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A LETTER FROM TUSCANY

*"Traveling in the company of those we love is home in motion"
- British writer Leigh Hunt*

(San Gimignano, Tuscany)

As I sit here contemplating the view out the window of the restaurant in our San Gimignano hotel, I wonder what it is that makes me prefer Tuscany to, say, Provence. This is a hill town, once rimmed by seventy-four towers to thwart invaders from Florence and Siena. The town is still remarkably preserved but now pigeons have carved nests in the crevices of the 13th century walls. They scatter quickly, flapping their wings as the church bells ring. It is 7:13 in the morning. Perhaps the bellringers are off by a few minutes. But I don't care. This isn't Switzerland.

The town is at eye level from my breakfast table, buildings the color of museli and oatmeal with a blood-red orange sun slowly rising over the hills in the distance.

Down below, and far into the distance, is a scene that no man-made camera has ever successfully captured, a canvas of shades of green, with irregular patterns of terraced farmland framed by rows of trees that appear to be dancing upwards, freezing momentarily as the eye takes them in. No one here in Tuscany owns anything comparable to the King Ranch in Texas. One sees criss-crossing patterns of small plots of perfection. Three-foot grapevines alongside rows of tomato plants and patches of basil. This has been valuable real estate since the days of the Medicis. Every square inch is used, and one sees Italian angles not Amish squares, the eye takes in a collection of scenes framed by the low-rising morning fog.

It is too beautiful to think about eating. I pick at my croissant and stir the marmalade. The jet black coffee with warm milk sits idly in the cup to my right. I sip slowly from the tiny glass of orange juice the color of red velvet, sighing deeply and trying to remember the scene stretched out in front of me. This may be the most beautiful countryside I've ever seen.

Angela and I are back in Italy, with a group of fellow travelers largely composed of readers of these rantings. It is a wonderful collection of people and from the outset it is clear that not a few deep friendships will result from this sojourn.

We have designed this one ourselves, breaking away from the standard tour offering in an attempt to offer our guests a true Italian experience that goes beyond the short glance at a picture in the Uffizi or a drive-by of Vatican Square.

In fact, we are going to stay in the north of Italy because I have always believed that Italy must be consumed as two separate piatti secondis. Mixing Rome and Florence is like mixing Alfa engine oil with virgin Olive. These are two separate countries.

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We've flown into Pisa, beginning our journey in one of the most beautiful of the many hill towns in the Chianti Region south of Florence. For the next several days, we will explore the heart (and a bit of the liver) of Tuscany. From there we are off to Florence, the grande dame of European walking cities, a place that literally produces a kind of touristic dementia, characterized by artistic and historic sensory overload. For a city of just over half a million opinionated and proud souls there is more culture here to munch on than any other city in the world. It helps that its all flat and walkable. Finally, we will seek our Florentine dementia cure along the cool shores of Lago Maggiore in the Italian Lake District. It is my wish to walk the shores of Lake Lugano, Lake, Como, and Lake Maggiore with Angela and our friends.

Angela and I designed this tour from the ground up. There were no existing tours that met our needs. We were anxious to introduce our guests to the elements of Tuscan cuisine. But we didn't want to produce a "hard-core" cooking school experience. We wanted to explore contemporary life in northern Italy, but we wanted a foundation in Renaissance history and art to be part of this experience.

On a personal level, this was a return home for me. I lived in Italy for several years, serving as Headmaster of an American School housed in a sixteenth century villa in a small village forty-five minutes south of Florence. I was anxious to fall in love again with the land and the people that made such a strong impression on me twenty-one years ago.

I'd love to share a few of the most memorable aspects of this trip with you in the weeks to come. I won't be able to paint the whole canvas but I would like to offer a few observations along the way. But be forewarned. This is not unbiased reporting. My feelings for the people and the land run far too deep for that.

* * *

(Costello di Volpaia)

We arrived in this village of 48 residents in the late afternoon. It sat at a crossroads among the rolling hills south of Radda in Chianti. The narrow street that led through town was lined with flower pots, setting off the old stone walls with sudden unexpected flashes of colour.

Once a hostel for pilgrims, the tiny village of Costello di Volpaia has a simple bar on its one corner, with a few outdoor tables. Connected to the bar is a fair-size kitchen. It is here that Signora Carla and her mother, chefs of some reputation in the region, cooks for her fellow villagers on special occasions.

After a brief walk, we all gathered in a small cavern built into the ground floor level of a fourteenth century house, Small, folding chairs had been set up for us facing a long, wooden table piled high with bottles of Chianti, bowls of red ripe plum tomatoes, a plate of chicken livers, along with long loaves of freshly baked water bread and baskets filled with shiny green sprigs of basil.

We put on our aprons, anxious to begin our introduction to true Tuscan appetizers. Mama ran in and out of the cellar with huge platters of fresh

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ingredients, while Carla taught us the right, the only way, her way, to cook these simple, yet unique dishes. She was able to balance the crostini (warm chicken pate served on toast points), the pappa al pomodoro (bread soup with tomato and basil), along with fettunta cooked on a small barbecue grill just outside in the street. The smell of the wood chips burning, mingled with the garlic and the oil, created a woody smell that I will never forget.

Several years ago, I extolled the virtues of fettunta, which is authentic tuscan garlic bread dripping with olive oil and garlic. Someone who claimed to have lived in Tuscany wrote a letter to the editor claiming fettunta didn't exist. It showed up several times on our menus during this trip.

We stood in the intersection, secure in the knowledge that no cars would be barreling through, sipped wine and mingled with the villagers as we ate the sopping wet, toasted bread. Finally, a signal was given, and we proceeded across the street to the back of the bar. There, under a huge Cypress trees, one long table had been set up.

We ate more appetizers, this time including ruby red bruschettas and crisp, sweetened eggplant. There were sausages and pastes and veal and, I really don't remember because overtime someone would come out from the kitchen carrying platters of food we would cheer and drink another toast .

The sun started to set and we got up not a few times to look out over the edge of the terrace at the incredible landscape below. The rolling fields lapped against the hills and the colors started changing as the sun sank slowly. Tuscany is about sights and smells, and we had our share this night, but its also about colors and we could stand on the stones and look out over the fading sunlight and watch it engulf portions of the scene before us.

Our group was clearly compatible. This was the completion of our first full day in Italy and as Angela and I leaned back in our chairs and took in the scene, we realized that this was all going to be a rather special ten days. This thought was interrupted by the news that it was now time to leave. We had been eating for three and a half hours. Tomorrow we would wake up to have breakfast in the 600 year-old dining room of our hotel. As we slowly stood, reluctant to leave, Mama and her daughter, and half the village, came out on the terrace to say good-bye. Words quickly became hugs, and hugs turned to kisses. It was an unexpected and emotional beginning to our time in Italy. On the bus back to San Gimignano, Angela leaned over and whispered, "I don't remember any of the French chefs kissing us good-bye."

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