

Bread, wine and language

November 5, 2003 - I could think about the stray dishes that always seem to be sitting next to my sink every time I walk into my kitchen, but instead I think of Italy. It's not because there's dried pasta stuck on one of the bowls either.

In September, my husband and I spent two weeks in Florence--undoubtedly one of the most pleasant times of the year to visit one of the most beautiful places in the world--learning about Italy in a way that I highly recommend. In the Centro Koinè program "Pane, Vino, e Lingua" (Bread, Wine, and Language) the emphasis is on sensual Italy--call it cultural immersion with your mouth as the guide.

Koinè operates "PVL" in conjunction with the Enoteca de'Giraldi, a tasteful (and tasty!) wine bar on the ground floor of the Palazzo Borghese, a 16th-century palace that the Koinè language school also calls home. The palazzo is in the center of old Florence, only a few minutes' walk from the splendor of the Duomo, the temptations of the San Ambrogio market, and the glories of the Uffizi Gallery. And the school's immersion in the heart of the city mirrors its philosophy of immersion for its students into all facets of Italian culture.

Each day began with a 4-hour language class, in our case, Beginners. Neither of us knew much more than musical terms and what we had gleaned from repeated viewings of "The Godfather", so we knew we'd be starting from scratch. Luckily, Koinè has 20-plus years of pedagogical experience to draw from in teaching newbies--the school started in 1980 as an association of teachers who were dissatisfied with how Italian was being taught. That experience showed. I have taken a lot of other language courses, and even a few other intensive courses, but I have never encountered a better method for teaching beginners.

We dived headlong into the language in a way that didn't overwhelm, and classes were peppered liberally with real-life applications. The first day the beginning teachers took the classes on an introductory practical tour of Florence. Recognizing that we would have ample opportunity to sample the typical tourist route and plenty of time to explore the sites, the teachers took us to places we would actually need to find--the post office, the pharmacy, the market--and taught us the survival words to function there (though I'm sure most of us forgot them that day). One morning, our highly enthusiastic and energetic teacher, Cosetta, took us to the market for a scavenger hunt--forcing us to find out what produce was in season and what the difference is between prosciutto crudo and prosciutto cotto, for example. All the while we were forced to interact with regular Italians--key for building skills and confidence.

That emphasis on contact with the community continued in the cooking classes, which were held later in the afternoon. On our first day of class, we accompanied our teacher, Lucia--a delightful culinary wiz who taught herself to cook in self-defense because her mother didn't--around Florence to learn the best places to buy the staples of Italian cooking. And she shared the secrets that only a lifelong Florentine would know--the best gelato, the best pizza, and the best cooking supplies--to our group of eight. We felt like VIPs.

In the kitchen, the emphasis was on learning about the culture through the cuisine. With every dish we prepared, Lucia offered the history and context behind the choice of preparation and ingredients--in Italian and English. She also made sure that we were involved in the cooking--whether chopping, rolling, or zesting--while passing along gems of Italian slang and kitchen know-how. And we got to eat everything we cooked, with wine that had been handpicked to complement the dishes. The recipes we learned ranged from a classic spicy tomato sauce to Tripe Florentine to tiramisù (see recipe below)--enough to make our own "essential" Tuscan cookbook.

On two afternoons, we had guided wine tastings. Wally, a certified sommelier, held forth in basic Italian (with translation provided when needed--which wasn't often) on the chemistry of wine and the human anatomy to teach us what to look, smell, and taste for in a range of Italian wines. Never again will I have to be intimidated by a restaurant wine steward looking for my reaction to a proffered bottle--now I know what to do with a glass of wine besides drink it! Perhaps more importantly, she taught us the importance of thinking about the wine before the food--once food is planned and cooked, it's too late to think about wine. In order to make the food and the wine taste their best, the menu should be developed in concert.

We were able to apply Wally's lessons on our excursions into the Tuscan countryside. Our full-day excursion over the weekend included a visit to a small but prestigious vineyard, Cennatoio, where we were able to see the whole operation--from the vineyards to the cellars--and taste the results with the proprietor. It was an insight that few tourists would ever manage. We were also treated to an amazing lunch at a trattoria in one of the Tuscan hill towns before we made our way to Greve in Chianti. An afternoon excursion to another vineyard and farm took place later in the second week. The final level of immersion was the opportunity to live with an Italian family in a residential section of the city. Our homestay host offered us a capacious room in a beautiful, high-ceilinged flat that he shared with his brother near the Fortezza da Basso. While it was within walking distance of the school, we found that renting bicycles was the best choice for getting around--once you're part of the flow of traffic it seems that you're slightly less likely to be run down by the various vehicles that jam the Florence roads. We had excellent luck with Florence by Bike at Via San Zanobi 120/122, renting two no-frills road bikes for the duration of our stay for only about USD \$50 each. I highly recommend the bike option for both convenience and

fun. I felt like I was back in elementary school again each day that I got to hop on my bike and ride to class.

By the end of the two weeks, we were not fluent in Italian or ready to start our own trattoria, but we had made a start. We were certainly able to communicate basic needs and understand a great deal more than that, plus we had recipes and wine sense enough to host excellent dinner parties for years to come. Most importantly, we are now able to say with confidence that we experienced a small slice of real Italian life. That definitely left us hungry for more.

Before finding Centro Koinè on the Internet, we had despaired of being able to afford our dream vacation: a cooking school in which we could also learn Italian and stay for at least two weeks. All of the schools we looked at before Koinè were clearly targeting a demographic beyond ours--a single week without accommodations or travel that was generally more than \$2,000 per person! Koinè combined our interests perfectly--two weeks of morning language lessons, afternoon cooking and wine classes, and excursions into the countryside--at an unbelievable price.

The Koinè program offers the best of Italy in the kitchen, the vineyard, and the classroom for an unexpectedly reasonable price--slightly under USD \$1,000 per person for two weeks. Accommodation is also reasonable: A room with an Italian family is just over USD \$200 for two weeks. Rooms in apartments and one- to three-star hotels are also available. Some meals are provided as part of the cooking classes, and a final farewell dinner is held in a local trattoria. Centro Koinè also offers other language and cultural options in cities around Italy.

Lucia's Tiramisù (serves 12)

4 or 5 eggs (depending on egg size) 250 grams mascarpone cheese 1/2 package Pavesini biscuits or ladyfingers Espresso coffee Cocoa powder or grated chocolate Brandy or cognac 4 tablespoons very fine sugar (not powdered) Brew the coffee. Set aside to cool.

Separate the eggs. Put egg whites in medium bowl and egg yolks in a larger bowl. To egg whites, add a little salt and beat with a wire whisk until stiff peaks form--5 minutes or more, probably. Set aside. To the egg yolks, add the sugar. When mixed, add the mascarpone. Mix until the mixture is fluffy. Add the egg whites to the yolk mixture. Mix together with a hand mixer. Set aside.

Get a 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Dip the biscuits quickly into the cooled espresso. They should be covered but not soaked. Line the bottom of the pan with one layer of espresso'd biscuits. Spritz very lightly with brandy or cognac. Pour 1/3 to 1/4 of creamy mixture onto the biscuits. Repeat, laying the biscuits in the opposite direction. There should be no more than four layers.

On the final layer, generously sprinkle cocoa powder or grated chocolate. Refrigerate at least three hours, but preferably 24.

Before serving, sprinkle more chocolate or cocoa on the individual pieces or over entire pan. Eat within three days. (As if it will last that long!)

About the Author

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