

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

On January 17th Massimo Osanna, the interim director of Pompeii's excavations and the soon-to-be director of all of Italy's State Museums, was a guest on Sunday evening's popular TV talk show "Che Tempo Che Fa" ("What's the weather like?"). His appearance was carefully timed to announce the reopening of Pompeii's excavations on weekdays to visitors with reservations from Italy's "yellow" regions: Campania, where Pompeii is located, and those nearby, Molise and Basilicata, because at the moment none of these regions is subject to stricter virus lockdown rules than a mask, hand-washing, and social distancing.

The topic of host Fabio Fazio's interview with Osanna was the latest discovery at Pompeii, a *thermopolium* also known as a "popina," the ancient equivalent of a modern fast food restaurant(!), a take-away shop selling mainly cooked dishes without seating frequented by the least wealthy of commercially prosperous Pompeii's some 20,000 inhabitants. Its discovery, one of Pompeii's some 80 *thermopolia*, dates to the spring of 2019, but was first announced on December 26, 2020.

It's well known that the Naples area, which includes Pompeii, is highly seismic. According to Pliny the Younger, since earthquakes were frequent, the inhabitants of Pompeii paid little attention to the tremors felt for the four days before the catastrophic eruption in 79 AD of nearby Mount Vesuvius, the deadliest volcano still today in European history. For two days, Vesuvius spewed forth a deadly cloud of molten rock, pulverized pumice and hot ash at 1.5 million tons per second, releasing 100,000 times the thermal energy of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and burying Pompeii under 13 to 20 feet of debris.

"From a recently uncovered charcoal inscription," said Osanna, "we know now that the eruption began around 16 days before the Calends of November or around October 24 in the early afternoon around 1 PM, and not on August 24 as had been believed until recently. This is confirmed by the remains of autumnal, not summer, clothing materials still worn by some of the 1,500 corpses and by the foodstuffs

POMPEII'S
FORERUNNER
OF McDONALD'S

excavated here. For examples, in the *thermopolium's* several terracotta vessels are samples of duck meat, snails, goat meat, fava beans, dried fruits, pomegranates, and *garum*, a favorite fermented fish sauce used to preserve and flavor. Not to leave out the large

amounts of wine — proof that the eruption occurred after the year's grape harvest."

The modern day equivalent of *garum* is a delicacy of the small fishing village of Cetara on the Amalfi Coast. This "colatura di alici" or "anchovy drippings" produced by fermenting anchovies in brine, is still used to season pasta.

"This *thermopolium*," continued Osanna, "was certainly more luxurious or trendy than most. The counters of *thermopolia* were usually not decorated or at most had marble finishing, while this one's large L-shaped counter

is decorated with a series of brightly painted frescoes along its front and side wings.

The largest is of a Nereid (a sea nymph, see images below) riding a seahorse in a marine setting. Its other frescoes are:

an illustration of the shop itself, a kind of trademark; of ducks hanging upside down ready to be cooked; *idem* for a rooster; and a dog on a leash, a kind of 'Cave

Canem.' 'Beware of the Dog' was probably a reminder to customers to leash their pets. A rude graffiti was scratched along its frame... Its author was probably a fleeced customer or fired worker. Beside the dog fresco, among the remains found here, were the skeletons of a dog, of the *thermopolium's* owner who was lame and lying on his bed, and of another younger man's bones in a jar, probably stuffed there long ago by illegal 'archeologists' looking for coins or jewelry."

Probably because of the busloads of approximately 2.5 million visitors annually before covid, there are many tourist-trap restaurants near the excavations, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997, but for special contemporary *thermopolia*, when it's possible to travel again, head to *Ristorante Garum* or *Bettola del Gusto* for local specialties and then to *De Vivo Pasticceria* for dessert. A family business since before World War II, its *sfogliatelle*, *babà* and *gelati* are to-die-for. ○

