



Judy Weiss, Cucina Cucina

INSIDE:
Where Italian Buffaloes Roam 4
Read Italy: Summer Books 5
Sicily's Private Homes 6
News, Tips, Deals and Events 8



PAY A VISIT TO FOUR OF Florence's Other Museums

Between the noise, the traffic, the heat, the dust of 600-year-old buildings and the exhaust of motor scooters and tour buses, along with the squadrons of German and Italian tourists dutifully following the high-held umbrella or long-stemmed plastic rose, it's a wonder why anyone ventures to Florence anymore, much less returns again and again. The author Mary McCarthy enumerates each of these complaints and about 100 more in the first 10 pages of her narrative guide, *The Stones of Florence*. The amazing thing is that this book was written 40 years ago! The only difference today is that now hordes of American and Japanese tourists are also being herded through the narrow, sidewalk-less streets, urged on by honking taxis and scooters.

In the rest of her book, McCarthy eloquently answers the question "How can you stand it?" I have my own personal cure, one that every visitor to the city can use. I escape to Florence's lesser-known (than the *Uffizi*) museums, which, though listed in almost every guidebook, are rarely visited by tourists and never by tour groups. Here is a guide to my favorites:

continued on page 2

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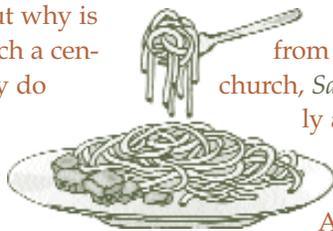
July/August 2003

Bologna Begs You to Take Another Bite

Welcome to Bologna, the "The Fat Town" (*Bologna la grassa*) of Italy. No trip to Italy would be complete without a visit to what is widely recognized as the food capital of the old country. But why is Bologna considered to be such a center of culinary delights? Why do Italians from all parts of the country agree that *si mangia bene a Bologna* (you eat well in Bologna)? You certainly won't suffer from hunger pains in other Italian regions, but while Naples, Tuscany and Rome have their respective gastronomic pleasures, there is something about Bologna that keeps it head and shoulders above the rest.

Named a European city of culture (*Città Europea della Cultura*) by the European Union in 2000, Bologna is most famous for its historic university,

founded in 1088 and the oldest in all of Europe. The city is also well known for its unique architecture, with beautiful porticoed streets to protect pedestrians from the rainy and windy late autumn and winter months. These porticoes come sweeping down from Bologna's most famous church, *San Luca*, situated beautifully atop the hills surrounding the city.



Another architectural landmark of Bologna are the *due torre* (two towers) that loom over the city center. Visitors will be interested to notice that one tower has a pronounced lean to it, just like another famous leaning tower in Tuscany! However, even with all of these great attractions Bologna, situated somewhat evenly between the tourist havens of Florence, Venice and Rome, is often overlooked by tourists.

continued on page 10

"The Creator made Italy from designs by Michelangelo." —Mark Twain

Florence Museums *continued from page 1*

MUSEO DELLA SPECOLA

The Florence Zoological Museum or *La Specola* must be one of the most offbeat museums in all of Europe. It will certainly appeal to most children and to any adult who possesses a whimsical but slightly macabre sense of humor. Tucked away on the third floor of a palazzo on *Via Romana*, just past the *Palazzo Pitti*, this small museum boasts room after well-organized room of stuffed or preserved mammals, mollusks, birds and reptiles — from the smallest tapeworm and hummingbird to a taxidermist's ultimate accomplishment, a grinning hippopotamus. Although this might appear to be the collection of a 19th-century colonial great white hunter, in reality the zoological exhibits came from the collection of Grand Duke Leopold of Lorraine, who ruled Tuscany in the late 1700s, and from the vast 17th-century *Medici* family scientific collection.

The most remarkable section of the museum begins after the room of stuffed crocodiles and giant turtles. The next nine rooms could be a scene out of *Frankenstein* or a dissection lab, although without the smell of formaldehyde. The floors are of ancient blood-red polished tiles and the yellowing beige plastered walls complement a collection of 1,500 anatomical models and body parts created from colored wax. A school of ceroplastic modelers flourished at *La Specola* from 1775 to 1895, and their wax models were used in medical schools for teaching aids.

Napoleon visited the museum and ordered a set of the wax dissections for France. In 1850, the American dean of Louisiana's medical college came to Florence to obtain copies for his school. Organized by physiological system, the highlights of the collection are six full-sized male and female eviscerated figures lying in glass cases on long threadbare silk pillows and three bug-eyed skeletal/musculature models standing on glass-enclosed pedestals. In the final room, there are the four display boxes of gruesome allegorical scenes created between 1691 and 1694 by wax modeler *Gaetano Zumbo* and entitled "The Plague," "The

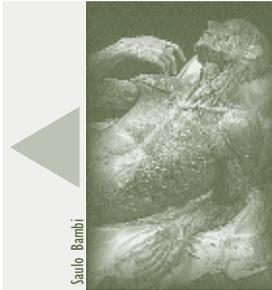
Triumph of Time," "The Corruption of the Body" and "The Effects of Syphilis." In the same room is "The Anatomy of the Male Head," a wax model housed in a real human skull.

MUSEO STIBBERT

Those people with a passion for knights in shining armor will love the Stibbert Museum. However, those with a passion for almost anything else will also find reason to love it. The British aristocrat Frederick Stibbert (1838-1906) was an eccentric, eclectic packrat who traveled extensively, collecting paintings, furniture, bronzes, umbrellas, china and ceramic dishware and knickknacks, candle sticks, fans and most every kind of antique. His main obsession, however, was for armor and weaponry. He obtained thousands of suits of armor from Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The most impressive room displays a "cavalcade," where a procession of 10 16th-century armored horsemen astride armored horses, 12 armed soldiers on foot, and four Islamic costumed horsemen appear to march under the gaze of a statue of St. George and the defeated dragon.

Stibbert also collected costumes. The museum contains rare and important examples of European, Islamic and Japanese dress, both military and civilian. One of most historically interesting costumes, housed among Napoleonic artifacts, is the regal garb worn by Napoleon in 1805 when he was crowned Emperor of Italy.

The museum comprises over 60 rooms of the historic villa that was the Stibbert home. The villa, located in the foothills at the edge of Florence, surrounded by one of the few remaining original Italianate gardens in Florence, full of exotic plants and featuring a small lake. The Stibbert is frequently empty because it is not in the center of Florence, although it is easily reached by taxi or by taking the No. 4 city bus from the train station.



MUSEO MARINO MARINI

Part of the charm of the Marino Marini Museum is the clean modern design and sense of spaciousness found inside the facade of the original building, a deconsecrated 14th-century church. The museum, created in 1988, contains an extensive collection of paintings, drawings and sculptures by contemporary Pistoian artist *Marino Marini* (1901-1980). The open interior operates on many different levels with walkways, balconies, landings, platforms and stairs, providing the visitor with varied



views of the paintings and large sculptures. There are also private spaces where pieces of sculpture are tucked away in smaller, subtly lit

areas that give an intimate feel to the art.

Marini, one of Italy's best-known abstract artists, is noted for his large, rough-hewn and elemental bronzes. He concentrated much of his work on studies of young men on horseback. The sketches, plaster models and final bronzes of this series can be found throughout the museum. One of the most interesting of the horsemen, however, (the one with the removable genitalia) is in the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice.

OPIFICIO DELLE PIETRE DURE

The Workshop of Semiprecious Stones, which specialized in Florentine mosaic work, or inlaid work with semiprecious stones (*pietre dure*), was founded in 1588 by *Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici*. The workshop's original purpose was to coordinate the various craftsmen who were already working on the Chapel of the Princes in the Church of San Lorenzo. Their intricate work was also used to decorate cabinets, tabletops and other smaller objets d'art depicting flowers, fruit and birds, usually against a black background. The Medici used these items in the rooms of the Palazzo Pitti and as gifts to visiting dignitaries. In 1975, the workshop became a national restoration and conservation laboratory, school, library and archive, dedicated to the restoration of stone, marble,

In Florence, red street numbers indicate commercial enter

bronze, terracotta and *pietre dure*.

The museum, created in 1995, houses a superb arrangement that highlights the products and history of the original workshop. The collection contains an extensive array of items — tables, cabinets, jewelry boxes, fireplaces, pictures and jewelry — made with semiprecious stone inlay and *scagliola* (painted plaster imitating marble or *pietre dure*), as well as decorative painted shale and slate. A loft space within the museum has been converted into an educational area with original 18th- and 19th-century equipment and tools used for cutting and shaping stone, a graphic display of the procedures used in the various crafts, and a collection of cataloged mineral samples that were mined in Tuscany and throughout the world.

If Mary McCarthy were alive to see present-day Florence she probably would be more cantankerous than ever, but she also would be secretly pleased to find that the Florentines continue to shoulder the burden of keeping Renaissance art and history alive and accessible in their beloved city. Over three million tourists visited Florence in 2002. By 2005, the number is

expected to rise to five million. From June to October, the wait in the Uffizi's ticket line can be as long as five

hours. What a comfort to know that there are so many pleasant, interesting museums where a visitor can escape the maddening crowds.

— Ann J. Reavis

Ann Reavis is a San Francisco native who now lives in Florence and operates the tour company *Tuscan Traveler* (www.tuscantraveler.com).



DETAILS:

Museo della Specola

Via Romana, 17
(39) 055 228-8251

Open daily 9 a.m. — 1 p.m.; closed Wednesdays.

Tickets: 3.10 euros

www.specola.unifi.it/cere/history.htm

Nearby trattorias:

Quattro Leoni, Via Vellutini, 1r;
(39) 055 218-562; open daily. (Try the updated
Tuscan dishes; innovative pastas.)

Trattoria La Casalinga, Via del Michelozzi, 9r;
(39) 055 218-624; closed Sundays.

(Come here for simple Tuscan home cooking.)

Museo Stibbert

Via Stibbert, 26 (City bus No. 4 from train station)
(39) 055 475-520

Open daily 10 a.m. — 2 p.m.; closed Thursdays.

Tickets: 5 euros; free on Sundays.

www.vps.it/propart/stibbere.htm

Nearby pizzeria:

Pizzeria Spera, Via della Cernaia, 9/r;
(39) 055 495-286; evening hours only; closed
Mondays. (There's takeout pizza available.)

Museo Marino Marini

Piazza S. Pancrazio
(39) 055 228-8251

Open daily 10 a.m. — 5 p.m., Sundays 10 a.m. —
1 p.m.; closed Tuesdays and month of August.

Tickets: 4 euros

www.museomarinomarini.it

Nearby restaurant:

Cantinetta Antinori, Piazza Antinori, 3r;
(39) 055 292-234; closed Saturdays and
Sundays. (Features seasonal Tuscan cooking
in a 15th-century palazzo.)

Opificio delle Pietre Dure

Via degli Alfani, 78; (39) 055 265-111

Open daily 9 a.m. — 2 p.m.; closed Sundays.

Tickets: 2 euros

www.opificio.arti.beniculturali.it/eng/index.htm

Nearby gelato:

Carabe', Via Ricasoli, 60r; closed Mondays.
(Try the gelato with lemons and pistachios from
Sicily; also famous for granite.)

1 euro = \$1.14 at press time



Opificio delle Pietre Dure

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prises; black identifies office buildings, homes and hotels.

Where *Italian* Buffaloes Roam

“*Bambola! Rossa! Tragedia! Veloce!* Come on, gals, it’s time to be milked.” The water buffalo milkman coaxes and wheedles his charges in a rich Neapolitan accent. It sounds like surreal poetry. “If you don’t call them by name they won’t come,” he says. “They’re gentle, lovable creatures.” Soon, big-lashed Bambola and her sister water buffaloes saunter from their wading pool to be relieved of their afternoon’s milk, the makings of what might just be the world’s best *mozzarella*.

We are standing in the middle of the ultra-modern *Vannullo Dairy* a half an hour south of Naples, famous throughout Italy for the quality of its wholly organic products:



mozzarella and ricotta fresh or smoked, provola cheese and yogurt. But the scene could have been straight out of antiquity: the ruined temples of *Paestum* rise across emerald fields and national park land a mere mile and a half from the facility.

Water buffaloes like Bambola have thrived in this lush swath of southern Italy — the birthplace of mozzarella — since time immemorial. No one is sure just when they arrived from India, via the Middle East, though many historians think *bubalus bubalis* may have trudged behind Hannibal’s elephants into Italy around 216 B.C. If they arrived later, it was probably with hordes of invaders around 600 A.D.

In either case, after the fall of the Roman Empire the land around Paestum slowly turned into a swamp fed by the *Sele* and *Alento* rivers. The inhabitants fled but the water buffaloes stayed on, ranging freely among the ruins. For centuries, local cowboys,

known as *butteri*, would round up the wild animals, rough-and-ready milkmen would milk them and cheese makers would transform the milk into the elastic, white balls found today in supermarkets worldwide.

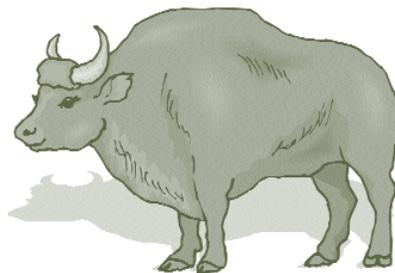
The region’s swamps were drained in the early 20th century. Today, the water buffaloes survive in captivity on farms, like Vannullo, equipped with pools or crossed by rivers. In order to regulate their body temperature, the water buffaloes must be able to submerge themselves in water several times a day.

There are an estimated 80,000 head of buffalo in Italy now, all of them on dairy farms.

Like the 400 females and dozen males at the Vannullo farm, most Italian buffaloes live in the hot, humid lowlands of the Campania region, between *Naples, Salerno, Caserta, Benevento, Battipaglia, Eboli* and *Capaccio*.

Vannullo is the brainchild of dapper *Antonio Palmieri*, a former banker who in 1988 gave up his career to take over the buffalo ranch his grandfather started in 1900. It

took Palmieri about eight years to embellish the family’s 18th-century farmhouse, plant espaliered lemons and roses along handsome stone walls and transform the ranch into a model organic farm, dairy and cheese factory. It was officially certified in 1996. What



that means, explains Palmieri, is that all the fodder — corn, wheat, rye, oats, alfalfa, sorghum and grass — is grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers on the estate’s 225 acres. No

hormones are given, there’s no artificial insemination and only homeopathic medicine is used to treat animals. Everything is done by hand, from the cheese making to the weeding.

And the pampering: the buffaloes get first-class treatment and are practically pets (except the mature males, who behave like the bulls they are). Their ample pens are swept several times a day. The place is uncommonly clean and orderly. I glance up from bashful Bambola to the snowy peaks east of the farm and think, “This could be Switzerland.”

In Italy, *mozzarella* refers only to cheese made from buffalo milk (cow’s milk mozzarella is called *fior di latte*). It’s richer (9 percent fat and 5 percent protein) and more flavorful than cow’s

milk (4 percent fat and 3 percent protein). The name derives from the verb *mozzare*, to pinch off into bits. At the Vannullo cheese factory you can arrange for a private tour as I did and watch the long, complex and artful process of making this delicacy.

First, the head cheese maker adds rennet to the fresh milk and heats it to about 100 degrees Fahrenheit. After 90 minutes, he breaks the curds up and lets them mature in the whey another three hours. Then he cuts them into 35-

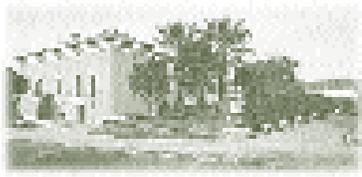
DETAILS:

CASEIFICIO VANNULO

10 Via Galileo Galilei
84040 Capaccio Scalo
(Salerno)

www.vannullo.it
(39) 0828 724-765

“As the Italians say, ‘good company in a journey



pound chunks, minces them and puts them in a tub with whey and nearly boiling water. He stirs the concoction with a wooden paddle until the pieces bind and form a soft lump that can be pulled into long, stretchy threads.

The cheese maker pinches the threads off into bits, keeping them constantly submerged. After soaking in a saline solution for another few hours, the glistening round balls are bagged in their own liquid and sold as thimble-sized *cardinali*, bite-sized *bocconcini*, normal *mozzarella* or giant *aversane*, which weigh about a pound. The real test of the mozzarella maker's art, though, is the intricately plaited *treccia*, my personal favorite when it comes to flavor and texture. I watch as a *treccia* is made with sweeping, graceful underwater motions.

Genuine mozzarella is rich, flavorful and delicate: it should be eaten the day it is made, at most a few days later (smoked mozzarella lasts longer). That's why, says Palmieri as we approach the sales counter, his cheese is sold exclusively on site and not even offered in local restaurants.

"We sell out every day," he admits, as we battle our way through lines of customers. "People drive all the way down from Rome to get it." I pop a still-warm *bocconcino* into my mouth, tasting an explosion of tangy cream with hazelnut highlights, and instantly understand why.

—David D. Downie

David D. Downie is the author of Cooking the Roman Way: Authentic Recipes from the Home Cooks and Trattorias of Rome (HarperCollins, 2002).

READ ITALY: Editor's Picks

New Books and an Old Favorite to Read This Summer



"The whole history of Italy — and much of Europe — seems to have been distilled, concentrated and acted out on this singular land," Francine Prose writes of Sicily in her new book, *Sicilian Odyssey* (National Geographic, \$20.00). The award-winning author weaves together tales of modern Sicilian life along with the 30 centuries of history that put it into context. The book also includes some of Prose's photographs.



I recently attended a panel discussion on Italian-Americans and their contributions to the writing world. The panelists concluded that these writers get little exposure for their work due in part to their own cultural predilection not to draw attention to themselves. I'll draw your attention however to *The Italian American Reader: A Collection of Outstanding Stories, Memoirs, Journalism, Essays, and Poetry* (William Morrow, \$27.95) with contributions from well-known Italian-American writers (Camille Paglia, Gay Talese, Nick Pileggi) and the lesser known as well.

The Food Lover's Guide to Florence: With Culinary Excursions in Tuscany by Emily Wise Miller (Ten Speed Press, \$14.95) will make you hungry — very hungry. This wonderful book includes a primer on Tuscan foods and wines and reviews of over 100 eateries. Mario Batali, The Food Network chef and author, says "This book says it all and makes me happy."



I almost feel guilty about recommending *Let's Go Italy 2003* (St. Martin's Press, \$22.99). After all, this is a newsletter focused on moderate to luxury travel and it's no secret that the *Let's Go* series is written for backpackers. The Harvard University students who write it revisit every place each year and give accurate, detailed information on where to go, what to see and how to get there via public transportation. While you might not want to stay in their low-end hotel picks, consult this guidebook for solid nuts and bolts information.

This summer, I will be rereading the book that solidified my fascination with Italian culture, Paul Hofmann's *That Fine Italian Hand* (Henry Holt, 1991; \$15.00). I remember riding on a train from Rome to Naples, during one of my first visits to Italy, immersed in Hofmann's explanation of the longstanding tensions between industrial northern Italy and the agricultural south. The author, former Rome bureau chief for *The New York Times*, writes perceptively of the contrasts that make Italian life equal parts fascinating and exasperating.



— Kathy McCabe



makes the way to seem shorter." —Izaak Walton

Turned Charming Accommodations

Anyone interested in getting to know Sicily from the inside should try staying in its grand private houses. Once this was the privilege of the few, it is now an option open to those with a taste for encounter and individuality. A growing number of privately owned city *palazzi*, country mansions, fortified feudal farm complexes and even monasteries are opening their doors to tourism. The outcome is a range of small hotels and bed-and-breakfasts.

Guglielmo Antonio Cartia, a pediatrician with a passion for art and architecture, lives in the historic center of Modica, in the southeastern tip of Sicily. He has turned the ground floor of his fine old family residence into accommodation "for the sort of guests who could share my enjoyment of the views, the architecture and furnishings."

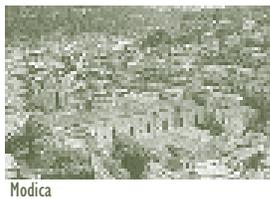
The result is *L'Orangerie*, a small, classy bed-and-breakfast of three suites, complete with cooking facilities, and four double rooms, all fitted out with a mixture of family antiques and some modern furniture. A number of charming 19th-century frescoes came to light during restoration and are now a sort of overall decorative theme.

Sicily's stratified history and diverse cultures are evident in Modica, a haven of elegant quietude and prosperity long bypassed by tourism. Like the neighboring towns of *Ragusa*, *Noto* and *Sicli*, Modica boasts magnificently

ornate Baroque architecture that has acquired recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site.



Dr. Cartia of L'Orangerie



Modica



L'Orangerie

For Francesco and Maria Alessi, a similar desire to reconcile the requirements of upkeep with the greater pleasures of convivial encounters encouraged them two years ago to make a bed-and-breakfast out of their family home, *Villa le Agavi*, just outside *Acireale*, near *Catania*.

"My wife, Maria, and I had been living in the north of Italy, and when I retired we

decided to return to base. By that time, the children had left home, so we had the space for two suites and four double rooms for guests. We have so much to offer here, from Taormina, which is only 20 kilometers away, to the wonderful landscapes of Mount Etna, where they're now producing some excellent wines."

Alessi says he is happy to arrange excursions for guests, from trips up Mount Etna to visiting the coast on a picnic-laden fishing boat. Maria Alessi, a decorator, holds short

courses in painted finishes and decoupage at the villa. She also makes homemade jams for breakfast and provides dinners in the garden or by the pool.

A gigantic *figus magnoliodes* towering over the courtyard of *Villa Castelforte*

greets people staying at *La Piana dei Colli* bed-and-breakfast, 15 minutes from the center of *Palermo* and moments from the beach at *Mondello*.

Maria Gabriella Pucci is a passionate gardener who has created a paradise of trees, shrubs and flowers, some of them wild and many of them rare, to share with her guests. "The villa itself was built in the seventeen hundreds by Ferdinando IV, the Bourbon king of Naples and Sicily," said Pucci, "to house his lover." Pucci speaks a number of languages and is a mine of information on the region's gardens, monuments, galleries and archaeological sites, and how to get to them.

On an entirely different scale, up in the *Madonnie* hills just inland from *Cefalu* lies a magnificent property that is the brainchild and passion of Francesco Lena. He bought it for a housing development, but soon decided it deserved a more bucolic destiny. Terraces were cleared,

DETAILS

L'ORANGERIE

Vico de Naro, 5
97015 Modica (Ragusa)
Phone: (39) 0932 754703
www.lorangerie.it

Rates: 88 to 110 euros per night for a double.

VILLA LE AGAVI

Via Provinciale 251, S. Venerina
Acireale (CT) 95010
Phone: (39) 095 958572
www.villeinitalia.com

Rates: 85 to 95 euros per night for a double.

LA PIANA DEI COLLI

Villa Castelforte
Via di Castelforte 98A
Palermo 90146
Phone: (39) 091 454565
www.sicily-accommodation.com

Rates: 44 to 52 euros per person, per night.

RELAIS SANTA ANASTASIA

Contrada Santa Anastasia
90013 Castelbuono (Palermo)
Phone: (39) 0921 672233
www.santanastasia-relais.it

Rates: 110 euros for a single, 200 euros for a double and 250 to 350 euros for a suite, per night.

BAGLIO SAN VINCENZO

Via Leopardi, 11
92013 Menfi (AG)
Phone: (39) 339 2426103
www.bagliosanvincenzo.it

Rates: 93 to 124 euros per night, including breakfast.

"They pour themselves one over the other like so much m

odations

vines were planted and olive groves tended or renewed. *Sant'Anastasia* now produces some excellent wines, both reds and whites. "Producing wines wasn't enough," Lena says. "I wanted people to come here and enjoy this natural splendor with us."

To make that possible, he has rebuilt the ruined abbey that was part of the property to create a 28-room hotel. All furnishings have been chosen by his wife, Paola, an architect whose ebullient flower paintings adorn the walls. The restaurant uses products from the garden and a home farm. There is also a spa, and an 18-hole golf course should be ready to open in a couple of years.

Another Sicilian who opened an inn and came to be involved in hospitality because of his passion for wine is Pietro Li Petri. He studied wine making in the north of Italy before returning to his native *Menfi*, on the west coast of the island, to plant vines on the hillsides surmounted by the *Baglio San Vincenzo*, a fortified farmhouse surrounding a large courtyard.

Li Petri has turned *Baglio San Vincenzo* into a delightful hotel of eight double bedrooms, three duplexes that can accommodate four and two suites. In the ancient vaulted cellars of the complex, the restaurant has become popular in the surrounding area.

Li Petri also offers a glimpse of history from the inside. Typical of the feudal properties built in the mid-1600s, during the Spanish domination of Sicily, the *Baglio San Vincenzo* was originally the headquarters of the barony bestowed upon Domenico Velasquez da Toledo in 1654 by the Viceroy of Sicily, Rodrigo Mendoza. It still domi-

Sicily is currently being hailed as Europe's most promising quality wine-producing region. As such, it is attracting some major investment on the part of winemakers who have already made their mark elsewhere in Italy.

In their pursuit of quality, Sicilian winemakers are uniquely blessed with an abundance of the right ingredients: a warm, dry climate; a variety of suitable soils; a wealth of interesting indigenous grape varieties and a vocation of wine making that dates back to the arrival of the ancient Greeks in Sicily during the mid-eighth-century BC.

Sicily is like several regions rolled into one. Grapes are grown from the coast, with its torrid temperatures and sandy soils, to the cooler climes and volcanic, mineral-rich soils of Mount Etna. Add to such natural resources grape varieties as the red *Nero d'Avola* or the white *Grillo*, to mention but two of the many indigenous to Sicily and practically unheard of elsewhere, and you have a range of tastes,

nates the surrounding landscape, proudly presiding over Li Petri's immaculately tended vineyards and beyond toward the shimmering blue of the Mediterranean. ♦

—Kate Singleton

aromas, colors and hues probably unequalled by any other single production region in the world.



Enterprising Sicilian winemakers initially showcased what their land could produce with wine genres that were readily recognizable to

international wine critics. This accounts for the Syrahs, the Cabernet Sauvignons, the Merlots and the Chardonnays that have gained widespread praise for their rich fruits and good structure, as well as some interesting blends of these varieties with local grapes.

In 2002, *Wine Spectator* placed the Chardonnay 2000 produced by the trailblazing *Planeta* winery 19th in its list of the 100 best wines for that year. Other Sicilian producers that are gaining far-flung critical acclaim include the well-established *Tasca d'Almerita*, *Donnafugata* and *Rapitalà* wineries, as well as relative newcomers such as *Abbazia Sant'Anastasia*, *Morgante* and *Baglio San Vincenzo*.

The challenge that Sicilian winemakers now find most enticing is the creation of unique quality wines with traditional Sicilian grape varieties. Of these, *Nero d'Avola* is generally recognized as being the sovereign red grape, and *Inzolia* a particularly rewarding white.

Whereas elsewhere in Italy quality wines have tended to belong to the various DOCs (*Denominazione*



Diego Banchetti

d'Origine Controllata, the Italian equivalent of a French appellation), so far in Sicily, this has not been

the case. Perhaps the production norms pertaining to each DOC are perceived as being too restrictive. Arguably it also has to do with a certain independence of spirit: Sicilians, yes, but individuals rather than clan members.

—K.S.

Kate Singleton, a British-born journalist, has lived in Italy since 1971. She is currently writing a book on Sicilian wines. This article originally appeared in the International Herald Tribune.

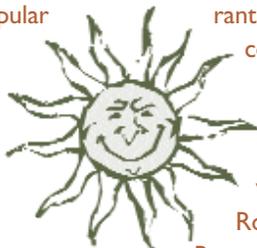
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melted butter over parsnips." —D.H. Lawrence on Sicilians

News, Tips, Deals

The Lowdown on August in Italy

The entire city of Rome shuts down. It's difficult to find a spot of empty sand on any beach. The heat is unbearable. Although each of these statements is based on a grain of truth, these are some of the popular misconceptions about visiting the land of *la dolce vita* during the month of August, the most important vacation time of the year for Italians.



The average Italian citizen gets 42 days of vacation per year. Most Italians take at least a week or two off each August, and many are on vacation for the entire month. Businesses shut their doors for all or part of this vacation period. In fact, the productivity of the entire country takes a dive during the eighth month of the year. The Italian national statistics institute reports that production falls by approximately 50% in



August and the volume on the national stock exchange reportedly diminishes by a third.

But just because Italians are on vacation doesn't mean you can't be. Here's what August is really like:

It just might be one of the best times of the year to visit Rome.

The streets are empty (half of the city's population leaves town). All of the major sites are open. You'll find many restaurants and shops still welcoming tourists, although most are closed for some portion of the month. If you ever wanted to drive in Rome, now is the time.

Reservations at the city's great hotel restaurants (see the January/February 2003 issue) are easy to come by. Because Rome is a major international capital, it must keep chugging along, even in August, but you can still enjoy it at a much slower pace.

Crowded beaches, yes, but a great time to visit inland towns.

It might not be the ideal time to visit the beaches of Sicily and Sardinia, as many hotels are booked up as much as a year in advance. But this can be the ideal time to visit Italy's inland hill towns, especially in the south. Southern Italians who left their villages for work in the north or even to move to the United States often return home in August. The streets come alive with summer festivals and the evening *passeggiata* is even more lively, and the weather in the hills is lovely. Which brings us to the next point ...

The heat? That depends on your definition of hot.

For a visitor from Washington, D.C. (where the summer heat and humidity can truly be unbearable), last year's August temperatures hovering at around 80 degrees Fahrenheit were a pure delight. Of course, this summer has started off to be a hot one with temps climbing into the triple digits. Your perception of Italy's August weather all depends on where you are coming from. One way



to ensure your comfort in case the temperatures shoot up is to make sure that your rental car and hotels have air conditioning. When all else fails, just take a siesta. In a sense, that is what the month of August is for all of Italy.

A final bit of advice, based on personal, frustrating experience. Don't attempt to drive on any of Italy's major highways, including the biggest, the A1, on any Saturday during August. Instead, flip on the television and watch as newscasters present special programming and live shots of the mass exodus of cars from the nation's cities. Even if you can't understand Italian, you will get the point that these traffic jams last for hours. You'll be happy you're not among those experiencing the August traffic nightmare. ♦

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Italy on the Web

Our friend and favorite travel guru Joe Brancatelli (www.joesentme.com) turned us on to two new Web sites that should be most helpful in planning your next trip. The first one might even help you locate your relatives in the old country. A phone directory for all of Italy is now online at www.paginebianche.it (translation: "white pages"; there's also a link to the "yellow pages"). If you know the town where your ancestors came from, try searching for your family name to see who is still living there. If you make contact and want to go visit, try the Italian mapping engine tuttocitta.virgilio.it for driving directions.

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"Italians lose at soccer as if it was war and lose wars as if they were

and Events



Venice Biennale Underway

The 50th Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition has begun. The Venice Biennale is an interdisciplinary cultural society concerned with visual arts, architecture, dance, music, theatre and cinema. The exhibition, which has been a tradition since 1895, is the biggest yet, with the work of over 400 artists on display. Italian Francesco Bonami, now at the Chicago Museum of



Contemporary Art, assembled the entire production entitled *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer*. The majority of the events and installations are located in the

Giardini, the Biennale grounds in the east end of Venice. The exhibition continues through November 2, 2003. For more information, visit www.labiennale.org

Italy in America:

More Americans Discover the "Fun" of Prosecco

Americans often seem to think they're missing out on the care-free feeling and fun of Italian life. And in the case of *prosecco*, the Italian sparkling wine, they're absolutely right. For years, Italians have enjoyed *prosecco* as an aperitif and an all-around appropriate drink for any time of day. Now Americans are catching on ...

Michael Franz, wine critic for *The Washington Post*, may have summed up *prosecco* best when he recently wrote, "Good bottles of *prosecco* are extremely uncomfortable at seminars but fit right in afterward around the swimming pool.

Prosecco thinks polo is stupid, but loves to shoot pool and stay out too late. You get the idea."



In 1996, Mionetto, one of Italy's foremost *prosecco* producers, sold just 300 cases of its *prosecco* in the United States. Now, Mionetto can be found in liquor stores in 40 states. The cheaper and lighter *prosecco* is fast becoming a popular alternative to champagne at American weddings.

Prosecco is available either fully sparkling (*spumante*) or semisparkling (*frizzante*). There's also *Cartizze*, which indicates a subzone of the Veneto hills where the grapes are grown. And the price is right. You can get a good bottle of *prosecco* for as little as \$10.

They may both be sparkling wines, but the difference between *prosecco* and champagne is in the type of grape and the method of production. *Prosecco* is a wine grape grown in the hills of *Valdobbiadene* near *Conegliano*, north of Venice. It's more floral and fruity than the chardonnay and pinot noir grapes used in champagne. Champagne takes longer to ferment and does so in individual bottles, where it is exposed to yeast for years. *Prosecco* makers use the *Charmat* method of a second fermentation in pressurized steel tanks, which preserves the wine's fruitiness and limits exposure to yeast.

If *prosecco* has piqued your interest and you're in the New York area, visit the only *proseccheria* in the United States. *Proseccheria at Pasticcio* is a wine bar devoted to *prosecco*. Turin native and owner Nicola Maurello serves five kinds of *Prosecco* and can walk you through the choices. Also be sure to try the mouth-watering and reasonably priced *bruschette*.

Details: 477 Third Ave., New York City; (212) 679-2551; www.pasticcionyc.com

Have a Laugh at the Forum



For the fifth year, the Miracle Players, an English-speaking comedy troupe, bring their unique and original performances to the Roman Forum. This summer they tell the comic version of the story of Cleopatra. For a schedule of performances, visit www.miracleplayers.org

Touring via the Tiber

So the new tour boats on the Tiber River aren't quite the *bateaux mouches* of Paris. Well, the Tiber isn't really the Seine either. In any case, this long-neglected waterway now provides a new way to travel through the Eternal City. Before the service began in May, city workers removed tons of trash from the river and painted over graffiti on the walls along the banks. One boat makes eight stops between Ponte Marconi (EUR) and Ponte Duca d'Aosta. One-way tickets

are 1 euro and round-trip are 2.30 euros. A 75-minute boat tour leaves several times a day from Ponte Sant'Angelo; tickets cost 10 euros each. A 43-euro dinner tour departs every evening from Ponte Sant'Angelo at 7:30 p.m. For more information, call (39) 06 6929-4147 or visit www.battellidiroma.it



soccer games." —Winston Churchill

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But many Italians agree that this is where to go for some of the best cooking in Italy.

Bologna, nestled in a valley surrounded by picturesque rolling hills, is a cosmopolitan yet traditional city, with a fine and proud dining tradition. Bolognese cuisine utilizes the best variety of natural food treasures that the region has to offer, combining fresh, golden pasta with fine aged meat to create simple yet stunningly delicious offerings. Many of these sumptuous Bolognese specialties, like *lasagne* and *ragù*, Bolognese meat sauce, are famous the world over.

Simply walking through the porticoed streets of Bologna provides visitors with a comprehensive tour of the city's greatest culinary accomplishments. On display in meticulously arranged store windows throughout the city center you will find a treasure trove of handmade (*fatto a mano*) golden pastas priced by the kilogram. These delicious, tender pastas will later be used to wow you in the bustling restaurants in and around Bologna.

The best handmade pastas can be found in the historical center of the city around Piazza Maggiore, at such Bolognese institutions as *Paolo Atti & Figli*, founded in 1880, on *via Caprarie 7*. If the pasta is handmade in Bologna, chances are that the recipe has been handed down from grandmother to granddaughter, so that you are, in essence, eating pasta that has been taste-tested by generations of hungry Italians. In a city that takes its eating as seriously as Bologna, this is an important fact.

Bologna's succulent, handmade egg pastas, like *tortellini*, *tortelloni* and



tagliatelle, can be served in a variety of ways. Tortellini, small pasta filled with prosciutto, mortadella, parmesan and other spices, are usually served *in brodo*, a delicious broth, or *con panna*, in a rich cream sauce. Tortelloni is essentially a super-sized tortellini, with a ricotta cheese filling in place

of the meat, and can be served with a variety of sauces, one favorite being a light but extremely satisfying butter and sage sauce. Tortelloni can also have a variety of fillings, ranging from spinach to mushrooms to rucola, but if you want a real treat, try a traditional tortelloni dish with a butter sauce and topped with white or black truffle shavings, harvested from the hills around Bologna and a favorite among food connoisseurs throughout the region.

Of course, no trip to Bologna would be complete without a sampling of its famous many-layered lasagna. The *lasagne* is made with fresh, handmade spinach pasta, *ragù* Bolognese, parmesan cheese and béchamel sauce. Lasagna is omnipresent in Bologna, served in almost every restaurant and bar throughout the city.

Moving on to the mouthwatering meats, Bologna offers a wide array of regional specialties. Hanging from the ceilings of nearly every butcher store (*macelleria*) are the legs of prosciutto, ready to be thinly sliced and incorporated into a variety of the local delicacies. Then there's Bologna's famous *mortadella* loafs; although this mortadella is probably a world apart from that used in the bologna

sandwiches you used to eat as a child. Other fine pork products such as salami and sausage can be found in these shops. The macelleria is also the place to go to for those wonderful Italian cheeses: buffalo mozzarella from Naples, pecorino from Tuscany and Parmesan, or *forma*, from nearby Parma. Many of these delicious cheeses are also incorporated into the Bolognese menu.

These are just a few of the sumptuous specialties waiting to be discovered in the bustling Bolognese restaurant scene. The best way to truly understand the delights of the Bolognese culinary tradition, however, is to try it for yourself. Here are a few restaurants to try on your next visit to *Bologna la grassa*:

La Braseria

Located in the heart of the historical center of Bologna, this traditional trattoria offers fine dining in a casual and comfortable atmosphere. Surrounded by the jerseys of Italian soccer and basketball heroes (the Bolognese are crazy about basketball!) past and present, you will find an exuberant waitstaff willing and able to advise you on their many choice selections. Also be on the lookout for Italian VIPs, as this popular trattoria is well known to be a magnet for Italian sports stars and television and music personalities.

Begin the meal with a heaping *antipasto* plate, the components of which will be chosen by your waiter. The plate might consist of eggplant parmesan, buffalo mozzarella, slices of aged salami, roasted vegetables, and more, depending on what the chef has prepared for the evening.





There are many options for the first plate (*primi piatti*), ranging from the traditional *tagliatelle con ragù* to nightly specials, which may include local favorites like *strozzapretti* (literally: choke the priest) in a cream sauce with prosciutto and zucchini. Delicious! All the pasta offerings are handmade daily, served *al dente* and recommended with a healthy dose of fresh-shaved parmesan on top.



ride from the city center. You will feel as if you are in someone's home as you are escorted through a maze of varied and minimally decorated dining rooms to your seat. This popular

bread, served with a plate of delicious sliced meats and cheeses. Slice open a hot *tigella* and select from slices of prosciutto, salami, mortadella and mozzarella, a special garlic and parmesan pesto sauce, and make your own sandwiches. This fun and communal style of eating is famous in Bologna and the small towns surrounding the city.

For the meat dish, you might enjoy the Bolognese *cotoletta*, a delicious fried veal cutlet, or veal scallopine covered with a thin slice of *prosciutto cotto* (ham) and fontina cheese. You can even order up a mouthwatering Florentine steak. However, you're better off heading to the rolling hills of Tuscany, where the Florentine steaks seem to grow on trees. With your meat try a *contorno* (side dish) of roasted potatoes, crunchy on the outside and soft and steamy on the inside. Fish lovers, note that the trattoria offers fish selections only on Thursday and Friday nights.

Bolognese restaurant specializes in traditional pasta dishes, although the menu changes with the season, so you may be surprised not to see tortellini or tortelloni, for example, on the menu. However, the pasta here is tender and delicious, and has kept people coming back for over a half-century.

For a light dessert, try a plate of fresh-picked fruits and berries with a dollop of whipped cream on top. All of this at a reasonable price: 7 to 9 euros for a *primi* and 12 to 15 euros for the *secondo* (entrée) makes this trattoria a great place to visit.

For dessert, if you still have room, the *mascarpone* is heavenly when served up with a few fresh-baked cookies. Words really cannot describe how refreshing and surprisingly rich this simple-looking cream is. Top it all off with a shot of espresso and you're ready to go.

The Trattoria Monte Donato also offers two unique specialties for the second dish. First is the *Pollo Croccante*, a heaping plate of roasted chicken on the bone, potatoes, onions and tomatoes, seasoned with rosemary and salt. The minimum order for this plate serves two, but if you've already polished off a steamy plate of their savory tagliatelle, this plate can easily feed three people.



As this is a very popular location, especially in the summer when its location in the hills provides some much-needed cool air, call ahead to make a reservation: (39) 051 472-901. Trattoria Monte

Donato is located at *via Siepelunga, 118*, and is closed on Mondays. If you are traveling from the city center you will need about 15 minutes to arrive by taxi.

Meloncello

Located on beautiful *via Saragozza*, this typical Bolognese eatery is another

continued on page 12

Prices range from 35-50 euros per person, not including wine. Call ahead for reservations: (39) 051 222-839 or (39) 051 264-584. *La Braseria*, located at *via Testoni, 2*, is closed on Sundays.

Trattoria Monte Donato

Monte Donato sits among the beautiful hills surrounding Bologna, just a short

Their other specialty is *tigelle*, which are small, pancake-shaped pieces of

Where to Stay

The four-star *Hotel San Donato* is centrally located in Palazzo Malvasia, near the two towers, the historic university and a stone's throw from Piazza Maggiore.

This 59-room hotel offers modern accommodations, including air conditioning and satellite television. There's also a sprawling terrace bar and buffet breakfast daily.

Details:
via Zamboni 16
(39) 051 235-395
www.hotelsandonato.it

Rates: 89 to 260 euros per night for a single; 130 to 360 euros per night for a double.

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consumes 60 pounds of pasta a year.



local favorite. This small but accommodating trattoria specializes in *osso buco*, a tender cut of meat surrounding a circular bone filled with succulent and juicy marrow. While this is the recommended meat dish, Meloncello has many appetizing pasta selections.

Ask for two or three pasta dishes, maybe the tortelloni with butter and sage, the *gramigna* with sausage, and the tagliatelle with ragù, and they will bring out a plate with three small portions (*tris*) or two portions (*bis*). This is a great way to sample some of the delicious offerings at this casually elegant spot. That may seem a contradiction in terms, but you will soon notice that the always fashion-conscious Bolognese can make jeans and a button-down shirt seem elegant and almost formal. The overall atmosphere here is relaxed, with tables very close to one another. The friendly waitstaff will explain their nightly selections, since there is no written menu.

Popular entrees here include two savory veal dishes: a heavy veal stew, great in the winter and colder months, and a simple but well-executed roasted veal. Other choices include a delicious deboned rabbit dish and a roast loin of pork plate. Or you might opt instead for a wonderful meatball (*polpette*) dish in a red sauce. Tender and about the size of golfballs, these relatively small meatballs are another favorite dish at Trattoria Meloncello.

A Dining Dictionary for Bologna

PASTA

Tortellini in brodo

This traditional Bolognese specialty consists of golden handmade tortellini in a deliciously simple broth. This is the dish of choice among Bolognese traditionalists, while the younger generation tends to opt for tortellini con panna, succulent tortellini prepared in a light cream sauce. Eaten mainly in the fall and winter months, tortellini in brodo is a cornerstone of the culinary tradition of Bologna.

Tagliatelle con ragù

Perhaps the most omnipresent Bolognese dish, this hearty pasta plate can be found in just about every restaurant in Bologna, regardless of the style and elegance. Flat handmade, egg noodles covered

with ragù, this plate is often imitated but never duplicated outside of Bologna.

Lasagne

Bolognese gastronomes have turned this world-famous lasagna into a household word. This is another omnipresent and extremely popular Bolognese specialty. Made with a tender spinach pasta, layered around ragù Bolognese and oozing with creamy bechamel sauce, this attraction is often a meal unto itself.

MEAT

Bollito misto

This is the classic meat dish of Bologna, and consists of all of the meat parts that are used to make the succulent broth used for tortellini con brodo. Diners will usually find juicy chicken, cow tongue, a calf's

head and the knee of the cow. Not for the faint of heart or stomach, this traditional Bolognese delicacy remains very popular throughout the region of *Emilia Romagna*.

DESSERT

Mascarpone

While not necessarily a Bolognese specialty, this deliciously smooth cream, the same used in the world-famous *tiramisu*, is a favorite among natives and tourists both. A little bowl filled with this hand-mixed, lemon-colored cream, made from mascarpone cheese, with a few biscotti for dipping, transports you directly to heaven! This is the perfect finale to a long, drawn-out Bolognese dinner.

For dessert, the *zuppa inglese* is an extremely popular offering. Creamy and colorful, this well-known dessert is a big winner here. After your coffee, take a stroll through the porticos of elegant *via Saragozza* and you will understand the true Bolognese dining experience.

Call ahead for a reservation: (39) 051 614-3947. Prices range from 30 to 40 euros per person, excluding wine. Meloncello at *via Saragozza, 240/a*, is closed Monday nights and Tuesdays.

— Daniel Marcus

Daniel Marcus is an American writer and musician living in Bologna.



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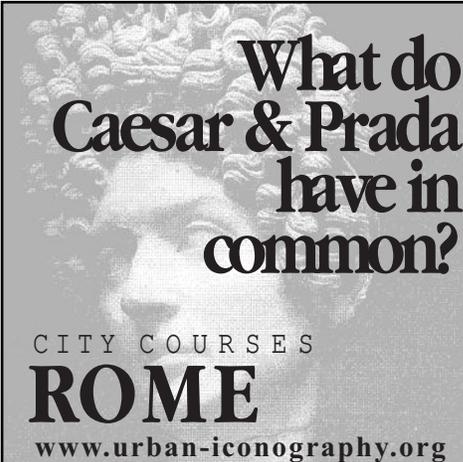


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