



In Ostiense, vibrant street art is now commonplace.

Rome's COOLEST QUARTER

Once the gateway to the Roman Empire, Ostiense was a critical link between the ancient capital and the port of Ostia on the Mediterranean Sea. Just a couple of kilometres south of the Colosseum, this once forgotten quarter has survived armed invasions and decades of industrial development. **Words by Josephine McKenna and photos by Susan Wright**

OSTIENSE IS REINVENTING itself as one of the Eternal City's most vibrant neighbourhoods. From spectacular street art to 2000-year-old tombs, there are plenty of surprises in Ostiense and enough cocktail bars and restaurants to put the quirky quarter on the must-see tourist map.

"There's a good vibe and it's just great walking around the neighbourhood," says Darius Arya, an archaeologist who heads the American Institute for Roman Culture in Rome. "You are walking through layers of history."

Following the footsteps of the Goths who breached the ancient Roman walls in a violent siege during the 6th century, art lovers are at first drawn to Rome's last surviving pyramid, which is a dramatic landmark.

Ostiense is also home to the Basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls, a spectacular church originally founded by Emperor Constantine in the 4th century over the burial place of St Paul. It's an essential stop for Catholic pilgrims and curious tourists as it's filled with ancient artefacts.

The Pyramid of Caius Cestius was built as a tomb for the powerful dignitary, Caius Cestius, in 12 B.C. after Emperor Augustus added Egypt to his expanding empire. Recently restored by Japanese businessman Yuzo Yagi for €2 million, the marble pyramid is 36.4 metres tall and contains a barrel-vaulted burial chamber with original frescoes.

"When Augustus conquered Egypt he brought back all these slaves and artisans," says Darius. "Egyptomania took over. The pyramid is like a beacon in Ostiense."

In Roman times there were many pyramids dotted around Rome and tombs lined what is now Via Ostiense because it was forbidden to bury the dead inside the city walls. But Cestius' imposing pyramid was testimony to the importance of the man buried inside.

"Cestius was a statesman, a politician, and the fact that he built something so prominent at the point of entry into Rome is significant," says Darius. "It was built in only 330 days."

"He was really concerned about saying 'This is who I am and this is what I did'. The bigger, the better."

Behind the pyramid is the leafy Protestant Cemetery, an oasis of tranquillity featuring the graves of many famous names.

Many come to pay homage to celebrated English poets, John Keats who died in Rome in 1821 at the age of 25, and Percy Bysshe Shelley who drowned off the coast of Tuscany only a year later.

A couple of kilometres along Via Ostiense is the Centrale Montemartini, one of Rome's hidden gems.

A former power plant, it has been turned into a spectacular museum displaying ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian art treasures amid old turbines and engines.

"Montemartini is fantastic because it's an incredible use of the power plant and the statues there are phenomenal," says Darius.

Inside the museum visitors can find pieces of massive statues that once stood in the ancient Temple of Fortuna in central Rome and a fabulous 2000-year-old mosaic.

There's also an eye-catching statue called the Hanging Marsyas which dates back to the 2nd century A.D.

Discovered by Darius and his team during a dig at an ancient villa on the outskirts of Rome in 2009, it is made of rare reddish purple marble and remarkably intact.



Archaeologist Darius Arya is part of Rome's American Institute for Roman Culture.

“That was the find of a lifetime,” says Darius. “It’s a well-preserved statue carved from a single block, it is as good as anything that was produced for the emperor.”

The museum is a new take on industrial chic. But the hipsters and artists who fill this neighbourhood are now taking their art to the streets and covering the walls of abandoned buildings and railway underpasses with massive murals that are genuine traffic stoppers.

“Ostiense is the soul of Rome by night. So in the evening you can start with an aperitivo, follow up with dinner and finish in a nightclub.”

Even artists get hungry. And this neighbourhood is a mecca for bar-hoppers and foodies.

Eataly has created a food revolution across Italy and it seems fitting that the gastronomic megastore opened its

first Rome store in a former terminal at Ostiense railway station. Founded by entrepreneur Oscar Farinetti in 2004, the Eataly empire has spread around the world and stores are now found in New York, Sao Paolo and Tokyo.

Describing his philosophy, Oscar says, “Eataly is a store with a great Italian vocation to take food of the highest quality and share it with the world.”

Inside the store are three floors of bars, restaurants and an array of fresh fruit and vegetables as well as rows of quality Italian pasta, olive oil, boutique beers and wines to take home.

For many Romans, the store has become a destination in itself and another reason to visit this dynamic, vibrant neighbourhood. On any given day a group of a dozen gourmands can be seen touring the store tasting salami and cheese. There are regular wine tastings and visitors can also choose from 30 artisanal beers at the store’s *birreria*.

At lunchtime the store looks like an open restaurant with seven different ‘hubs’ – one serves pizza by the slice, another pasta of the day, there is fresh calamari being served at a seafood hub



At the in-house cheese factory at Ostiense’s Eataly, customers can watch buffalo mozzarella being made.

while another serves fresh seasonal vegetables with couscous and some other dishes.

At the *caseificio* or in-house cheese factory, customers can watch creamy buffalo mozzarella cheese produced every morning, while fresh bread and pizzas emerge steaming hot from the store’s ovens throughout the day. On the third floor, students of three-star

Michelin chef Niko Romito create their own take on the latest Italian cuisine at the store’s top restaurant, Spazio.

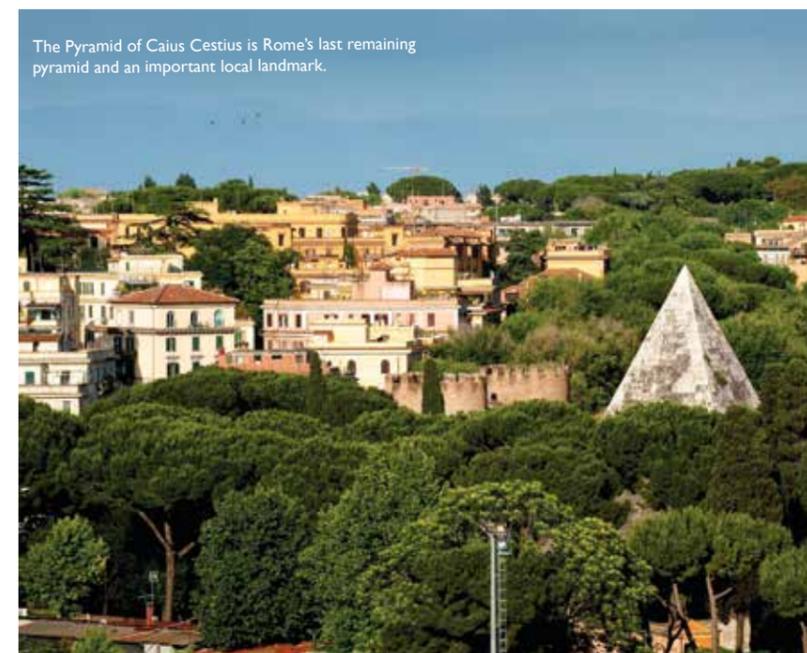
Eataly celebrates the finest Italian culinary traditions with attention to the freshest ingredients and respect for ‘Slow Food’.

“A pasta is so much better when it is dried slowly, a prosciutto when it is perfected slowly, bread when it is leavened slowly,” Oscar says.

If you are still hungry, head to Porto Fluviale, a dynamic restaurant, pizzeria and cocktail bar that is located inside a former warehouse. In a rare move for Rome, the restaurant offers *cicchetti*, Venetian bar snacks, as well as an extensive menu which features a choice between a thin-crust Roman pizza or a thicker Neapolitan classic for as little as €6 or €7.

The flour is organic and the dough is leavened for 72 hours – essential for producing a top pizza according to the best pizza makers.

Luca Perone, Porto Fluviale’s manager, says the restaurant attracts food lovers from across Rome and overseas as well.



The Pyramid of Caius Cestius is Rome’s last remaining pyramid and an important local landmark.

“There were hardly any restaurants here three years ago... It was an industrial area but it’s really becoming a gastronomic quarter.”

“Ostiense is the soul of Rome by night,” he says. “So in the evening you can start with an aperitivo, follow up with dinner and finish in a nightclub.”

Since Porto Fluviale opened in late 2012, bars and restaurants have begun popping up throughout the hip neighbourhood.

“There were hardly any restaurants here three years ago,” says Luca. “It was an industrial area but it’s really becoming a gastronomic quarter.”

It’s always hard to get a table at DoppioZero. The cocktail bar and restaurant offers a tasty buffet to complement its popular aperitivo and chef Giuliano Brenna has also created a diverse menu including salmon tartare and homemade tortelli, roasted salmon and chunky hamburgers served with buffalo mozzarella.

Gelato lovers line up at all hours of the day and night for a mouth-watering gelato at La Romana. Founded in the seaside city of Rimini by the Zucchi family in 1947, this gelateria has won the hearts of aficionados because the family uses only organic milk, fresh cream and quality fruit and nuts for its traditional recipes.

Gelato is usually served here as late as 1am, so it’s worth stopping by for flavours like blood-red orange or a show-stopping mascarpone topped with coffee and dark chocolate on your way home.



Street art is found on the walls of many abandoned buildings and railway underpasses in Ostiense.



Cocktail bar and pizzeria, Porto Fluviale, was opened inside a former warehouse.