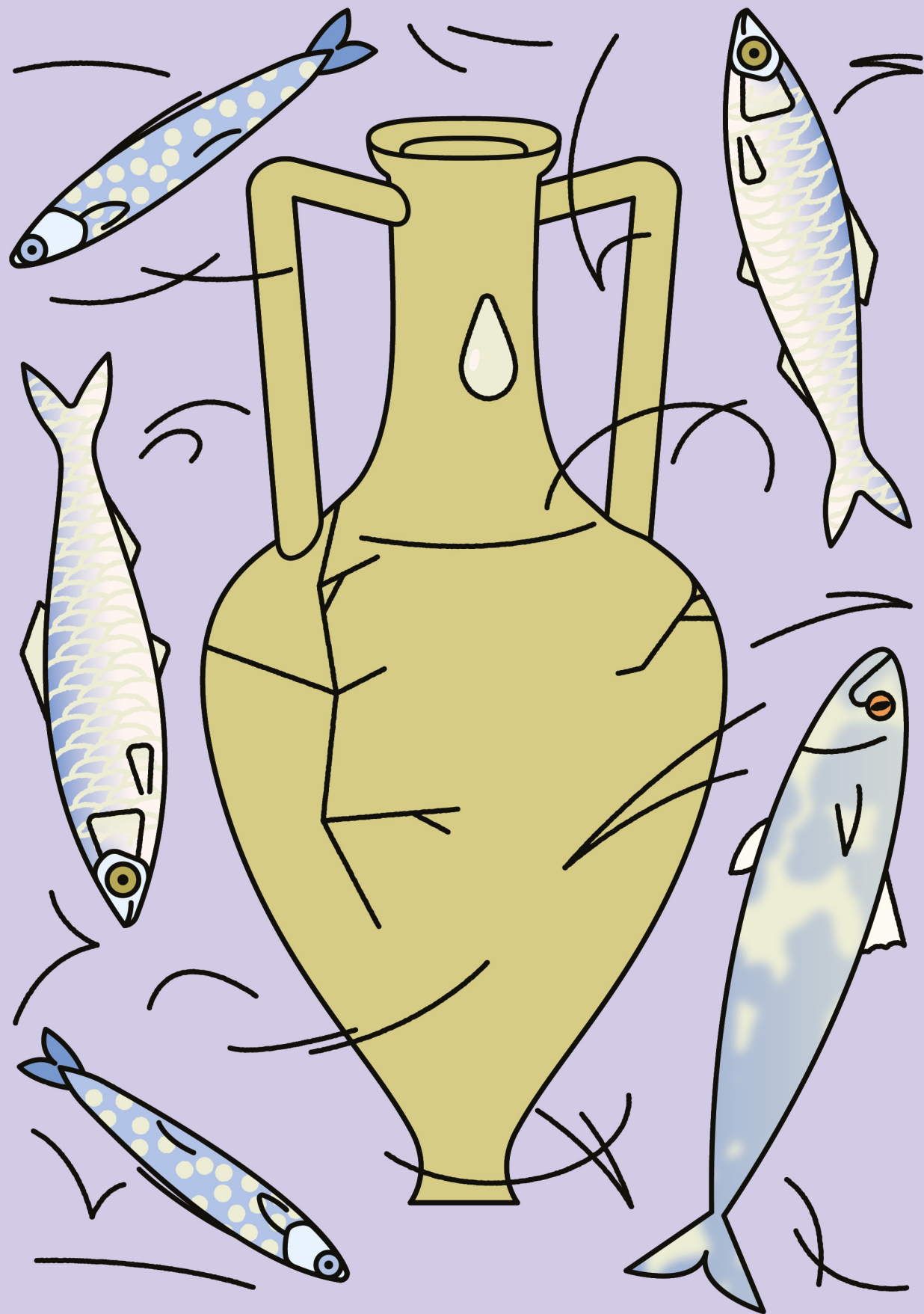


# FUNKY FISH

Is Roman-style fish sauce making a comeback? Susan Low investigates.  
Illustration: Thomas Hedger



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arum is a sauce with one foot in the past and one in the present. This umami-rich condiment made from salted, fermented fish was a defining ingredient of ancient Rome. An important commodity, it was made wherever Roman society took root – including Britain. And then, it just sort of died out. Now, thanks to experimental chefs and curious archaeologists, this ancient sauce is making a comeback.

But what was garum? Fundamentally, it was a type of fish sauce. The Romans were not the first to make fish sauce in Europe – credit for that must go to the ancient Greeks who, in the fifth century BCE, were producing a fish sauce called gáros (from which the name garum likely stems) along the Black Sea coastline.

Some 2,500 years ago, the Phoenicians of Carthage, in present-day Tunisia, were producing fish sauce in a way that would later be adopted and adapted for use throughout the Roman empire. When Carthage fell to the Romans after the second Punic war (218–201 BCE), the method for making this pungent brew was adopted by the city's new rulers, who took to the stuff with gusto. Garum became a defining taste of Roman cuisine.

In port cities throughout the empire, fish sauce factories called cetariae were built and new trade routes established to transport the fishy condiment around efficiently. Richard Curtis is a garum scholar and author of a leading text on the subject, *Garum and Salsamenta: Production and Commerce in Materia Medica* (Brill, 1991). Until his recent retirement, Curtis led a team of archaeologists who were researching an ancient garum factory that had been uncovered among the ruins of Pompeii.

No proper recipes for garum survive but this is how Curtis describes the process: 'In general, Romans placed into a vat small fish, particularly anchovies, sardines, and mackerel, and added salt at prescribed ratios and sometimes various herbs, spices, or wine. They used weights to press down on the concoction, covered it, and allowed it to remain in the sun for several months. At the end of this time, they withdrew the liquid garum by using a basket, filtered it, and placed it in a terracotta transport vessel, or amphora.'

Curtis surmises that the sediment left behind, called allec, would have been brined and refermented to make a less-pungent sauce called liquamen. A quick note here: defining what ought to be considered proper garum is a topic of much scholarly debate.

Sally Grainger is a leading researcher on garum and author of *The Story of Garum* (Routledge, 2021), a definitive text on the topic. In her 2006 book *Cooking Apicius: Roman Recipes for Today*,

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in which she tried to recreate the flavours of Roman food, she defines garum as 'a sauce made from the fresh blood and viscera of selected fish, mainly mackerel, fermented with salt,' and describes it as a 'high-status condiment. Liquamen, in contrast, was made by 'dissolving whole small fish, as well as larger pieces of gutted fish (including the empty mackerel bodies used to make garum) into a liquid with salt.

There were other Roman-era fish sauces and pastes, such as muria, allec and haimaition (made with blood and guts), too. For this piece, I'm using garum as an umbrella term to describe Roman-era fish sauces in general.

### Powered by umami

Making garum would have lent a certain pungency to the atmosphere of the local surrounds, which is why cetariae were usually set up away from main town centres. You can still see the remains of ancient factories near Tarifa in Spain, in southern France, Morocco, in Pompeii, Portugal's Alentejo, even in Israel. Grainger says there is evidence that garum was made in Roman Britain, too – in London (most likely in the borough of Southwark), in York and Essex.

Much like wine or cheese, garum could be said to have a sense of terroir, the colour and taste varying with the climate and temperature of where it was produced. Garum from the Roman city of Carthago Novo (modern-day Cartagena in southern Spain) was particularly prized. Called

garum sociorum and made solely from mackerel, it had a lofty reputation and a price tag to match – 12 pints of this lauded garum would sell for the same price as 2,000 loaves of bread.

Clearly garum was popular. But why did people go to so much trouble to produce it? Why not just use salt, which would have been a whole lot less hassle?

'The use of fish sauce was a fundamental part of an international Mediterranean cuisine developed by an ancient Greek culinary culture,' says Grainger. 'The use of it had become fully part of Hellenistic cuisine and this was absorbed by Rome in its entirety. Salt was, of course, used but the umami taste of fish sauce was rapidly considered essential and easily acquired by much of Roman society.' It's that rich hit of umami that made garum so popular – and that is driving its revival today.

### Garum's decline

Garum was fundamental to Roman cuisine. So, why do we no longer have a bottle of garum in the kitchen cupboard along with the soy sauce and ketchup? Why did its use decline?

'It's difficult to pinpoint a single reason why the Roman salteries ceased production,' says Curtis. 'They probably never did disappear entirely, though the large installations and trade began to die out when the Romans could no longer protect the areas of production and the free use of the sea lanes. Fish sauce production did not die



out all at once but over time in different places at different times, surviving in some places (southern France, for example) as part of a local cuisine. It apparently survived a bit longer in the eastern Roman empire, to the 16th century CE.'

Generally, the garum trade reached its peak from the second to the fourth centuries CE and declined thereafter, but the taste for umami-rich foods didn't wane. 'Garum never lost its appeal in the Mediterranean region, where it was used throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance,' writes Ole Mouritsen, a physicist and professor of gastrophysics at Copenhagen University in his book *Umami: Unlocking the Secrets of the Fifth Taste*. 'It has survived to this day in the form of salted anchovies and anchovy paste.'

For those looking for an edible link to ancient garum, there are a few extant examples in Europe. One is colatura di alici, a golden-hued liquid made from gutted anchovies by several small-scale producers in the fishing village of Cetara on Campania's Amalfi Coast. On the coast of Provence around Nice, a traditional fermented fish paste called pissalat is made from anchovies and flavourings such as cloves, pepper and bay.

Across the border in Liguria, a similar product, called machetto, is made from sardines or anchovies. Both preparations are most likely relics of the garum and liquamen of ancient times – but a producer in Portugal is making a sauce that Grainger believes comes closest to Roman garum.

### The recipe revival

It's now a laidback summer beach resort but back in Roman times, the Tróia Peninsula, a thin finger of land sticking out into the Atlantic on Portugal's Alentejo coast, was a major supplier of garum. It was made in huge rectangular stone tanks – which have recently been called back into service by a group of local chefs, researchers and archaeologists as part of the Garum Lusitano project. In May 2021, the group successfully made their first batch of garum.

Victor Vicente, a gastronomy researcher who works with the innovative Can the Can restaurant in Lisbon, tells me how the project got off the ground. 'In 2019 we started a project of studying and recovering Portuguese techniques of fish conservation. We produced muxama, a dried tuna loin – a very traditional product in Portugal. This led to new adventures, and we started doing tuna pastrami, cured swordfish loin and tail, tuna sausages, different kinds of bottargas. And then we arrived at garum. We started reading all about it, old books, papers – everything we could find in order to find the magic recipe. But there was no magic recipe.'

Vicente and the Can the Can chefs had been experimenting and making garum in large plastic containers, as a way of using up every bit of the fish – including the entrails – that they were using in the restaurant; but they wanted to make garum in the traditional way. 'We wanted to experiment, to make garum like the Romans, or at least in the

most similar way, and learn from the experience. You can make garum in a controlled environment, but in natural conditions you learn more.'

The team took to plunge and contacted Inês Vaz Pinto, an archaeologist at the Tróia complex, and asked how she would feel about putting the old garum factory back into service. 'She said that that had been her dream too – both our dreams could finally come true.'

In May last year they used 400kg of local sardines and 150kg of salt and, with a bit of informed guesswork, replicated the handiwork of the ancient Romans as well as they could. The result? 'We have already removed the garum from the tank and filtered it, so it's ready and wonderful. We are very happy with the experience and we want to do it again.' Similar projects have taken root elsewhere on the Iberian Peninsula: in Cádiz, the Flor de Garum project, created with input from researchers from Seville and Cádiz Universities and using archaeological evidence from the site in Pompeii; and in Cataluña, two Michelin-starred chef Pere Planagumà's escata sauce is based on Roman garum.

### Garum is back

Clearly there's a bit of a garum revival going on. Culinary big-hitters such as Noma in Copenhagen were pioneers in the contemporary garum game (although their meat-based, koji-fermented and vegan 'garums' are very different from the Roman-

era ones). Influential Sydney-based chef Josh Niland is also a garum convert. His book *The Whole Fish* (Hardie Grant) includes a garum recipe ('Start by adding 50 per cent of water to the total amount of heads, bones and scraps you have from small fish...') and the sauce figures large on the menu of his Saint Peter restaurant. In London, the chefs at The Sea, The Sea, a restaurant-cum-food lab in Hackney, produce garum made from mackerel, scallop and razor clam.

There are a few factors fuelling the interest in this fishy seasoning. Partly it's the increase of interest in umami flavours generally: 'umami' was cited as a 'future trend' in Waitrose supermarket's 2021-22 Food & Drink Trend Report. It's partly about minimising food waste: both Vicente and the chefs of The Sea, The Sea cite a desire to use 100 per cent of the fish and throw nothing away. But Vicente has the most romantic reason for its resurgence. 'We think that making garum comes from the new desire to know more about the past and learn from it,' he says.

Adding a few drops of this powerful essence adds intensity and depth to savoury dishes, magically making them taste more of themselves, rather than merely fishy or salty. Add a bit to your caesar dressing, sprinkle a dash into a meaty stew or fish pie for added oomph or enliven tomato-based dishes with drop or two. Garum is a taste of the past, an umami-rich, edible echo that links us firmly to the present.

## THE FISH SAUCE FAMILY TREE (SORT OF)

Garum bears an uncanny resemblance to Asian fish sauces and there are theories that the recipe somehow made its way from Europe to East Asia via the Silk Road. But Grainger dismisses that theory as 'myth, almost certainly', while Curtis says, 'any connection between the fish sauces of the Roman world and those found in east Asia today is speculative. Knowledge of it could have occurred through trading contacts or it could have been that the salting process used in both areas developed in parallel. The basic process is, after all, quite simple. This schematic fish sauce family tree shows where the various condiments are made and roughly how closely they're related to Roman garum.'



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