

Amber Road Tours

Small group journeys through the best bits of Italy

Life In Italy

September newsletter 2009



2010

Tour Calendar

Sicily

May 6-17

Oct 11-22

Week In Tuscany

May 2-8

June 6-12

Sept 5-11

Tuscany/Umbria

May 13-25

Sept 9-21

Sept 23-Oct 5

Oct 7-19

Tuscany/Liguria

June 2-10

Sept 15-23

Amalfi/Apulia

May 14-26

Sept 24-Oct 6

The backside of Ferragosto

Our little village sits on a ridgetop overlooking the Spoleto-Assisi valley. The road that passes underneath is called La Spina, built by the Romans in the second century BC to connect Umbria with the Adriatic region of Le Marche. The village is divided into lower and upper parts, *alto and basso*. There is a one lane dead-end road that passes through the alto, the basso is entirely pedestrian.

People have lived here a long time though the historical records only go back to the 14th century. Most of the houses are thought to have been built between the 11th - 15th centuries. In the 16th century when Spain governed the Kingdom of Naples, the northern boundary being in Umbria, there was a Spanish garrison headquartered here to control the Spina pass. A large palazzo with loggia was built for the commander - it is now an historic residence with vacation apartments, leloggedisilvignano.

Most of the Italians who live here were born here. Fifty years ago they numbered 400. Many worked for large landholders down in the valley. In the village there were markets and shops, an elementary school. On Sundays the families gathered round the small square after church, played bocce in the afternoon, held dances at one house or another. There were many children, as Italians famously had large families back then. They were poor people. There were no cars - if they went to Spoleto they walked the 8 miles. Though piped water arrived to the fountain in the square in 1907 (every house had a cistern to collect rainwater) there was no indoor plumbing until the nineteen-seventies.

Now the year-round population is 70. The shops and bars have long closed their doors. Three times a week a van comes to sell bread and pizza. There is one bus a day to Spoleto for the many who still don't have driver's licenses. The square has become a parking lot (holds three cars). There are just a few children who attend school in the next village and Italy has one of the lowest birth rates in the world.

When the industrial boom, the *Italian Miracle*, hit in the fifties and sixties most of the young people left for jobs in the city or emigrated to other countries. Some have returned to retire here. The old folks have passed on. The houses they left behind have been bought up by foreigners, mostly used as vacation homes. Counted among those are Germans, English, French, Americans and Australians in addition to families from Rome.



Ferragosto and Christmas are the most important Italian holidays and Ferragosto is the peak of the whole summer. Literally meaning Augustus's holiday, it is a tradition dating back to 18 BC. The Emperor consolidated the various late summer festivities into a month-long period of feasting, celebration of various deities and repose. The rich and powerful of the time left for their sumptuous villas along the Bay of Naples.

Now Ferragosto is celebrated the 15th of August and personal vacation time can include the week or two weeks before and/or the week after. Fifty percent of Italians have their vacations during these three weeks!

It's very hot in August - ninety five degrees in the shade though the evenings can be quite pleasant. Air conditioned homes are not common. To escape the heat Italians leave for the beaches, mountains or small hilltop villages like ours. Many of those who remain in the cities work in tourism - at the hotels, restaurants and shops where they play host to masses of foreigners (mostly Europeans) who are apparently impervious to heat. It's chaos! - the exodus of millions of Italians and the entrance of millions of *stranieri* (foreigners).

The arrival of the aforementioned *villeggianti* (second home owners) swells our village population to around 150 which to us seems crowded. Don't laugh - imagine your town doubling in population in a few days time! The mornings find our villagers taking walks and stopping to chat with neighbors. The men may rise early to hunt wild mushrooms and the women to harvest edible plants. Around midday the houses are all shuttered up to close out direct sun and keep interiors cool. In the evenings the locals get together for wine, food and cards.

By the end of the month the air is cooler and the *villeggianti* have all gone home. We enjoyed their coming and can also appreciate their leaving.



Car-free Spoleto update

Those of you who have traveled with us on our Tuscany/Umbria tour may remember that our town of Spoleto has a long term project to eliminate all cars from the historic district. Much progress has been made despite, as you can imagine, a lot of resistance. This is a photo of the now pedestrian main street, Corso Mazzini, looking down to the Piazza della Libertà. Quite a difference from the heavy vehicular mess of a year or two ago.

The city was clever in how they managed to accomplish this. They closed the street to lay new water, sewer and gas lines (which no one objected to) and then never reopened it to cars.

Southern cuisine

Puglia, the little touristed heel of Italy's boot (called Apulia by the ancient Romans), means *land without water*. Though this region has Italy's longest coastline (no place is more than 25 miles from either the Adriatic or Ionian sea) there are no lakes or rivers. You might be surprised then to hear that it is often referred to as the "garden of Italy".

Puglia produces 40 percent of the country's olive oil, 17 per cent of its wine, a large proportion of its fruits and vegetables and an abundance of seafood. Vegetables cultivated here include fava, artichoke, beans, eggplant, potatoes, chicory, asparagus, zucchini, tomatoes, onions, carrots and various greens. Among the many fruits are oranges, peaches, figs, apricots and table grapes. South Italy is famous for *grano duro*, the hard wheat that's used to make pasta. Most Italian wheat and barley come from Puglia and Sicily. Mozzarella and ricotta cheeses are an essential part of Apulian cuisine and pasta is everyday table fare. Italy's best bread is *pugliese*.



Featured Restaurant

A typical product of Basilicata and Puglia is *grano arso* flour, literally burnt wheat flour. It was born out of the abject poverty that typified rural areas in 19th century Italy: landlords allowed peasants too poor to afford flour to gather up the leftover grain burnt by the hot steam engine machines that harvested wheat in the fields. They would grind the grain into flour and mix it with water to produce pasta with a smoky, slightly grainy flavor.

Today the most original products, obtained mixing white flour and burnt flour in equal parts, are called *strascinati*, a special homemade pasta. This is not available at your local supermarket, but you may find it online or in Italian specialty shops that sell typical products from Puglia. For the purposes of the recipe you can substitute with any short pasta like penne.

*The strascinati di grano arso can be savored in Melfi, Basilicata at the Ristorante delle Rose, a favorite stop on our **Amalfi/Puglia** tour. Maurizio, the owner, has kindly provided the recipe.*

Il Ristorante delle Rose:

*Strascinati di grano arso con zucchini, formaggio di capra e sfilacci di bufala
(burnt wheat flour pasta with tomato, zucchini, goat cheese and dried buffalo)
recipe for 4 persons*

Ingredients:

320 grams pasta

1/2 cup semi-hard ricotta goat cheese

salt and pepper

5 small zucchini, cut into small pieces

4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

5 tbsp sfilacci di bufala

(thin filaments of smoke-dried meat)

2 crushed garlic cloves

300 grams cherry tomatoes

1 onion

Cook pasta "al dente" in a large saucepan of boiling salted water. Meanwhile, heat oil in a small, non-stick frying pan over high heat. Add garlic, onion, zucchini and tomatoes. Cook, stirring often until tender. Drain pasta, reserving 2 tablespoons cooking water. Return pasta and reserved water to saucepan. Add zucchini mixture, salt and pepper to pasta. Toss over low heat until thoroughly heated. Spoon into bowl. Top with grated goat cheese and sfilacci and serve.



Look forward to seeing you in 2010!
Jonathan & Sonya
Amber Road Tours

Visit our website:

www.amberroadtours.com

Contact us at:
Amber Road Tours
Jonathan Bassett & Sonya
Conti

Via delle Cantoncelle
06049 Spoleto, Italy
0743-224946

info@amberroadtours.com

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