

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

On July 31, UNESCO proclaimed the *Via Appia*, or Appian Way, Italy's 60th World Heritage Site. Running about 500 miles from Rome south to Brindisi and lined with cypresses and umbrella pines, the *Via Appia* was begun in 312 BC by its namesake, the blind Censor Appius Claudius Caecus, for military reasons. Nicknamed *regina viarum* or “queen of the roads”, it's the oldest of Rome's consular roads and widely considered the world's first highway.

The ancient Romans, first the pagans and later the Christians, didn't bury their dead within the city limits, but instead along extra-urban roads. Thus, the monuments along the *Via Appia*'s first 5 miles from its starting point at the *Porta San Sebastiano* are mainly pagan tombstones and family tombs, the Christian catacombs of Calixtus, of Domitilla, and of St. Sebastian, and even a Jewish catacomb. Secular sights here include the Museum of the 3rd-century Aurelian Wall in the *Porta*, a circus built by the Emperor Maxentius, baths, and a patrician villa.

In 2023, some 60,000 tourists visited this first stretch. The internet suggests several types of tour: by public transport, bicycle, e-bike, on foot or the most restful — and my favorite — the hop-on, hop-off buses. To plan your visit in advance consult the Appia Antica Service Center, tel. +39-5135316, e-mail: puntoappia@parcoappiaantica.it or website: www.infopointappia.it. Other practical hints: Sunday is the best day to visit because private motor vehicles are banned; wear comfortable shoes and a sun hat; and bring a water bottle and sunscreen. If you're tired at your tour's end and opt for a taxi to return downtown, make sure it's an official white one with its meter on and write down its logo before entering to avoid a fare misunderstanding at your destination.

If you decide to linger instead, the three best restaurants, all in or next to ancient monuments, are:

The closest to downtown is at *Via Appia* no. 68 — **Priscilla**, at the foot of the 1st-century AD sepulcher of Priscilla, the wife of Titus Flavius Abascanus, a freedman of the emperor Domitian. It's also across from the *Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis*, a small 17th-century church. Here St. Peter, who was fleeing persecution by the Emperor Nero, had a vision of the risen Christ. According to tradition, Peter asked: “Lord, where are you going?” Christ answered, “I'm going to Rome to be crucified

THE APPIAN WAY: DIRECTIONS, SIGHTS, AND GASTRONOMY



again.” So Peter understood and turned back to face his death.

Priscilla was founded in 1902 by Margherita and her husband Nazzeno, both from near Rieti, who were the grandparents of present owner

Alessandro Ratini. However, it was first documented on a cadastral map as a post station and restaurant in 1436. My favorite Roman specialties here include: home-grown fried artichokes, *tonnarelli cacio pepe*, and *pappardelle al cinghiale*. Closed Sunday evenings.

Also on *Via Appia*, at no. 139, is **Archeologia**, originally a grandiose tomb for a wealthy Roman official and his family. Like the pyramids of ancient Egypt, it was built not just to house the dead, but to dazzle passers-by and boost the owner's reputation. Founded in 1804, **Archeologia** is the perfect dining location after a day of walking or bicycling. Only its location is ancient; its contemporary menu is very imaginative, if a bit overly sophisticated and pricey. I recommend the fish stew and the homemade gnocchi with calamari and cherry tomatoes. Open only in the evening. Closed Tuesday.

I already mentioned **Hostaria Antica Roma** in my June 2015 “Food For Thought”, but it's moved to no. 176 — across from the round tomb of noblewoman Cecilia Metella, whose father and husband were rich patricians and successful generals of late Republican Rome, and near the Church of San Nicola and the St. Sebastian catacombs. Since the move owners Massimo and Norina have passed it down to their affable son Paolo.

Hostaria Antica Roma continues to feature family recipes and a menu of ancient dishes attributed to Apicius, like *patina cotidiana*, Latin for “daily dish”, a mixture of omelet and tomato-free lasagna, *pullum oxizomum*, pieces of chicken cooked with leeks, olive oil, vinegar and *garum* (the ubiquitous ancient Roman salty seasoning made from macerated fish interiors), and *tiropatina*, Apicius' version of crème caramel, to name a few. Obviously, no dishes include ingredients like tomatoes, potatoes or chocolate which Columbus brought back from the New World. With advance notice, owner Paolo will organize an ancient Roman banquet — not to mention that the hostaria's beautiful garden is a favorite venue for school graduations, private parties, and weddings. Closed Sunday evening and Monday. Reservations recommended. ○

From left: the church of *Domine Quo Vadis*, the catacombs of St. Calixtus, where in the 3rd century AD 500,000 Christians were buried, early photo of **Priscilla**, the garden of **Hostaria Antica Roma** with the Tomb of Cecilia Metella in background; and *Pullum oxizomum*

