

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

FLYING TOWARD TUSCANY

“With all their pride . . . the nobles of Florence are humble enough to enter into partnership with shopkeepers, and even to sell wine by retail. It is an undoubted fact, that in every palace or great house in this city, there is a little window fronting the street, provided with an iron-knocker, and over it hangs an empty flask”

- Tobias Smollett, *Travels through France and Italy*, 1776.

Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam

I am, once again, en route to Italy, to experience a sense of village life and to drown in the remnants of the Renaissance, followed by a few days of contemplation along the placid waters of Lago Maggiore. I am also going to get my culinary senses revitalized with a blast of *real* Italian food. I'm off to meet some of northern Italy's most interesting chefs for a series of dining experiences that will encompass everything from peasant food in a small grotto to a trip-ending feast in a castle.

Of course, I am not alone. Twenty-two fellow travelers have joined me on my annual pilgrimage to discover proper pasta, garlic bread of grandeur, and deep red wines that do, after several glasses, seem to reflect the character of the terraced vineyards and deep, rich soil from whence they came.

We've got a few hours to kill at Schiphol, my favorite airport in Europe. The flight over was uneventful except for the extraordinary concern of the KLM flight attendants and their rather serious work ethic. Captain Immanstragguntousandfieldstrup or something, I couldn't quite grasp the name, came on the PA system, soon after we boarded the flight at O'hare, to announce that he intended to depart on time and to arrive three minutes early. But he was wrong. His Dutch smugness didn't work. I looked at my watch on as our wheels touched down. He was only two minutes early.

I was seated next to a woman who had ten children and was on her way to lead a tour of Catholic shrines. She began to educate me about the whereabouts of each of her ten children. Fortunately she knew how to sleep on planes, a skill I greatly admire but have never developed. I'm always too busy planning what I'm going to do when I arrive. Several years ago, when an important age rolled around, I started realizing that what I mostly do on arrival at my final destination is sleep. But I plan anyway.

Schiphol is everything that O'hare is not. It is sleek, modern, and filled with the kind of diversions that make a delayed flight almost a welcome treat. I had a few hours to wander around and stuck my head in the Holland Casino, the kind of place you might find on a grade B cruise ship except that entrance to this casino was apparently denied to non-smokers.

I wandered downstairs and had a nice shower in a clean facility, with fresh towels provided by management.

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

I paused to buy a \$400.00 software program that details every major flight in the world, all of the current European train schedules, hotels etc. updated monthly. It was the best program of its kind I'd ever seen, manufactured in Holland with no US representation. I have confidence in the Dutch and felt good about my purchase.

Then I looked at hams, and cameras, a luggage store, and a video outlet that was doing a brisk business selling movies that are not available at Blockbuster.

All of this was operated within the confines of Europe's cleanest, and most efficient airport.

Finally, we boarded our 50-passenger BAC four-engine Meridiana jet for a non-stop flight into Florence, Italy. The plane was brand new and the service was shockingly professional. The fish pate was excellent.. The flight attendant explained that the airline is owned by the Aga Kahn and that "the Aga likes things to look good". How perfectly Italian, I thought.

Pescille, Toscana

The arrival at Florence airport was uneventful save for the pilots apparent difficulty in locating the runway. On deplaning, we entered a small arrival area where we were given the bureaucratic shrug and half-wave, a gesture I have come to know and love. This was the Italian customs officer's way of saying, "look it's twelve-thirty in the afternoon, I am due back at the house in twenty minutes for lunch and who knows what else, do you really think that I'm going to take the time to stare at the passports of a planeload of passengers"? No one was stopped.

We headed out in the direction of the Chianti region to a small crossroads and our hotel in the countryside.

Our big bus could make it only as far as the end of a long stone driveway. We walked past a few out buildings with vineyards and a small sloping valley off to one side, with a perfect view of the towers and walls of San Gimignano, only three kilometers away.

The hotel was an old villa, a huge home that was now a comfortable hotel. It did not have a gift shop but it did have a charming wine store that sold olive oil from the local farms. The backyard contained gardens and outdoor tables, with a large swimming pool set amidst the trees. More valley rolled away from the terrace, and one could almost reach out over the low stone walls to pick the grapes off nearby vines. It was sunny and the hand-held shower worked well. We had taken a vote. Despite the trans-Atlantic flight, no one in the group wanted to miss dinner the first night. Everyone opted to go to town. It was going to be an action-packed ten days.

The next morning we explored the villages of Radda in Chianti, an old town that sits on a ridge looking out over the river Arbia. and Gaiole in Chianti, another medieval town surrounded by terraced gardens and working farms.

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

In the early evening, we set out for a village that barely has a name. It is home to fewer than fifty residents. The village has been producing wine since the 11th century. We gathered in an ancient room with arched walls and wood beam ceilings that faced the village crossroads and the small cafe/bar. A long table was set up, piled high with fresh vegetables, large pots and pans, bottles of wine and water, cloves of garlic, and large loaves of crunchy Italian water bread.

Our cooking lesson was followed by drinks across the street, where "Mama" our "chef du inspiration," set up a small grill to cook the traditional Tuscan bread enjoyed with wine. The technique is simple. She set up a barbecue grill and began to toast large slices of bread after first rubbing them furiously with cloves of garlic. When they had the proper black grilling lines, she would whisk them off the grill with her hands, salt them, and then pour thick, pea soup green olive oil on top of the bread. The olive oil is what is called "first press" and it is never clear. It has a sweeter taste than the processed virgin we normally enjoy.

So here we are in this village, standing outside with Mama and her daughter Carla, having just learned the secret of preparing a series of "country-style" appetizers, drinking lots of red wine that would win awards if it were available for sale in this country. The hot garlic and olive oil bread soaked our napkins as we decided in unison that if everyone has garlic breath than in reality, no one has garlic breath, a philosophy that can do wonders in the game of life.

We returned to our grotto, where some of the villagers had set up two long tables. The feasting was set to begin. You must understand that this was not a gourmet meal. It was far more enjoyable than that. It was a comfortable, family-style, melange of the dishes that are actually prepared in Tuscan kitchens.

We started out with circular plates filled with crostini, the small toasted bread points covered with a peanut butter smooth chicken liver pate. Huge oval platters soon appeared with a wide range of local salami and prosciutto. Before the salami left our presence, many bottles of wine had found their proper resting place. It was now time for something hearty and warming as the cool night air rushed through the wooden doors that opened to the center of the village.

A classic bowl of ribollita arrived, the classic peasant stock of Tuscany, a thick vegetable soup made with chunks of leftover bread and white haricot beans, to which the cook adds a variety of fresh vegetables. Garlic and thyme are added as well as a more than necessary amount of olive oil.

The Tuscan believes that olive oil is the elixir of life. Heart attack statistics would tend to support this theory. What tomato sauce is to Sicily, olive oil is to the northern Italian. I was quite surprised to find that they don't put it in their gelato.

The meal was now entering its midway point. With a great deal of excitement, platters of roast chicken and roasted potatoes were served to each table. Four or five minutes into this simple dish there was a kind of shocked

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

silence. We were all thinking the same thing. This was absolutely the best chicken dish we'd ever had in our lives. What was so special?

I can't tell you for certain but it had something to do with the fact that pieces of fresh rosemary and sage were stick under the chicken's skin before the pieces were cooked in an extremely hot pan with a proper dousing of olive oil.

Somehow our bodies were starting to feel, well, sort of looser. You could almost sense that deep beneath the skin layer, portions of our arterial landscape were getting a good shot of lubrication. That was good, because the ladies of the village were getting ready to deliver one of the main courses, a gigantic platter of roasted pork, cooked with rosemary, garlic, and - olive oil.

Espresso followed, along with a local blueberry torte dessert that most of us ate out of a sense of politeness. Then there was grappa, the one thing on the menu that I won't have anything to do with. Imagine pure alcohol laced with cleaning fluid. This was followed by glasses of a delicious semi-sweet dessert wine called Vin Santa, which the Tuscan always enjoys with biscotti that are dipped into the wine glass during lulls in the conversation. By this time, there weren't any lulls in our conversation, but we dipped anyway.

The bus pulled up and we slowly lumbered out. Mama and her daughter Carla, and the ladies of the village came to say their good-byes. There were hugs and thanks, and even a few tears. Our first real night in Italy ended as we slowly wandered along roads that have no name, in the blackness of the night, guided by a moon passing between clouds, on a bus that carried us back to our rooms, at the end of a very long driveway.

Tomorrow we will be certain not to overdue it. We will swear off the olive oil and skip dessert. But wait a moment. Tomorrow is our first cooking lesson - followed by a special dinner in a dining room all our own. And now, shutters open to the garden below, secure in the knowledge that I will see valleys of vineyards in the morning, I go to sleep. Our first full day in Italy has come to an end.

Churchill & Turen Ltd.

Copyright 1999 Churchill & Turen Ltd.

www.traveltruth.com

1-800-445-7979