Still life with eggs, birds and bronze dishes, from the House of Julia Felix.

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What was life like for Romans in Pompeii? We know a lot about their battles, philosophers, and emperors, but what about the lives of ordinary Romans? Jessica Venner pieces together the clues that will help us better understand Pompeian daily life through an examination of food production, culture, drink, and diet.

By Jessica Venner

Much of what we know of the Romans has been passed down to us through the literature of the elite, authors such as Tacitus, Suetonius, and Seneca telling us stories of murderous emperors, bold orators, and bloody wars in foreign lands. As a result, the lives of ordinary Romans have been harder to uncover; what were their pastimes, what made them laugh, and, more importantly, what did they eat? Luckily for archaeologists and historians, the fate of the town of Pompeii in 79 AD preserved precious details, allowing us to piece together the daily lives of Romans; clues indicating their favourite tipple and savoury treats were among them. It is no secret that the Romans loved their food and wine, and Pompeii was no exception. Throughout the city, numerous wall frescoes depicting raucous drinking parties build an image of a vibrant community united by their love of consumption. In these lavish paintings, slaves carry drunken guests, beautiful ladies recline on couches, and men converse over wine in silverware.

It is not only through the frescoes that we may learn about the food and drink that adorned their tables. Pompeii offers a world of clues into the past of its citizens, if you know where to look.

Back to the basics...

Let’s start with the basics. Bread was unsurprisingly one of the most important parts of the ordinary Roman’s diet; grain received in doles could be handed in for fresh loaves, an event that can be seen in a fresco from a house in Pompeii. In it, three males are handed the now infamous Pompeian loaf of bread: plump, round, and divided into eight sections. In the bakery of Modestus, 81 of these exact loaves were found in one of the large ovens, placed there moments before disaster struck. The conditions of the eruption were so unique that it carbonized the bread, leaving us a gift of this wonderfully human evidence almost 2000 years later. The same bakery is the most complete out of the many that have been excavated in Pompeii and in the neighbouring town of Herculaneum,
boasting mills and a tub for working grain, a stable for the beasts that worked the mills, a proving room, and a shop. The bread produced in the bakeries of Pompeii would likely have been decorated with star anise, poppy seeds, sesame, or egg white for crusting, much as we might do today. In most cases, the loaves would have been branded with the maker’s stamp, used either for regulation by the baker’s guild, the Collegium Pistorum, or as a means of tallying bread for payment. One such loaf, found in Herculaneum, was stamped by “Celer, slave of Quintus Granius Verus”.

Evidence in the form of carbonized food, frescoes, root cavities, sewage remains, ancient literature, and even skeletal bone analysis have revealed much about the foods Pompeiians loved to eat. In the 1970s, an archaeologist named Wilhelmina Jashemski developed the technique of filling ancient root cavities with plastic and identifying the species of the plant grown there at the time of the eruption. Root cavities were left when the plant decayed in the time following the eruption and left an imprint in the hardened soil. Combining this with carbonized evidence found in suspected garden areas, including seed remains, and pollen
analysis, Jashemski identified hundreds of species in the shop-house gardens, and vineyards. As you might expect of the average Mediterranean settlement, olive trees and grapevines were the most prevalent in Pompeii, with vineyards sometimes covering whole blocks. Hazelnuts and almonds were also common, often accompanied by broad beans, as in the House of the Ship Europa. The house was so named after the etching of what appears to be a trade boat, named Europa, in the atrium of the property. It is thought that this residential house may have been converted into a working space focused around the use of the garden as a commercial area. This garden is now being planted today to mimic its use in 79 AD, predominantly as a working vineyard for commercial use. In fact, you can even buy the wine produced in the gardens of Pompeii today, named Villa dei Misteri after a villa found close to the site!

**Famous Falernians: wine in Pompeii**

Much like the House of the Ship Europa, many other commercial garden sites have been identified in the same area, closest to the Amphitheatre. In the Caupona of Euxinus, caupona meaning ‘inn’, another vineyard was found at the back of the property. Vines were planted at regular intervals in rows, with room between for the gardeners to walk. If you were to take a quick tour around the modern local area, you would find extremely similar vineyard conditions, squeezed into green spaces between shops, houses, and blocks of flats, propped up by stakes and ropes. As we

(Top) A fresco from Pompeii now on display at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples. While it was previously believed to be image of a baker selling his bread, it probably is a scene of a politician giving out this food. © Public domain

(Bottom) Carbonised loaf of bread from Pompeii, now on display at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.
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know from ancient literature, Campania, the region in which Pompeii resides, was famous for Falernian wine. A price list on the wall of a bar in Pompeii even states: “For one ‘ass’ you can drink wine, for two you can drink the best, for four you can drink Falernian.” It could be that this wine was even produced in one of the gardens in Pompeii. In fact, Falernian was one of the wines served by the *nouveaux riches* fictional character Trimalchio. A figment of the ancient writer Petronius’s imagination, Trimalchio simultaneously delights and disgusts his many dinner guests with culinary illusions. A boiled calf wearing a helmet, saffron-squirting cakes, cooked chickens sitting on goose eggs, and a wild boar accompanied by piglets made of pastry are just some of the outlandish ideas employed by Trimalchio to demonstrate his superiority over his guests with food. Much as it is today, food was the perfect instrument for expressing one’s social status, this being simultaneous with the distance from which one may import food to the table. Spices and seasoning, such as pepper, were perfect examples of this, with pepper being imported from as far away as India.

However, local produce was just as important as imported goods, as a pottery object found in the house of D. Octavius Quartio proves. Small ledges run around the inside of the jar with troughs placed at stages. Known as a *gliarium*, this jar would have been used for storing and plumping up dormice. When fat enough, the little creatures would be stuffed with mincemeat, seasoned, and roasted, or covered with honey and poppy seeds and cooked. In fact, Trimalchio himself served up dormouse kebab to his guests! No doubt Octavius Quartio would have relished serving up the same treat to his own guests. Similarly distasteful to our modern tastes, a Roman delicacy known as *garum* seems to have done well for himself by producing this condiment. A mosaic depicting a jar of *garum*, from the house of Aulus Umbricius Scaurus in Pompeii. Scaurus seems to have done well for himself by producing this condiment.

**Diet diversity**

The Romans were forever attempting to diversify their diets, and Scaurus would not have been alone in exporting his produce outside of Pompeii. Pompeii was conveniently placed on the Sarno River, allowing for the movement of goods in and out of the town by water, mainly to the adjoining river town of Puteoli, an important trade point for Rome. As a result, Pompeii would have benefitted greatly from the exotic produce coming into the city as well as exporting their own to local towns and beyond. One such category would have been foreign fruit trees. The date palm, a tree native to the Near East, was undoubtedly grown in Pompeii. Frescoes from Pompeii and Herculaneum show the plant growing either in the ground or in pots. A large quantity of carbonized dates were found in the garden of the House of the Ship Europa, as well as at other locations in smaller volumes. Cereals, such as grains, lentils, and chickpeas, were most likely imported into Pompeii via Puteoli from locations such as Egypt. Many other foods that became firm Pompeian favourites were most likely imported, due to the inability to grow them at home. Food such as figs and walnuts would have fallen into this category, and both trees have been found depicted in frescoes in the city. Beautiful paintings of lemon trees have been found adorning the walls of the House of the Fruit Orchard in Pompeii. Excitingly, root cavities thought to belong to...
the species have been found in several houses in Pompeii, all from the regions closest to the Amphitheatre. We find other edible fruits and vegetables depicted in paintings in the Vesuvian area, the most notable being asparagus, a highly regarded and delicate food, as well as strawberries, mulberry, and quince. It may be that these foods were indeed grown in the area, but the evidence points mostly to their importation. The Pompeiian cabbage, however, was noted by Pliny himself, who states that in this local variety, “tenderness is a valuable quality.” Another agricultural author, Columella, also mentions the Pompeiian cabbage. No doubt guests being served this local vegetable, already considered a Roman table luxury, would have been even more impressed to find it was Pompeiian! Similarly, the Plinian cherry, so named due to its eponymous critic’s praise of the variety, would have been found growing in Campania, as would the pompeiana cepa, the ‘Pompeiian onion’. Other foods, such as carrots, almonds, hazelnuts, and olives, were found to have been grown in abundance in the ancient city.

Roman fast food?
This great variety of diet would not have been restricted to the upper echelons of society; these foods would have been available to almost all citizens in Pompeii. However, where you ate was a different matter, most definitely dictated by your class. As a visitor to Pompeii today, walking along the many cobbled streets, one comes across hundreds of shop fronts with the characteristic countertops punctuated with large dolia, or jars, for holding food. Such dolia would have been filled with stews, bread, and nuts, among other options. Known as thermopolia in ancient times, these food joints have now famously been dubbed the ‘McDonalds’ of ancient Rome. This description is not far from reality, as food would have been hot and literally ready to go. But who would have frequented the thermopolia dotted around Pompeii? Unlike today where eating out is a sign of affluence, it was quite the opposite in Roman times. At the end of a long work day, the poorer ranks of society would fill the streets and buy food from their favourite fast-food shop. They may even frequent one of the many drinking inns, or tabernae (taverns), in the local area, gamble a little with friends, and, if they were lucky, pick up a woman. The ancient equivalent of pubs were renowned for attracting shady sorts, and would not have
been a place to go if you weren’t willing to end the evening with a test of muscle.

On the more privileged side, those who had any interest in preserving their reputations would not be caught dead in the city’s roadside inns and fast-food shops. Though their homes may have even incorporated one of these shops at their house front, as was common in ancient town planning, they would not be frequenting the establishments themselves. Instead, they would take a light meal at home on more quiet evenings, host, or visit an acquaintance’s dinner party. Here they would sit down to a feast of home-grown cabbage, boiled ostrich, roasted wild boar, boiled eggs in pine nut sauce, and seasoned mussels and oysters, all washed down with honeyed wine, perhaps also from a local vineyard. Honeyed dormice may also have made an appearance. All wine, spiced or not, would be watered down, or boiled in lead containers to make it sweeter. During their feasting, whether rich or poor, Pompeians would not have forgotten to set a metaphorical place at the table for their household gods.

This place would have been found in their household lararium, or shrine.

Most often a fixed structure in private homes, dedications of animal and plant remains would be made at the lararium, a shrine for the Lares, or household gods. Shrines in the streets of Pompeii, thought to be sites of dedications for the neighbourhood’s gods, have also been excavated. Many lararia in Pompeii have been found with burnt organic remains from the last offering or ritual carried out by the family or, in more wealthy households, by their slaves. Animal remains such as chicken and pig bones have been identified amongst the offerings, in addition to plant remains, most commonly stone-pine cones, figs, dates, grapes, and hazelnuts. The exact conditions of a ritual for a specific god had to be kept to the letter or else the dedication itself would be rendered useless. Prayers would most often be followed by libations, the shrine perhaps decorated with flowers and incense, and with food and objects of value being offered by fire. As a Roman citizen would have witnessed in the forum, Roman priests would have killed an animal, such as a bull, under the correct sacred conditions and offered a portion of its...
meat to the gods. Although available to most individuals in Roman society, meat was a more valuable commodity than today. After the gods were given their fill, the rest of the sacrificial meat would be taken home by the priests or, if dedicating privately, eaten by the family. In other words, it was almost like the Roman people sitting down to dinner with the gods, and sharing their meals.

Whether a pauper or a wealthy businessman, a priest, or a god, all citizens of Pompeii enjoyed a varied diet. From exotic lemons and home-grown cabbages, to their own local wines and a variety of meat and seafood, the Pompeians knew how to eat well. While odd at moments, the Pompeian diet wasn’t that different from the diet we enjoy today. In many cases, it was a lot healthier! Perhaps Petronius’s Trimalchio wasn’t too far off the mark after all. AH

Jessica Venner holds an MA in Classical Civilisation from Birkbeck, University of London. Her research interests are dedicated to the late Republic and early Empire of Ancient Rome, specialising in ancient gardens, landscapes and identity formation in Roman society. She lives and works in London.