

Ten days, nine dinners, eight lunches and several breakfasts - Italy 2006. July and hot. Really hot, the sweaty kind, not like Phoenix, but lose your appetite and remind yourself to eat (not a usual issue for me). But I can't lose my appetite - I'm in Italy, so I find myself walking everywhere, taking the stairs when I can, expending energy, sweating more (or should I say perspiring, so much more ladylike), anything to build the appetite and eat. Which I do, and quite well, thank you very much.

My trip to Florence and Rome includes my oldest daughter, Sam, and my mother, Rosalie. About two years ago I announced to anyone within earshot that a three generation trip to Europe was on order. So reservations were made, tickets purchased, itineraries created, and off we went. Little did I know at the time of planning that I would be simultaneously retrofitting a new catering and instruction kitchen, but is there ever a good time to do anything?

Rosalie had the charter of cultural must do's. No church went unvisited, no tomb unseen, artwork was appreciated, architecture was admired and castles were climbed. I was responsible for map orientation, language and communication, and most importantly, food - oh, and wine, and limoncello (but we'll get to that later). We were successful on all counts - a parallel inundation of architecture and pomodori (tomatoes), sculpture and formaggi (cheeses), medieval priests and Panini (breads) - that left our intellect honed and our palates satisfied.

Happily, nearly every meal was an excellent adventure with amazing flavors and textures as the reward. I am certain it is the brevity between farm and cook that contributes to the excellence of the food on the Italian table. In Rome, for example, our hotel was merely steps from the famed Campo di fiori, which hosts the morning market six days a week. Fruit, vegetables, cheese, spices and meats are sold to the signoras doing their daily shopping and to chefs purchasing for their *verdure di giorno*. The cantaloupe are a vibrant orange, the figs bursting with flavor (noted by the juice running down my chin), the tomatoes just begging to be brought home. My only regret was the lack of an oven or stove for me to use - the abundance of zucchini flowers alone was enough to make me weep with culinary frustration. I "settled" one day for three different types of tomatoes - ciglieni di pomodoro (cherry tomatoes), pomodorini (baby romas shaped like red

torpedoes) and heirlooms, bocconcini mozzarella di bufala (buffalo milk mozzarella, freshly made), and pizza bianca - the most lusty, crusty chewy flat bread liberally brushed with extra virgin olive oil and dusted with sea salt- and created a wonderful picnic for Sam, Rosalie and me. Coupled with a nicely chilled vino bianco and the fragiolini (wild forest strawberries), and a view of Rome spread out before me from the roof of our hotel, and all was right with the world.

Here is a breakdown of our restaurant experiences, beginning with our first dinner, Monday evening.

Dinner - 4 Leoni. Trattoria 4 Leoni Via de dé Vellutini 1r. Piazza della Passera Firenze

We stumbled, literally, upon this gem in Florence, which has outdoor and indoor seating. No reservations, no patio, but no problem as our wonderful waiter brought us bruschette pomodorini (the first of probably ten we ordered over the course of the trip), porcini risotto, penne pomodoro and insalata con avocado, cabbage, pine nuts and white truffle oil. Let me tell you about this salad - it is fabulous. The earthy truffle oil literally changes the mellowness of the avocado and eliminates any bitterness from the cabbage. We finished the meal with our first pecorino mista with miele - basically two different aged pecorinos with honey drizzle that was amazing.

Tuesday Lunch - La Badia. Via Dei Tosinghi, 5/R

A quick stop post-Duomo in Florence took us here. Typical little café where we enjoyed panino mozzarella and pomodoro and a calzone vegetariano. Simple, quick, delish - why do we have fast food in the US, when we could have this? We were in and out in 30 minutes.

Tuesday Dinner - Osteria delle Brache (near Santa Croce church).

This was our least favorite stop in Florence, but more due to the touristy nature of the restaurant - it was our only concierge recommended restaurant in Florence. We started with a simple insalata mista, followed by fagiole ulla ucchete - borlotti beans stewed with tomatoes, garlic and herbs. The tonno salmoriglio (tuna pan-seared with olive oil, garlic and tomatoes) was outstanding. Rosalie and Samantha gave up the fight on their respective shrimp dishes - gamberi col spaghetti for Sam, Scampi col vino e Pomodoro

for Rosalie - both were prawns that were huge, with heads and eyes - not the dining companions there were looking for.

Wednesday lunch was just a quick bite off a pseudo-stand, but later that day Samantha and I went out for a stroll on the street of our hotel in search of *Olio e Convivium* (4 Via Santo Spirito), a wonderful gastronomy/restaurant/charcuterie. The owner/manager seemed to enjoy his two American visitors as he spoiled us rotten with pecorino and white truffled honey, a few other cheeses and some gifts he stowed in my shopping bag filled with goodies for my friends back home. I was loving life, and Samantha was having a ball documenting the moment on camera in conjunction with the Italian version of Scooby snacks. Truffles and cheese - if I ever pass out, wave this under my nose and I will come right back to life, never fear!

Wednesday Dinner - Trattoria Angiolino Via Guelfa, 138/R 50129.

Oh, my, Oh, my. The chef was tall and thin and resembled a Tucci brother from Big Night. Our server was the smaller Tucci brother -it was uncanny. And the restaurant was hot - I mean in a sweaty kind of way. But that didn't stop us from working our way through (another) bruschette e Crostini pomodoro, fagiole ulla uchette, and for Sam, ravioli burro e salvia (handmade ravioli in butter and sage sauce). Rosalie was in heaven with risotto asparigi, the color was glorious, the texture superb. I, however, despite the 90 degrees, decided to feast on my only ribollita of the trip. This bread and bean soup starts as vegetable soup from the day before, and is thickened with bread, more beans and allowed to cook as long as 7 hours. This Tuscan specialty was amazing, and worth the extra perspiration (who else eats soup in this weather!?!). And the chianti of the evening, Fattoria di Palazzudo, Trattoria Angiolino 2004 was great despite its warm temperature.

We spent Thursday outside of Florence in the hills of Tuscany, in the Chianti region. Our guide was Jessie, of The Accidental Tourist, a Florence based company that specializes in touring throughout the region with hikes, bike rides and, in our case, wine tastings, olive oil tastings and cooking class. Upon our departure from Florence we were whisked into the region, surrounded by cypress trees, fattorias for wine, olive oil, cheese, etc. Yes, I had arrived in paradise. We spent the first part of our morning at the

estate of the Fattoria di Grignano learning how olive oil is made, the distinctions between virgin, extra virgin and pure, how to store it, and how it was stored. This was followed by our Chianti 101 session - I lamented my inability to crawl inside one of the vast vats holding reserve Chianti from 2000. We then spent time doing an all-important tasting of both the olive oils and wines. And bread - crusty, crusty bread - again.

We left the estate and headed to the home of Christiana, our cooking hostess. We spent an hour in her "basement" making fresh pasta all'uovo with semolina, egg and a little water. We rolled it out for mezzalune di ricotta e spinaci (half moons stuffed with ricotta di pecorino, grana padano and spinach) and for tagliorini - a thinner cousin of fettucini. Then upstairs to cook the fruits of our labor. Our fresh pasta was cooked with a salsa cruda - olive oil heated with chunks of garlic, basil and tomatoes until just "wilted"- that was killer. Our mezzalune were tossed in a butter and sage sauce. We were also treated to mozzarella en carrozza - think Monte Cristo meets mozzarella grilled cheese- a spinach and asparagus frittata, baked cauliflower in béchamel and figs fresh from the garden, dripping with sun-inspired juice. Needless to say, I slept the whole way back to Florence, content in my cooking lesson and new wine knowledge.

We did crawl out for a light supper later that evening at one of the many enoteca in Florence. Right across from the Pitti Palace sat Enoteca Pitti Gola e Cantina at 16 Piazza Pitti. In conjunction with wonderful wines by the glass, we shared bruschette di pomodoro (thought we'd forget?), a tonno (tuna) salad with freshly sliced tomatoes (really?) and a fabulous cheese assortment that included aged pecorino, pecorino with chile pepper, bufala mozzarella and gorgonzola. We didn't leave much behind.

Friday was our last day in Florence. We grabbed lunch at Yellow Bar, Via del Proconsolo, 39r, which we passed on our walk to the Palazzo Medici and I insisted we retrace our steps to find it for lunch. It didn't make me popular to do the walk in the middle of the hottest day yet, but I was forgiven by fabulous pizza margherita for Rosalie, pizza funghi (mushrooms) for Samantha and an insalata for me that had my name all over it: romaine, tuna, white beans and fresh cipolline (onions). The balsamic they offered was a perfect balance for the olive oil.

We left for Rome on Friday afternoon, taking the train. We arrived in our second home of the trip, Hotel Smeraldo, in the aforementioned Campo di Fiore. After four days of sleeping until ten, I found myself for the remainder of the trip (except Sunday, when relatively little is open), heading for this open air market with the abundance of fresh produce, meats, flowers and cheese, by eight thirty. I met many of the purveyors who readily greeted me each morning and I worked on perfecting my culinary Italian in conversation with them.

Our first stop for dinner in Rome was L'Orso 80, Via dell'Orso 33 (north of Piazza Navona) to enjoy the famous and fabled antipasti. I am a self-admitted antipasti maniac. Called hors d'oeuvres in France, tapas in Spain, appetizers (or now, small plates) in America, this is my favorite way to dine - a taste of this, a bite of that and at L'Orso 80, the plates just keep on coming. Here's a snippet of what we enjoyed: zucchini misto, prosciutto e melone, spinaci frittata, zucchini marinate, smoked salmon with Arugula and lemon juice, drizzled with olive oil, fennel marinate, fagiole en pomodoro ragu, celery salad with chunks of provolone, porcini marinate, potato wedges with pesto and stuffed mushrooms, meatballs and marinara, all washed down with a Vermentino di Gallura 2005 Piero Mancini. Remember, we walked A LOT!

Saturday we had simple fruit from the campo outside the Villa Borghese, not from a cart boasting the sale of "sandwiches". We headed to the Piazza di Spagna and the Fontana di Trevi, enjoyed a lemon granita (hot day again), then made it back to the hotel to pass out. Too hot to really enjoy any food, we had salads that evening at a small Italian chain called Insalata Ricca. Aside from the fact the salad was larger than a bowling ball, it was good, just not indicative of traveling abroad. What was impressive were the people next to us who each enjoyed their own bowling ball salads, then consumed enormous plates of pasta - and they were locals. We wandered home, fed Samantha's affection for gelato - this was the evening I encouraged her to try Gianduja - which is chocolate hazelnut - and a favorite was born.

Sunday was Coliseum day. You know how large objects appear closer than they are? Well add 95 degrees of heat to the equation and blistered feet, and you'll understand how that damn ruin nearly ruined us in its ability to

move farther away as we approached. But we made it, bypassed the line (thanks to reservations), did our Arch of Constantine routine, the Forum and the Campodoglio, then began the long, arduous walk back to town. Well, this was the first time I ever saw my mother nearly melt, so it was without a trace of remorse that we sat in one of the most expensive restaurants, Tre Scalini in the Piazza Navona, for a lunch none of us were hungry for, merely starved by the thought of luxuriating in their air conditioning. A good thing that was our priority, since the simple caprese salad, antipasti di mare and insalata mista were nothing to write home about.

Later that evening we visited another enoteca before dinner. Cul de Sac, Piazza Pasquino, 73. This adorable spot had indoor and outdoor seating and the cooler air of the evening invited us to remain al fresco. I happily ordered a Riesling - Oltrepo Pavese Monsupello - which I paired with the following cheese assortment: Scarmoza (a smoked mozzarella), Taleggio (my new love affair), Pecorino (again!) and Fontina. As for pairing the Riesling with these, I would go again with the scarmoza and the Taleggio, and leave the pecorino and fontina for another wine, as they tasted of curd and bitterness, respectively.

We walked around for awhile, then found ourselves at the door of La Brace v.selva candida 460, off the campo di fiore. While Rosalie suffused her love of mushrooms with a fabulous fettucine col funghi, and Samantha continued her taste tests of the margherita pizza, I enjoyed a simple verdure grigliate (grilled vegetables) and the attentions of the chef, who single handedly worked the pizza oven, the pasta station and the salads (think Chris Bianco, with an Italian accent). He decided to play "stump the chef" with me and brought me a pesto with ten "secret" ingredients. The short version is, I nailed it, but only after learning the Italian word for parsley - prezzomolo. Apparently my culinary Italian outdid his rudimentary English for I started with "parsley" and was told no. So, after racking my brain for every green herb known to me and poring over the dictionary, I went back to my palate and repeated "parsley" but in his language - and voila! The other ingredients? - they included olive oil, bread, anchovy and salt and pepper, to name a few. It was delish, and no vampires dared come near!

I haven't talked about my friend the baker, across from our hotel. Roscioli, Via dei Chiavari, 34, Rome, (the bakery) and on Via dei Giubbonari, 21-23,

Rome, (the enoteca/restaurant/charcuterie), is probably the best purveyor of breads in the city. I had the misfortune of purchasing their pizza bianca early in our stay. Think a thin, slightly chewy yet crisp bread, liberally brushed with olive oil and dusted with coarse and fine sea salt, and you have pizza bianca (literally, white pie or pizza with no tomato sauce or cheese). If only I could find this here, but then again, I would be larger than a house (but quite content). You see, as the queen of carbs, no bread is safe in my proximity. Each day my baker friend would see me as I came in for pizza bianca, or spighe (crusty rolls with huge salt crystals), or Sam's apple tart. I miss Rome...he started putting things aside for me, so trusting was he of my appearance - he even invited us out to the Jewish quarter for a street fair, but we graciously declined.

Our last two evenings were fantastic for dinner in restaurants that shared part of the name. Our Monday dinner was spent at Ristorante S. Anna, Via di S. Anna, 8/9. Here, Rosalie dined on sea bass al forno - oven baked sea bass on a bed of thinly sliced potatoes, topped with her favorite funghi - porcini. Needless to say, she was not much for conversation as she sighed with satiety. Samantha enjoyed her pennette di checca - baby penne pasta tossed with fresh mozzarella and diced tomatoes, olive oil and a little salt - simple and tasty. I chose well with spada (swordfish) with pomodoro, olives and capperi (capers) - an arrabiata of sorts. It was excellent. We topped off our evening with Mandarina Sorbetto with Grand Marnier (Orange Sorbet with Grand Marnier) and Granny Smith Apple Sorbetto with Calvados (I ate/drank them both - I have no self control) while Sam enjoyed the restaurant's version of chocolate soufflé (more a molten cake) with gelato. And to top all this off, a complimentary glass of limoncello, a true Sicilian specialty. Funny, I don't remember the walk home, but I do remember being extra silly...I have not yet opened the bottle I brought home for fear of consuming the entire 750ml in an evening - it's that good.

Our last evening we dined at Osteria de St. Ana, Via Della Penna, 68/69, near Piazza del Popolo. Part entertainment, part history (they are in the Guinness Book of World Records for the world's largest candle), and all classical Roman cuisine, this restaurant came recommended by our concierge - and he nailed it. We started with green figs (I love summer in Italy) and aged pecorino con miele. Simply presented white cheese on a white plate with golden honey drizzled all over. I would have licked the plate but decided to

spare my daughter death by embarrassment. This being our last night, it was the first time we ordered a primi piatti in addition to our main courses. We shared a tagliorini con funghi that was made up of parsley, porcini mushrooms, olive oil, butter, salt and pepper. Again, so simple, but so perfect. My mother and I shared the turbot al forno. Easily a close second for ugly fish of the year award (monkfish wins), this was brought to the table prior to cooking for closer inspection, the oven baked on a bed of potatoes and tomatoes, expertly filleted tableside. Samantha went for red meat for the first time on our trip, for after ten days of Italian, was craving hamburger or something less colorful. Her manzo con erbe aromatiche was thinly sliced beef, marinated in herbs and olive oil, then expertly grilled. Well, it was a little more cooked than she prefers, but still hit the mark. We drang a Galaghina TABURNO 2005 which was excellent, and dessert centered on limoncello (uh oh) again. Then our wonderful waiter, Carlo, took us to the back and showed off his candle - you know what I mean. We were treated warmly and well, and would go back in a heart beat.

Over all, this was a wonderful ten days. The beauty of Italy when staying in the cities is the ability to walk everywhere, and the lack of snacking and the focus on enjoying each meal for its own sake. The Italian table is filled with fabulous flavors that are simply prepared - the ingredients stand for themselves. Not once were we served a tower of food, or garnished with something we couldn't eat; we usually had no garnish at all. Service as always excellent, from the smallest pizzeria to the grandest of restaurants. Our efforts to speak Italian were constantly rewarded - we were never handed a tourist menu and often our Italian was superior to the English of our server. My recommendations for your own successful culinary trip (aside from taking me)? Do your homework before you go - visit Fodors, Frommers, Guide Michelin, the New York Times, the thousands of Italy sites, talk to your friends and ask your concierge. It is nearly impossible to eat poorly in Italy, but it is possible to miss out on tremendous culinary experiences. Spend time in the open markets and see what the specials are before they even reach the chefs' market baskets. Visit the specialty stores for cheese, meats and wine and enjoy the samples - the more educated your palate, the greater your comfort when ordering, the more incredible your trip will be - Ciao!

Chef Laura