

speaking of Italy



*A Personal Journal
by Steven Tambone*

Issue 6 - August 2015

PIZZA NIGHT AT LA CUCCAGNA

I tend to be one of those “nice quiet table in the corner” people when going out to dinner with my wife. Is it just me, or does it seem like every time you try to make early dinner reservations to avoid the crowds (and enjoy a little space), the maître d still finds a way to seat you right “on top of” someone else – even when the restaurant is half empty! I don’t know; I just find that awkward, and I tend to clam up. If I can see what’s on your plate (or you can see what’s on mine), we’re sitting too close. It’s not that I don’t enjoy being around others; I certainly don’t consider myself anti-social. It’s just for me, sharing a meal is personal – reserved for family or close friends. A few years ago though, during a trip to Italy’s heartland I learned that those feelings were perhaps a little extreme. I also learned a lesson about camaradery, friendship and the power of food.

My wife Marion and I are guests at a farmhouse retreat called La Cuccagna (land of plenty) just outside the ancient town of Gubbio. It’s situated in the Italian countryside with panoramic views of rolling hills that never seem to end. The farmhouse has been meticulously restored by the owners Sal and Sarah making it the perfect stay for travelers seeking a peaceful and serene getaway. Today, we receive an invitation to dine later this evening in the main dining room. Pizza Night is a tradition here, and Sal prepares bread and pizza (with a variety of toppings) in an outdoor stone oven. Marion and I don’t have any plans tonight, and how can you say no to stone oven baked pizza in Italy! A few hours before dinner I decide to take a walk down to the main house for a peek at the dining room – it’s rustic and cozy. But wait a minute; there are no separate tables here, just one big

one. This can’t be the dining room – can it? “Ciao Stefano (Hi Steve),” Sal cheerfully greets me as he enters the room.

“Ciao Sal – una domanda (a question). Will there be separate tables this evening?”

“No signor, just this table here,” he says with a smile, “and we’re very happy to have you. See you tonight,” he says gleefully as he races out the door. OK, there’s no way no way this is going to work. We’re in Italy on a romantic trip and I’m looking for a nice candle-lit table for two – not communal dining. I head back to the room to make my case for dinner in town; Marion disagrees – we’re going to Pizza Night!

The evening begins and we’re among an eclectic group of about a dozen guests from all over the world. We’re all enjoying aperitivos (pre-dinner cocktails) outside on the veranda engaged in polite conversation. I can feel my mind starting to wander – this place is absolutely beautiful. There’s a single winding road off in the distance that eventually disappears into the hills. The shadows from a setting sun fall perfectly across the countryside, and I’m thinking heaven can’t be too far away. Someone’s tugging my arm – it’s Mar politely keeping me engaged in the conversation.

It’s time for dinner and we all make our way into the dining room. As we politely find our places, I feel like a kid looking for a place to sit during lunch on the first day of school. After a few moments of awkward silence, Sal comes around the corner with these incredible looking pizzas - and Sarah’s right behind with a tray of breads,

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looks great! “Boun appetito (enjoy),” he shouts with great enthusiasm. We quietly begin passing the food around the table. I help myself to a slice of margarita with toppings of slice tomatoes, cheese and basil and take a bite – hey, this is delicious – outstanding! One guest, Andrew from Australia, pokes fun at himself because he’s already on his second slice – we all laugh! Marion and I begin speaking with a teacher from the U.K., and there’s a couple from Long Island who own a small B&B sharing a story. Sal’s back with more pizza and the room is now filled with conversation and laughter. Wait a minute - I’m enjoying myself. I take a quick look over at Mar – so is she - so is everyone else!

Later in the evening Andrew pulls out his own bottle of wine and looks over at me. “Hey mate, let me have your glass.” He pours some wine in my glass and then into his own. We toast the evening and newly found friendship. Sal and Sarah enter the room (for the last time) to make sure everyone is having a great time - we all know this wonderful evening is coming to a close. No one wants to say good night though, we all feel like old friends. Marion and I have to leave early in the morning, so we thank our gracious hosts and say our good-byes.

Morning arrives and I take one last walk down to the main house to meet Sal in the dining room to return our room key. The table is decorated with fresh flowers, and there’s an aroma of freshly brewed coffee – most of the guests from last night are still sleeping. What a great time we had last night – who would have thought. The evening started off a little awkward – after all, we were total strangers. But you know what - maybe we had

something in common right from the start. We all recognized something special about this place – it was magical! We traveled great distances to get here and came together for dinner one night – on Pizza Night. We shared fabulous food prepared by wonderful hosts, drank amazing wine, told stories, and laughed – we were comrades, we became friends – and it did feel like family! I shook my head and had to laugh at myself a bit - Steve, maybe you need to loosen up. Right at that moment Sal greets me with a final “boun giorno” as he enters the room. “We hope you enjoyed your stay Stefano. Maybe someday you and your wife will return to La Cuccagna and join us for another Pizza Night – yes?”

“Yes Sal, we will,” I said as I placed the key in his hand, “Thank you my friend – and arrivedirci (so long)!”



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WHY I SPEAK OF ITALY...

My greatest love is, and will always be my wonderful wife Marion – until my last breath. But a little over 25 years ago I began another great love affair - with a country across the Atlantic – Italy.

It's a place where the senses truly come alive – a place where life seems to slow down just enough so that you really feel like you're living! With each visit I have found something new to love, something new to learn – and I've always left, with a reminder that it's some of the simple things in life that really make it worth living.

As family and friends have come to learn, I'm always willing and eager to assist with travel suggestions. I also take great pleasure in sharing some of my wonderful experiences – some of the things I've learned. So although my blog – “Let's Make Sense” is all about personal finance and investing, I hope you don't mind, if every once in a while I digress by – *Speaking of Italy*.

Sincerely,

Steven Tambone

