

One sunny autumn afternoon in 79 AD the volcano Mount Vesuvius erupted, ejecting a cloud of poisonous gases and molten ashes some 20 miles into the sky before it buried the town of Pompei under some 20 feet of ash — killing over 2,000 of Pompei's 15,000 inhabitants.

However, very little ash fell on nearby Herculaneum, allowing almost all of its 5,000 inhabitants to escape before the town was buried under 66 feet of lava which flowed down the mountainside in six successive surges on the next day.

Only some 350 people died — carbonized — at Herculaneum. Once the lava solidified, this rich town, a seaside retreat for the Roman elite, was preserved under the lava, charred but nearly intact because of the lack of oxygen. Thus, many wooden objects such as roofs, beds and doors, as well as other organic-based materials such as food and papyrus, were preserved.

For many centuries it was believed that Mount Vesuvius had erupted during the summer. However, recent excavation and research have determined for several reasons that the eruption took place on or after October 17.

For example, the Pompeians buried under ash were wearing heavier clothing than their light summer clothes. Coins found in a woman's purse include one minted with a 15th Imperial acclamation among the Emperor Titus's titles, impossible before the second week of September. Wine in fermenting jars found at both archeological sites had been sealed, which would have happened around the end of October. And fresh fruits and vegetables excavated in the shops are typical of October; conversely, fruits typical of August were already being sold in dried or conserved form.

Going on in Herculaneum until December 31 at the magnificently frescoed 18th-century rococo Villa Campolieto designed by the Neapolitan architect and painter Luigi Vanvitelli (1700-1773) is the exhibition, "From Eggs to Apples: The Culture of Food and the Pleasures of the Table in Ancient Herculaneum."

This first-time exhibition, devoted entirely to ancient "Roman" food, gets its name from a proverb: "*ab ovo usque ad mala*," composed by the ancient Roman poet Horace, who was alluding to the Roman tradition of starting a meal with eggs and finishing it with apples.

LAST DAYS OF POMPEI: FOOD, FROM EGGS TO APPLES, PRESERVED IN LAVA



The Last Day of Pompeii by Russian painter Karl Pavlovich Bryullov (1833). Below, a broken loaf of bread preserved in hardened lava



The first of its four sections concerns ancient Herculaneum's most important food: bread. The bread displayed here was made with many different grains like spelt, millet, barley and wheat, in shapes like round loaves or flat like today's pizza. At first the grains were home-ground and home baked. Later, bakeries produced both bread and cakes; some even baked their clients' bread, inscribing the dough with the owner's initials.

Also on display here are millstones, primitive hand-turned mixers and bronze baking dishes and trays.

On display in the "Not to Bake, to Cook" section are legumes: lentils, chickpeas and dried peas and beans, the common ingredients for thick soups, popular nourishment during the autumn and winter, as well as numerous terra-

cotta pots.

Also here are iron spits and grills for meats, usually chicken, rabbit or lamb, and bronze cooking utensils.

Highlights include a covered bronze boiler filled with water, omnipresent on the stove so there would always be hot water for soups and braised meats; a large decorated bronze "barrel" or *cista*, also filled with water but for general household use; a store's multi-shelved wooden cupboard, still containing amphoras of olive oil and wines, sacks of flour, onions, dried vegetables, pine nuts, almonds, olives, dates from Egypt, and terracotta or glass jars of honey and valuable spices like pepper from India. There is also a section of a septic tank containing human waste from the latrines often located next to the kitchen, as well as culinary discards like fruit pits, egg shells, meat and fish bones, and broken dishes and cooking utensils.

The highlights of "Shopping List" are frescoes on loan from the National Museum of Archeology in Naples of mullets and shellfish, and another of amphoras labelled with the local wines for sale, hand-held scales, coins, and a *locellus* or wallet made of wood, bronze and silver, dropped by its owner, probably while in flight from the terrifying lava flow after the volcano's eruption.

The artifacts in "From Breakfast to Dinner" are items of tableware, and foods, at the three daily meals: *Ientaculum*, *Prandium* and *Coena*, and a *larva convivialis* — a banquet table decoration consisting of a miniature silver skeleton, there to remind the guests, usually both men and women, that life is short and its pleasures should be enjoyed. ○