Last Supper in Pompeii celebrates the Roman love affair with food and wine. Pompeii is the focus, from fertile countryside to bustling bars, fine houses and finally the banquet, with rich furnishings and sumptuous decor. Before Pompeii, the exhibition considers the origins of Roman customs, then in the third and final rooms, travels to Roman Britain, to see how the Romans exported their ‘food industry’.

The gods and superstition are everywhere, and in death, food and wine feature hugely. A banqueter on a British tombstone and a Pompeiian skeleton both tell us us to enjoy the banquet while we can, carpe diem, ‘sieze the day’.

The exhibition displays over 300 objects, many seen for the first time outside Italy, including mosaics, sculpture, dining and cooking ware, food items and painted wall plaster and a resin cast of a woman from Villa B at Oplontis, near Pompeii. Themes include: food production in the Bay of Naples, the atrium, dining room, kitchen and garden. It covers aspects of life and death in Roman Britain and finally, explores the story of the eruption, destruction and rediscovery of Pompeii.
Mosaic showing a bottle for fish sauce
Pompeii VII 16, 13 (House of Aulus Umbricius Scaurus), AD 23-35, Pompeii Archaeological Park

Garum, or liquamen, a sauce made from fermented fish, was key to Roman cooking. This mosaic shows a typical fish sauce bottle with the maker’s name ‘Scauri’ and the ingredients ‘scom’, short for ‘scombri’, meaning mackerel. Scaurus made a fortune from fish sauce, bought a mansion in Pompeii and set four of these panels into the floor of its entrance hall. He was one of the richest people in Pompeii.

Statue of Bacchus
marble, Piacenza, Emilia-Romagna (in the ruins of a temple), AD 50-150, National Archaeological Museum of Naples

Bacchus (Dionysos to the Greeks) was the Roman god of wine and fertility. Wearing only a wreath of ivy leaves and grapes, he holds a wine cup and his sacred staff and has his trusty companion, the panther, by his side. Bacchus and other gods were central to every aspect of food and drink. Only by gaining the gods’ support through prayers and offerings, could anything be produced, sold or consumed.

Fresco showing the wine god Bacchus and Mount Vesuvius
Pompeii IX 8,6 (House of the Centenary), AD 60-79, National Archaeological Museum of Naples

Wall painting from the slave quarters of a large house. Bacchus, god of wine and fertility, was so important to this area that he is depicted draped in a bunch of grapes. The lower slopes of Mount Vesuvius are shown spread with vine trellises of a squared, ‘pergola’ type, discovered in Roman vineyards excavated near Pompeii. Wine was central to the economy and many local estates were almost exclusively wine producers.

Bread and Bribery
Pompeii VII 3,30 (House of the Baker), AD 40-79

At first glance, this fresco seems to show commercial activity in the Forum at Pompeii. A baker is selling loaves to two men and a boy from a stall made of wooden planks. But in fact the bread seller is well dressed and is not selling, but giving away bread, a carefully timed act of generosity just before the election of town officials.
Loaf of carbonised bread
Herculaneum, VI, 21 (House of the Deer), AD 79

Shops and bars were essential to the life of Pompeii, but food and drink was also distributed in other ways. Temporary stalls sprung up on festivals and holidays. Some wealthy households imported their provisions directly from their estates while for the poor, hawkers and peddlers sold bread, pastries and sausages in the streets.

Bronze lampstand, Pompeii (House of the Ephebe), 20-10 BC, National Archaeological Museum of Naples

This lampstand or candelabrum is in the form of a young man (ephebe in Greek). He holds a frond of acanthus, which has spikes for four bronze oil lamps (now missing). For a touch of extra luxury, the lamps could be filled with scented oil. The statue is Roman and dates to around 20 BC, but is a version of a Greek statue, 400 years older.

Mosaic panel showing sea life
Bay of Naples area, 100 BC-AD 79, National Archaeological Museum of Naples

This mosaic boils with sea creatures, such as squid, eel and various types of fish, swirling around an octopus, locked in mortal combat with a lobster. It was an ‘emblema’: the centrepiece of a larger mosaic floor, and uses very small mosaic tiles (tesserae) to show fine details of colour and texture. Such panels, very Greek in style, were extremely expensive and proclaimed the family’s wealth and taste.

Terracotta doormouse jar (glirarium)
Bay of Naples area, AD 1-79, National Archaeological Museum of Naples

A doormouse would have been kept in this jar with ridges to run around. It was fattened up with acorns and chestnuts. The dark jar encouraged the doormouse to get fat, as if for hibernation. When plump, it would be removed and roasted, perhaps with a seasoning of honey and poppy seeds.
**Fresco of a cockerel and fruit**

Pompeii (House of the Chaste Lovers), AD 45-79, Pompeii Archaeological Park

The Romans loved to depict food in their art, sometimes showing a live animal eating what it would be cooked with, in this instance, cockerel stuffed with pomegranate or in pomegranate sauce. Elsewhere in this display there is a fresco of rabbit eating figs - maybe the inspiration for another Roman recipe?

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**Mortar**

Rose Hill kilns, Oxford, AD100-170, Ashmolean Museum

This mixing bowl (mortarium) was made in Oxford. Its gritted surface made it easier to grind the herbs and spices together with other ingredients, to give sauces a distinctively Roman taste. It is similar to a modern pestle and mortar.

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**Working with objects: key questions**

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for? How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- What does it tell us about life in Pompeii at the time of the eruption of Vesuvius?
- What was the role and significance of eating and drinking to the Romans?
- How might it be interpreted by different people and at different times?
- How is it different from or similar to objects in use today?
- If you had to choose 3 objects from the exhibition, which would you choose and why?

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