

## Guest Commentary

# Dick Davis

## La Dolce Vita

**S**alute! We were off and drinking for 10 days in Italy with that toast of prosecco, an Italian sparkling wine. More accurately, we were off drinking and eating.

Then we ate again.

Lots of walking and negotiating steep steps at historic sites allowed for more eating and drinking. So we cooked, drank and ate some more.

My vacation with my wife, Mary Michael, started with three days in Rome. Then we had a week at the culinary Casa Gregorio in the Ciociaria region of central Italy that was mixed with that *salute* and traditional Italian multi-course feasts.

We had enough *salutes* to make my arm think it was a Ferris wheel.

The casa provided meals, daily cooking lessons, tours of nearby family-owned and operated vineyards, olive oil mills, cheese and meat producers, along with stops at several restaurants, a seaside fishery, historical ruins, a pizzeria, and a gelateria.

Food and wine were the heart of our vacation while *la famiglia*, the Italian family, was its soul. I was humbled to be part of a visit to a Ciociarian olive grove and feel the warmth of the host Di Folco family. The Di Folcos have worked the land and operated the mill in Arpino for four generations.

Our visit and lunch on the family farm were a celebration of an Italian family with deep pride in each other and their land. Son Vincenzo is learn-



One of the majestic views at the Casa Gregorio in the Ciociaria region of central Italy. Photo by Mary Michael, the author's wife.

ing English and hopes to expand the operation to attract more tourists. His mother, Pina Savone, is not so sure.

Oh – the food. The spread in a rustic building included antipasto plates the size of tires piled high with locally produced vegetables, cheeses and meats. And wine, of course. The wines were made in the same room.

*Salute!*

Three tins of the Di Folco extra-virgin olive oil found their way into our suitcases. Now that we're home, I wish we had had space for three cases.

Mary's Italian roots led us to the casa in Castro dei Volsci, a hillside town about 55 miles south of Rome. The family of her mother, Lena Cataldi Michael, is from Castro, while the family of her late father, Albert Michael, is from nearby Ceccano. (Michael is Americanized from Micheli.)

Mary's sister, Patty Maykowski, discovered the casa online earlier this year. She and her husband, Bill, committed to the trip and Mary and I joined them and 14 others from around the United States. Bill is Polish and I'm Slovak-English-Irish but we didn't let that get in the way of a good time.

We expected good Italian food. (I know, I know. Some would say "good Italian food" is redundant.)

Interactions with locals, the luxury of the casa, and the oversight of its founder, Gregory Aulensi, and his staff, and mixing with other guests as we cooked and toured made it a week we hope to repeat.

Seven years ago, Aulensi, an interior designer, bought an abandoned 17th century, 12,000-square-foot house in the heart of the medieval city.

The food tour included 10 food and wine tastings at seven of some of Trastevere's historic and loved places. Samples at the various family-owned restaurants ranged from prosciutto, burrata cheese and pasta to wine, pizza and cookies. A gelateria was the final stop.

The Michigander seems to have spared no expense converting it to a seven-bedroom estate with modern conveniences, a cavernous fully equipped kitchen with a wood-burning pizza oven, and tastefully decorated lounges. To

be safe, he built a second, slightly smaller, kitchen upstairs.

Nine months of the year, the casa hosts weeklong, hands-on cooking programs on Italian cuisine. Aulensi just opened a villa a few steps away and plans to add a swimming pool and more specialized, intense cooking classes.

With his attention to detail and help from those family-owned businesses in the region, Aulensi is fulfilling his "Under the Tuscan Sun" dream.

*Salute!*

Mary and I exchanged that toast several times in Rome before cooking at the casa. Our culinary highlights

were devouring the house specialty, penne a la carbonara, at La Carbonara restaurant and a twilight walking food tour through the city's Trastevere neighborhood.

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Walking among and talking with the locals and dodging scooters in narrow, ancient streets between restaurants provided unexpected entertainment. We were glad to have comprehensive health insurance.

*Magnifico!*

Television chef Nick Stellino piqued my interest in the penne dish years ago during his visit to La Carbonara on his PBS show. I hoped we could visit the restaurant and we did. In fact, once we got our bearings at our hotel in the heart of Rome near the Campo de Fiori, Piazza Navona and the Pantheon, we discovered we were a five-minute walk of La Carbonara.

As my wife and I relaxed in the restaurant's patio, in the heart of the Eternal City, and sampled the al dente penne mixed with pancetta, cream, eggs, parsley, olive oil, and parmesan cheese, I had no doubt it was worth the nine-hour flight.

*Salute!*

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author, Dick Davis, and his wife reside in Sharpsville, Pa. Davis is a professional writer employed by the Sharon Regional Health System.