

Cooking in Italy

Our Ligurian “simply benissimo” culinary experience with Micol and Dino, owners, chefs and culinary tour operators of the Rustico Cooking School of New York, confirmed that dreams definitely do come true.



This anticipated week long, lifelong dream was at the tail end of a marvelous eight week Grand European Adventure that saw us climbing the Eiffel Tower in the rain, eating langos in Budapest, followed by sausage in Vienna, then being totally entranced by Venice, overwhelmed by Florence and simply settling into Italian village life with a week long “rest” in Santa

Margherita de Ligure, before arriving in **Rapallo** to join our culinary compatriots.

Being independent travelers, prior to undertaking this long standing dream of ours we admit to a bit of trepidation that our first experience with a group tour would bring us an officious, fancy-umbrella wielding leader, who would insist we wear name tags and keep us in an orderly line. Micol and Dino turned out to be the most adorable couple who exuded a friendly, down to earth, breezy, but definitely knowledgeable, persona; we knew that we had chosen well, even before the first of the extraordinary tables and many adventures that comprised our marvelous week together!

Our fears quickly dashed after having settled nicely into historic accommodation in a sea-side, Art deco hotel in the village of Rapallo, we joined our group for a welcome *un 'ombra* and introductions. We enjoyed our first lunch at **Vesuvio** in Rapallo, which featured the seafood cuisine of Liguria; that lunch confirmed we needed good appetites; Micol told us to “taste” but not to feel pressured to eat.



It was reassuring to find our group a small one. Adorable Woody and Gloria from Chicago...he was our senior citizen at 90, but put us all to shame with his stamina and his quirky repartees, Gloria's hope for the week was to put a fresh touch on her Mother's recipe for tomato sauce. Sisters from New York, Jean and Pauline, who delighted with their strong *Neu Yawk* accents, were tiny women of Asian descent...they were challenged to swallow more than a taste of the mountain of food we shared. The "wives of LA", Debra, Kim and Deb, "amused" us initially with their loud, unending need to call friends and family on their cell phones, including us in their conversations...until Woody had enough and insisted they might want to enjoy the wonderful scenery instead of their phone dial....peace reigned! Debra from North Dakota was a friendly, unobtrusive woman; Helene, first time traveler from her North Carolina home, was a cheerful companion; Bob and Kathleen from "*Nou Jersey*" entertained, as least Bob did, with a running commentary while Kathleen remained quietly in the background. Then there was us, the only Canadians in the group, a bond shared with Micol and Dino, ex-pat Canadians in New York.

Our culinary adventures took us to quaint, colourful, postcard-picturesque villages that clung precariously to the scrap of land fronting the sea, as well as to the multi-layered city of **Genoa**; they took us from an ancient family-run olive oil factory to an equally ancient family-run petit winery, where we sampled their equally exquisite product; then on to the sweetest of the sweets, a candy and chocolate factory, the other sweet simply the best of gelato. A taster's paradise!

Our hands-on cooking adventures were loaded with fun as well as being instructive. After our hands learned the tricks and our eyes



dazzled by all that we made, our palates sang! We discovered that the humble but colourful blendings of herbs, especially the aromatic revered basil, with nuts.....tiny pinoli and the freshest crunchy walnuts, and sea bounties such as cuttlefish, calamari, mussels and bream, as well as the majesty of superb olive oil, could produce a cuisine that was simply delightful and delicious in its own imposing way. As proud

Canadians, we were thrilled to learn that the best pasta flour used was Manitoba flour!

There were so many Ligurians who contributed to the success and happiness of our journey, where we were welcomed as family and were treated as family and left as family. As with everything, there were some George and I will never forget... learning the tricks of the "real" foccacia de Recco with Mario at Manuelina's, Fausto with his crazy hats, his tricks-up-the-asparagus and our 14 specialties made under his watchful eyes, and we will especially treasure the sweet, elegant, pleasurable pasta-making day with Mauritzia and the warming bites of her Nona's apple cake!

The day we were leaving Rapallo, George and I paid a visit to Mauritzia's pasta shop to buy corzetti to take to our family in Wales. As usual, the customers were lined-up out the door and the cupboards were almost bare. Mauritzia spotted us in the line-up, shooed us to the front, helped us with our request, wrapped our parcel of corzetti in paper and ribbon like it was the finest of designer gowns and then adamantly refused payment..."a gift for you, from me, to take to your family".

Far too soon our week was over, goodbyes were said and promises made to stay in touch with new friends. Our sense of having spent a comfortable cozy week with family is tucked into our memory book, along with the pictures that will bring us joy for years to come.

Jo-Ann