

A Taste of Italy

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Story and photos by [Lillian Africano](#)

I have visited Italy many times, the most extended visit being the long-ago summer when I rented an apartment in the little town of Chiavari on the Italian Riviera. My children and I spent an idyllic summer living like Italians, shopping at the open markets and the fragrant bakeries, cooking simple meals and spending long lazy days at the beach.



Chef Fabio Choosing Ingredients at the Campo Di Fiori Market

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Though Perillo has been arranging escorted tours for well over a half century, their newest product, ItalyVacations, (www.ItalyVacations.com), offers independent travel to suit any interest – especially food and wine. Best of all, this family-run company is plugged into the Slow Food movement – so that my tastings and restaurant meals would conform to Slow Food standards.

I travelled alone, on Alitalia flights to Florence. My hotel, the five-star 18th century Grand Hotel Villa Medici was an 18th century bastion of luxury, located in a quiet neighborhood, away from the noise and bustle of the city center, but an easy cab or complimentary shuttle ride away. Once the palatial home of a wealthy Florentine family, the Villa Medici's heritage is reflected in the antiques that grace its public areas. The 100 spacious rooms and suites, however, are a comfortable fusion of the old and new, many furnished in pale, neutral colors, with sumptuous marble bathrooms, jetted tubs and high-end amenities, as well as flat-screen TVs and in-room WiFi.



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My first tasting was at the Caffè Mangiafoco (Borgo Santi Apostoli, 26), a charming wine bar located in a 14th century building, small and unpretentious from the street, but spacious and authentically atmospheric inside. It's a place where locals stop by for a glass of wine and conversation with owner Francesco Nuti. My guide for the evening was Cristina, who spoke excellent English and who was as knowledgeable about Italy's food products as she was about wine.



This Trip Renewed My Appreciation of Italy's Extraordinary Cheeses

A 2007 Chianti Classico from the nearby estate of Podere il Palazzino was my first wine. Pronounced one of the area's best by Francesco, it was served with small rounds of Tuscan bread, salt and pepper, extra virgin olive oil produced in 2010 in Florence, along with a super-rich balsamic vinegar from Modena. I don't always love Chianti, but this one was dry, not harsh, with bright flavors and a nice finish.

Next came a *Tagliere Mangiafoco*, a sampling of typical Tuscan *salumi* and a selection of cheeses, accompanied by a warm bread that was almost like *focaccia*, an organic honey and what the Italians call "marmalade," a jelly made with Vermentino wine. My second wine was a Montecucco Marleo Rosso 2009, made with 90% Sangiovese grapes and 10% from Ciliegiolo grapes, which Cristina described as a

Sangiovese "clone." This was my favorite tasting, for I discovered a sublime Pecorino with black truffles, a Sardinian product made from raw sheep's milk. With the marmalade and the gorgeous ruby-red wine that was redolent of red fruit, this was tasting bliss.

The final wine, an Inseglio del Cinghiale 2009 accompanied a Papa al Pomodoro (a bread and tomato soup) and a ricotta and asparagus ravioli with butter and sage. These were pleasant enough, but what I left with was a renewed appreciation of Italy's extraordinary cheeses, honeys and jellies.

The following morning, after a lavish breakfast in the hotel's Conservatory restaurant, I walked to the city's oldest gelateria (opened in 1939), a place called **Perchè No!** (www.percheno.firenze.it).

After meeting and greeting owners Cecilia Cammilli and Francesco Cioni, I watched as Francesco blended three simple ingredients -- bananas, sugar and water -- and poured them into the gelato machine. Soon the machine brought forth a smooth and creamy banana dessert that had I not watched the preparation, I would have sworn contained milk or cream.

I tasted many flavors here, including cardamom, rose, hazelnut, strawberry, vanilla and more; some had the imprimatur (the photo of a snail) of the Slow Food movement. All were made with care, fresh every day, with no binders, no additives, no coloring. As a result, everything had the color that Nature gave and nothing else; for example, the pistachio gelato was beige, not green. To demonstrate the purity of her gelato, Cecilia challenged me to a blind-tasting. I closed my eyes and when she put a spoonful of something near my face, I inhaled the unmistakable aroma of lavender and named it. Cecilia smiled, pleased that her products presented themselves so accurately. I said good-bye reluctantly to the flavors I hadn't tasted, not because I was tired of ice cream, but because there was lunch to be enjoyed in a few short hours.

My destination: the Hostaria del Bricco (www.osteriadelbricco.it), located in a 15th century building that was once a stable. A good number of Italian families were already seated for Sunday dinner, and as there was no televised soccer that afternoon, no one was in a hurry to leave.

Owner Daniele Bacci quickly brought me a bottle of Chianti and a plate of *crostini* with toppings: chicken liver, onions, eggplant, peppers and mushrooms. These weren't as refined as the tastings I'd had at Mangiafocco, but then this was a "down-home" kind of place serving authentic home cooking. Next course was a pasta with artichokes and ricotta, followed by rabbit served with fresh peas. I tried not to think of lovable bunnies when this was last dish was placed before me and managed to sample enough to please the chef.

Chef Fabio Bongianini Conducts Cooking Classes in His Elegant Apartment Near the Spanish Steps

The following day I joined a Perillo escorted tour that was in the city, headed for the 18th century Tenuta Torciano winery in San Gimignano. This highly educational visit offered superb wine, excellent food and lots of stand-up comedy by Pierluigi Giachi, the 13th generation in a long family line of winemakers. The afternoon was like a dazzling ballet of wines -- Chianti, Vernaccia, Brunello, Vinsanto, to name a few -- accompanied by an equally impressive parade of food -- cheeses, salami, bruschetta, lasagna, and more -- along with truffle oil and fine balsamic vinegar. We feasted like royalty while Pierluigi instructed us in the care of wines, young and medium and old, the glasses in which they should be drunk, the foods they should accompany, and so on.



For the second leg of my trip, Rome, I boarded a first-class carriage on the Eurostar Express for a pleasant and comfortable journey. My hotel, the Rose Garden Palace, is a fusion of old and new, a tastefully restored historic building with comfortable well-designed rooms and modern amenities, including an inviting fitness center, flat-screen TVs and complimentary in-room WiFi. The restaurant, set amid the eponymous garden, was bright, cheerful and clearly popular with locals. The daily menu was excellent, and one item made me smile: a decidedly non-Italian pizza that included pineapple topping -- a nod to Wolfgang Puck perhaps?

My first evening in the city, I shared a four-hour dinner with some Slow Food advocates at the Osteria Armando al Pantheon (Salita dei Crescenzi, 31). Their passion for good, honest food was shared by brothers Claudio and Fabrizio Gargioli, who owned the restaurant – and who wowed us with one extraordinary dish after another, including a hearty soup with mushrooms, orzo and truffles; roasted baby lamb; and, of course, artichokes, which were in season.

In spite of feasting late into the night, I was up early and ready for my cooking class with with Chef Fabio Bongianni (www.fabiolouscookingday.com). His apartment, in an elegant building, near the Spanish Steps, was once owned by an Italian *principessa*; it has gorgeous city views – and the kind of sprawling space a New Yorker would envy.

Before we cooked, the chef took us on a foodie walking tour, stopping at Da Giggetto, the most famous restaurant in Rome's Jewish Ghetto. Outside the front door, we found a small mountain of artichokes, waiting to be cleaned and prepared as the restaurant's specialties – fried artichokes that open into flowers and fried zucchini flowers stuffed with mozzarella and anchovies.



These Fresh Plump and Juicy Tomatoes Would be Used for the Bruschetta During Our Cooking Lesson

We moved on to the Campo di Fiori – a fragrant open-air bazaar of everything seasonal and fresh-- to shop for the ingredients we'd use in our class. Chef Fabio made his selections and we headed back to his apartment, divided into groups and given different tasks: chopping and marinating tomatoes, to be used in bruschetta; measuring out flour for each student, to be used for homemade pasta; separating eggs, the yolks also to be used for pasta.

With encouragement from Chef Fabio, we made enough pasta noodles and ravioli for our meal. We cooked enthusiastically, preparing a main course and a dessert – and then, in a turnabout, the chef served us our lunch, along with appropriate wines, in his dining room. We felt like real chefs, among new friends, enjoying the results of our

labor.

That was my last excellent Italian food adventure and all too soon it was time to go home. Next time, I thought, next time I would go to Umbria, known as the "green heart of Italy," the place where crisp, peachy Orvieto is produced, where both black and white truffles abound. And who doesn't love wine and truffles?

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The official magazine of:

International Food Wine & Travel Writers Association (IFWTWA)

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