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**CELEB
CHEFS'
BEST
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RECIPES**



A Postcard from Pompeii

A modern bistro and shop basks in the rich history and flavors of this ancient city known for its culinary delights.

By Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

We are in Pompeii enjoying lunch at Melius on this warm winter day.

On the menu is a hearty Neapolitan pasta e patate with creamy provolone and crunchy pancetta, and a bottle of Crateca red wine bottled on Ischia in 2017.

“Wish you were here.” I write to my parents on a postcard from Pompeii. Although I have visited Pompeii many times — my husband was born here — when we visit his family, we always dine at Melius, a boutique bistro and upscale food emporium market.

The concept is genius. The word Melius is Latin and translates to meglio, which means “better.”

Walk through the door and husband and wife team Francesco and chef Angela Longobardi greet guests while they slice, wrap, and box food from

the glass showcase. An oversized portrait of the Madonna di Pompeii, in Naïve brush strokes of bright orange and green, is mounted on the wall overlooking the cash register.

The cases are stocked with Provolone del Monaco, Gorgonzola, Parmigiano Reggiano, Pecorino — sheep’s cheese — and Caciocavallo. There’s artisan Prosciutto aged in a cave, speck, mortadella spiked with pistachios, pancetta, bresaola, and Neapolitan salami with fennel seeds, and so much more.

Francesco brings us a plate of flash fried beauties called fritelle, small puffs of dough made with pieces of small seaweed and dusted with sea salt. They’re hot and golden and still sizzling on the plate. He tells the story of the family business.

“Our parents were butchers with a



commercial business. Their butcher shop allowed us to evolve to the Melius Show Food business 30 years ago when we started selling artisan specialty products and take-away gastronomy. We transformed to Melius Salumeria con Cucina with the addition of the restaurant 12 years ago. Our culinary offerings are exclusively from Campania,” he says.

We start our meal with antipasti — buffalo mozzarella from Cilento and fiordilatte from Agerola with Sorrentino tomatoes.

First courses are the main specialty

prepared with the skill and passion of Chef Angela. The most popular is pasta Genovese made with onions from Montoro, Avelino, and meat that is slow-cooked for hours.

Another tasty and popular specialty is spaghetti alla Nerano prepared with white zucchini and a mix of cheese to create a creamy sauce. In short, Chef Angela’s love and passion for cooking delights every palate.

“After 30 years of activity, meticulous research throughout the territory and countless visits to hand-selected purveyors, we can define Melius Salumeria con Cucina as an important reference point in terms of quality and competence for the region of Campania” explains Francesco.

Angela shares her recipe for Pasta Genovese, which she says is a Neapol-

itan pasta. Although named after the city of Genova, it is not from Genova. “It’s a style of cooking that dates to ancient Pompeii when meat and bay leaves were slow-cooked with wine in terracotta pots for hours,” she says.

The bistro shop walls are lined with artisan products, from Gragnano Pasta made with semola, to paccheri, ziti, rigatoni, risoni, maltagliata, meaning badly cut pasta, for pasta fagioli.

Tomatoes from the slopes of Vesuvius preserved in jars sit alongside extra virgin olive oil from Benevento.

Chocolates filled with Strega and Babà, sponge cake soaked in rum, are displayed in beautiful glass jars tied with ribbon.

There are no menus here, just a black board with daily specials written by hand. One example is ravioli filled

Previous Page: Life abruptly ended for almost everyone in Pompeii when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. **This Page:** Paths and ruins in ancient Pompeii reveal a well-structured city.

NATIVE SOIL

with creamy whipped ricotta served in a red cherry tomato sauce garnished with rucola and shaved Pecorino.

The wine list includes 250 labels of red, white and sparkling wines: Greco di Tufo, Biancolello, Fiano, Feudi San Gregorio, Aglianico, Taurasi and Piedi Rosso; along with Marisa Cuomo Costa d'Amalfi's Furore Bianco, Furore Rosso and Fiorduva. There's also a collection from Terre Stregate.

The lunch service ends and the conversation begins on ancient Pompeii.

Francesco opens a bottle of Nifo Sarrapochiello D'Erasmus, an organic Aglicanico wine, and the couple join us at our table.

Pompeii was the ancient, splendid city where Roman aristocrats came to build grandiose villas and summer on the Campania coast because of the climate, health benefits, Mediterranean Sea, food and wine. Two thousand years ago, the city was a resort town with a smart urban plan paved with beautiful streets and a lively population.

Life ended when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD and buried Pompeii under a volcanic ash six meters deep. Everything calcified, leaving the remnants of life preserved in a protective covering.

Today, Pompeii is vibrant, bustling, and welcomes more visitors than the Vatican City. It's home to the Pontifical Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary of Pompeii. It's also a UNESCO World Heritage Site and hosts archaeologists who continue to excavate and discover more otium villas (Roman Emperors' leisure life villas), decorated with elaborate artwork, frescos, gardens and fountains, that were built for relaxation, entertaining, meditating, and reading. The wealthy entertained in festive banquets that lasted for hours — sometimes days.

The average working person did not even have a kitchen because they were too expensive, so they dined at Thermopolia, a "cook shop," where hot food was sold.

The word thermopolia comes from the Greek "thermos," meaning hot, and "poleo," meaning to sell. There were 80 flourishing Thermopolia when Vesu-

vius erupted. The dining spots were a part of the culinary and social culture of Pompeian life.

Fish was the predominate food, followed by chicken and sheep meat, snails, ducks, pigs, sausage, ham, lamb, veal, pork and goat.

Lasagne was a favorite made with layers of pasta, meat and ricotta — sauces were white because tomatoes arrived in the 16th century. Pliny the Elder, Roman author and philosopher, documented more than 1,000 edible plants used in cooking during ancient Pompeii.

Historians say Campania was called felix campania, meaning happy country, because of the many vegetables and fruits that were cultivated and consumed.

Cherries, apricots, and peaches were soaked in red wine and enjoyed during meals. Olives were preserved in vinegar and honey while vegetables were preserved in brine or vinegar, and fruits were dried, then kept in honey.

Bread, called panis quadratus, was round and made with ancient grains. The dough was marked in eight parts of equal size, then baked to a crisp in an oven hearth. The bread was served at every meal and was dipped in olive oil, broth, sauce and soup.

The most important ingredient during ancient Pompeii was Garum, a fish oil extracted from alicci where the small fish have been layered between salt and pressed to extract their oil.

Garum was used abundantly. Today, it's called cultura.

Another important food was artisan cheese made from sheep and cow's milk and smoked, rolled in herbs, ash or grape must.

Every meal ended with fresh fruits and dates soaked in honey, or on special occasions, a dense cake made with dried fruit, walnuts, figs, dates, pine nuts, almonds, and sultanas that were left to macerate in passito, a sweet white wine, and honey. Wine was abundant and served at every meal.

The farmers in surrounding vineyards in the Vesuvius area were masters at cultivating grapes and wine-making. Pompeii became the most important city for winemaking and trading throughout the ancient world.

The Romans and Greeks traded ideas on everything.

Food historians say the Greeks introduced wine bottling to the Romans (prior the Romans were storing it in animal pelts) and the Romans taught the Greeks winemaking secrets like placing broad beans at the bottom of ancient Amphoras to enhance the wine's color.

And with that, we raise our glasses and toast to ancient Pompeii.

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Previous page: Chef Angela and Signor Francesco Longobardi of Melius. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli.

This page, top: An ancient fresco in Pompeii represents mythological figures. Photo by Enrico Della Pietra.

Bottom: The dining room at Melius.

