personal interview, 29 July 2004, Mérida, Spain.)

It is clear that the spectators' part has been privileged in this kind of a performance, but above all, the function of their senses is the most important aspect. For this reason, every single sense deserves to be analyzed and thought of in a special way except, in this case, hearing, which was not particularly altered or different to a conventional performance. The awakening of the senses during the dinner/performance profoundly changes the role of the conventional spectators, who are used to sitting, silently, while more or less passively watching a show.

Sight

As a spectator, I noticed that my visual attention to the dramatic action was often disturbed. This occurred not only because I was eating at the same time, but also because, having so many dishes that I had never seen before, I wanted to discover them with my eyes. The presence of food and its absorption displaced the spectators' attention. In other words, our sight was attracted by the image of food (and then by its consumption) obliging us to reduce attention towards the dramatic action.

Looking at food is a unique pleasure in itself. According to Stanton B. Garner, the existence of food on stage (or on the table, as in the case of *Sequoreme*) provokes a reaction of the audience that cannot be attributed to any other type of prop. (1994, p.99) Helen Iball in her article "Melting Moments: Bodies Upstaged by the Foodie Gaze" explains that "Prior to moments of absorption, food draws attention to its own life, its own presence, and in so doing, highlights the "liveness" of the theatre by forcing the acknowledgement of its permeability". (1999, p.70) In this way, food's organic nature blends with the nature of the live performance that is theatre, through the spectator's gaze.

La suegra's theatre director, Jose Antonio Raynaud, had taken this fact into account. For this reason, he inclined towards a type of performance that would be more interactive between actors and spectators. Sequences of the play would take place on a stage constructed at one end of the space; however, most of the action was taking place around the tables of the spectators/banqueters. Moreover, spectators were asked to participate in the play. According to the director, during rehearsals, he and the actors had examined any possible reaction of the public and had consequently rehearsed how the actor should react in all cases. (personal interview, 29 July 2004, Mérida, Spain.) During the performance, the interaction worked well and, as a result, the spectators' gaze towards the actors and towards the food, was more or less well gauged.



Plate 3 Sarose



Plate 4 Sarose

Smell

Smell is, according to Kant, "the 'most interior' and 'least informative' of the senses". (Kirshenblatt-Gimblet 1999, p.7) It is well known to loosen memories or spatio-temporal references. *Sequoreme* had plenty of different smells: incense, together with flowers, released wonderful scents. In addition, the dishes, arriving one after the other, revealed odours that were up to then unknown to us. In the case of Roman cookery, these dishes represented the revival of smells of that era, unfamiliar to the diners of our day. So, the lost memory of Roman foods could be reborn on that evening.

Taste

Apicius' recipes were used as a basis for the menu, created by the cook, Candido Pozo. The ingredients used, were the same as in ancient Rome, when products coming from the Americas did not yet exist. Hence, tomatoes, potatoes, cinnamon, and sugar were not used in the meal. On the contrary, the processing methods (the use of an electric oven, for instance) were those applied today. According to the cook, some alterations related to taste had to be done, since some flavours were too strong for a diner of our times. (personal interview, 29 July 2004, Mérida, Spain) Romans loved them, mainly because the methods for conservation that we have today, did not exist at that time. Besides, some ingredients used in Roman times do not exist anymore, or they are very difficult to find. Apart from that, the current hygienic regulations do not allow, for example, the use of the real garum (sauce made out of fish, by macerating the juice of rotten fish left under the sun). In order to give you an image of the banquet, I will present you the menu:

Sitting at the table

Salad with fruit from the forest
Garum

Gustatio

Fish-balls in aromatic herbs
Quail thighs in brine
Fennel roots in sour sauce
Roman bread

Prima mensa

Guinea-fowl thigh stuffed with sauce
Blackfish in the "Tajano" style
Roll of rod macerated

Secunda mensa

Orgy of exotic fruit

Conmisatio

Figs of the "via de la Plata" bathed in jelly
Cake of milk and honey with blackberry cream
Accompanied by herbs' liquors

Touch

Who knows whether someday, touch will have its turn, and whether a happy accident will open to us, from that side, some source of new pleasures: which is all the more probable since tactile sensitivity exists all over the body, and can, therefore, be aroused everywhere. (Brillat-Savarin 1982, p.44)

Brillat-Savarin, the great theorist of cookery was wondering so, nearly two centuries ago. In the case of *Sequoreme* the question is as follows: how can we activate the sense of touch during a banquet/performance and incorporate it into the theatrical event? Spectators were using touch, of course, when eating (they held, for instance, some kinds of food with their fingers). Yet, the event's creator added a massage session, during and after the show. A masseur offered his services to the spectators that desired so. Members of the audience confided that the massage offered them indescribable sensations. They felt calmer and serene, but, on the other hand, in spite of those new sensations, they felt that they weren't able to follow the performance entirely. As a result, the use of senses like touch or taste (less so for the smell) must be very well considered, so as not to disturb either the audience's attention, or their concentration.

The audience's need for conviviality

All these new experiences that are not part of conventional theatre productions are maybe the reason why *Sequoreme* was so successful. Active participation by the spectators, their shared meal, the awakening of the senses, the good food, the idea of traveling in time and taste are the secrets of the successful recipe of the evening.

The fact of having added the eating and sharing of food, as well as allowing the spectators to make acquaintance with their co-spectators around a table and during a theatre performance, are some of the elements today's spectators need. Theatre typically no longer manages to give its audiences the feeling of collectivity and thus break up their isolation. Jean-Marie Pradier concludes with the following reflection: "The stage is not the table. Performing arts seem, however, to answer to an expectation for conviviality, which is not fulfilled by the spectator's state anymore." (1994, p.30) The experience brought about by *Sequoreme* underlines this desire for stronger feelings, directed towards sharing, meeting and having an active presence.

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