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Recollections of Campania

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Café Capriccio Travel
 Recollections of Campania
 By Jim Rua, 1998, Chef/Owner/Writer/Globetrotter
 Café Capriccio
 Albany, NY

After years of idle threats, and a couple of false starts, I finally arranged to take a group of 18-- family, friends and patrons of Café Capriccio--to Italy for a two week holiday in October, 1998. This was made possible after I was introduced to the Orofino family, who live in Napoli, by my renowned brother-in-law Jim McKenna, an international business tycoon from Boston. The Orofinos, fratelli Giorgio, Luca and Fabio, and their distinguished parents, own and operate hotels, spas and restaurants and also arrange for holiday itineraries through their American company named Stay and Visit Italy. Several aspects of the Stay and Visit concept struck me immediately: 1. Groups are small, 2. Itineraries are focused in specific Italian regions where travelers are allowed to "feel part of the local atmosphere," 3. Guests stay in one primary hotel from which they take day trips, and occasional overnight visits-- as we did to Amalfi and Capri. Incredibly, on those overnight trips we retained our primary hotel in Ischia, traveling with overnight bags, and 4. The moderate cost of the program includes all meals, wine, hotels, excursions, tickets whenever necessary, professional guides at all times-- everything but a gift for your secretary. (The cost for two weeks was US\$2,400 per person, plus airfare.) In addition to our guests, the group included my wife Anne and son Franco, age 16. Franco had the best deal, being granted an "educational leave" for two weeks by his enlightened educators at the Doan Stuart School in Albany.

Following are my recollections of a memorable holiday.



What Was I Thinking?

I should have been more adequately prepared to absorb the impact of Campania (Naples, Sorrento, Amalfi, Capri, Ischia). I've been interested in Italian culture for years, have seen the photographs, know a smattering of history and geography, cook with San Marzano tomatoes every day, love pizza pie, and am acquainted with many Americans descended from Neapolitan ancestors—but most of all I know the folk music. For many years, the songs of Naples (canzoni di Napoli) have been among my favorites. And what did I learn above all else from these songs? I learned this: whereas Italian immigrants to America from regions other than Naples often speak fondly of their homeland, the Neapolitans cry for Naples. Their messages are in the music: "addio mia bella Napoli," "Napoli, bella mia, terra d'amore" (land of love), Santa Lucia, how far away you are, and how sad it is; homage to cielo e mare (the sky and the sea), and the ultimate sentiment, expressed in the dialect: "si e nato a Napule, ce vo muri!": I was born in Napoli and there I want to die! What was I thinking?

Impressions

Although during our recent visit (October 4–17, 1998) we experienced several days of rain, unusual in October, the lingering impression I have is of a land with perfect climate. When the sun shines over the Gulf of Naples, the world appears to be in perfect harmony: the air is sweeter, the sea more blue (or emerald green) and clear, the sky more expansive and brighter than anywhere I have visited. The natural beauty is astounding. And then to imagine yourself walking in the footsteps of the Caesars as you trek down to the famous Faraglioni rock formation off the shore of Capri; or perhaps cruising along the shoals near Cumae in a modern speedboat while contemplating the journey of Aeneas, described by Virgil two thousand years ago; or, recollecting the younger Pliny's description of the eruption of Vesuvius, and destruction of Pompeii, which he witnessed from across the Bay of Naples in 79, A.D. Virgil and Cicero are buried somewhere near and the ghosts of the Caesars, along with their many allies and victims, are all around. One also has a sense that the great mythological gods of Rome and Magna Graecia could only have been imagined by people who lived in these places. Even the contrarious Wagner was inspired to write Siegfried during his visit to Ravello.

The overwhelming grandeur of the geography provides another memorable impression. Consider the Amalfi drive, for instance. At once terrifying, exhilarating, awesome: the sea, the cliffs, the structures on the cliffs, hanging off the cliffs, the vineyards on the cliffs, gardens too—every parcel of land is cultivated: who tends these gardens, who picks the grapes?—the road itself, too narrow for busses to pass each other. Pericoloso, baby: it's dangerous up there and many passengers on the bus are understandably afraid to look at the wonder of it all. How many vehicles have driven (been driven) off the cliff, 500 meters above the sea? Say a prayer, hold your breath. You must take a chance, however: the scene is fantastical, sensory overload, sure, but you only live once, right? The terrace of Villa Cimbrone in Ravello, also on the Amalfi coast, is equally perilous with its "infinite view" of sea, space and time itself. I stood near the fragile railing for a few moments: I did not feel the security of terra firma, but at least we weren't riding in a bus.

In Contrast to the towering splendor of towns on the Amalfi coast, and Capri, is the serenity of the Gulf of Naples which pervades the entire region of Campania. During our two week sojourn we crossed the Gulf several times, sometimes in bad weather, but my imagination admits only recollections of tranquility, warm sunshine, big sky, intense light, sweet air. Fragrances from the Gulf of Naples are not like those we encounter in places like Cape Cod. On the Cape we enjoy wet, salted air, redolent with the scent of fish--living and dead. In Campania, the air is light and naturally fragrant, like in the mountains, with no salt-laden humidity, and without the scent of fish. When you wake up in the morning in Campania, there is no residue from last night's fog on the balcony; and, in fact, there was no fog last night. Mysterious.

Ischia

Our primary residence was the small island of Ischia, a fertile paradise, 18 miles and only 35 minutes by hydrofoil from Naples. Ischia is one of three islands in the Gulf of Naples. The other two are Procida (about 15 minutes travel) and Capri, 1 hour. Augustus lived on Ischia for a time, but later traded it for Capri. Clearly, Augustus was

possessed of an excess of riches. His decision to trade up should not, however, demean the virtues of Ischia, whereon one could easily imagine to be located the Garden of Eden.

We stayed at the Orofino's beautiful hotel and spa named Ischia & Lido, about 70 rooms, most with balconies and fabulous views across the Gulf.

The Food

A new friend of mine, an experienced and respected chef, told me a few days ago that the best food in Italy comes from Campania, "no question about it." I did not dispute this revelation, consistent with my agreeable nature, and I can understand his point of view-- within a certain context. The context is that no where in the world do the indigenous vegetables and fruits taste better, especially tomatoes, peppers, those with green leaves and lemons. And the fish: we observed the sparkling waters of the Gulf and the Campanian fishing industry as it is practiced: one aging man in a row boat tending his nets. I didn't see any commercial fishing vessels; and no polluted waters except within the immediate areas of Naples' main ports of entry. Fish in the local markets glittered. I was struck especially by the tanks of living octopus fighting with each other on the sidewalk in front of the fish monger's shop on our walk down town one bright morning. And the pasta. The Italian pasta industry started in Naples and continues to flourish in the region. Napoli knows pasta! And the wood-oven pizza garnished with those fabulous San Marzano tomatoes, mozzarella di bufala and incomparable basil. Napoli knows pizza, you better believe it. Some wicked wit, I don't remember who, declared that there are only two certain laws in the universe: "Gravity, and everybody loves Italian food." So, what's not to like about la cucina di Campania?

Italians Don't Grow Old at the Table

My experience is that Italian cooking from Florence, and to the south, is characterized by the utmost simplicity, in contrast to the more complex cooking styles found in Bologna and the Piedmont. Early this year I was in Florence for two weeks, with family and friends. We were dedicated to eating copious meals and drinking Tuscan wines in cozy trattorias two times each day. We loved the Florentine experience, but I can tell you this about Florentine cuisine (beloved by all the world): 1. Every restaurant (except the famous Cibreo which doesn't serve pasta) has the same menu; 2. Every restaurant is charming, many are romantic and they're all very busy; expect perfunctory service. 3. Every restaurant is expensive if you choose to order antipasto, salad, pasta, entree, dessert, water, wine and coffee at every meal. We ordered everything, including grappa, and paid the fare; and 4. If you do not order the lusty porterhouse steak (bistecca alla Fiorentina), you may expect your entree portion to be modest, and often unaccompanied by potatoes, polenta or vegetables. Order a veal cutlet and that's what you get, with a slice of lemon on a leaf of lettuce--buon appetito! Order a veal cutlet at Café Capriccio and it's likely to be layered with eggplant and roasted peppers, four cheeses are melted over the top and it's served with a pile of roasted potatoes and vegetables. We use the biggest dinner plates made and still don't have room for everything. Italians prefer more balanced (and lengthy) meals, and they always save room for dessert. The conviviality one finds at an Italian table can, perhaps, be best understood through a proverb I once saw in a favorite book: "non si vecchia a tavola"; in Italy, one does not grow old at the table.

Dining in Campania

Food at the Hotel: Most of our meals were taken at our hotels, including the Ischia & Lido, where we were treated to a cooking demonstration one afternoon by the chefs who were preparing our evening meal. I missed the first part of the demonstration, but witnessed preparation of pasta and two sauces. After the demonstration I was pleased to remind Franco (a kid with some interest in cooking) that the techniques he observed were exactly like those we use at Café Capriccio, and at home. Pasta is cooked to order, tomato sauces are prepared with San Marzano tomatoes, cooked pasta is always tossed in the sauce, clams for pasta alla vongole are cooked slowly in a saute pan with olive oil, garlic and herbs (not boiled or steamed over a pot of water).... This is the way it's done in the best kitchens. Most of us have not seen hotel kitchens function and would not be pleased if we did. The Hotel Ischia and Lido kitchen, professional, orderly and clean, is exemplary.

Restaurant Fare: I also visited several restaurants (in Capri, Sorrento, Ischia, Amalfi, Caserta, and Ravello) and enjoyed a fine lunch with Giorgio Orofino and his wife at a private club in Posillipo (Naples). Every restaurant I visited displayed a selection appetizers in attractive platters, placed upon a table strategically located for maximum exposure. There were usually 4 or 5 choices: always roasted peppers, sometimes anchovy fillets, steamed green vegetables dressed with olive oil and lemon, eggplant

and zucchini prepared variously, tomatoes, green and red.... These antipasti choices were the very same foods and preparations offered to us each day at the Hotel Ischia & Lido, sometimes twice daily, with one important difference: at the hotel we were given 25 or more choices. As best I could determine, chefs at our hotel prepared the complete repertoire of Ischian appetizers which were offered to us every day—and they were delicious. The restaurant at Giorgio's exclusive club, filled with Neapolitan aristocrats enjoying long lunches, offered a few selections and none better than prepared at our hotel. The antipasto table set for us at the Hotel Ischia & Lido was superb and overflowing.

Pasta, Risotto, Gnocchi, Crespelle: The pastas at the hotel and elsewhere were always very good; and some were unforgettable. For example, the pasta con vongole served to us in Amalfi was splendid, as was our view from the dining room of the Miramalfi hotel. The gnocchi di patate in Ravello (Restaurant Salvatore) were fluffy as Neapolitan clouds, and delicious. The excellent and copious penne Napolitana (eggplant, ricotta and melted mozzarella) served for lunch in Sorrento was part of a fine meal in every respect. Two risottos served at the hotel stand out as among the finest dishes in my memory: risotto with cuttlefish and caviar (it was the color of pale lavender), and a risotto con frutta di mare served the night before our departure. Both risottos were full of flavors and had perfect texture—creamy with bite. We enjoyed flawless crespelle in Ravello, and the robust pappardelle served at a restaurant in Caserta Vecchia were glorious. The gnocchi di semolina with spinach prepared for us at the hotel was another winning dish, which I would be proud to serve—if I can figure out how to make it. I also remember farfalle pasta (butterflies) with salmon sauce, acclaimed by everyone at our table. The pasta, risotto, gnocchi and crespelle dishes were terrific.

Pizza Pie: Napoli's most celebrated culinary treasure is the pizza pie. Giorgio made special arrangements for our group to visit his friend Gaetano, Napoli's most acclaimed pizza maker, who provided us with a great show of pizza-making-brilliance, wonderful photo opportunities, and a memorable lunch. Each of us received a robust pie, covering a 12 inch plate, with the most incredible toppings of our choice. The fresh San Marzano, bufala mozzarella and basil on the pizza Margherita made for me was surely the tastiest pie ever made, honest to god! Campania lived up to its reputation for pizza, A+.

Dinner Entrees: I loved the rabbit (twice), the poached salmon, one particular fish boned by our captain (Pepino) who said it had no name, and a swordfish steak which our guide Valentina told me had been caught earlier in the day. Other entrees were less memorable and some were disappointing. Roasts and large fish, like sword and tuna, are cut thin in this part of the world, unsatisfying to many Americans—cowboys and epicureans alike. Could we be spoiled? Another difference in our culinary cultures is that meats and fish are cooked to a higher internal temperature (i.e., more "well done") than we are accustomed. Americans also expect plates of food to be more elaborately arranged than the Italians of whom we speak. Designer food platters, like those we see in magazines, have not yet captured the fancies of trattoria owners in Campania, nor in Florence for that matter.

With notable (in some cases stunning) exceptions (the subject of another essay), the best Italian fare is found on the antipasto tables, the primi platters of pasta, risotto and polenta (of course), le verdure, le insalate, il formaggio, i dolci and la frutta. I'm sorry, but i secondi often plays second fiddle in the Italian culinary symphony. Call me heretic; but I speak the truth, and we witnessed it all around Campania as we had previously in Firenze. Nevertheless, with so much abundance and culinary excellence present at every meal, what right to complain about a skinny veal chop? My advice: take the existential view: resignation: savor the prosciutto & melon, rejoice in the pasta, meditate upon the Parmigiana, revel in the vegetables, luxuriate upon the sweets, and devour i secondi without even thinking about it, or set it aside, and get on with the meal. This is Italy, eat your vegetables and enjoy your youth.

Wine: Whatever benefits the lava-rich soil of Campania bestows upon fruits and vegetables, it does so at the expense of its local wines. Only the wine made by our host at Caserta Vecchia (actually he told me his friend made the wine) lingers in my reverie. I was lusting for a good Chianti or, Bacchus forbid, a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon from the great state of Napa Valley—admittedly, I happily consumed more than adequate measures of the local red served at the hotel. My advice, when in Campania sample the local wines, but defer to other regions when it comes time to order.

Highlights For Me

The association I felt with the ancient Greek and Roman world (Virgil, Cicero, the Caesars, Homer, Pliny, the poets) was a profound experience. I did not expect that, but

now it seems that I had been waiting my entire adult life to visit Pompeii. Franco still says that Pompeii was the highlight for him. The Amalfi coast and its towns are incomparable, as is Capri. Ischia is paradise. Seeing the Baths of Tiberius on the way to Grotta Azzurra will not be easily forgotten, and neither will be the beauty of that day. Another memorable surprise was the exhilarating motorcycle tour I took around Naples with Giorgio driving-- more perilous, I assure you, than the bus ride to Amalfi. During my tour of the city, Giorgio actually talked our way into the Teatro San Carlo, Europe's oldest opera house, where we watched a rehearsal in progress, standing below the opulent royal boxes. Valentina Salzano, our constant companion and guide, deserves special accommodation for her attentive and intelligent ministrations throughout the trip. Valentina never let us down, Brava Valentina. Orofino family members were wonderful hosts and I am eager to see them again. Most of all I am grateful for having seen the Neapolitan sea, the sky, the land, the people. Two weeks in Campania is a great reward. I hope I live to do it again. And I can't wait to hear again the canzoni di Napoli. Finally, I know what they're about.



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