

# Spicy wine: New study reveals ancient Romans may have had peculiar tastes

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Buried Roman fermentation jars (dolia) from Villa Regina, Boscoreale. Credit: E. Dodd, courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei

It's no secret that the ancient Romans were lovers of wine. So gripped by the grape were they, that they even worshiped a god—Bacchus—devoted

to wine and merriment.

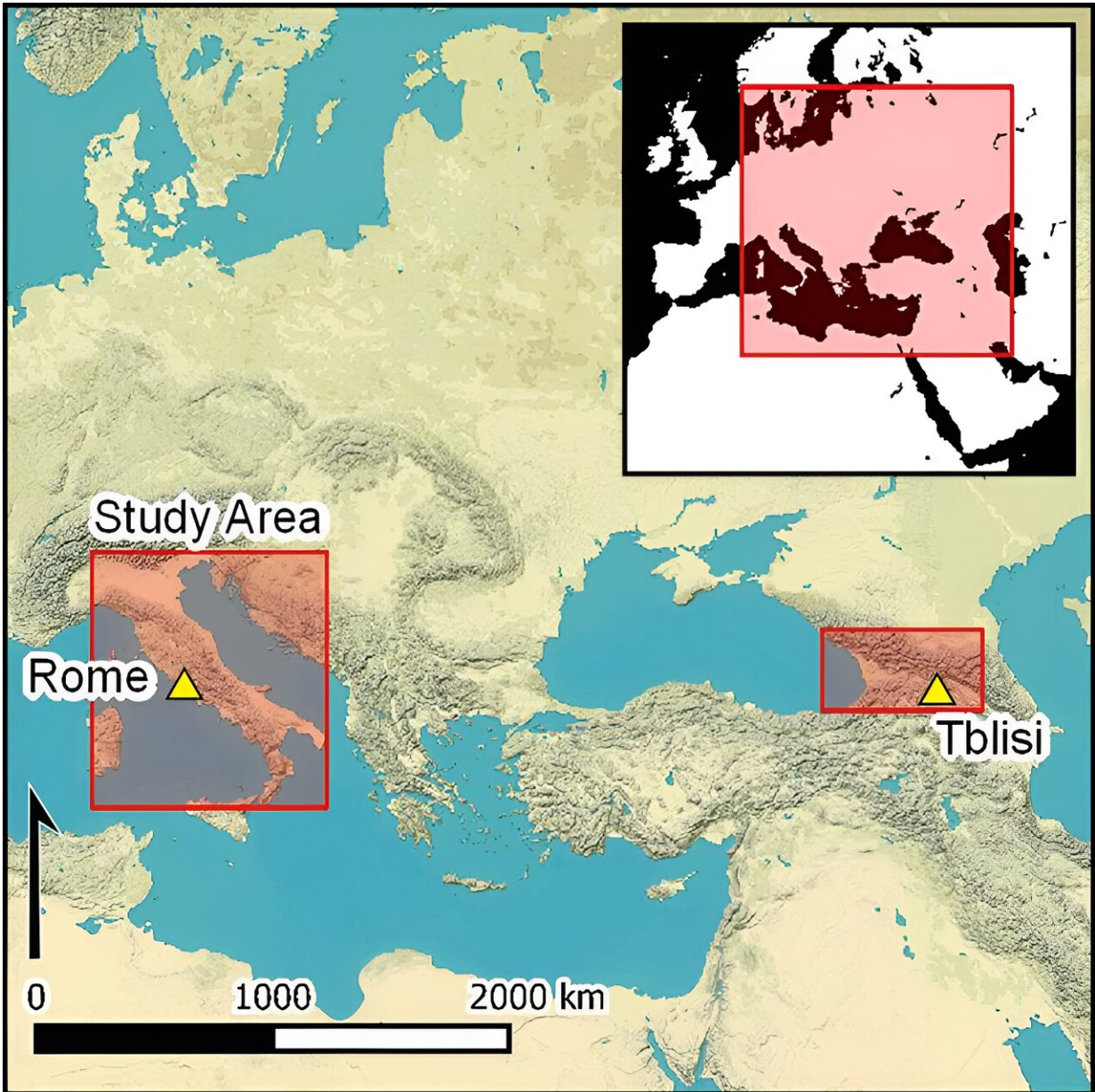
But, little is known about what their wine actually tasted like. Was it bitter or sweet? Fruity or earthy? According to a pioneering new study, it was rather spicy and smelled like toast.

The study, published on Jan. 23 in the journal *Antiquity*, analyzed Roman clay jars, known as dolia, which were used to manufacture, ferment and store ancient wines.

By comparing these vessels, which have long been overlooked, to similar containers used in modern wine-making, researchers were able to demystify the ancient flavors and the processes that created them.

The findings "change much of our current understanding of Roman winemaking," researchers, affiliated with multiple European institutions, said.

Dolia vessels were porous, egg-shaped containers that would have been partially buried underground and sealed during the wine-making process—all factors that would have contributed to the flavor palette of the finished product.



Credit: *Antiquity* (2024) DOI:10.15184/aqy.2023.193

As a result of this process—and the addition of natural yeasts—the wine would have taken on a "slightly spicy" taste and given off the aroma of "toasted bread, apples, roasted walnuts and curry," researchers said.

The study also looked to answer the question of whether Roman [wine](#) was red or white—a topic of longstanding interest and debate.

The researchers found that "contrary to widespread belief, it seems unlikely that most vinification in antiquity was 'white' in the sense of its modern meaning."

Instead, grapes were added into the mix regardless of color and the skins were left in, rather than filtered out with strainers, researchers said.

"This explains in large part the wide color range of ancient wines, as attested in the ancient sources," researchers said. These colors included white, reddish-yellow, blood red and black.

Thanks to their "precisely engineered" dolia, researchers concluded, the ancient Romans were able to ferment wines of a variety of flavors—though further studies are needed to better advance the archaeological understanding.

**More information:** Dimitri Van Limbergen et al, Making wine in earthenware vessels: a comparative approach to Roman vinification. *Antiquity* (2024) [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2023.193](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.193)

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