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Did fish sauce in Vietnam come from Ancient Rome via the Silk Road? The similarities between nuoc mam and Roman garum

There are striking similarities between ancient Roman condiment garum and Asian fish sauces such as Vietnam's nuoc mam, nam pla in Thailand and Japan's gyosho

Food historians are divided on the origins of Southeast Asian fish sauces, with some arguing they took their cue from soy sauce making in ancient China



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A wide variety of fish sauces and condiments can be found throughout Asia, adapted to local cooking traditions. According to experts, they are intriguingly similar to an ancient Roman dressing known as garum.

One in particular, Vietnam's iconic nuoc mam – made with fermented fish, usually anchovies, and salt – bears a resemblance in taste, composition and texture to the garum fish sauce first produced around 100BC, according to food historian Giorgio Franchetti.

He is a scholar of ancient Roman history and the author of the book *Dining with the Ancient Romans*, which was recently translated into English.

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“Vietnam's nuoc mam can be described as a ‘living fossil’ or ‘living archaeological culinary finding’ that maintains the ancient Roman tradition and flavour,” Franchetti says. “Recent studies have shown that nuoc mam is today the closest existing sauce to the garum of an earlier age.”