

# EATING AMONG THE RUINS

When in Rome, dine as the Romans did

Text & Photography LUCY GORDAN

**W**hen you're in Rome, feast on some of the ancients' favourite dishes served in restaurants surrounded by the awe-inspiring ruins of their civilization. You'll get a new perspective on Italian cuisine at Rome's earliest restaurants.

Some of Rome's first recorded gourmets owe their obsession with food, at least in part, to fellow citizen Marcus Gavius. Better-known as Apicius, he was a wealthy and decadent epicure, who in the first century wrote *De Re Coquinaria* (Concerning Culinary Matters). He specialised in spicy sauces and cakes, and was nicknamed Apicius either because he was bald like an *apica* (ewe's stomach) or because *apicius* means 'sought after by bees, hence sweet'.

Apicius especially loved prawns. He hired fishermen to catch them for the extravagant feasts he delighted in cooking for his friends, in particular, the Emperor Tiberius' son, at his seaside villa at Minturnum between Naples and Rome. Alas, when he'd blown most of his fortune, he was afraid to die of hunger, and Apicius poisoned himself.

By appointment between mid-March and Christmas, retired UN interpreter Giulia Passarelli will prepare ancient

Roman holiday feasts: Liberalia (on 20 March for the vernal equinox), Megalesia (in April for the arrival of spring), Agonalia (21 May to protect your home), to name a few. You can certainly sample an Apicius recipe here.

The ancient Romans ate with their hands while lying on couches. But in her peaceful garden beside a second-century BC tomb, Passarelli serves her guests at two long tables, shaded by canopies and set with modern utensils. Typically, her feasts of 12 dishes (usually nine savoury and three sweet) are selected from the 100 or so of Apicius' 470 recipes that she's updated.

First comes an array of *gusta* (appetizers), among them *epityrum* (olive pie), *puls fabata* (broad bean soup with sausages) and *laganum* (the ancestor of lasagna). They are accompanied by *mulsum*, honey-spiced white wine made by her wine-historian brother Ernesto. His *rosatum* (rose and violet wine) accompanies the next course or *prime mensae* (entrées): *isicia* (baked sausages made of differently-spiced seafood, chicken or veal), *sfondilos* (charcoal-grilled kebabs of minced artichoke heart wrapped in bacon), *sumina assa* (roast sow's udder), *murena assa* (grilled eel) or *betas et porros* (boiled beets and leeks in raisin sauce), among others.

Passarelli, whose menus change







seasonally, grows all her own spices and even makes *garum* or liquid salt, the basic Roman seasoning. 'Spices were first brought to Rome from the East,' she explains. 'Garum means salt in Latin and Indonesian, and spice in Hindi'. Her address: Via Appia Antica 187A. Tel: 39 067857151. Open by appointment.

Running over 350 miles south to Brindisi and lined with cypresses and umbrellas pines, Via Appia, begun in 312 BC, is the oldest of the seven consular roads. At no 87, the restaurant Liberti was first opened in 1796.

Today's owner Massimo Magnanimiti's specialities include homemade *gnocchi* with clam sauce, homemade *tagliatelli* with smoked salmon and asparagus tips or grated white truffle, *pennette* with spicy lobster sauce and an array of homemade desserts. *Complimenti allo chef*, Magnanimiti's son Paolo, for his white chocolate mousse and peppery flan! Like Passarelli's up the street, you can sample Apicius' recipes here, and Magnanimiti willingly caters Roman banquets. Tel: 39 065132888. Website: [www.anticaroma.it](http://www.anticaroma.it). E-mail: [hostaria@santicaroma.it](mailto:hostaria@santicaroma.it). Reservations recommended. Closed Monday.

Roof-top Les Etoiles at four-star Hotel Atlante Star, an arms-length from St Peter's, is unbeatable. Here's the perfect place to propose or hold a wedding reception. A star under the stars: 360-degree panorama, William Morris decor, discreet service and chef Paolo Preo's cuisine. His cooked-to-order *risotti* (for two), especially those flavoured with Spanish melon and imperial shrimp or bone marrow and champagne, are to die for. Other recommendations: lamb and artichoke soup, breast of duck with red cabbage and liver with grape and homemade grappa sauce. Address Via Vitelleschi 34, Tel: 39 066873233. Fax: 39 066872300. The Wedding in Rome package includes rooms overlooking St Peter's dome ♦

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*SIA flies from Singapore to Rome  
three times weekly*

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*left A restaurant since 1796,  
Liberti now serves a fantastic chocolate  
mousse and peppery flan.*