

Domus Romana

Imagine you are digging in your cellar and along with a lot of mud and water, you come across a past realm, with its stones and relics. This happens every time someone digs down under Lucca, since three meters below is the old Roman city. A law was passed in the year 2000 for the *tutela del sottosuolo* (protection of the underground), requiring that an archaeologist do a site survey for any digging beyond 30 cm. After this, the modernization process usually goes ahead. After all, history in Italy is everywhere. Lucca can testify to 2200 years of civilization.

On the corner of Via San Giorgio and Via Cesare Battisti, under Palazzo Orsucci, Giuseppe Bulleri decided to prepare a wine cellar under his restaurant *Locanda di Bacco*. The excavation uncovered ancient drainage channels for water, money from Tiberius (14 d.C.), a decorative bronze brooch, walls from Renaissance, Medieval, Lombard and Roman times, and more. Pieces of a terracotta frieze, representing a gorgon's head flanked by two boys astride dolphins with star-shaped eyes, were uncovered. Bulleri found a similar design from the 1700's in the Vatican Museum, and the frieze was reconstructed following this clue. Bulleri, who has conducted archaeobotanical research at Pompeii, decided to change his plans for the cellar. And so the *Domus Romana* (meaning Roman home, or domicile) project was created. This small museum is the basis for a big idea, that of promoting the Roman city underneath Lucca.

This particular street-corner, near the almost-forgotten Roman theatre outside the Roman walls (not far from Piazza Sant'Agostino), was probably an important intersection. The dolphin riders may have been a propitiatory symbol to purify the threshold.

Since opening to the public, Bulleri has organized a series of events and talks, accompanied by Roman food and drink. Last month, archaeologist Elisabetta Abela gave a fascinating talk that connected these



finds to others around town. Professor Abela has been practicing archaeology all over Italy for years, including the amazing Roman ships excavation at Pisa-San Rossore, but recently she has been so involved with the Lucca finds that she has no desire to go anywhere else. In 2002, under the direction of Prof. Ciampaltrini, she participated in the excavation of the old hospital in Via Galli Tassi, which exposed some of the original Roman walls. In Via dell'Angelo Custode and Via Sant'Andrea, Roman walls were found just 30 cm below ground, at the level of the sewer pipes. (The job of Lucca archaeologist is a muddy one; Professor Abela says that at 1.5 meters below ground, they always hit water.)

Sipping on honey mead or mint flavored juice while taking in this rich past is truly an experience. If you go to Provins (in Champagne), you will find an entire underground world opened up to tourists. Lucca would do well to follow this example, creating incentives for such dank, dark cellars – haunted by cats, rats and trash – to be converted into mini-museums, maybe with secret passageways.

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Ristorante Ammodonostro

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