

VNY *La Voce di New York*

— *america Oggi* 1988 —

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The First Italian English Digital Daily in the US

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Arts

September 8, 2026

Daily Life at Herculaneum: the Exhibition Reveals the Art of Living Before 79 AD

More than 70 archeological finds will be on display in Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo till October 18



Italian Hours

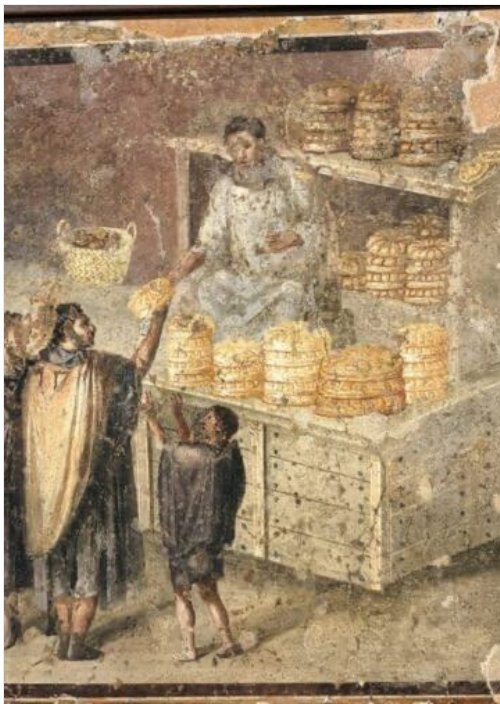
Lucy Gordan



Herculaneum, Photo: Diego Delso via Wikipedia

“Herculaneum: The Art of Living,” an exhibition of over 70 archaeological finds, will be on display until October 18 in Rome’s Castel Sant’Angelo. Many of these come from the deposits of Herculaneum’s Archaeological Park and are exhibited here for the first time. Inspired by the exhibition “From the Egg to the Apple: The Civilization of Food and the Pleasures of the Table,” held last year in Herculaneum’s Villa Campolieto, “Herculaneum: The Art of Living” extends the story from food to the entire experience of everyday life.

The first of its seven sections is a Wunderkammer, inspired by Renaissance collections of rare and precious objects. Unlike those in a Renaissance Wunderkammer, the 42 artifacts here were never rarities or treasures and didn’t belong to a single royal family. Rather, they are among the best-preserved artifacts discovered during excavations. These locally made marble statues, busts, colorful frescoes, semiprecious jewelry, household shrines, and bronze candelabra offer a cross-section of the quality of life, artistic production, and cultural level reached by Herculaneum shortly before its destruction in 79 AD.



Bakery fresco. Photo: Lucy Gordan

The second section concerns the eruption itself. Audiovisual installations, plus paintings, prints, and decorative arts illustrate the tragic event through the imagination of artists, writers, and scholars from all over northern Europe on the Grand Tour. On display alongside the views by Pierre-Jacques Voltaire are tempera by Giacomo and Antonio Baseggio (1784), *Gale in the Bay of Naples at Moonlight* by Austrian Joseph Rebell (1822), and a rare porcelain cup of Neapolitan Poulard Prad manufacture.

The third section reconstructs the city in its daily dimension with audiovisual installations and archaeological finds from shops and thermopolia—ancient fast-food establishments selling ready-to-eat meals and drinks. On display here are single recently minted coins, a mound of coins melted together, a terracotta dice shaker and ivory dice (gambling was the favorite pastime), a wooden and bronze coin purse with a metal lock, charred wicker baskets, and various pieces of market scales.

The fourth section concerns the vital importance of bread. On display here are some 25 oven pans and molds from the bakery (pistrinum) of baker (pistor) Sextus Patulcius Felix along with a fresco of a bakery, the first of several food and wine frescoes displayed in the exhibition on loan from the

MANN (Naples’ National Museum of Archaeology): the others are of figs (Herculaneum’s favorite fruit), peaches, a goose, fish, wine, and banquets.



Coin purse with metal lock. Photo: Lucy Gordan

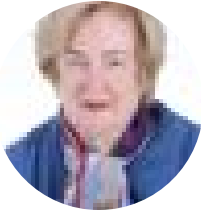
The route then leads into the intimacy of the *domus* or house, the pantry, and the kitchen: mortars, pots, casseroles, and organic remains—cereals, nuts, olives, legumes, onions, pulses—uncovered during excavations document the daily varied diet of the ancient inhabitants of Herculaneum, offering an authentic insight into their eating habits.

Food is followed by wine, the protagonist of one of the most flourishing economic activities in ancient Campania. In his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny the Elder celebrated Falernian as one of the most renowned local wines, but wine was also a bridge to the divine, linked to the cult of Bacchus, god of wine, fertility, and ritual intoxication. Besides marble chair feet depicting busts of Bacchus is a charming small bronze statue of a young lady with the ritual libation bowl (*patera*) making an offering.

The first artifact in the final section, “Meals and Banquets,” is a larger-than-life white marble statue of wine-loving Hercules, best known for his strength, but here dead drunk and urinating. Excavated in 1930 in Herculaneum’s most luxurious villa, the Casa dei Cervi, it probably decorated the passage between the villa’s two large dining areas. Also on display are glasses, plates, cups, serving dishes, silver and bronze tableware, numerous table decorations (man with a pig and a hare, for example), and a bronze bell for summoning servants. The final artifact is a monumental marble meal-time sundial.



Statue of Hercules. Photo: Lucy Gordan



Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly Inside.th

DELLO STESSO AUTORE



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The Tramezzino Turns 100: How an Italian Sandwich Was Born in Detroit

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