



[« back](#)

Ancient Romans Preferred Fast Food

Jennifer Viegas, Discovery News

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June 18, 2007 — Just as a U.S. Presidential state dinner does not reflect how most Americans eat and socialize, researchers think the formal, decadent image of wining and dining in ancient Rome mostly just applied to the elite.

According to archaeologist Penelope Allison of the University of Leicester, the majority of the population consumed food "on the run."

Allison excavated an entire neighborhood block in Pompeii, a city frozen in time after the eruption of volcano Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D.

Historians often extend findings from Pompeii to other parts of Italy, particularly Rome, given the city's proximity to the Roman Empire's center.

"In many parts of the western world today, a popular belief exists that family members should sit down and dine together and, if they don't, this may represent a breakdown of the family structure, but that idea did not originate in ancient Rome," she told Discovery News.

Her claims are based both on what she did not find during the excavation, and what she did.

Allison noticed an unusual lack of tableware and formal dining or kitchen areas within the Pompeii homes. Instead she found isolated plates here and there, such as in sleeping quarters.

"Similar to how children today bring a plate of food to their rooms before watching TV or playing on the computer, my guess is that Roman youths would tote food to certain areas where they possibly engaged in other activities," she said, adding that kids might also have dined with slaves in nanny or caretaker roles.

What she did find in the homes were multiple mini barbecue-type fire boxes, suggesting that "BBQ or fondue-style dining" often took place.

Allison outlines her findings in the new Oxford University Press book, "The Insula of the Menander at Pompeii Volume III."

Stephen Dyson, one of the world's leading authorities on ancient Rome, is a professor of classics at the University of Buffalo who formerly served as the president of the Archaeological Institute of America.

Dyson told Discovery News that the new book "was meticulously researched" and that his own work in

Pompeii and Rome supports Allison's conclusions.

He said, "We've also found numerous fast food restaurants in Pompeii and other parts of ancient Rome."

Dyson likened these places to a cross between "Burger King and a British pub or a Spanish tapas bar." Open to the street, each had a large counter with a receptacle in the middle from which food or drink would have been served.

"Most Romans lived in apartments or rather confined spaces, and there is not much evidence for stoves and other cooking equipment in them," he said.

Dyson thinks "fast food" restaurants became popular because they were plentiful, the same way modern New Yorkers often eat out due to the panoply of affordable choices. Additionally, many of Rome's and Pompeii's residents, who worked as artisans, shopkeepers, weavers and such, made enough money to support these places.

Grabbing food to go, either in a house or on the street, also seems to match the energy and flexibility of the Italian mindset.

Dyson said, "Italy's vibrant street and bar scenes today, along with the often multipurpose design of homes with bedsteads stacked in a corner, or kitchenettes in surprising places, reflect the wonderful, slightly chaotic, aspects of early Roman life."

[« back](#)

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