



Lucca

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Roman pine in Garbatella

# DREAM OF ITALY®



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## The Artisans of Lucca

**M**y favorite pastime in *Lucca* is wandering. I poke around. There's no set route. If I see a lovely garden, I head toward it. If I have never walked on a street, I will go turn the corner. If a shop looks intriguing, I will enter it. And I always find something new.

While meandering last spring I discovered four artisans, each one happily working in the ways of the past.

One business is a family tradition. The other three artisans' paths to their careers were no more planned than were my wanderings. Although those paths differed, the destination is the same. They all have a passion for their work.



### Antica Tipografia Biagini

Years back, Spaniard *Matteo Valesi* tired of the crowds walking on *Via Fillungo*, so he spontaneously turned down *Via Santa Giustina*. Those steps would change his life.

During the stroll, he stepped into *Antica Tipografia Biagini* and chatted with its owner, *Gino Biagini*. That chat lasted, his wife later reminded him, for four hours. "I was lost in time," Matteo reminisces. Mr. Bagnini, who started the business in the 1950s, was tired and he wanted to close the business.

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## Garbatella: An Authentic Side of Rome

**I** spent my early days in Rome taking the bus into *Piazza Venezia* and walking the *Via del Corso* to popular Roman monuments admiring the familiar scenes like I was walking in a living postcard.

In 2015, I moved to *Garbatella* and discovered a different, more authentic side of Rome. Garbatella is a place where a coffee still costs 80 cents and where neighbors leave freshly picked figs on each other's doorsteps. Away from the shiny white *Trevi Fountain* and the bustle of crowds, Garbatella feels authentically Roman.



The unique architecture sprouts up out of the dense greenery of the area. A short walk from the cluster of buildings that make up historic Garbatella leads you to one of Rome's lesser known secrets: the *Tor Marancia* murals. A walk around this area of southern Rome is a feast for the eyes with architectural wonders and alluring street art.

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# Lucca is the city of 100 churches.

## A New Neighborhood

In the 1920s, a plan was devised to create a canal that connected the center of Rome to the waterfront in *Ostia*, a major outlet to the Mediterranean Sea. The canal construction and its future use would require a large number of port workers, and Garbatella was developed as a neighborhood for these workers and their families to live in. On February 18, 1920, King *Vittorio Emanuele III* came to Garbatella and laid the first brick of the Piazza Brin and called for the development of this new neighborhood.

While the canal was never realized, the initial intentions of this neighborhood are still apparent to the knowing eye. Many of the piazzas and buildings in Garbatella are named for naval heroes and famous naval subjects still to this day.

In the 1930s, the Italian government made drastic changes to the cityscape of the historical center of Rome. With the intention of making Rome appear grander and more modern, the powers that be decided to demolish the *Borgo* neighborhood and the houses on the Roman forums to create impressive boulevards that would stun visitors to the Italian capital.

The creation of *Via della Conciliazione* which connects *Castel Sant'Angelo* to the Vatican, and *Via dei Fori Imperiali*, which links *Piazza Venezia* to the Colosseum, meant knocking down homes and displacing families who sought refuge in Garbatella.

Given that the people who inhabited Garbatella in its early years were from the very center of Rome, the neighborhood developed a still-standing reputation of being home to families of authentic Roman lineage.

## A Garden Project

The design of Garbatella was modelled after the English "Garden City Movement." Buildings were constructed around central gardens that were to serve as informal



Mural dedicated to Lotti



their houses and to this day the greenery of the zone is unmistakably unique in Rome.

Today, the smaller villas on the lotti of Garbatella are prized homes. Families who still live here are hesitant to sell since they are in possession of jewels of the Italian architectural world. The smaller, single-family homes are often painted shades of the Roman soccer team and shine like clusters of amber jewels against the cityscape.

Gardens in between the lotti are home to quirky lawn gnomes that are often watched by statues protruding out of the tops of the

villas. Murals dedicated to famous Roman actors and football players grace the walls of some of the homes and on days when AS Roma plays, you can hear the entire zone buzzing and cheering for every goal.

The shared gardens were created with the intention of giving residents a space to mingle with their neighbors and it is thanks to this decision that the sense of community is stronger in Garbatella than perhaps any other Roman neighborhood.

## What's In A Name?

A running debate between the residents of Garbatella circles around the name of the neighborhood. There are endless rumors about its origins, and any of the locals happily share their personal interpretations with anyone who will lend an ear. While



gathering spots for the inhabitants. The plots of land were divided into numbered *lotti*, or "lots," and each *lotto* boasted a green area and an elegantly designed building.

The buildings were divided into relatively small apartments with several families living in each *palazzo*, but the bounty of the outdoor space proved to be a welcome bonus for those who lived there. Residents of Garbatella often had a small *orto* or garden on the plots of land around

# Garbatella is on one of the old

there are surely dozens of rumors, there are three likely explanations for the true meaning behind the name of the garden district.

The first hypothesis is that many years ago, a woman named *Carlotta* had an inn in the area that was so loved by travelers, that they called it the “*Garbata Ostella*,” or the nice,

pleasant hostel. Over time, they combined the two words to “*Garbatella*” and the name stuck. Today, there is a modest, simple fountain built for *Carlotta* in the heart of *Garbatella* that is compassionately cared for by those who live around it.



Carlotta Fountain



Tor Marancia mural



Tor Marancia mural

colorful sky.

The walk from *Garbatella* to *Tor Marancia* is littered with other artists’ work on a wide variety of themes and in assorted styles. The street art, not always city-regulated, sometimes appears overnight as a surprise.



stand tall as exhibits in a magnificent outdoor museum. Since 2015, the otherwise modest-looking buildings on the *via Tor Marancia* have been transformed into giant works of art as a part of the *Big City Life Project*. Twenty artists from around the world painted the buildings which are all completely unique from one another.

Some of the buildings pay homage to Roman history, such as the *Veni, Vedi, Vici*-themed design. Others give subtle hints to Roman culture, such as the building painted with breezy waves of the *ponentino* wind which, historically reached the city from the shores of *Ostia*.

Entrance to this complex is completely free and the residents are happy to have visitors admire their open-air museum. Those who live in the apartments spend a lot of time down in the communal gardens with their dogs and their neighbors and are quick to smile at anyone who comes to admire the larger than life masterpieces. The benches in the garden allow you to rest while admiring the sky-high creations. I like to visit the complex towards the end of the day when the sunset bathes the buildings in a golden light and makes them pop even brighter against the

Seeing this artwork is like reading the diary of a personified Rome. Interpretations of current events and expressions of public sentiment presented in larger than life contexts

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Another theory is that “*Garbatella*” comes from a beloved tavern that used to exist in the neighborhood behind the *Basilica of San Paolo*. The third, and most probable theory, is that in the gardens of the neighborhood, winemakers used a method in which they hung the grapevines on pre-existing maple and elm trees, which was called “*a garbata*.”

While some theories are much more believable and fact-based than others, I love to hear everyone’s passionate explanations as to how *Garbatella* got its name. It has become clear to me that part of the magic of this neighborhood is the charming folklore and the mystery around its name.

## Tor Marancia

Across the busy *Cristoforo Colombo* from historic *Garbatella*, the *Tor Marancia* neighborhood is an absolute feast for your eyes. Apartment buildings in a condominium complex

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# est pilgrimage routes in Rome.

## Lucca *continued from page 1*

Lucca had once been one of the most important centers for book printing. In 1477, *Matteo Civitali* founded the first printing house in Lucca. Antica Tipografia Biagini is the last handicraft typography here.

Later in 2012, when he was back in Spain, Matteo decided that, "My destiny was to help this typography exist." He bought the print shop. "I had a good life in Spain, he recalls. "I had more money and less hours of work."

At Antica Tipografia Biagini words are formed letter-by-letter in the traditional method of manual setting with lead moveable characters. Dozens and dozens of shallow wood drawers filled with various sizes of innumerable fonts line the walls of the workroom.

The shop's 300 zinc and magnesium plates, used for cards, invitations, and prints, are filed in plastic sleeves in large notebooks. The metal plates are in the right-hand pockets; the corresponding printed examples in the left side pockets.

Each item in an order, whether it is a business card, a wedding invitation or personal stationery, is meticulously crafted one-by-one. The customer is part of the design process, choosing one of the very fine papers, the fonts to be used and the custom-mixed colors of the ink.

Creating *Ex Libris* is a specialty. "Every bookplate has a story. It is a graphic message about the book's owner," says Matteo, who loves this work.

Following Mr. Biagini's teachings, Matteo spends time getting to know the client through personal interviews and the completion of a long form.



Matteo Valesi



This form includes questions about hobbies, work, zodiac signs, special interests such as music, photography, flowers, any particular symbols the client would like and, if desired, a motto of six words. After Matteo and the client have distilled this information, graphic designer *Stefano Citti* creates a visual message about the book's owner.

A recently created *Ex Libris* includes a bear standing by a redwood tree, the Golden Gate Bridge and the setting sun — all symbolic of the client's home state, California.

The bookplates are printed on one of the two mid-20th-century Heidelberg Stella Classics printers. There's a clank as the print machine's arms move, the bursts of air that follow keep the pages from sticking together and create a breeze.

Other printing machines date from 1850 to the first half of the 20th

century. During my visit, the very large, green Super Egeria Nebiolo 1960 was printing hundreds of copies of the Italian Constitution. It took typographer Antonio eight hours to set the type on just one page of the constitution.

There are two 1940 embossing machines. The Italian-built *Saroglia* embossing machine makes a swish with each press of its foot pedal. "The sound of another time," says Matteo. "I love it!"

Yes, Matteo's love for his shop, its traditional ways and his work is unbounded.

Matteo enthusiastically welcomes visitors. Whether they want to place a custom order, buy some of the items in the shop or just look around, he is delighted to explain his work and give a quick tour around the shop.

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### ✪ Fabio Piagentini ✪

In a brick-walled workroom, just steps from busy Via Fillungo, *Fabio Piagentini* is touching a piece of wood, inhaling its aroma. The light is intentionally low, classical music plays quietly in the background and the shop's door is closed. Fabio is starting to fashion a violin.

Fabio's story begins with a tiny wooden dinosaur, a devoted mother and two perceptive teachers.

# The streets of *Lucca* follow

When Fabio was quite young, he loved to carve small things from wood. His mother, *Carla*, noticed his innate manual dexterity and decided to further develop this skill by offering the six-year-old piano lessons.

One day, *Carla* showed *Giuseppina Consolo*, the teacher, a small wooden dinosaur skeleton that Fabio had carved. *Giuseppina* immediately realized that her young pupil's artistic talent combined music and dexterity.

Years later, after attending an art institute and working at varied jobs, Fabio took a master class with cellist *Giovanni Pelliccia*. Again, a music instructor recognized Fabio's passions for both music and woodworking. *Giovanni* asked Fabio, "Why don't you become a luthier — a maker of stringed instruments?"

Quickly realizing that violin making was the perfect match for him, Fabio, at age 23, applied to the renowned Cremona International Violin Making School. His long hours of studying for the theoretical and practical entrance exam allowed him to directly enter the third year of the five-year school.

After graduation, Fabio worked with another luthier in Lucca for two years. When that person moved to Rome, Fabio took the plunge into opening his own business. "It was harder than learning to make a violin," he stated.

Fabio makes seven or eight violins a year. It takes him 230 hours — equivalent to a month-and-a-half of work — to make the instrument.

There are no electric machines in the shop, nor does Fabio use sandpaper. Everything is handmade with gouges,

chisels, planers and hacksaws — descendants of those 16th- and 17th-century tools.

Fabio is extremely particular about the wood he uses and fusses over his stock of red spruce and maple for years before it is used. Spruce is used for the construction of the table, and maple is



Fabio Piagentini

used for the back, ribs and scroll.

Fabio personally selects red spruce from *Val di Fiemme* in the Dolomites. He chooses trees that are at least 180- to 200-years old. After the trees are cut, they are seasoned — first submerged in water for its purifying benefits, followed by a one-year drying process.

Fabio then stores the wood in his warehouse — every piece cataloged and filed — for years of seasoning. This means that Fabio is buying wood now that he will not use for 10 years, or longer.

He has concocted his own secret formula for varnishing, the final step that takes 10 to 15 days. "The varnish needs to be thin, resistant and transparent. It must not hinder the sound quality.

By choice, Fabio sells directly to musicians. Before making a violin, Fabio meets with the musician, explaining his work and encouraging the violinist to test one of Fabio's

instruments. He says, "Musicians come to me with their needs and problems, which I must understand and solve."

"Meeting with the musicians is one of the best parts of my job," he states.

"When the instrument comes out of the shop, it must be at the top. If the musician thinks the instrument does



not sound right, I will be the first to say, 'I will not sell it, and I will make you another one.' Then that person will speak only well of me, which will bring other people. Word of mouth is my best publicity."

"The most beautiful part of my work is building the instrument from scratch," he says. "When one makes a violin, the sound represents the soul of the violin maker, the timbre represents the creativity."

Fabio has made about 160 instruments. Smiling, he says, "I know where they are, who plays them — they're almost like 160 children scattered around the world."

**Fabio Piagentini**  
Via del Gonfalone, 1  
(39) 0583 491010  
[www.fabiopiagentini.it](http://www.fabiopiagentini.it)



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# a rectangular Roman plan.

🐟 **Tommasi Loomworks** 🐟

A dozen or so years ago, harpist *Genni Tommasi* followed her great passion and curiosity for women's work by taking weaving classes from expert weaver *Lucia Nesi* at Lucca's *Museo di Palazzo Mansi*.

Lucca has a long tradition of weaving luxury textiles. In the last half of the 14th century, luxury textiles woven on thousands of looms in Lucca were sold throughout Europe.

As a harpist, using her hands and feet in rhythmical work on the loom came naturally to Genni. "I found a great affinity between music and weaving."

She fell in love with weaving, which, at first, was just for fun. Gradually weaving became her work, and she opened a shop in 2012. She gives harp lessons, but no longer plays professionally.

Last year Genni moved her shop to *Via San Andrea*. Her lovely shop is an oasis of tranquility on this busy street. Calming music plays in the background, light flows through the large window, and, of course, the artful displays of Genni's unique work are very tempting.

Under a wood-beamed ceiling in the rear of the shop Genni focuses on her weaving. One of her two large looms has a late eighteenth-century frame. She has restructured this loom, making some functional modifications.

On most days, you will meet *Lady*

*Hawke*, Genni's beautiful Collie snoozing in front of the desk.

Genni weaves her scarves, shawls and clothing with yarns of natural fibers — hemp; cotton; alpaca; flax; nettle — colored only with vegetable dyes. She especially favors alpaca for its many



One of these scarves hung on a mannequin displaying a long linen vest. A white scarf of silk and cotton would be a standout for any summer event.

Summer dresses made of light cotton weaves are cool to wear. Genni weaves the fabrics, and then a dressmaker sews the garment.

Genni's scarves and shawls are of many sizes and of multiple combinations of yarns and colors. A black stole has alternating strips of silk and alpaca. A naturally grey alpaca scarf has a touch of silver threads. And

another has rivers of various blues. Genni has also woven tote bags, vests, lampshades, and fabrics for curtains, upholstery and carpeting.

Given the impact of colors, materials and patterns, Genni says, "You could stay at the loom all of your life without repeating an article."

"I really, really love my work," Genni states. "Everything about it, every step from preparing the yarns, plotting the weave, setting up the design. Setting up the loom and weaving is like meditation for me." She concludes, "It's fantastic, I am in my own world."

**Tommasi Loomworks**

Via Sant Andrea, 28  
(39) 0583 490391  
www.tommasiloomworks.com  
Open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.



Genni Tommasi



shades of black, brown, grey and white. Genni often uses silk and occasionally adds some lurex for a bit of sparkle.

"It's easy to learn to weave," says Genni. "The harder part is learning about the yarns. I always need to increase my knowledge of yarns." She constantly tests different yarns, and the many fabric factories in Tuscany give Genni an abundance of sources.

Summer was on its way when I visited Genni. For the warmer weather ahead, Genni's summer scarves are more like long necklaces — narrow, with small splashes of color that appear as sparkling stones in the woven linen.

## 🦋 La Bottega di Nello 🦋

Facing a grassy square behind the *Duomo*, is a narrow brick and stone building. Its dark wooden doors are usually closed. The windows' shutters are often closed. There's no shop sign, no indication that inside is not only Lucca's oldest silversmith, but also the town's oldest workshop.

This is *La Bottega di Nello*.

On November 21, 1791, the *Serenissima Repubblica di Lucca* issued a "patente" to *Giovanni Battista Bastiani*. "Patentes" — basically licenses — were issued to goldsmiths and silversmiths in order to ensure the quality of their work. Each shop was required to "punch" its jobs with a personal metal stamp to ensure the object's origin. The sword that Bastiani adopted as his shop's punch is still used.

The bottega's "genealogy" is on the back of the framed patente. First, the Bastianis, followed by the Favillas (*Carlo, Luigi and Mario*). Since the 1950s, the bottega has belonged to the Giovacchinis — first *Nello*, who died in 2013, and now his son, *Cesare* and Cesare's cousin, *Angelo Ramacciotti*.

Little has changed inside the deep, narrow workroom.

Many of the innumerable tools hung on the walls, arranged on shelves or standing on work benches are centuries old.

Pointing out the oldest tool, a drill, Cesare notes, "In 60 years the technical sphere here has changed little.



Everything is done by hand, so there is no need for large machines." A tool used to make spoons dates back to the early 18th-century. A hand-cranked rolling mill is used to obtain thin sheets of metal.

Various sizes of wooden forms are used on the lathe to make silver goblets.



Angelo Ramacciotti

Cesare chuckles over one change. "Grandpa (Nello) used to come to work in a shirt and tie, over which he put his work coat, adding his work cap."

La Bottega di Nello does extensive repairs and restorations on ecclesiastic objects for churches in Tuscany and Liguria as well as private clients and institutions.

During my visit Cesare and Angelo were restoring two religious objects, a "pisside," the host container, and a "pastorale," a bishop's cane. Cesare notes that like all the work done here, extensive research, including determining how the object was originally made, precedes the physical work.

Sitting by the window, Angelo is "tunneling," a difficult and complex step in repairing the missing parts of the pastorale. Using a small hammer and tiny chisels, he slowly and precisely recreates the intricate original design on a copper "mask." Once finished, the design will be transferred to silver.

So well-respected, trusted and knowledgeable are Cesare and Angelo that they have the extraordinary honor of being the only people allowed to handle the exquisite jewelry that twice a year adorns the crucifix of Lucca's revered *Volto Santo*. Prior to the annual May and September processions, they



dress Volto Santo with delicate, gem-laden, intricately crafted treasures, such as his crown, collar and belt. Some of these pieces date back to the 14th century.

Cesare is also a sculptor, and his works have brought a new dimension to the workshop. He creates drawings and models of his new designs, which Angelo then produces. Thus, one of the bottega's windows displays religious items; the other features bracelets, earrings, rings and small sculptures.

As for the oft-closed doors...In order to capture daylight for his intricate work, Angelo has his workbench by a window near the door. Angelo, who needs to concentrate on his task, chuckles, "We do not want to be fishes in an aquarium."

**La Bottega di Nello**  
Via Arcivescovato, 22  
(39) 328 0024101  
[www.labottegadinello.it](http://www.labottegadinello.it)



—Mary Ann Hemphill

*Mary Ann Hemphill last wrote about papermaking in Florence in 2015. She would like to thank her friend, Lucca tour guide Paola Moschini, for her help with this article. For more information, visit [www.paolamoschini.com](http://www.paolamoschini.com)*

on the side of these buildings leave lasting impressions on visitors. For an alternative to the city center, pack your walking shoes and visit Garbatella and Via Tor Marancia. These spots provide unique settings for vacation photos and give an invaluable glimpse into how the real Romans spend their days in the Eternal City.

### Catch A Glimpse

The 1993 film *Caro Diario* by *Nanni Moretti* is an ode to the beauty of Rome's lesser known zones. The first episode of the film is called "*La Vespa*" and it starts with Moretti driving around Garbatella and other parts of Southern Rome on his motorbike. The episode highlights the unique architecture of Garbatella as well as the beautiful green gardens and hidden alcoves of the area.

A few short minutes of this film, which won the Best Director Award at Cannes Film Festival, transports the audience to the quaint streets of Garbatella and although it is a quarter-century old this year, it feels as though it could have been made at any moment in the neighborhood's existence. The beauty of Garbatella is that it was designed with such a respect for beauty, architecture and design, and that its residents have always regarded it as a jewel to be admired and preserved.

—Danielle Abbazia

*Danielle Abbazia is an Italian-American Cultural Heritage professional living in Rome. Enjoy her vignettes of Roman life on Instagram @giramond0*



Alberto Sordi



House and courtyard



# Neighborhood Hangouts



*Garbatella is filled with coffee shops, craft beer bars and restaurants serving authentically Roman dishes. These atmospheric spots provide the perfect places to take a break while exploring the neighborhood.*

### Hey Hop Garbatella

Piazza Bartolomeo Romano, 4

(39) 068 3601573

[www.facebook.com/heyhopgarbatella](http://www.facebook.com/heyhopgarbatella)

Open daily, 6 p.m. to 1 a.m.

This bar sits in the very heart of Garbatella, across from the landmark Palladium Theater. The friendly barmen here will help you choose among the mostly Italian craft beers. During most of the year, the outdoor seats are full of locals enjoying a pint, some chips, and the cool surroundings.

### Biffi Roma

Piazza Eugenio Biffi, 11-12

(39) 065 1435360

<https://biffi-bistrot-roma.business.site>

Open Monday to Saturday, 7:30 a.m. to 2 a.m. and Sunday 7:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., 5 p.m. to 2 a.m.

A café by day, Biffi Roma turns into a hip spot for aperitivo and late-night drinks. It's located in the corner of Garbatella's *Piazza Biffi*. The bar has glass walls on all sides and outdoor seating, so you will be able to admire the beautiful buildings surrounding it no matter where you sit. Breakfast is one of the most popular times at Biffi Roma and their coffee and fresh juices are the perfect way to start the day. They offer several baked goods, on display in beautiful glass stands, as well as sandwiches, teas and soups for lunch and dinner.

### Er Panonto Pizzeria

Via Enrico Cravero, 10

(39) 06 5135022

[www.facebook.com/PizzeriaErPanonto](http://www.facebook.com/PizzeriaErPanonto)

Open daily, except for Wednesday, 7 to 11:30 p.m.

Across the street from the Palladium Theater and set in a historic building, this pizzeria has a large indoor dining room and ample outdoor seating for warmer months. The outdoor garden is covered in vines and is a family (and pet) friendly place for dinner. Er Panonto serves typical thin-crust Roman pizza like the pizzerias of vintage Rome. The waiters all have Roman accents and the food, such as the fried *filetto di baccalà*, is so very Roman.



Pizzeria Er Panonto



Palladium Theater

# Garbatella has a population of 45,000.