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Insider's guide: what's hot in Rome right now

Big changes are remaking the Eternal City - here's a cheat sheet for what's new in the Caput Mundi right now

Five o'clock mass at St. Peter's Basilica, seen from the viewing platform at the base of the church's dome, on the way up to the top of the copula.

By Andrew Sessa

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ROME, Italy - Visitors to Rome often approach the city with what you might call a Julius Caesar attitude: "Veni, vidi, vici," they say. "I came, I saw, I conquered."

Colosseum? Check. Imperial Forum? Check. Coins tossed in the Trevi Fountain, neck cramps suffered at the Sistine Chapel, scoops of gelato eaten in front of the Pantheon? Check. Check. Double check. And then they're out.

There's good reason for this, of course. Not for nothing is Rome called the Eternal City - for the most part, it seems to stay eternally the same. So why change the itinerary from the greatest hits tour your parents did in 1967, or even the one your grand-touring ancestors did in 1767?

But Rome is a place in flux these days. The city has seen two popes in as many years and three prime ministers in the last 18 months. And that's just the beginning.

Despite the economic crisis that continues to linger in Italy in general and in Rome in particular - or perhaps because of it - there's innovation aplenty to be found here. Exciting just-opened hotels and novel restaurants impress with their style and design; rising neighborhoods and forward-thinking individuals demand attention; and even the old is new again, as ancient and recently uncovered historical sights have opened to the public for the first time.

Today, getting to know the city is all about going deeper, feeling more adventurous and veering much further off the typical tourist path. Here are seven insider tips for making the most of Rome right now.

[DINING] Nibble around the edges

Some of the most exciting new spots to eat in Rome these days are well beyond the well-trod historic center. All you need to experience them is cab fare - or a willingness to brave public transportation - and a sense of adventure. A good appetite won't hurt, either.

In Monte Verde Vecchio, you'll find **Cesare al Casaletto** (Via del Casaletto, 45; &39-06-536-015). It's been in business since the 1960s but for the last few years run by Leonardo Vignoli, whose passion for carefully sourced regional ingredients, long-forgotten Roman recipes and all-natural wines shines through in everything he does.

More recently opened are two spots in the city's far east. In nightlife-savvy Pigeto, one of Rome's most on-the-rise neighborhoods, **Mazzo, the Fooders** (Via delle Rose, 54; thefooders.it) - a bricks-and-mortar iteration of a popular former pop-up - specializes in small-bites and craft beers. **Pro Loco Dol** (Via Domenico Panaroli, 35; dioriginelaziale.it), in even more far-flung Centocelle, doubles as a restaurant and deli-like specialty food shop, serving giant boards of local cured meats and cheeses and wood-fired pizzas with intriguing toppings, plus a small and frequently changing assortment of pastas, mains and vegetables.

Heading south of the city center to the Testaccio area, you'll encounter the **Nuovo Mercato di Testaccio** (Via Galvani, 57), a covered market near former cattle stockyards, which themselves now house a branch of the city's contemporary MACRO museum. Nearby, try the **Città dell'altra Economia** (Largo Dino Frisullo; cittadellaltraeconomia.org), a foodie destination comprising a simple coffee bar; an organic food store; a weekend outdoor organic market; and **Stazione di Posta** (stazionediposta.eu), a restaurant that plays with traditional dishes.

Farther south, in Garbatella, there's the huge Roman outpost of **Eataly** (Piazzale XII Ottobre 1492; roma.eataly.it), the pan-Italian specialty-food hall and restaurant complex that got its start in Turin and now, in partnership with Mario Batali, has U.S. branches in New York and Chicago. Another option is **Porto Fluviale** (Via del Porto Fluviale, 22; portofluviale.com), a buzzing, subway-tiled, all-day dining spot serving casual Italian dishes, with an emphasis on the tapaslike Venetian snacks called cicchetti, in its lounge, bar, trattoria and pizzeria.

Trapizzino (Piazzale Ponte Milvio, 13; trapizzino.it) is worth a detour up north to Ponte Milvio. It's an order-at-the-counter joint, serving the novel snack food from which it takes its name: a triangular bit of pizza dough stuffed with hearty fillings such as shredded bits of chicken cacciatora, meatballs in red sauce or zucchini and eggplant Parmesan.

Beyond official restaurants, Rome has a budding pop-up dining scene. **The Eatery** (theeateryinrome.com) hit the ground running this winter with semi-monthly, four-course, locally procured dinners that combine the backgrounds of its creators, an Italian-born sous chef at the American Academy in Rome and his Danish pastry-chef girlfriend. Meanwhile, in addition to conducting market tours and leading lunchtime cooking demonstrations, self-described "food interpreter" **Eleonora Galasso** (eleonoragalasso.com) hosts Italian-focused dinners once or twice a month at her three-suite **La Regola 67** hotel.

[HOTELS] Sleep in stylish new stays

After what seemed like ages without a new hotel of note, Rome has welcomed a pair of perfectly appointed, aesthetically minded boutique spots.

A stone's throw from the Spanish Steps, past the west end of high-end shopping mecca Via dei Condotti, sits **J.K. Place Roma** (from €540 per night, Via di Monte d'Oro, 30; jkroma.com), the months-old sister property of the beloved J.K. hotels in Florence and Capri.

Here, Florence-based architect Michele Bönan and consummate host and hotelier Ori Kafri have created a residential-feeling home-away-from-home that takes its cinematic, midcentury modern cues from Federico Fellini's "La Dolce Vita" and Tom Ford's "A Single Man." In addition to 30 rosewood-paneled, marble-bathed and smartly appointed rooms and suites, the hotel has a living roomlike lobby, book-lined library and bistro café. An alfresco rooftop lounge is expected to bow this summer.

A block off the Tiber River, meanwhile, a team of chic natives have opened the noir-feeling **D.O.M Hotel** (from €400 per night, Via Giulia, 131; domhotelroma.com) in a 17th-century former monastery on the very aristocratic street Via Giulia. Combining influences gothic and contemporary, Art Deco and Hollywood regency, its 24 rooms, clubby bar, lounge-like restaurant and sun-soaked rooftop terrace all offer a sexy boudoir feel.

[RETAIL] Mount a shopping excursion to Monti

It feels of late like every major high-fashion Italian label has launched or re-launched a flagship near the Spanish Steps, with Bulgari, Bruno Magli, Max Mara, Pucci and Versace all now newly in place, and Valentino soon opening a massive store next to its headquarters just off Piazza di Spagna.

For a more under-the-radar retail experience, however, those in the know head to the neighborhood of Monti, just south over the Quirinal Hill from the historic center. Here, on the parallel streets of Via dei Serpenti and Via del Boschetto, as well as Via Panisperna and others running perpendicular, you'll find a fleet of artisanal and one-of-a-kind items, as well as the vintage and unknown.

Among the newest arrivals are the jewelry shop **Lo Scrigno di Valentina** (Via dei Serpenti, 135), where designer Valentina Pacifici creates contemporary cameos, some incorporating skull and bone motifs, as well as more classical looking pieces using precious metals, coral and turquoise. Nearby, **Wow Bar** (Via del Boschetto, 123; wowbar-shop.com), a spinoff of Monti's popular Gallinelle women's boutiques, does casual pieces plus brightly colored and patterned shirts of its own production.

In addition to the linens, rugs and jewelry it imports from Turkey, **Fondaco dei Turchi** (Via degli Zingari, 12; fondacodeiturchi.com) has a selection of Italian cashmere and deconstructed-looking, all-black women's wear from local micro-label FRI.DA. Slightly older is women's vintage shop **Blue Goose** (Via del Boschetto, 4; &39-06-4890-6738), offering a mix of midrange and high-end Italian labels, and **Le Talpe** (Via Panisperna 222a; le-talpe.it), whose eclectic mix of jewelry, art and fashion changes frequently.

If you need a shopping break, grab a coffee at the months-old café **La Casetta** (Via Madonna dei Monti, 62) or a snack at the equally new **Dall'Anto** (Via Madonna dei Monti, 16; dallanto.com), a bakery focusing on delicious breads and snacks made from ancient types of wheat as well as chestnut and chickpea flours.

[NIGHTLIFE] Quaff craft beer and cocktails

Having swept through most major American cities, not to mention London, Paris, Tokyo and beyond, the crazes for local artisanal beers and artfully made cocktails have finally hit Rome.

Settembrini Birra (Via Ciro Menotti, 32; viasettembrini.com), in the northern reaches of the Prati neighborhood, is among the latest brew bars to join more long-standing and centrally located beer bastions like the cavernous **Open Baladin** - with 20 to 30 beers on tap plus 100-plus more in bottles - and smaller

No.Au

For harder drinks, the reservations-only, password-protected **Jerry Thomas Project** (Vicolo Cellini, 30; thejerrythomasproject.it) gives the city what may well be its first bar with real speakeasy style.

Although largely focused on natural wines, **Litro** (Via Fratelli Bonnet, 5; vinerialitro.it) in the Gianicolo Hill area also specializes in tipples made with mezcal. **The Gin Corner** (Via di Pallacorda, 2; hoteladriano.com), as its name suggests, focuses on sips made from the distilled-juniper spirit; from the folks behind Barnum, a pioneer in Rome's classic cocktail scene, it sits in the Hotel Adriano.

Two others with hotel connections are **Co.So.** in Pigneto (Via Braccio da Montone, 80) whose mixologist comes from the tip-top bar at the ultra-posh Hotel de Russie, and **0° 300° Cold and Grill** (Via del Vantaggio, 14; ristorantealloro.it), where creative drinks can be paired with food by a Michelin-starred chef. It fills the rooftop terrace of the historic center's First Hotel and offers some of the best 360-degree views in town.

[PILGRIMAGE] Rediscover the Vatican

Holy Father-turned-international rock star Pope Francis - Papa Francesco in Italian - isn't the only new thing remaking the Vatican, which expects a crowd of up to 5 million pilgrims for the canonizations of popes John Paul II and John XXIII on April 27.

The Vatican Museums (Viale Vaticano; mv.vatican.va) have debuted or re-opened several new spaces in the past 18 months, including the **Profane Museum**, whose cache of small 17th- and 18th-century *objets* such as cameos, glass pieces, ivories and bronze statuettes are displayed in the gallery's original ornate Brazilian-wood cabinets, and the **Carriage Pavilion**, which shows off how papal modes of transportation have evolved over the years. The Vatican Historical Museum, which sits above the Carriage Pavilion, will soon emerge from its own reorganization and renovation.

Also part of the museums but requiring a separate ticket and guided tour, the **Via Triumphalis Necropolis** was unveiled this winter after a 60-year excavation, revealing a fascinating and expansive burial site, used from the 1st century B.C. until the 4th A.D and filled with sarcophagi, statues, mosaics and frescoes.

Want to stay close to the Holy See? Next month, Small Leading Hotels is debuting the nine-suite **L'Angolo di San Pietro** (from €580 per night, Via Stazione Vaticana, 1; langolodisanpietro.it), located in an early-20th-century former Catholic guesthouse only slightly beyond the southern walls of Vatican City. The nearby but much larger **Gran Meliá Rome** (from €475 per night, Via del Gianicolo, 3; melia.com), whose outdoor pool and gardens make it unique, debuted two years ago in a centuries old ex-convent.

[SITES] Venture underground

A pair of ancient sites, only newly open to the public, invite history buffs to descend through the ages, going underground to go back in time.

What is today the oval-shaped Piazza Navona sits atop a stadium originally built in the 1st century A.D. by Emperor Domitian. Now, after extensive excavation, a piece of the complex's below-street-level ruins have opened as the **Stadio di Domizianomuseum** (stadiodomiziano.com), showing off the structure's impressive travertine archways, columns and staircases in all their glory. Through May 4, the museum's temporary galleries will exhibit photographs of Pope John Paul II, some never before seen.

Elsewhere in the city, on the edge of the Villa Ada park, the newly revealed **Catacombs of Priscilla** (Via Salaria, 430; catacombepiscilla.com) comprise eight miles of 2nd-to-5th-century burial chambers and galleries, including the tombs of many early Christian martyrs and some beautifully restored frescoes.

[SIDE TRIPS] Get out of town

Those looking for a relaxing little day trip will find a perfect destination in **Fiorano** (Via di Fioranello, 34; fattoriadifiorano.it), a 20-minute drive or 90-minute bike ride from the center of town along the Appian Way. Alessia Antinori, whose renowned and aristocratic wine-making family has held this acreage for centuries, created a small organic farm, winery and café that opened in September, offering a table-to-farm experience for city-weary locals and visitors alike.

Further afield, but an easy overnight, is the 12-room **La Bandita Townhouse** (from €195 per night; 111 Corso Rossellino; labanditatownhouse.com), which opened last Easter in a 15th-century former convent in the picture-perfect medieval hilltop town of Pienza, about a two-hour drive from Rome.

Sitting in the rolling hills of southern Tuscany's Val d'Orcia, the Townhouse offers easy access to the nearby wine capitals of Montalcino and Montepulciano, with their Old World tasting rooms and ancient architecture.

But the hotel's hands-on American owners and operators - a former music industry executive and his writer wife, whose first La Bandita outing, a converted farmhouse just outside of Pienza, won raves - have also injected some highly contemporary cool to its downtown-loft décor, as well as to the modern Tuscan menus at its restaurant.

If you go

GETTING THERE

There's no nonstop commercial flight to Rome from Houston, but flights with one stop to Rome's Leonard da Vinci-Fiumicino Airport (FCO) from IAH start from about \$1,200 and are available on Air France, Alitalia, British Airways, Delta, KLM and United.

GETTING AROUND

Rome is a walking city more than anything else, and you'd be remiss if you don't explore on foot, even if you get lost now and again. The underground metro's two easy-to-navigate lines hit many of the top tourist sites, however, and a single ticket, good for 100 minutes, costs €1.50, with daily tickets available for €6. Both cover not only the metro, but also the extensive (though considerably more opaque) bus and tram systems. In town, reasonably well-priced cabs can be hailed but are best found at plentiful taxi stands. Cabs from the airport to the city center have a fixed rate of €48, and the air train from FCO to Termini, the main train station, costs €14.