

By David Yeadon



Aliano

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www.solimeneceramica.it

## Bowled Over in VIETRI

There is a hilltop town on Italy's Amalfi Coast whose ceramics animate kitchens and dining rooms around the globe with sensuous colors, Mediterranean light and a joyous spirit. The town is Vietri sul Mare, for centuries a seaside resort and ceramic-making center. Vietri's naïvely decorated *terra cotta* vases, tiles, coffee cups, wine pitchers and plates are the distilled, idealized essence of its culture, climate and surroundings.

Around Vietri, whitewashed houses cling like barnacles to sheer rock faces that have been sculpted into orchards and vineyards. Vibrant yellow lemons and clusters of purple grapes ripen together on rustic trellises. Weathered fishing boats with rose-colored hulls cut across the cobalt blue of the Gulf of Salerno. Wherever you look, the sun pours down through a powder-blue sky. It bakes the russet-colored *terra cotta* roofs. It glints off the bright green-and-yellow majolica-tiled cupola of the church of San Giovanni Battista, Vietri's physical and spiritual core for the last thousand years.

While most of Amalfi's stunning seaboard lives off tourism, industrious Vietri sul Mare carries on a craft tradition passed from generation to generation since at least the Middle Ages. On the southern edge of town the startling Vincenzo Solimene ceramics factory designed by Paolo Soleri — a student of Frank Lloyd Wright — raises its turreted, *terra cotta*-studded mass, a hint of what lies in Vietri's historic center.

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# DREAM OF ITALY

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## Seasons in Basilicata A Home in Aliano

Award-winning travel writer/illustrator David Yeadon was inspired and intrigued by Carlo Levi's groundbreaking expose of the poverty and mysticism of southern Italy in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. The book, which came to win international acclaim, recorded Levi's 1935 confinement as a political prisoner in Aliano, a remote, and virtually inaccessible southern Italian hill village. "This is a closed world, shrouded in black veils, bloody and earthy — that other world where the peasants live and which no one can enter without a magic key," Levi wrote of Aliano.

A few years ago, Yeadon and his wife, Anne, set out on an exploration of the wild, mountainous "lost world" of Basilicata in the arch of Italy's boot and made a home in Levi's Aliano. Here they became immersed in the rich pagan-laced tapestry of people, traditions, festivals and feasts and stayed far longer than originally intended, beguiled by the delights and the "dark side" elements of this strange and little-known region.

In this excerpt from his newly published book *Seasons in Basilicata* (HarperCollins, \$25.95), Yeadon describes his first visit to the region and his attempt to find a place to stay in Aliano.

The drive south from Rome became increasingly dramatic. The mountains rose abruptly, aggressively, from the valley floor and huddled, huge and ogre-like, striated with eroded, skeletal-white strata, their summits bare and wild. Freeway signs to Naples, "Capital of the South,"

beckoned, but I decided to save that intense and intrigue-laced city for a future visit and instead soared on southwards around cloud-cocooned Vesuvius and down into the mammoth ranges. Here, I sensed, was the true topographic barrier between north and

*continued on page 4*

Carlo Levi gave Aliano the fictitious name Gagliano in his book.



As you stroll among scores of workshops and overflowing ceramics boutiques on the town's winding main street you experience two worlds, one real, the other painted with deceptively simple motifs. Platters brightened by low-relief lemons are stacked among smiling tiled suns and winking moons, flanked by cornucopia-motif vases and umbrella stands swirled with groups of stylized peasants at work or play. There are tiles everywhere — on walls, floors, flower containers, cafe counters and roofs.



vista of Vietri, surrounded by tiled baskets of peaches, carrots, melons and more grapes, melds with the luscious real fruit piled high in front of it. One of the earliest records of Vietri — almost 1,200 years old — speaks not only of ceramics, but also of “a land of vineyards and orchards.”

At the intersection of an alley leading to the *Church of San Giovanni Battista* a large tiled scene depicts Saracens invading the town in the Middle Ages. Pirates dash off a two-masted galley to burn and pillage the town but are repelled by heroic locals. The façade of the *Avallone* ceramics shop a hundred yards north of the intersection portrays, on one side, a lively grape harvest and a barefoot-winemaking scene. On the other is a hunting scene in the archaic, angular style of nearby *Paestum*, the ancient city of *Magna Graecia* whose palaces and temples were scavenged a thousand years ago to build Salerno

and villages like Vietri on the Amalfi Coast.

Archaeological finds suggest that Vietri — known as *Marcina* in antiquity — may have been producing tableware back in Paestum's heyday 2,500 years ago. It is certain that the highly sought after local *Ogliara* clay still used today has been quarried for millennia. When fired in a kiln, this grayish, non-porous clay turns terra cotta red. More homogeneous and durable than many Mediterranean types of clay, its abundance helps explain Vietri's initial vocation as a ceramics center and its long-running success. Today some 30 small ceramics workshops, three factories and dozens of shops employ a large share of the population.

Beyond *Ogliara* clay the most distinctive feature of Vietri's ceramics derives from the fact that they are still entirely handmade and kiln-fired twice: objects and tiles are shaped, air-dried, fired,



Vietri's oldest ceramics workshop, *Ceramiche Pinto*, is tiled from street-level to second floor with scenes of village life: women in traditional costumes draw water from a splashing fountain; fishing boats float off the coast while a seahorse dances with an octopus; winemakers harvest the local black-hued grapes from surrounding hillsides then fly into a bacchanalian feast. Further along the bustling, pedestrian-only street, at *Papalino Frutta Genuina* (a grocery store), a tiled

2



## The Details



Upon request you can visit most of Vietri's workshops and factories. All will make ceramics and tiles to order.

### Ceramica Artistica Solimene di Solimene Vincenzo s.n.c.

Via Madonna degli Angeli, 7  
(39) 089 210243  
www.solimeneeceramica.com

Housed in an extraordinary factory designed by Paolo Soleri, Vincenzo Solimene and his family make all the classic Vietri ceramic tableware,

including the country-style *Decoro Campagna* set, decorated with farmyard animals, which Bill Clinton fell in love with during his 1992 visit.

### Ceramica Vietri Mare Fratelli Solimene

Via XXV Luglio, 15  
(39) 089 210048  
www.solimene.it

Founded by brothers Francesco and Antonio Solimene, this large factory on the north end of town

produces a wide range of traditional Vietri ceramics, including decorative tiles that are silk-screened and hand-painted.

### Ceramica Artistica Vincenzo Pinto

Corso Umberto Primo  
(39) 089/210271  
www.pintoceramica.it

Vietri's oldest workshop, founded in 1850, Pinto still prepares its own glazes with antique mills. Beautifully decorated floor tiles are this com-

pany's specialty, though Pinto craftsmen continue to produce classic ceramic tableware.

### Museo della Ceramica

Torretta di Villa Guariglia  
(39) 089 211835

This museum displays local ceramics from the 1600s to the present. Open 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday.



Photos of Vietri courtesy of the Italian Tourism Board. Photos of tiles and painting of plate, courtesy of www.solimene.it Photo of plates, courtesy of www.solimeneeceramica.it

Legends tell of a nymph named Amalfi who haun



# Just in Time for Halloween: TALES FROM THE MEDICI CRYPT



www.comune.vietri-sul-mare.sa.it

glazed with a white background, decorated by hand, then fired again. The result is a luminous, one-of-a-kind creation, each representing a subtly different variation on a classic, naïve Vietri theme.

Surprisingly, some of the town's signature designs were created not by locals, but by visiting artists during the so-called "German Period" of the 1920s and '30s. That is when ceramist *Richard Dölker*, a teacher at the Fine Arts Academy of Stuttgart, fell in love with Vietri and opened a small factory near the town's waterfront. To the traditional, 19th-century repertoire of decorations (flowers, grapevines, curlicues, dots and lemons) Dölker and his pupils added scenes from daily life: antique fishing boats and costumed washerwomen, donkey carts and peasants, now known as *Pupazzetti Vietresi*.

Though the donkeys and peasants of old live on solely in modern Vietri's ceramics, the sun, sea and terraced vineyards — and the Amalfi Coast's timeless spirit of place — are little changed since antiquity. If you feel like you know the place already you should not be surprised: flip over your favorite decorated Italian ceramic dish and you might well find the words "Vietri sul Mare." ♦

—David D. Downie

*Downie wrote about a Salerno buffalo dairy in the July/August 2003 issue. He is the author of Cooking the Roman Way: Authentic Recipes from the Home Cooks to the Trattorias of Rome (Harper Collins, 2002).*

American and Italian scientists are in the midst of a two-year project to solve the mysteries surrounding the *Medici*, the powerful family that ruled Florence from 1434 to 1737. The basis of the study comes from an unusual place — the remains of 49 bodies of family members being exhumed from the *Medici Crypt* in Florence's *Basilica di San Lorenzo*. Scientists expect the latest forensic tools will reveal how the Medicis lived and perhaps, just as importantly how they died.



surprises as the crypt has not been opened in over a century and some of the bodies have never been exhumed.

"Studies have been done on crypts of monks, hundreds of Capuchin friars in southern Italy...but nobody has ever worked on a royal population," says Dr. Brier who is also one of the project's lead researchers.

"In a sense, we're looking at the lifestyle of the rich and famous." ♦

—K.M.



The family of bankers and Renaissance patrons, which also included three popes and

two queens of France, had their share of mysterious deaths. For example, *Francesco I's* successor, his brother *Ferdinando I*, insisted malaria killed Francesco in 1587. But did his symptoms match up? And why did Francesco's second wife — hated by Ferdinando — die one day later of the same mysterious symptoms? Is she one of the two unclaimed women's bodies also buried in the crypt? DNA samples taken from the bodies and studied at the University of Pisa could answer these questions.

If you would like an up-close look at the crypt and the on-site lab at the intimate Laurentian Crypt, tune in to *Mummy Detective: Crypt of the Medici* on the cable television channel, TLC. The program, hosted by Dr. Bob Brier, premiered on October 17th and will be repeated. There are sure to be some

## DREAM OF ITALY

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ted the shore and became the lover of Hercules.



# And way, way up – over fifteen hundred feet up from the valley road

south Italy, the place where the strangeness begins – a gateway to the great bastion of Basilicata itself.

Further to the south the weather and the topography turned surly as I watched valley mists move like ancient oceans against the bare hills and ridges. From the wide, fertile valley of the *Sauro River*, dry as a dustbowl, a ridge rose abruptly, dotted with strangely eroded buttes and green-clay gorges that looked recently torn out of the soft, oozy earth. Straggly olive orchards clung to tiny patches of land between the eroded clefts. And way, way up – over fifteen hundred feet up from the valley road – perched little Aliano, like a craggy, half-completed fortress.

with olive-branch prunings; a huge blue bus, the local public transport; one of those rickety three-wheeler Ape trucklets, with a maximum uphill speed of around five m.p.h., and an old woman on foot bearing a voluminous bundle of kindling twigs on her scarved head. The woman was half hidden by a tumult of weeds and brush that overhung the road, and I had to swerve quite dramatically to miss her. The look from her enraged eyes seared through my car window like a laser, and as I continued upward, I wondered if her irate gesticulations were an omen of things to come.

but spectacular mountain vistas in almost every direction and then immediately began a precipitous tumble. Older buildings, some with ancient stone façades, began to close in tightly as the road continued its steep descent. And then, with no warning and in that wonderful way that

Italians articulate urban spaces and the “accidental aesthetics” of architecture-without-architects and townscape-without-city-planners, the road flared out at the bottom of the hill into a

piazza boasting an elegant circular paving pattern of cobbles and smooth black stones. Across the piazza a church rose up with whitewashed walls and a sturdy stone tower. Small streets wriggled away in various directions around a couple of prominent palazzos. The main street, set at a right angle to my descent, was broad, neatly paved, tree lined, and dotted with small stores and coffee bars.

I like the look of this, I thought. I'd expected something a lot tougher and surlier from Levi's descriptions.

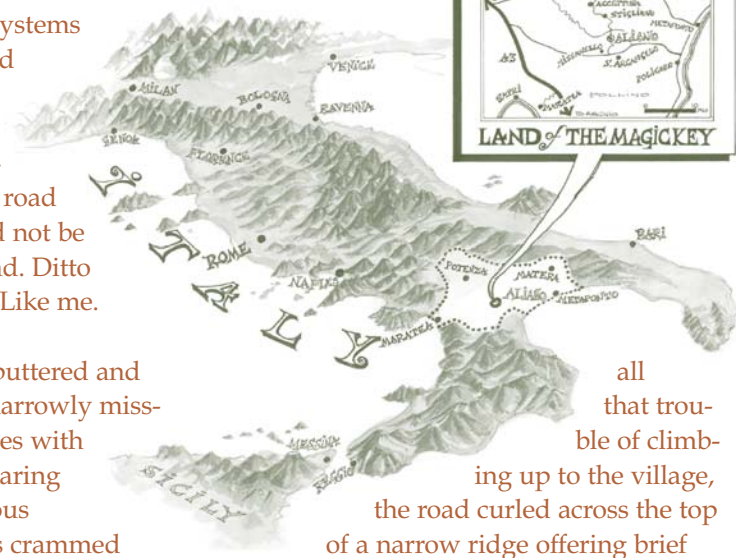
But as I drove slowly down the main street, the pavement suddenly appeared to vanish and tumble into a dramatically eroded gorge hundreds of feet deep. The road made a sudden turn to the left by another coffee bar, but the shock of that abrupt precipice remained and increased as I continued my exploration of the village.

The main street had indeed been something of an illusion. Beyond the tightly clustered dwellings I caught glimpses of Aliano's *panorama calanchistico*, vistas of startling precipices studded with ancient cave dwellings. Elsewhere,

I counted 22 hairpin bends and a dozen or so additional tight curves on the painfully slow ascent to the village. I'm sure the ever-increasing breadth of views across the rolling green wheat fields and the high, craggy hills beyond must have been spectacular. But I wouldn't know. I was too aware of the fact that most of the twists and turns were densely crowded in by ancient olive groves full of fractured and contorted branches and even more contorted root systems that curled and looped around one another like orgies of serpents. Anything coming down the narrow road from the village could not be spotted until mid-bend. Ditto anything coming up. Like me.

Welcome to Aliano, I whispered to myself. Don't forget all Levi's warnings about the *pagani* strangeness here and the life-and-death power of village witches. This, I knew, was an ancient and mysterious place. Possibly more than 9,000 years old, according to the findings at a necropolis near Aliano's sister village, *Alianello*. Tread lightly.

Having gone to



My little rented car sputtered and choked in first gear, narrowly missing traumatic interfaces with two donkeys, both bearing on their sides enormous straw pannier baskets crammed

all that trouble of climbing up to the village, the road curled across the top of a narrow ridge offering brief

“No one has come to this land except as an enemy, a conq

## d – perched little Aliano, like a craggy, half-completed fortress.

blank windows stared out of cracked and broken walls, buildings leaned drunkenly, and in a lower section of the village two tightly clustered clumps of seemingly abandoned houses — the perfect setting for some werewolf or vampire horror movie — perched precariously on even more vertical precipices. A sudden shudder of strata would send the lot tumbling and shattering into the ghost-colored gorges far below.



anything really, particularly after it became clear that his claim to speak a “little” English was utterly without foundation. He spoke none at all. But when you’re in a serendipitous mode, you don’t think about such things. You just dive in and “let the systems run.”

Something in his understanding of what I expressed in flowery body language obviously touched

again. I hadn’t the heart to remind him that the coffee was really meant for me because he had gone into a paroxysm of dialing and slamming down the phone and redialing until...

“Ah, Don Pierino. Aldo. Si, si. Per favore...” And the rest became one of those amazing steeplechase-paced Italian monologues that always seem to suggest the speaker is a fully accredited master of the Australian “circular breathing” didgeridoo-playing technique.

## His name was Aldo. I don’t think I’d ever met an Italian Aldo before, or since...

I was beginning to rethink my initial optimism as I backtracked to the main piazza, parked the car, and sat outside one of the coffee bars ruminating over a late morning *caffè latte*. Old, diminutive men with bowed backs stood or sat around the other side of the street watching me warily, and I sensed in the eerie silence Levi’s “age old stillness of the peasant world.”

But then things changed as they always do when you let serendipity guide your actions.

His name was *Aldo*. I don’t think I’d ever met an Italian Aldo before, or since, but he was a charming, slightly nerdy-looking youth who happened to be behind the counter at the second of the three coffee bars on Aliano’s main street. His helpful, ingratiating smile made me warm to him immediately, and as he was preparing my cappuccino, I let it drop that I liked Aliano very much and wished I could live here for a while. I didn’t expect

a nerve, and his face lit up even more brightly than when I’d first walked in. He abruptly paused in mid-cappuccino-frothing. The machine obviously didn’t like such erratic treatment and began spitting and wheezing like an asthmatic harridan. (If you’ve never seen one of these, watch out.) “Live? Here? In Aliano? You?” At least I think that’s what he said.

“Yes, I would like.”

Aldo’s grin widened, and he was about to pick up the phone behind the counter when I tactfully suggested, by more expressive body language, that I thought his ancient espresso machine was about to explode. “Ah,” he said. “Grazie,” and completed the ritual of cappuccino-making, put the cup down on his side of the counter, and then picked up the phone



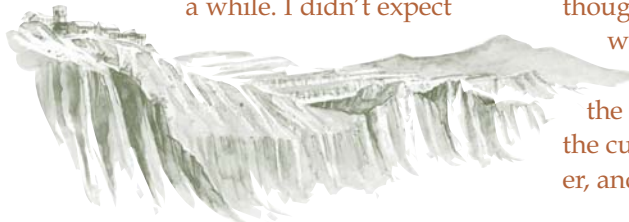
“Bene. We go. To Don Pierino. Our priest. Very nice man.” (Or something along those lines.)

And with that he came around the counter, took off his apron, led me out of the door (my coffee obviously now completely forgotten), and locked up the bar. Locked it! Unheard of in Italy. You don’t lock up bars during opening hours. But he

didn’t give it a second thought. Outside, he led me at a strapping pace uphill from the piazza to a building around the corner from the church that was oddly painted (mud brown and moldy lemon), institutional looking, and plastered in *manifesti funebri* (Italy’s ubiquitous, black-bordered funeral notices). He rang the intercom, and we were immediately buzzed in. We climbed steep stairs to a tiny office packed with books, papers, Bibles, and

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ueror, or a visitor, devoid of understanding.” —Carlo Levi



# News, Tips, Deals

## Opera Houses Unveil Makeovers



Over the course of its history, Venice's *Teatro La Fenice* (The Phoenix) has certainly earned its name. After sustaining significant damage from three devastating fires, this



Teatro La Fenice

cultural landmark has risen from the ashes an astounding three times. It burned to the ground once in 1790, and again

in 1836. After each tragedy, the Venetian people pulled together and rebuilt their beloved opera house. By 1995, Venetian officials decided that modern electrical and fire prevention systems were badly needed. As dredging work began on many of La Fenice's surrounding canals, an undertaking of significant proportions commenced within the structure itself.

Unimaginably, on January 29, 1996, La Fenice suffered another disaster. Already four months behind the reconstruction's schedule, La Fenice was again destroyed by fire. The seemingly cursed theater would have to be rebuilt one more time. Fast forward to today and Venetians are eagerly awaiting the November reopening of La Fenice. Following political debates and construction delays, the theater will open its curtains on November 12, 2004 with the premiere of *La Traviata*, the opera written by *Verdi* in 1853 for La Fenice's company. *La Traviata* will run for eight days. Ticket prices range from \$60 to \$1,450.

For more information, call (39) 041 786575 or visit [www.teatrolafenice.it](http://www.teatrolafenice.it)

Renovations of a less drastic scale are also nearing completion at Milan's famous *Teatro La Scala*. Since December 2001, construction totaling \$67 million has been focused on the expansion of seating as well as more storage space for sets. (Performances have been temporarily held at Milan's *Teatro degli Arcimboldi*.) With these changes, the theater will no longer be limited to certain types of productions. Restorative work has also been done on the flooring, revealing beautiful Venetian marble and *terra cotta* tiles under the more recently used carpeting. The project's architect, *Mario Botta* said, "We kept all the historical parts in all their particulars."

On December 7, 2004, the theater's traditional opening day as well as St. Ambrose's Day, opera fans can judge *Botta's* work for themselves when the opera house stages a grand reopening. *Salieri's Europa Riconosciuta*, the same



Teatro La Scala

opera that played on La Scala's opening night in 1778, will be performed. Tickets are extremely hard to get but

may be available through ticket agents such as *NWtix* ([www.nwtix.com](http://www.nwtix.com), 800-281-0753) For more information on *La Scala*, call (39) 02 86077 or visit [www.teatroallascala.org](http://www.teatroallascala.org) ♦

— Caitlin Finnegan

## Pimsleur Makes Learning

The hardest part of learning a new language, I've discovered, is getting my kids to stop trying to learn along with me. My two school-age daughters are so fascinated by the process of learning Italian as I do that they have happily abandoned their computer games, IM sessions, and favorite television sitcoms to sit with me in the backyard and listen to the 30 lessons of *Pimsleur Comprehensive Italian I*.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for my kids learning anything — and a second language? *Quanto grande che è?* But their rapid-fire, syncopated responses are getting in the way of my poor aging brain's ability to



take in all the new words, phrases, and sounds that I'm hearing. Finally, on CD number seven during my first of four weeks learning Italian in preparation for a trip, I leave them outside and banish myself to my office so that I can concentrate, as Dr. Paul Pimsleur, creator of the Pimsleur Method™ instructed when he developed his system.

Pimsleur Spoken Language Systems have a long and trusted history — they are the language-learning system of choice for institutions like the CIA and the U.S. State Department, who find

“The impulse to travel is one of the hope

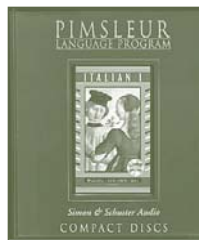


# and Events



## ning Italian Simple

that its combination of deep memorization and easy-to-use cassettes or CDs makes it effective for the largest number of people.



Newer programs exist, like the celebrated *Rosetta Stone*, which is language-learning software — one of its bonuses is that it allows for written language practice. I tried the Rosetta Stone Italian course and found that I preferred its larger use of vocabulary but (despite much computer experience, including developing CD-based curricula) found I could not get past a number of bugs in its sophisticated structure.

Back to Pimsleur. So you ask, did it work? *Si, certo!* By the time I took off for two weeks in Tuscany, my Italian (although certainly elementary), was serviceable — and my pronunciation, guided by the Pimsleur experts, was excellent, prompting compliments from many quarters. I highly recommend Pimsleur for your Italian language instruction — and so do my daughters, who have now commandeered the Pimsleur box and are trying to catch up to Mom. ♦

— Bethanne Kelly Patrick

The 16-CD set of Pimsleur Comprehensive Italian I is \$276 through [www.pimsleurdirect.com](http://www.pimsleurdirect.com)

## And Restorations on the Art Front...

### AREZZO (TUSCANY)

The renowned painted Crucifix (c.1268-71, tempera on wood, 336 by 267 cm), by the Florentine artist *Giovanni Cimabue*, has recently been returned to the *Basilica di San Domenico* after a complicated process attempting to fully restore the painting from the severe damage it incurred in the 1966 floods of Florence. Cimabue, famous for instructing the master *Giotto*, set the precedent for early Italian Renaissance art in his more realistic treatment of subject matter that diverged from the stoic, impersonal attributes of Byzantine Art. *Piazza San Domenico, 7; (39) 0575 22906; [www.comune.arezzo.it](http://www.comune.arezzo.it)*

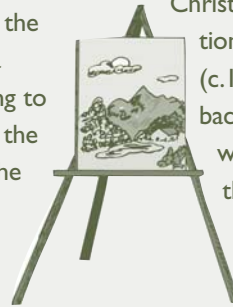


figure of Christ, but revolutionary in *Masaccio's* mathematical use of perspective in painting, exemplified by his depiction of the barrel vault above Christ. Also, after 12 years of restoration, Florentine artist Giotto's *Crucifix*, (c.1290-1300, tempera on panel) is back on display. Giotto's best panel work, the painted crucifix hangs in the front of the nave, making it easy to see how this artist's talents inspired Florentines such as *Masaccio* and *Michelangelo*. *Piazza Santa Maria Novella; (39) 055 282187; [www.comune.firenze.it](http://www.comune.firenze.it)*

### VENICE

The palace of the aristocratic family Rezzonico, completed in 1750, is now finally (having been under restoration since 1979) restored to its original splendor. The apotheosis of 18th century Venetian brilliance, *Palazzo di Ca' Rezzonico* boasts the most comprehensive collection of 18th century Venetian art (by such artists as *Canaletto*, *Rosalba Carriera*, *Giambattista Tiepolo* and *Francesco Guardi*), tapestries and furniture. This breathtaking palace is worth the trip if one is interested in traveling back in time to an era of mesmerizing grandeur. *Fondamenta Rezzonico, Dorsoduro 3136; (39) 041 2410100; [www.comune.venezia.it](http://www.comune.venezia.it)*



### FLORENCE

Inside the *Basilica di Santa Maria Novella*, a site to see in itself because of its decorative white and green marble façade and hybridization of Gothic and Renaissance style architecture, there are two newly renovated masterpieces that anyone interested in art must see. After three years of restoration, Masaccio's *Trinity* (c. 1426-7), the fresco on the left wall in the middle of the nave of the church, is finally unobstructed. This painting is famous for its realism of the



—Elizabeth Tocci

1 € = \$1.23 at press time

ful symptoms of life.” —Agnes Reppelier

# But hardly had we settled in and cooked our first gargantuan Italian dinner together, before the strangeness began...

hundreds of religious tracts.

And there he sat, the closest thing to a sparkling-eyed, ironic-smiling, leprechaun-faced Irish-Italian priest I'd ever seen. And, as with Aldo, I liked him immediately, especially when he told me in a fair shot of coherent English how much he'd enjoyed his two trips to New York, including to one Bronx neighborhood – he couldn't remember exactly which one – that contained "more Alianese than Aliano."



Don Pierino (Little Peter) Dilenge had been Aliano's priest for more than 30 years. Little did I know when I met him just how much this man would become involved in our life and experiences here. But for the moment, after a few hesitant "Italianish" pleasantries, it was down to business. "So – we must find you home here in Aliano. Yes?"

"Oh yes – please." I gushed.

The good Don out-Aldoed Aldo in the speed and precision of his movements. Phone in his ear. Numbers rattled off. Silence. Then not. Then another one of those Italian monologues with a few pauses for responses from the other end. And it was all over.

Next thing I knew I was back in the piazza with the priest and shaking hands with *Giuseppina*, a plump, elderly lady, dressed like most of the other village women in ritual mourning black. A wonderful aroma of warm

olive oil, Parmesan, and garlic wafted around her. She led us both inside and up the steep tiled steps of a sturdy stone house overlooking the main street. We entered an apartment on the third floor, neatly furnished with huge cupboards of family china and glasses, a TV and stereo, books, even a guitar (at last, maybe I'd be able to revive my once enthusiastic involvement in folk singing), a large fireplace, and a bright little kitchen with a gas stove, fridge, and double sink. There was a sparkling-white tile bathroom too, and a large bedroom with a double bed and enormous pieces of that ultra-rococo carved-wood furniture that Italians seemed to love, teeming with curlicues and floral flourishes and even a couple of cherubs at the headboard below a stately crocheted portrait of the *Madonna* in a richly gilded baroque frame.

Both the bedroom and the living room had small balconies and spectacular views of Aliano's North Dakota-type scenery to the east. It was an admirable apartment for 15€ a day – negotiated by Don Pierino and a truly serendipitous steal. Then Giuseppina opened another door near the entryway to what I assumed would be a storeroom of sorts. And there it was – like a dream – a huge terrace, bedecked in plants and flowers and pepper bushes and flurries of tomatoes, tubs of basil, mint, rosemary,

oregano and other less familiar herbs – even a small table for dining and a metal-frame bed in case I wanted to sleep outside. And of course, those million-dollar vistas across the piazza, over the whole town and the vast towering magnitude of the western mountains of Calabria.

I tried to suppress my enthusiasm – that 15€ a day could quickly have risen to 50 if I'd started to dance a jig – but my eyes and my overly flushed face must have spoken volumes, because Giuseppina smiled brilliantly, squeezed my hand, and invited the good Don and me down to her apartment on the floor below to seal the deal with a glass of a strong local *Amaro Lucana* liqueur.



Ten minutes later, I was alone on my terrace dancing that jig for all the street below to see, and telling myself that this could not possibly have happened in less than half an hour from my arrival at wonderful Aldo's beautiful bar and my introduction to a perfect priest and one of the nicest landladies it had ever been my pleasure to meet.

Anne arrived a few days later and we danced more jigs of delight together on that splendid terrace. But hardly had we settled in and cooked our first gargantuan Italian dinner together, before the strangeness began... ♦

*All illustrations by David Yeadon.*



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