

**WHO WOULD** have watched food television programs 50 years ago? Would Americans have gravitated to *Iron Chef America*, watching Bobby Flay and Cat Cora hurriedly trounce around kitchens in an effort to out-impress gustatory judging? Would we have enjoyed watching Takeru “the Tsunami” Kobayashi eat 110 hot dogs without the buns in only 10 minutes in a competitive eating contest? These are a far cry from *The French Chef*, with Julia Child’s calm methodical demeanor that aired in 1963. The changing times and television programs simply reveal that we are into food, in a big way.

In the context of concerns regarding feeding the world, the following was penned in the weekly newspaper, *The Economist*. “The food industry has been attracting extra

attention of other kinds. For years some of the most popular television programs in English-speaking countries have been cooking shows. That may point to a healthy interest in food, but then again it may not. The historian Livy thought the Roman Empire started to decay when cooks acquired celebrity status.”<sup>1</sup> Having celebrity status in Roman times does not mean the same as it does today. Cooks had been nothing more than slaves or servants. However with Asiatic influence, meals changed.

Imported into Rome was the notion of having numerous dishes and luxurious variety at a meal. Cooking came to be regarded as an art and thus the chef became highly valued. Historian Livy lived and died long before the Roman Empire fell, however he is not alone in expressing the sentiment that food was an accomplice in the demise of the Roman Republic.

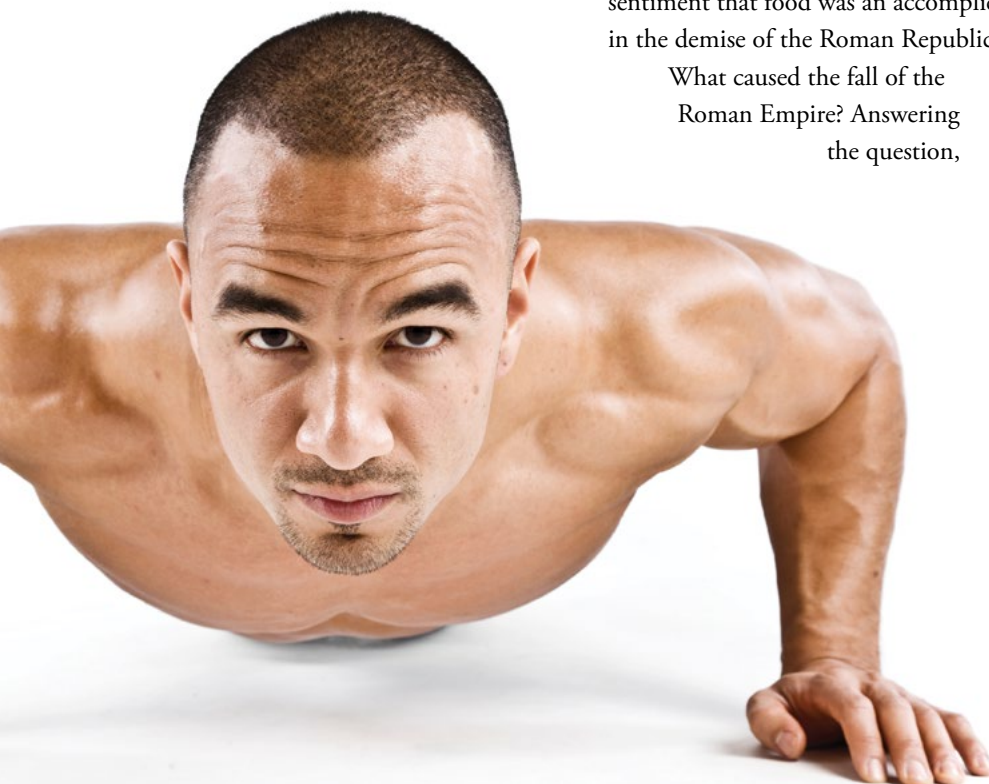
What caused the fall of the Roman Empire? Answering the question,

physician and fitness expert Michael Applebaum, MD, JD, FCLM says, “Their diet, according to many modern scholars.”<sup>2</sup> Their diet? How could something as unthreatening and immobile as food that sits on a plate or drinks that swish in goblets contribute to national degeneration? It seems overstated. However, its notability among historians and present-day

## WHAT CAUSED THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE? ... “THEIR DIET...”

thinkers alike suggests that Romans had some food issues.

Applebaum points to lead toxicity that came from “water pipes, cooking utensils, water tanks and storage vessels. Lead was used as a preservative and flavor enhancer. Wine was cheap in ancient Rome and was contaminated with lead from as many as 14 sources during its preparation. The Roman aristocrats chased platters of lead-seasoned food with gallons of lead-containing wine.”<sup>3</sup> The effects of lead are no small thing. “Much of the food and wine the Romans consumed to such excess was contaminated with amounts of lead far exceeding today’s safety standards. Accumulation of lead in the body can cause one form of gout, a painful and sometimes crippling inflammation of the joints, as well as the mental retardation and erratic behavior normally associated with lead poisoning.”<sup>4</sup> While it would be enlightening to discuss heavy metal



poisoning, the phrase “to such excess” will be our focal point.

Zooarchaeologists, wading through 2,000 year-old garbage, have proof that not only was there an enormous amount of variety at meals, but there were enormous amounts being consumed. Binging and vomiting were accepted practices. At dinner parties, 10 course meals would be served. The

## WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR HAD VICTORY IN EVERY BATTLE, BUT NOT WITH THE BULGE.

Roman elite were known for their excesses. After gorging, they would purge themselves and then return to the party to eat again. Nero was a notorious glutton, holding wild parties and unimaginable meals of excess. His feasts would last from noon till midnight.

Though his reign was somewhat inconsequential, the Roman Emperor, Vitellius, is infamous for his gluttony and the size of his stomach. He had a massive silver dish filled with foods brought from all over the empire, including flamingo tongues. The Roman era was an age of culinary hedonism, but they are not alone.

Soliman was an 8th-century caliph who died of acute indigestion. The amount of food this man is recorded to have eaten at one meal is staggering. William the Conqueror had victory in every battle, but not with the bulge. When Henry the VIII wasn't marrying and divorcing, he was feasting. At 340 pounds he was a bit heavy for horseback riding. At 44 years of age, “his horse rolled on him in a tournament, crippling one leg and leaving him a chronic invalid. The accident deprived him of his ability to take exercise, while his eating

habits did not diminish, so that during his last few years he measured four and half feet round the waist.”<sup>25</sup> Reportedly, he weighed 400 pounds and had a 52-inch waist judging by his armor at the time of his death.

America's largest president was Howard Taft. By the end of his first year in the White House, Taft was tipping the scales at nearly 350 pounds. Tales are told of him consuming seven plates of food at a time, and eating to the point of being too full to move.

A lunch or dinner

menu included lamb chops, smelt, lobster stew or lobster a la Newburg, salmon cutlets, tenderloin, cold tongue and ham, baked possum, terrapin soup and salad. For dessert Taft is said to have especially loved butterscotch cream pie, lemon pie, caramel cake, four-fruit cream tarts and tapioca. “Less than a year after leaving the White House, Taft made up his mind to get healthy. Through diet and exercise, he proceeded to drop some 80 pounds. By 1921, Taft finally got the job he really wanted when President Warren G. Harding appointed him chief justice.”<sup>26</sup>

Through all these ages, Scripture has spoken in wisdom, “Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles, and your princes feast at the proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness” (Ecclesiastes 10:17).

The land, a nation, an empire, is blessed; they are benefited when their rulers, those in leadership positions, eat for strength and not for intoxication. Drunkenness or intoxication is defined as a state in which a person's normal capacity to act or reason is inhibited. The Bible draws a connection between a way of eating and impairment and weakening of mental processes. This is

very significant. Not only were these rulers and leaders larger than life, literally, but their ability to reason, think, control, and lead was affected.

Eating food is meant to strengthen man. The Bible's account of one of the greatest leaders of the Christian faith is this. Paul, ate after being baptized and “he was strengthened” (Acts 9:19). So simple, and yet that is what makes it profound. Though Paul lived in an era of excess, he chose to eat for strength. The impact this had, and will continue to have, on the Christian faith we may not comprehend, but we will be forever thankful.

<sup>1</sup> John Parker, “The 9 billion-people question,” *The Economist*, 2/24/11, <http://www.economist.com/node/18200618>.

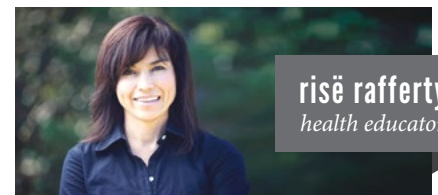
<sup>2</sup> Michael Applebaum, <http://www.drapplebaum.com/fitness%20rants/rome,%20usa.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John Wilford, “Roman Empire's Fall is Linked With Gout and Lead Poisoning,” *The New York Times*, 3/17/83, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/03/17/us/roman-empire-s-fall-is-linked-with-gout-and-lead-poisoning.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Hutton, “Henry VIII: Majesty with Menace,” *BBC*, 2/17/11, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/majesty\\_menace\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/majesty_menace_01.shtml).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Guggenheimer, “A president for our times; William Howard Taft ushered in an era of American gluttony,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2/18/13, <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/opinion/perspectives/a-president-for-our-times-william-howard-taft-ushered-in-an-era-of-american-gluttony-675847/#ixzz2USDA58dq>.



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