

Armed with a rental car, a map and a tank full of diesel fuel, a Peters Township chef discovers

PHOTOS: JASON CAPPS

By Jason Capps

Italy has always been whispering to me, subliminally drawing me in over the years and this fall I made the journey. A research project of sorts, I was in search of architectural and interior design inspiration to authenticate the construction of my new banquet hall here in the McMurray area. I was also going to finally meet my Italian relatives I had heard so many things about. And of course, as an eternally curious chef, learning more about their world-renowned cuisine promised to be equally as exciting.

Starting at the Rome airport in my sporty rental car, I headed south past Naples toward the Amalfi coast. If you have never driven the Autostrada, imagine widening the PA Turnpike and tearing down the speed limit signs. Once you get adjusted, you realize that 160 km/hr is the norm and converting that to miles per hour isn't necessary, but keeping up certainly is. High beam flashes mean move out of the way. Turn signals are occasionally utilized, often to tell others what you are thinking and the dotted center lines appeared meaningless to everyone. Road rage as we know it doesn't seem to exist, but "radical driving maneuvers" are commonplace.

Throughout the trip I saw more than my share of death-defying passes into oncoming traffic on rural two-lane roads. I would often find myself shaking my head because the driving style in no way mimicked the otherwise passive and laid back lifestyle I found everywhere.

Approaching the port city of Sorrento was like stepping into a postcard. Positano was even more impressive. Carved neatly into the base of jagged cliffs, this town consumes you in every way with its charm and beauty. I ate well that night. Plates of buffalo mozzarella, so fresh it oozed its milky interior as I cut into it, paper-thin prosciutto, ripe tomatoes, extra virgin olive oil —

ITALY

ONE MEAL AT A TIME



Great dining can be found throughout Italy, including this street in Montepulciano, Tuscany.

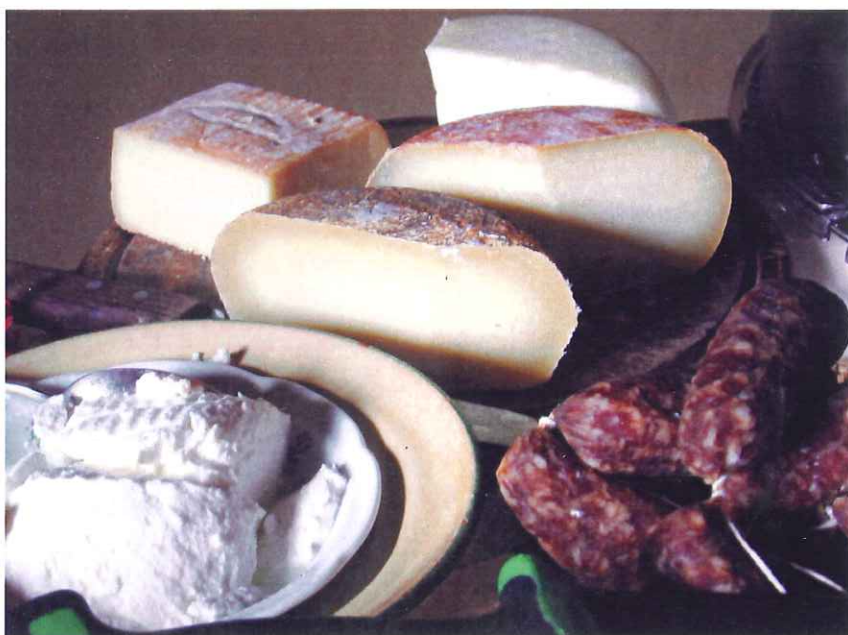
and this was only the first course, the antipasti. I opted for the seafood pasta entrée, thanks to my jovial host, Mario, who put a bib on me and sent me off into al dente linguini bliss. Clams, shrimp, mussels, perfectly cooked pasta, fresh herbs and pungent grated cheese. If I would come to learn anything during this trip, as it was that every region has something different and fresh to offer, hence the saying, "when in Rome, eat what the Romans are eating...", or something like that.

Reaching my family's town of Bovino, a small village outside of Foggia in the Puglia region, was a dream come true. Traditional kisses on both cheeks turned into lengthy hugs. Something puzzling happened here that I viewed as a sign from above. After only a few photographs my digital camera

battery died and so did my spare, although I recall charging them. It became apparent that I was not meant to disturb this perfect evening in this perfect village with camera flashes and technology. I found myself walking with newfound family on the antique streets where both my grandparents were born, a truly spiritual and surreal experience indeed. So this was where it all started! As dusk became night, we meandered through countless groups of people, each bunch gathered in conversation. Men talking vivaciously, kids huddled and storytelling, women vocalizing about who knows what, everyone mysteriously intimate, genuine and completely absorbed. Bovino is at the top of a mountain and it is home to a magnificent castle and church dating back to 900 A.D. The oldest working pipe organ in Italy is in that small church,

and I was blown away by the exceptional and pristine condition of everything. The 1,100 year-old church doors stood 12 feet tall, yet I could open them with only my index finger!

Cousins, aunts and uncles of mine are involved in operating an agriturismo (a farm style bed and breakfast with restaurant) on the outskirts of town. They also manage a farm nearby that produces milk, olive oil, grapes, and more. Coincidentally, they were in the midst of building a banquet hall addition, which will be ready in September of 2006 just like mine! Once inside, the food started coming immediately and without pause. Plate after plate, one after another they filled the table. After we ate and talked about the food, more came. Layers of eggplant, fried peppers with garlic, crusty breads, fresh ricotta. Then came the pasta. Perfect gnocchi with fiercely flavorful marinara and aromatic fresh basil. My aunt Philomena took it upon herself to order another round of pasta, this one with a meat sauce and orchietta pasta. As a chef, I had to know what was the meat in this sauce. "It's cinghaile" I was told, but I needed more info. It turns out that cinghaile is wild bore and Italians hunt and eat it like we do whitetail deer. It was molto bello! Next came the meat course and as I slowed considerably, the salad came. After that were the sweets and I somehow mustered up the courage for tiramisu and a cappuccino. It still amazes me that Italians can routinely eat dinner at 9 p.m. and remain a healthy weight. Miraculously, my little cousin Antonella kept pace with me, course after course, and she is only 17 years old.



Formaggio!

and a map, the country was wide-open. Along the way, I had the pleasure of visiting some remarkable wedding venues for my research. As luck would have it, and because the natives were so accommodating, I actually got to witness functions being set up and wedding receptions in progress. A renowned chef at a wonderful property in Torgiano, Perugia heard I was coming and found me wandering the hotel. He proceeded to give me a tour of the multiple kitchens and reception rooms, and invited me to join him for a wonderful dinner. The meal was filled with delightful dishes complimented by white and black truffles and porcini mushrooms, an obvious celebration of mushroom season. Planning all of this would not have been possible, but what I saw and ate absolutely changed the course of history for my new banquet facility.

My Italian got better every day and I found myself carrying on lengthy conversations with people that didn't speak a word of English. My laptop came in handy for slide shows of my family, my American home life and my business. Little Antonella is scheduled to stay with us next summer to work in the kitchen at Greco's. As I boarded my plane to depart Rome, I realized how quickly I became accustomed to the Italian way of life. I successfully smuggled home treasures like olive oil, soppressata, pecorino, limoncello and plenty more. In nine short days I was hooked in every way, far beyond my wildest expectations. I found it easy to fit in there, and their living style is so simple it is infectious. Sure, as an American I found numerous ways to complicate things, mostly with high-tech gadgets like a laptop, an iPod and a camcorder, but I rationalized the use of these toys as a means to recount the wide variety of terrain I covered. Countless images are forever ingrained in my mind and if you ever had the urge to travel Italy, you have my blessing to go find some truly unforgettable memories – and meals – for yourself.



The author, seated at center with his family, (standing l-r) Aunt Enza Greco, her son Paolo, Uncle Filiberto Bucci, Aunt Filomena, (seated l-r) Aunt Grazia Greco, Great Aunt Antonietta Russo, Jason Capps, cousin Antonella Bucci and cousin Antonella Greco.

My quest for architecture pulled me from my family far too early, but after many good-byes I headed north up the Adriatic Coast through the regions of Molise, Marche, Abruzzo and Umbria and into Tuscany. Staying randomly at various bed and breakfasts and small hotels, my agenda was loose and the often-felt pressure of travel plans was non-existent. With my car, diesel fuel

Jason Capps is the owner and chef of Greco's Gourmet Catering in McMurray. He recently broke ground on Bella Sera, the first banquet facility in the area. Scheduled to open in the fall of 2006, the 18,500 square foot Italian country villa was created for receptions and celebrations. Visit www.grecosgourmet.com for more info.