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A WINE LOVER'S GUIDE TO  
WHAT'S NEW IN THE OLD CITY

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## Story and Photos by Monica Larner



As a kid growing up a coin's throw away from the Trevi Fountain, I was sent by my mom down to Signora Maria's shop with empty water bottles to have them filled with wine before dinner. The silver-haired Signora's tiny store had a stone vaulted ceiling, a cobweb-encrusted light bulb and a large oak wine cask at the back. For a few lira coins, and definitely less than the cost of the fancy mineral water sold with the bottle, she'd fill me up with cloudy, sometimes slightly effervescent white wine trucked in that morning from the Castelli Romani. Today, Signora Maria is long gone—the umpteenth ghost of this nostalgic city—and her store has been transformed into a sleek wine bar, with spot lighting, contemporary art and tall racks of Sassicaia, Tua Rita Redigaffi, Aklo Conterno Barolo and other cult crus.

Signora Maria's legacy and the micro-reincarnation of her neighborhood wine repository are tiny steps in a greater drive to quench the eternal thirst of Rome. As Italy's biggest wine market and the nation's most eager consumer, changes are rapidly underway that confirm Rome's transformation from a table wine city to a true European capital of wine.

I have lived in Rome on and off since age 11 and have witnessed this eno-gastronomic evolution first hand. Over the past 25 years, and in particular since the year 2000 Jubilee celebrations in which Rome's palazzi and monuments underwent a major aesthetic makeover, this city of 2.7 million residents has grown in confidence, wealth and sophistication.

Yet despite millennia of history, Rome has never shaken its bacchanalian propensities, that in ancient times were manifested through wine-fueled banqueting and lawless revelry. *Vita vinum est*, or Petronius' assertion that "wine is life," remains a citywide motto—only it has been polished and perfected to become a contemporary lifestyle choice today. Increasingly choosy Romans and culinary-versed visitors demand new and improved restaurants, wine bars, wine institutions and education.

"More wine is sold in Rome than in any other part of Italy and as the country's biggest wine market, it offers the most diverse selection of varieties and styles from all regions of the peninsula," says Claudio Arcioni, president of the "Arte dei Vinattieri" association of wine shops. "The number of enoteche [winebars] has increased 10 times in five years to reach 190, which means Rome is number

one in Italy in terms of wine bar density.”

Unlike Florence, Turin and Verona, which are immediately associated with the excellence of their nearby wine zones—Chianti, Barolo and Valpolicella—Rome occupies a region that is largely ignored from a wine point of view. The region of Lazio does have pockets of innovation in the Castelli Romani, some 20 miles south of Rome where historic wineries such as Fontana Candida are based; also at the Casale del Giglio winery 40 minutes from Rome with its excellent Mater Matuta, a 85-15 Syrah and Petit Verdot blend; and at Riccardo Cotarella's Falesco with its Linea Lazio wines (including Montiano, a 100-percent Merlot). Otherwise, there's little wine news to report from Lazio.

On the other hand, Rome's wine-neutral status means that you can find that obscure bottle of Gravner Ribolla aged in amphora instead of oak, or taste a *passito* dessert wine from the most remote corner of Pantelleria island with a simple nod to the waiter (or a stern holler, depending on the restaurant you choose). Sometimes, it is easier to find a regional wine in Rome than it is in its place of origin.

It is for the reasons listed above that *Wine Enthusiast Magazine* selected a beautiful street between the Forum and the Colosseum as the site for our Italian bureau: The capital is an excellent hub for travel and being in Rome sends a message of non-partisanship to producers across the country.

By no means are we the only wine institution to call Rome home. Within the past five years at least two major wine bodies have been created, adding to the many already in existence. The first is the International Wine Academy of Roma ([www.wineacademy-roma.com](http://www.wineacademy-roma.com)), founded in 2002 on the model of Paris' Academie du Vin and owned by Robert Wirth, the same man who owns the Hotel Hassler. It is located in Il Palazzetto, a 16th-century stuccoed building at the top left of the Spanish Steps, has an excellent restau-

rant and offers a year-round (except August) wine school for all levels as well as tailor-made wine courses for visitors or companies who book. It is also the only wine school to offer courses in English. “The wine academy is founded on the remains of a villa owned by Lucullus, a consul of ancient Rome,” explains academy Director Ian Domenico D'Agata. “Lucullus was a sybarite and a huge lover of good food and wine who held lavish feasts and had an onsite vineyard.” In fact, ancient Rome was once covered with vineyards as part of the estates of the rich.

Incidentally, D'Agata is also one of the organizers of Roma Wine ([www.romawine.it](http://www.romawine.it)), a large-scale consumer event that will debut next month in Piazza San Lorenzo in Lucina and is scheduled to become an annual appointment on the Roman calendar.

A second important wine-and-food center is Gambero Rosso's Città del Gusto (City of Taste), located in an 86,000 square-foot warehouse on the banks of the Tiber River in the Marconi neighborhood ([www.gamberorosso.it](http://www.gamberorosso.it)). There is a cooking theater where visitors can watch top Italian chefs perform their culinary arts, a wine workshop and a cooking school for amateurs and professional.

Visitors looking specifically for an English-language cooking school should consider the excellent A Tavola Con Lo Chef ([www.atavolaconlochef.it](http://www.atavolaconlochef.it)) in the Prati neighborhood. Chefs Antonio Sciallo and Hells Poulsen guide students through all levels of pastry, pizza and cooking instruction in small groups.

Another popular Rome-based wine institution is the Italian Association of Sommeliers or A.I.S. ([www.bibenda.it](http://www.bibenda.it)), near the Borghese gardens. It offers the only state-recognized diploma to

graduates of its 18-month sommelier school, as well as a bartending school and olive oil courses. It boasts a full calendar of exciting wine events throughout the year, with producer visits and vertical tastings of Italian and foreign wines that are open to A.I.S members (often free of charge) and non-members alike.

If you are in Rome for a short time, you could book a ride with the Tiber River "wine cruise." With a sommelier-led tasting of Lazio wines on deck, the Battello del Gusto ([www.battellodelgusto.it](http://www.battellodelgusto.it)) covers the most beautiful stretches of the river three times a day only in June and July.

### **Annamo a magna**

What makes eating in Rome today different than eating in Rome 20 years ago is the fact that there are two schools: Traditional eateries cohabit with modern, innovative restaurants. And that's a good thing because Rome's culinary specialties are not for the faint of heart. Many recipes come from a poor people's tradition in which fresh meat and prime cuts were not often available. In its place are macabre meals, usually consisting of the discarded parts of animals, deep-fried or smothered in sauce and generally beyond visual recognition. It is known as *cucina di quinto quarto*, or "fifth quarter" cuisine because the poorest quality of meat was given to butchers to round off their pay and they in turn sold it to the neighborhood osterie.

Among the favorites are cervello fritto (golf-ball sized fried lamb brain patties); trippa alla romana (slices of calf intestines in tomato sauce); lingua di vitella in salsa piccante (veal tongue in a spicy sauce); and coda alla vaccinara (stewed ox tail). All-time favorites are pasta dishes made with cubes of

guanciale (bacon that comes from the pig's cheek) and topped with Pecorino Romano cheese. Two examples include bucatini all' amatriciana (red sauce) or spaghetti alla gricia (white sauce). Some of the city's most refined traditional dishes come from Rome's Jewish ghetto. The carciofo alla giudia, or crispy artichoke fried with its leaves opened like a sunflower, is perhaps the single most delightful vegetable dish in Italy.

"Rome's *quinto quarto* cooking was certainly

rooted in misery,” says Alfio Cortonesi, a professor with the Università delle Tuscia (near Viterbo, Lazio) specialized in medieval history. “Later in time, it became a question of taste among Romans who prefer decisive, strong flavors. Roman cuisine is unique in that it has remained surprisingly individual and untouched by outside influences despite the fact Rome has always been open to pilgrims and visitors.”


Until recently, these Roman specialties were safeguarded by tight tradition, and its restaurant scene was largely associated with Spartan *osterie* named after their owners—Da Valentino, Da Augusto and Da Giovanni—with handwritten menus, water-damaged walls and rude waiters as part of the charm. Once I dropped a fork on the ground at Da Augusto in Trastevere and when I asked for a new one, Augusto snapped: “Where do you think you are, dear? The Ritz?” I never did get a new fork.

Much changed when German chef Heinz Beck came to town in 1994. His three-star Michelin rating opened the way for celebrity chefs and innovative techniques in Rome. Beck runs the kitchen at La Pergola, still considered Rome’s best restaurant, and remains one of the most influential gastronomic figures in the capital and the nation. For example, this month and next (October 28–31 and November 25–28) Heinz Beck will lead two exclusive cooking classes at Castello Banfi in Montalcino ([www.castellobanfilborgo.com](http://www.castellobanfilborgo.com), click on “amenities”).

Don’t worry: Rome has plenty of traditional *osterie* (Augusto is still going strong and happily taunting his forkless clients). But it also has restaurants like L’Altro Mastai with up-and-coming celebrity chef Fabio Baldassarre, La Rosetta with seafood specialist Massimo Riccioli and the Osteria di San Cesario with

chef Anna Dente who make the utmost effort when it comes to sourcing ingredients, from veal to sea bream to fresh greens. Remember those Roman fried artichokes? Anna Dente, better known as Sora Anna (or “sister Anna”) makes the best fried artichokes I have ever eaten. Her restaurant is 20 kilometers south of Rome and worth

every penny of the rental car fee you pay to get there.

Whether you go for the choice cuts or the quinto quarto, Rome’s food and wine scene promises it all: variation, sophistication, tradition and, yes, food with enormous personality. The only drawback is that, today, unlike in Signora Maria’s day, you can count on the wine costing more than the water. 

Clockwise from left: Piazza Navona; outdoor seating at Myosotis near Piazza Navona; Ristorante Chinappi is a great choice for fresh fish, such as lightly grilled Mediterranean shrimp on a bed of rughetta; Il Simposio is an upscale restaurant that is part of Enoteca Costantini, one of Rome’s most historic wine shops, shown here.





*'Annamo a magnà ("Let's Eat")*

*Of what does the happy life consist,  
 My dear friend Julius? Here is a list:*

*Plain food, a table simply set,  
 Nights sober but wine-freed  
 from fret,*

*A wife who's true to you and yet  
 No prude in bed, and sleep so sound*

*It makes the day come  
 quickly round.*

—MARTIAL, 1ST CENTURY ROMAN POET

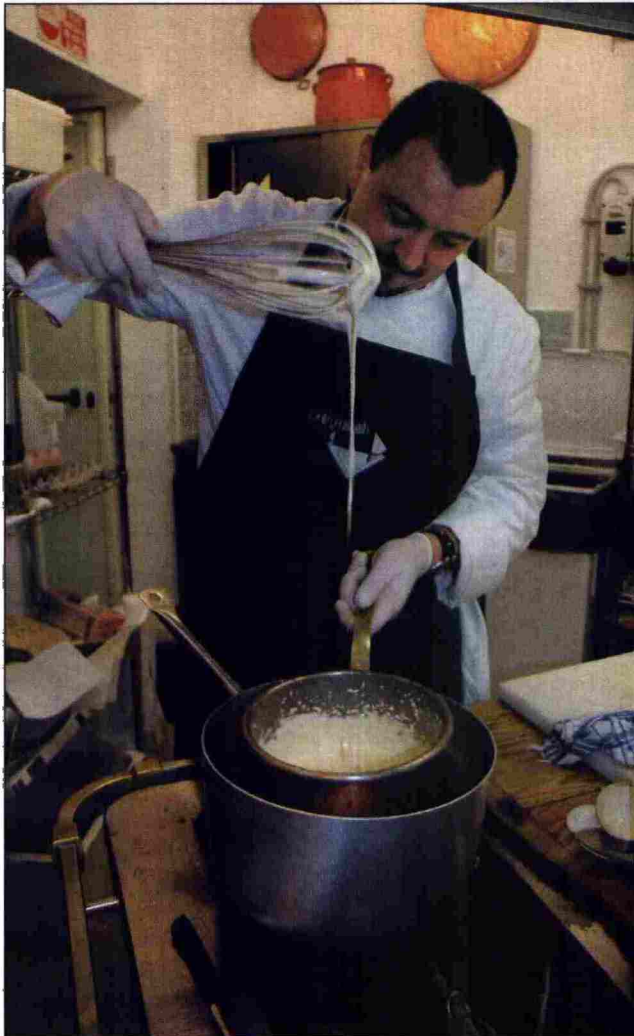
“Just then glass jars carefully  
 sealed with gypsum were brought  
 out, with labels tied on their necks:

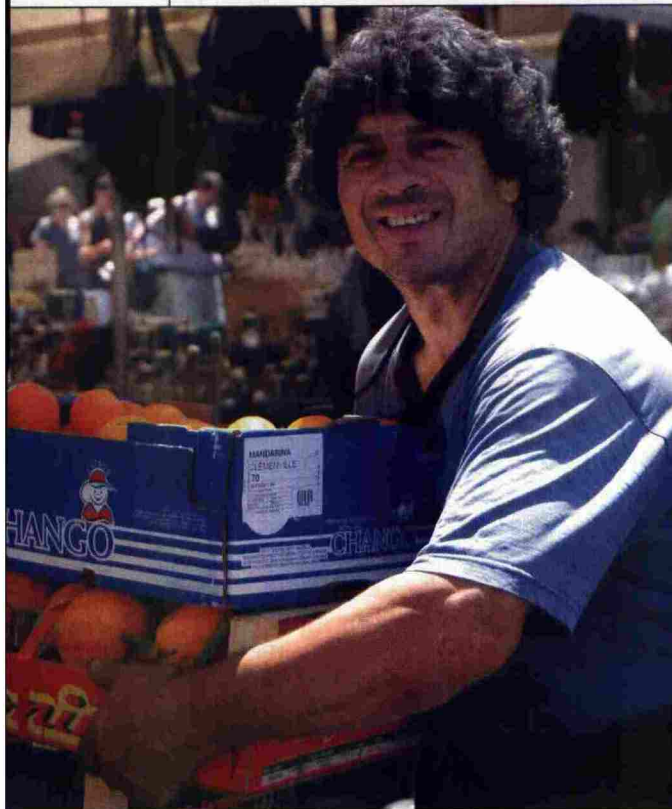
OPIMIAN FALERNIAN,  
 ONE HUNDRED YEARS OLD.

As we tried to read the old tags,  
 Trimalchio clapped his hands and  
 cried, ‘Ah me, so wine lives longer  
 than miserable man. Let us be  
 merry, vita vinum est.’”

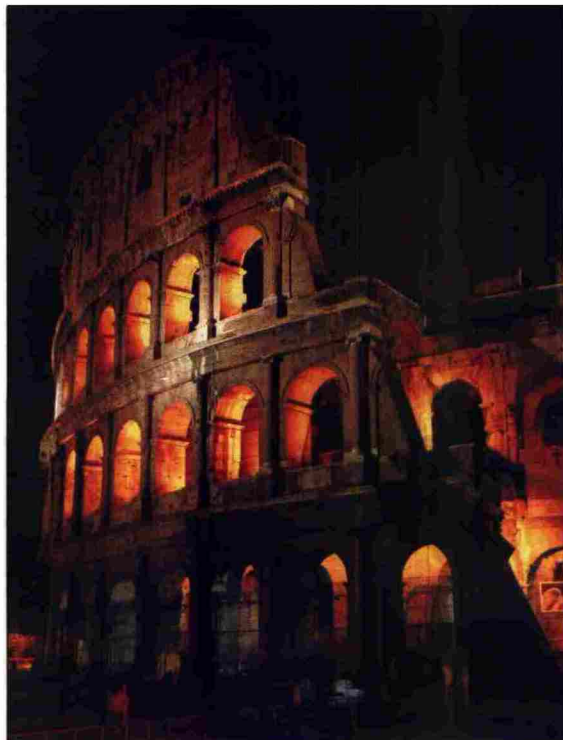
—PETRONIUS, SATYRICON, CHAPTER 34

**Clockwise from left: Piazza Venezia and the Vittoriano, or Altar to the Nation monument; bilingual cooking classes at A Tavola Con Lo Chef. Chef Antonio Sciullo is pictured here; traditional Roman fried artichokes are Anna Dente's signature dish (Osteria di San Cesario).**





**Clockwise from left: Fruit vendor at Campo de' Fiori; The Colosseum; Palatium, located on the posh shopping street Via Frattina near the Spanish Steps, is a regional enoteca specializing in Lazio wine and food.**







**Vicolo della Vaccarella and Piazza delle Coppelle, between the Pantheon and Piazza Navona, are home to trendy restaurants and wine bars for outdoor dining and aperitivi.**