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Rick Steves and Sarah Murdoch

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The Unexpected Vineyards of the Amalfi Coast

This is the time of year in Italy when the air smells like *mosto* — the heady scent of must fermenting to create wine. Often you'll find it unexpectedly coming around a corner while climbing a winding staircase or while driving along the windy Amalfi Coast road.

It is unexpected precisely because this isn't a landscape of rolling hills covered with postcard-worthy vineyards views. This is the landscape of sheer cliffs, rocky beaches, and narrow roads barely large enough for two Fiat 500s to cross paths.

Here on the *Amalfi Coast* everything happens in small spaces, including



Cantine Maria Cuomo

wine making. In this predominately vertical landscape, farmers have been cultivating grapes for centuries. This is no small feat. The terraces are a work

of art in nature, created by a traditional dry stone wall construction — itself a dying art. These terraces not only secure the landscape but also create functional spaces for cultivation. While many of the terraces are full of the lemon trees this area is most famous for, olive groves and vineyards are also dotted along the Amalfi Coast.

It's here in this scenic setting that some of Campania's best wines are produced. In an area known for its

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Adventures with Sarah: RICK STEVES' ITALY EXPERT

If you have ever visited Italy, it is likely you've used Rick Steves as a resource; reading one of his books, watching one of his TV shows, listening to one of his podcasts or even taking one of his tours. Even if you didn't know it, chances are you've encountered Steves' right hand woman when it comes to all things Italy — Sarah Murdoch.

Murdoch, a former architect and Italy travel expert, has worked for Rick Steves since 2000, spends four months a year in Italy, leading tours for Steves and updating his guidebooks. The travel bug bit her when she studied in Rome in 1995. After earning a B.A. in architecture and after working as an architect for a few years, she abandoned the drawing board for the allure of the open road. The rest of the year she's home in Seattle researching and lecturing and being mom to Lucca, 13, and Nicola, 10. *Dream of Italy* Editor Kathy McCabe had too many questions for her!

Dream of Italy: I'll ask you the question everyone wants to know. How did you get this job?

Sarah Murdoch: I went to Europe with some friends in college and found out about Rick Steves when I went to the office to buy a rail pass. I

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Italy is the largest wine producer in the world.

The guidebook work is an honor and a huge responsibility, considering how many people rely on our independent evaluations and recommendations. It is an art form. Rick has personally trained me and has quite the work ethic. People think it is very glamorous but it is very difficult, long hours and physically taxing.

started working in architecture even before leaving university and was doing pretty well. There were some frustrations, especially feeling like being a woman was a disadvantage in the profession.



Sarah tasting wine

After a frustrating day at the office, my mother-in-law asked me what I would do if I could do anything. Without hesitation, I said "Oh, I don't know, write guidebooks for Rick Steves and travel around Europe?" She said, "Well, why don't you?" I sent in a resume on a whim, not really being serious about it, because I had a very good job as an architect. I just thought, why not? And they called me. I took a job in the office to get a foot in the door, but once I went out on a tour, I found the job I was made for.

DOI: *How does your degree in architecture inform your tours and guidebook research?*

SM: I eventually wanted to be a professor of architecture history, that was my plan in the architecture world, and in a sense I have achieved that! I have a passion for history, and architecture is one of the best ways for people to understand the civilizations of the past.



Architecture isn't just practical, it speaks about the values of the people who built it. I use architecture as a lens to help my clients discover more about the place we are visiting, tracing the development of the urban fabric and what that evolution means for the people in a particular place. I am also an artist in my heart. I feel that architecture is the only truly interactive art form. I really enjoy explaining buildings and pointing out how we interact with them on an emotional as well as physical level.

DOI: *I love to know how the sausage is made when it comes to travel writing. What is the process for updating the guidebook?*

SM: We update them yearly, some bi-annually. The guidebook work is an honor and a huge responsibility, considering how many people rely on our independent evaluations and recommendations. It is an art form. Rick has personally trained me and has quite the work ethic. People think it is very glamorous but it is very difficult, long hours and physically taxing.

You get up in the morning and make a plan over breakfast. We always try to visit hotels in the morning after check out and before check in. Even if they show me the best room, I have done

this so long, I can tell what the problems are from looking at one room — if it is well-run, clean, a good value.

In the afternoon, I go to museums and sites, checking every price, timetable and strategy for a better visit. In the evening, I go to restaurants — obviously, we can't eat at all of them. We rely on our readers as our best critics. If I see someone with a guidebook on the table, I ask them what they think. Then I spend the rest of the night typing until about 1 a.m. and get up at 7 a.m. to do it again the next day.

The most I have ever done is five weeks straight and it was exhausting. Even if the workload is ridiculous, I have the advantage that I'm also a tour guide, I know these cities inside and out. I think that is the reason we write the best guidebooks, we are not just writers but tour guides who have a deep knowledge of places and personal contacts with the best information.

DOI: *This year you updated the Rick Steves Florence and Tuscany 2018 book and Rick Steves Italy's Cinque Terre book. Can you tell me your best new finds in each area?*

SM: My favorite new hotel for the 2018 edition in Florence is *Palazzo Guadagni* (39 -055 -2658376 ; www.palazzoguidagni.com) on *Piazza*

Cinque Terre literally

Santo Spirito. I remember when this hotel was a ramshackle backpacker's dive; it used to be called *Sorelle Bandini*.

I hadn't been there since the early days of guidebook research, more than a decade ago. I knocked on their door out of pure curiosity about what had happened to the hotel... and it is wonderful. The top floor *loggia* has stunning views. I've even gotten a few of our tour groups to stay there next year.



Torre Campitelli

Directly under the hotel, right on the *piazza*, is a great restaurant I've added as well, called *Tamero*. It's a funky and fresh pasta bar in an old automotive garage. They make the pasta fresh in an open kitchen. I've done a couple of tour group dinners here, and my clients loved it.



Framura, Cinque Terre

It's rare to find anything truly new in Tuscany, but I did find something cool in *San Gimignano*, of all places. They have recently opened up a *Torre Campitelli* as a museum. It's a period home, furnished with the former owner's belongings and displaying their story. They have a section of tower house visible with the floors cut away, to see the structure. Very cool. I love period homes and try to find one in each city I research. I think it really connects you to the history in a personal way.

The *Cinque Terre* is the jewel of the Rick Steves world. Everyone loves it...so it's pretty crowded these days. I have been working with my local

friends, including *Ruth Manfredi* from *Save Vernazza* (www.savevernazza.com) to try and give visitors better ways to visit the Cinque Terre and avoid the crowds.

About half of the trails remain



Mozia, Sicily

closed, unfortunately the easiest ones, so I went in search of a trail experience that anyone could do. Ruth suggested *Framura*, a little series of towns to the north of the Cinque Terre. You can walk or ride a bike on a flat trail from *Levanto*, then do the cliff-side walk at Framura to a pretty little beach. Anyone can do it! It's brand new this year, and I've written it up for the 2018 edition.

DOI: *What's a typical day like when you are guiding a Rick Steves Tour?*

SM: Today was a good example — we started about 9 a.m. We were joined by a local guide with expert knowledge of the area. We took a boat ride out to an island in the salt flats of western Sicily, and got a tour of the Phoenician ruins there. I arranged a country lunch on the island with fresh salads, pasta, cheese and bread, with plenty of local wine from the island.

We came back in the afternoon and had free time, then a happy hour on the hotel roof terrace before dinner. I

always encourage time for fellowship on my tours, because the social aspect is often a highlight that people don't expect. Then I head to my room for a little organization time and sleep. Then I do it again!

DOI: *How has Italy changed in the years you have been visiting?*

SM: I could write a book on that. I am privileged to have been around to see the change. When I studied in Rome in 1995, it was not the Italy you see today. We had to live without a supermarket — you would go to a butcher, then the pasta shop, etc. Quite a shock. *Siesta* time closed down cities every day for hours, it was hard to get things done. To make phone calls, I had to use a

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translates as “five lands.”



Sicily is a passion of mine. It is one of the most diverse and beautiful places in Europe. Most people have no idea what is here to discover. There are traces of almost every major ancient western civilization. The landscape is diverse and picturesque. The food is fantastic. The people are friendly.

public phone in a bar, using *gettone* (tokens). Sometimes the power would be out for no reason. I had to boil water to take a hot bath in my apartment's tiny squat bathtub.

There was no simple answer to anything. Sicily now feels like the Italy I remember, a little wild and untamed. I'm a little untamed myself, so I relate better to that Italy of the past. I'm concerned for the Europization of Italy and the dilution of the culture. For example, the *Campo de Fiori* market in Rome has changed severely, all the traditional vendors have had to move out because of EU hygiene regulations and now it is a touristic market.

DOI: *What's the biggest mistake travelers to Italy make?*

SM: It is a mistake to force Italy to behave the way you want it to or apply your standards and expectations on it. The biggest example I see is an American speaking really loud to an Italian waiter asking for ice. Italians don't typically use ice in soft drinks, sorry. Italy is not going to change for you. You have to let it charm you and accept it as it is.



DOI: *What is the next upcoming area?*

SM: Sicily. Sicily is a passion of mine. It is one of the most diverse and beautiful places in Europe. Most people have no idea what is here to discover. There are traces of almost every major ancient western civilization. The landscape is diverse and picturesque. The food is fantastic. The people are friendly. Mainstream tourism hasn't caught on

yet. I suggest you go soon, it won't be a secret much longer!

Most people have seen *The Godfather* but don't realize that there is so much more to it than mafia stereotypes. Every day I ask my tour group if they expected Sicily to be this way and they cannot believe it, no matter how they have prepared.

Beautiful beaches, snowy volcanoes, lush valleys, temples, museums. This island has it all. Did I mention the food?

I have such a passion for it, I have started a new blog devoted only to Sicily coverage. There are so few good resources on travel in Sicily. I hope to connect my readers with the information I have learned in tour

guiding and the wonderful locals I have met here. [Check out Sarah's Sicily blog at www.adventuresinsicily.com]

DOI: *If you could have a last meal in Italy where would it be and what would you order?*

SM: I would have a meal made by Stacy's husband *Domenico* in Venice. He's the chef at *Osteria Bentigodi* (39-041-8223714; www.bentigodi.com)

in *Canareggio*. He's a magician and artist. I never ask for anything particular, I just let him imagine something using the seasonal produce he has on hand. I recall a particularly delicious wild strawberry risotto a few years ago.

DOI: *What's your best advice for a strategy to plan your trip?*

SM: Start with priorities. The biggest mistake people make is to go to the places they think they should rather than where they will enjoy. Do you have to go see the Vatican Museum? No. It is a miserable experience normally and dangerously crowded on occasion. Most people go because they think they should, not because they want to. Most people would be happier to see the Borghese Gallery or



Sarah in Agrigento, Sicily



Osteria Bentigodi, Venice

September is no longer the

ride a bike along the Appian Way. Do what you enjoy, not what someone tells you that you must.

And we have to dispel this idea — I know that we have promoted it — that September is a good time to go. That was true many years ago, but now it is high season and super crowded. Any month is better. Go in April! Spring is lovely and not crowded at all. Seriously, don't go in September or early October unless you enjoy sardine-like crowds.

DOI: *What's your best packing tip for traveling to Italy?*

SM: Italy is a patchwork of climates, from the Dolomites to the sunny beaches. You can leave snow and lay on the beach in the same day! The best strategy is to pack layers. I prefer ultralight layers of clothes in natural fibers like linen and silk. Silk is a miracle fiber, it is surprisingly warm but works in the heat as well. I bring dresses, they are easy to layer with leggings and a sweater. Italians love to layer clothes as well, more for the style, so you'll fit right in!

DOI: *So what's Rick Steves like and how has he changed travel?*

SM: He has many facets. He's the Martha Stewart of the travel industry — totally self-invented. He works harder than anyone I know. He is a very savvy businessman and a deeply caring employer. I have so much respect and fondness for him, and have learned so much over the years from his example. He's given me a beautiful life and connected me to some of the people I love most.



Sarah and Rick



Paola and Sarah's son, Nico



Stacy Gibboni's art



Sarah and Stacy

He's changed travel for the better, at least I hope so. We encourage travelers to learn, live local and be sensitive. We have tried to break the mold of typical tour companies. We work in an honest way. We, the tour guides, are all passionate about our subjects and help our groups to travel like locals, to appreciate real experiences, and to support local economies. Our travelers, in my view, are the gold standard of the travel industry.

DOI: *Tell me about your favorite locals in Italy.*

SM: My favorite local in Venice is my friend *Stacy Gibboni* (www.stacygibboni.com). We met while I was doing guidebook research. She was running a B&B out of her Venetian *palazzo* and I came to update the listing. We immediately clicked and I blew off research for the rest of the day to drink *Prosecco* with her! She is a contemporary artist and paints gorgeous canvases.

In the Cinque Terre, my "sorella"

Giuditta Bernardi is my favorite. She runs a restaurant in *Monterosso* called *Piccolo Diavolo* (39-0187-801528), which is the best in the Cinque Terre in my opinion. I've known her since she was a kid, and she came to live with my family last year for a couple of months. I wrote about her in an

article on my blog, "The Italian in the Basement" and people have come in to the restaurant and called her that!

In Rome, one of my favorite characters is the famous *Paola Fazi*. She runs *Trattoria der Pallaro* (39-06 68801488), a restaurant near *Campo dei Fiori*. She's like my Roman

aunt. Her restaurant has no menu, you eat what they are cooking. That restaurant hasn't changed in 50 years;

it's like a time warp of the way Rome used to be. She's been feeding me for more than 20 years, and now she's feeding my kids too!

DOI: *How can our readers find out more about what you do?*

SM: You can read my blogs at www.adventureswithsarah.net and www.adventuresinsicily.com

I'm creating my own off-season tours for Italy and you can get my latest schedule by emailing sarahinitalia@yahoo.com I also offer my own tours to Morocco and Thailand.

To find out about the Italy tours from Rick Steves, visit www.ricksteves.com/tours

Sarah had so much to tell us that we couldn't fit it all here. Read about her six favorite towns in Italy on the Dream of Italy Blog.

best month to visit Italy.

Amalfi Vineyards *continued from page 1*

wine production since ancient Roman times, as evidenced by the vineyards uncovered at *Pompeii*, *Campania* wines have been growing in notoriety in recent years. This is also the case for the Amalfi Coast, with its *Costa d'Amalfi DOC* wines.

Along this rugged coastline, the wines created here reflect the marvelous combination of mountains and sea, along with the different microclimates that vary depending on dramatic changes of altitude, temperature and exposition.

Hidden away in the most unlikely of spots along the coastline are some unique vineyards and families working to continue the tradition of wine production. If you think the Amalfi Coast is just pretty views and sunny beaches, your taste buds are in for a surprise!

FURORE

Cantine Marisa Cuomo

Sprawling across a steep mountainside between the Amalfi Coast's two more talked about towns of *Positano* and *Amalfi* lies *Furore*. Known mostly for its eye-catching bridge over the Furore fjord, the town itself climbs up the mountain accessible by a road that zig-zags through it on the way to *Agerola*. Here

on this terraced cliff side with exquisite views of the coastline lie the vineyards of *Cantine Marisa Cuomo*.

Mountains soar above the terraced vineyards, yet the sun is warm and strong, creating a unique microclimate on the Amalfi Coast. It's here that *Marisa Cuomo* and her family create award-winning wines. Founded in

1980 by Marisa Cuomo and her husband, *Andrea Ferraioli*, the estate now sprawls over nearly 25 acres. With the extreme natural setting, the vines are carefully trained to grow on pergolas running along the narrow terraces carved into the mountainside.

The mountains form not only the backdrop of this scenic vineyard, but they also create the protective setting where Cantine Marisa Cuomo produces about 50 thousand bottles of wine every year. With a wine cellar literally carved into the limestone mountainside, the setting might be rustic but the

technology is cutting edge. Using modern techniques, the wine is made and housed in the cellar in French oak wine barrels.

This is where the magic happens. *Piedirosso* and *Aglianico* grapes—two of the most traditional red grape varieties

in Campania—are hand-picked and then combined to create the celebrated *Furore Rosso Riserva*, a dark ruby-colored wine with fruity aromas, smooth taste, and spicy finish. Grape varieties with unfamiliar names like *Fenile*, *Ginestra* and *Ripoli* blend in the *Furore Bianco Fiorduva*.

The winery also produces *Costa d'Amalfi DOC* wines in red, white and rosé as well as *Furore Rosso* and *Bianco* and *Ravello Rosso* and *Bianco*. Each wine is created with grapes grown in *Furore* and along the Amalfi Coast in *Ravello* and *Scala* and as far down the coastline as the *Vietri sul Mare* area.

With so many wines to sample, a tasting is definitely in order. Cantine Marisa Cuomo offers a guided tour of the vineyard and wine cellar, which also includes a tasting or lunch. Available throughout the year, but must be booked in advance. Find out more here: (39) 089 830348 or visit www.marisacuomo.com

VIETRI SUL MARE

Le Vigne di Raito

Love at first sight is a common occurrence in places as beautiful as the Amalfi Coast. This is precisely what happened to *Patrizia Malanga* the first time she saw *Raito* — a tiny village tucked away in the mountains above *Vietri sul Mare*. In 2001, she began the hard work of bringing a semi-abandoned 5-acre plot of land back to life. In contrast to the ancient vines cultivated further down the coastline, *Patrizia* decided to try something new.

After studying the land and realizing it had a long history of citrus and wine production, she decided to plant a new vineyard. In a fertile ground rooted in

Cantine Marisa Cuomo



Italy exports one-third of th

history, she was determined to produce a new wine — one that would capture the scents and flavors of the landscape that had captured her heart.

With the assistance of experts, the vineyard was planted on the terraced property overlooking the sea. After many years of hard work, the first wine was produced in 2007. *Ragis Rosso*, a mix of Aglianico and Piediroso grapes, is a rich, strong red wine. Reflecting the area's history, it takes its name from the supposed Gothic or Lombard founder of Raito, a certain Ratgis, according to local legend.

From the beginning, Patrizia was driven to create a vineyard with the highest respect for the land and local traditions. By 2011, *Le Vigne di Raito* was certified organic by I.C.E.A, the Italian organization regulating organic products. The same year they released their second wine, a refreshing rosé called *Vitamenia*, produced from Piediroso grapes with a touch of Aglianico.

Ten years on from the release of their first wine, Le Vigne di Raito is just getting started. Vistors can experience Patrizia's warm hospitality while getting a close look at a working vineyard and tasting their two flagship wines.



Le Vigne di Raito



Options include everything from a simple wine tasting to a full tour, tasting and lunch or dinner. This is a family farm and what's for sure is that you'll leave feeling like family, too. For more information, call (39) 089 233428 or visit www.levignediraito.com

RAVELLO

Ettore Sammarco

Located in a curve on the tiny road that winds its way up the mountain to *Ravello*, the entrance to *Ettore Sammarco* winery could easily be missed. Here, in an impressively small space, Ettore Sammarco and his family have produced wine since he founded the business in 1962. Today Ettore is just as involved in every aspect of the wine production, along with his son *Bartolo*, while his daughters *Maria Rosaria* and *Antonella* help with sales, making Sammarco wines truly a family affair.

While you'll see small terraces of vines along the steep slopes of Ravello, their wines are made with traditional Amalfi Coast grape varietals cultivated in a variety of locations around

Ettore Sammarco



Ravello. Their celebrated white wine *Vigna Grotta Piana* is produced from a century-old vineyard with a spectacular setting above Ravello — nearly 1,700 feet above the sea on *Monte Brusara*. A blend of *Ginestrella*, *Falanghina* and *Biancolella* grapes, only about 2,000 bottles of this special wine are made yearly.

The grapes harvested by Ettore Sammarco grow on small terraces around Ravello and the neighboring village of Scala, a landscape that sits right at the

cusps of sun-soaked lemon groves and northern-exposed mountainsides covered with chestnut trees that crave the winter cold.

Here the grapes take on different tones from the landscape and climate, which Sammarco have combined to create their *Selva delle Monache Costa d'Amalfi DOC* white, rosé and red wines along with the *Terre Saracene Costa d'Amalfi DOC* red and white wines crafted using a blend of Campanian favorites like Piediroso with lesser known varietals like *Pepella*, which is cultivated primarily on the Amalfi Coast.

A stop by Ettore Sammarco while visiting Ravello offers the chance to sample their wines, along with a wide selection of liqueurs, from the classic *limoncello* to *finocchietto*, a fennel-

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their wine to the United States.

Amalfi Vineyards *continued from page 7*

infused liqueur that is another local favorite. For more information, call (39) 089 872774 or visit www.ettoresammarco.it

TRAMONTI

Longtime *Dream of Italy* readers might remember when we delved into the *Ancient Vines of Tramonti* and visited several winemakers in the village. Many years on, *Tramonti* is still one of the most notable winemaking locations on the Amalfi Coast. That is due in large part to its protected setting in the *Monti Lattari* Mountains.

The name Tramonti literally means “among the mountains,” which is an apt description for a place composed of many tiny villages nestled in and around a valley rather than one central town. The vineyards as well are situated along terraced slopes and historic farmhouses, creating an idyllic mountain setting worlds away from Positano’s pastel-hued homes and rocky beaches.

Swirl the Glass Wine Experiences

Don't know your Aglianico from your Falanghina? Do you love discovering local wines while traveling? Whether you're new to wine or a connoisseur, *Swirl the Glass* takes travelers on in-depth tours of the coastline's top vineyards. This Amalfi Coast-based company was created by Positano local *Cristian Fusco*, head sommelier at *Le Sirenuse* hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant *La Sponda*, and his American-born wife Jenny Konopasek. *Swirl the Glass* offers travelers the chance to experience locally produced wines with the insight of a professional sommelier.

Visit picturesque vineyards while learning about the entire winemaking process from local grape vari-



etals to the unique challenges of growing grapes and producing wine on the rugged Amalfi Coast. You'll start right in the vineyard before moving into the winery and getting an up-close look at local winemaking traditions.

The final—and tastiest step—is sitting down to sample the wines, accompanied by a delicious lunch of local specialties. *Swirl the Glass* offers full-day wine experiences on the Amalfi Coast as well as further afield in Campania's wine producing areas, such as *Avellino* and the *Mt. Vesuvius* area. They also offer wine tastings right in *Positano* or catered to private villa rentals. For more information, call (39) 329 4219392 or visit www.swirltheglass.com

Tenuta San Francesco



Tenuta San Francesco

If the name seems familiar, *Tenuta San Francesco* was featured in season one of the PBS travel series, *Dream of Italy*. Launched in 2004, *Tenuta San Francesco* set out to revitalize the winemaking tradition in *Tramonti*, and they have since been one of the leaders of the *Costa d'Amalfi* DOC wine production. Set in a cantina from the 1700s, they have brought modern winemaking into a historic setting. With just over 22 acres, *Tenuta San Francesco* is one of the largest vineyards in *Tramonti* and produces some of the area's most respected wines as well.

Here among the peaceful landscape there are vines that have been growing for over 100 years. What sets these vines apart, besides their age, is the

fact that they are still producing grapes that are exactly the same as over a century ago. The isolated mountain setting saved them from the *Phylloxera* pest from North America that ravaged Europe's vineyards in the 19th century.

To save their vineyards, *Phylloxera*-resistant rootstock from America were grafted to vines across Italy and Europe. The work

of vintners in *Tramonti* over the past century have helped to preserve these very rare vines. It's not often you can taste wine that has change so little over a century!

Among these rare vines, *Tintore*, *Aglianico* and *Piedirosso* grapes are grown to create the *Tramonti Riserva 4 Spine*. A unique wine to *Tenuta San Francesco*, the *E' Iss* label was created exclusively from ancient *Tintore* grape vines and dedicated to the fathers of the vineyard's founders in honor of their hard work protecting the ancient vineyards of *Tramonti*. The white grape varieties cultivated at *Tenuta San Francesco* are just as treasured, and include *Falanghina*, *Biancolella*, *Ginestra* and *Pepella*.

Tenuta San Francesco offers tours of the vineyard along with wine tastings and lunch featuring local dishes that match perfectly with their wines. For more information, call (39) 089 876748 or visit www.vinitenutasanfrancesco.com

—Laura Thayer

Laura Thayer is a freelance writer and photographer living on the Amalfi Coast. She has contributed to Fodor's and DK Eyewitness guidebooks and shares about life on the Amalfi Coast on her blog, Ciao Amalfi. For more, visit www.ciaoamalfi.com

The average Italian drinks 45 bottles of wine per year.