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Travel

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Dining Near the Catacombs: Gastronomy on the Via Appia Antica

As the Eternal City prepares for the Jubilee in 2025, tourists and residents alike can feast near ancient monuments



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



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In mid-July, H.E. Monsignor Rino Fisichella, the Pro-Prefect of The Dicastery for Evangelization, responsible for organizing the upcoming Ordinary Jubilee 2025, announced that 30 million pilgrims are expected to visit Rome next year. Two weeks later, on July 31st, UNESCO's International Council on Monuments and Sites, proclaimed the *Via Appia Antica*, Italy's 60th World Heritage Site, one more than China at 59. Although that very same day, the Council modified the agreement, excluding with no explanation or apology three major sections of the "Queen of Roads", the first twenty miles or so remain a Heritage Site. Especially important for 2025 pilgrims are the first five miles closest to Rome because they are home to four catacombs, one of which is Jewish, and several important churches, not to mention three restaurants I can heartily recommend, all in or next to, these ancient monuments.



One of the twelve galleries in the Catacomb of St. Callixtus. The largest of the three catacombs on the Via Appia Antica, during the third century AD 500,000 Christians were buried here. They included 16 popes and St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music. Wikipedia

The closest to downtown at no. 68 is **Priscilla** at the foot of the 1st-century AD sepulcher of Priscilla, the wife of Titus Flavius Abascanus, a freedman of the emperor Domitian (at no.76). It's also opposite to the *Chiesa del Domine Quo Vadis*, a small 17th-century church (at no.51). Here St. Peter, who was fleeing persecution by the Emperor Nero, reputedly envisioned the risen Christ. According to tradition, Peter asked: "Lord, where are you going?"; Christ answered "I'm going to Rome to be crucified again.", so Peter understood he must turn back to meet his fate. (He was crucified head down in Nero's Circus, then outside the city, now in Vatican City.)

The restaurant **Priscilla**, founded in 1902 by Margherita and her husband Nazzareno, both from near Rieti, 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.



The Garden at Hostaria Antica Roma with the Tomb of Cecilia Metella in the background, Courtesy of the restaurant Hostaria Roma Antica.

Also on *Via Appia Antica*, 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 even after death. 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 sophisticated and pricey. I recommend the fish stew and the homemade gnocchi with calamari and cherry tomatoes. Open only in the evening. Closed Tuesday.



Patina Cotidiana. a recipe of Apicius, Courtesy of the restaurant Hostaria Roma Antica

Further along at no. 176, near the Church of San Nicola (at no. 161) and across from the round tomb of noblewoman Cecilia Metella (also at no. 161), whose father and husband were rich patricians and successful generals of late Republican

Rome, is **Hostaria Antica Roma**. Opened in 2007, it's also not far from the St. Sebastian catacombs (at no. 136). **Hostaria Antica Roma** features an à la carte menu of family recipes, a tasting menu of modern Roman dishes, 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 tomatoes, potatoes or chocolate, ingredients which Columbus brought back from the New World. With advance notice owner Paolo Magnanimiti, a longtime friend of mine, will organize a private ancient Roman banquet, not to mention that its beautiful garden is a favorite venue for school graduations, private parties and weddings. Closed Sunday evening and Monday. Reservations recommended.

This is **Hostaria Antica Roma**’s second location on *Via Appia Antica*. In 1982 Paolo’s parents, Massimo and Norina from Alatri in Ciocaria had opened at no. 87. There it was also known as “Liberti” because this location had originally been a *columbarium* or tomb with niches for the urns of the Emperor Augustus 6,000 freed slaves. A National monument, now sadly abandoned, there’d been a post station and restaurant there since 1793, but the rent became oppressive, hence the move. Nonetheless, I promise the menu at no. 176, both the ancient and Magnanimiti-family recipes, remains outstanding.

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Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

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DELLO STESSO AUTORE

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“Religious Places to Stay” In Rome

Lucy Gordan

Planning a Pilgrimage to Italy for 2025's Holy
Year

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