

Italians

Once upon a time I lived in Italy. Rome, to be precise, and I know that Rome no more reflects Italy at large than New York is representative of all America. So what? I love Italy. I love Italians...real Italians. I am an Italiophile. I have found that “Italian Americans” are fine people, too. But they just don’t cut it when it comes to being “Italian.” They must have picked up American habits and attitudes the last couple of centuries while living here. Real Italians, take my word for it, live in Italy.

(A comment about irrelevant comments)

...generally speaking, you can ignore all of the italicized commentary if you want to get to the actual story. You won't hurt my feelings. You might miss some non-essential insights, but let's face it; the story is just a story.

To illustrate my point, no American Italian has a clue about pizza. American Italians think that if you make some circular dough, throw on some cheese and a truckload of toppings, mostly meat, that it is somehow a pizza.

Real pizza, “Quattro Stagione” pizza, for example, is a whole story in itself. Quattro Stagione requires different things in each quadrant, corresponding to the four seasons and any real Italian fool knows that. I have imagined that the first Quattro Stagione was made in a lovely Sicilian garden by the woman who eventually won the heart of Antonio Vivaldi, utterly seducing him on the one hand and inspiring one of the world’s splendid musical achievements all in one night. Ah, I have become a romantic.

In the upper left hand corner of an authentic Quattro Stagione pizza is a fried egg, sunny side up. In the right upper quadrant are peas, “Piselli,” in Italian. Anything left over from the previous night’s rejections by clientele is probably on the other two quadrants. A sunny side up egg on a pizza? Look. You have to take another look at a country that thinks a runny egg, like a hung-over eyeball, belongs on pizza.

(Irrelevant comment)

A “pisello,” singular, is a penis, a sort of childish word like a “wee-wee”, so it is important to order at least two peas. Otherwise the waiter will laugh his ass off. “Waiter....per favore....may I have some steamed wee-wees with my pheasant?”

There are all kinds of wonderful mistakes that a foreigner in Italy can make with a meager ability with that fluid language, but unlike the French, they think mistakes like “I’d like a penis, please” is just funny. I once ordered a “cazzzo” (an adult penis word) when I should have asked for “cozze”: I requested a dick instead of mussels. The waiter laughed his ass off. My daughter told me later that the waiter, who realized that she spoke Italian, said to her as an aside that this wasn’t the dick season, so her father should come back in September when dicks were plentiful.

One fine day, walking to the Piazza Ungheria (the “Hungary Piazza”) in Rome, expecting to enjoy my cornetto and cappuccino over the “Daily American” newspaper, I stopped in the bar to get some cigarettes. I was newly moved in to a splendid seventh floor apartment overlooking the Villa Borghese and Saint Peter’s cathedral in the distance. I spoke virtually no Italian. I was fair game, I now realize.

(Totally irrelevant comment)

Sometimes I go to bars to get salt. Other times I go there to get milk. The bar is a harbinger of many things one would not normally think a bar ought to have, but you can get bar things too: coffee, Sambuca, Grappa,.....

The “Daily American is a daily newspaper in English, probably intended entirely for the resident Americans living in Rome. The news is at least two weeks old every day. Its only saving grace is that it has a couple of comic strips and “Dear Abby”! No Italian in their right mind would read it. Another reason to appreciate real Italians.

So I said, in my best and only Italian, pointing to the green box in back of the kiosk, “Per favore, signore. Un cartone di sigarette.” He smiled, handed me a carton of menthol flavored French death weeds and took my 20,000 lire note.

(Highly irrelevant comment)

Another reason I love Italy is that 20,000 lire was around 12 dollars if you knew Gianni at the local Cambio. This was a time in my life where I was actually a millionaire. My daughter’s tuition in elementary school was around 25 million lire. My rent each month was around 10 million lire. Each month!! Everything cost a million. And I could actually pay for it. I was a Lire-onaire. I had millions in my

bank. I carried millions in my pocket book. And the currency! You need an 8 1/2 by 11 wallet for these wonderful medieval bank notes.

Being a millionaire for the first and only time in my life is reason enough to be eternally grateful to Italy. The European Union and its stupid currency modifications will be the end of this ancient, laughable, splendid country. Even Benito Mussolini couldn't ruin it, but the EU will.

He handed me some candy in return. I gave him a 20,000 Lire note that I had obtained by exchanging real American money at my bank that very morning, and he gave me some CANDY.

I was new to this land, so I was polite and unknowingly abetted a clandestine practice probably dating back to the Etruscans, immortalized in frescos somewhere in Umbrian caves. I took the candy. I didn't have the language to complain or ask why. I just knew that I was the sucker of the day and it, if truth be told, pissed me off.

(Embarrassingly irrelevant comment)

My bank while living in Italy was called Istituto Bancario San Paolo di Torino. The Banking Institute of Saint Paul of Turin. Is this a great name for a bank? Anyone can have an account in Bank of America or Midlands or Sumitomo or the Credit Lyonnaise, but to have a bank with the extraordinary multi-syllabic sounds of this Italian bank is borderline erotic.

Sorry, but if you are reading the italicized stuff, reading the name of this bank is not going to do it. Take your tongue, wrap it around some vowels and say it. It will make you smile. You can wave your hands while doing it, too, for an Italian special effect.

"Is-ti-tu-to ban-ca-rio san pao-lo di-to-ri-no" Say it again. Accent on the "tu" and "ca" and "pao" and "ri." See? You are smiling.

As an embarrassingly irrelevant comment within the embarrassingly irrelevant comment, I speculate that this might have been the first real institutional bank in history with loans, money changing, foreign exchange with Carthage....Dido took a loan out with Aeneas to her everlasting regret.

When the proprietor handed me these foul smelling, deadly French inhaling devices, I actually accepted his fucking candy, also with a smile, but not before trying my best to make this transaction fair and honest.

So I said, “No, no.” In Italian this is “No, no,” so I had this vocabulary down pat. I quickly continued in the few other words I knew at the time, “Ho bisogno soldi, per favore.” I wanted change, not candy. He smiled and said, “Questo é il suo soldo, signore.” “THIS is your change, asshole,” was the translation my daughter provided some time later. Strange, I thought signore meant “sir.” Shows how naive I was.

I tried to argue, but my language skills weren't up to it and he seemed to be so nice, smiling as he conned me into accepting candy that I did not want, instead of real change that I did want.

At first, I thought, I would take my business elsewhere...get my cigarettes at some other kiosk...even though this was conveniently close to our apartment. But as I left the tabacheria on my way “al bar” for my cappuccino and cornetto with my Daily American in one hand and a fist full of candy in the other, I began to plot some serious, at that time, American revenge. “Don't fuck with Americans!” I thought to myself.

(not a totally irrelevant comment)

Apparently it really was difficult to give change at that time. Luigi was not alone in the candy change business. The 50 lire and 100 lire iron based coins were thought to have been bought up by Japan in order to get cheap metal for Hondas. I actually saw some kids trolling for these coins in the Trevi Fountain with magnets attached to strings. They went to the crowd and tried to exchange the metal for 500 lire notes.

While sipping my cappuccino I concocted a plan that made me feel much better and also allowed me to indulge myself whenever I wished to buy whatever I wished in the Piazza Ungheria. For the next three years I would keep a careful record of each and every transaction that transpired between me and the accursed proprietor of that accursed tabacheria. I never discovered his real name and he was not anxious to give it to me, so I named him “Luigi” since, from many exposures to films on the subject, that is the name of all Sicilian bank robbers. I wondered where he kept his fedora hat and violin case.

The very next day, I went back to the Piazza Ungaria and got another carton of these dreadful cigarettes. I brought with me a little notebook. Luigi handed me back a handful of candy with a big Sicilian smile, and I took it with a smile. We were brothers in a smiling contest.

Just after leaving, I noted the date, the amount of the transaction and the equivalent amount of candy. Then I went “al bar” to listen on my tape recorder to the dialogue between “Signora Righini and Senior Meltzi,” the two titillating lovers in my Berlitz language tapes, as they whispered a clandestine tryst at his summer home over the holidays, ordered my usual cornetto and cappuccino, read the Daily American newspaper with news several weeks already old. Life was wonderful. I listened to the splendid language being spoken by the natives.

(the most totally irrelevant comment yet)

*My bank isn't the only thing with a great name. Attune your ears to science. Galileo Galilei, Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, Enrico Fermi and....get this.... Count Alessandro Guiseppe Antonio Anastasio Volta. Aless-**and**-ro Guis-**epp**-e An-**ton**-io Anas-**tas**-io **Vol**-ta. A great scientist who discovered how to make dead frog legs jump when attached to a battery. Mary Shelly based her novel about a guy built out of dead bodies with bolts on his neck on this guy. I would kill to have a name like this. A COUNT, for God's sake and my daughter went to high school with Lorenzo Cusani Visconti! I went to high school with Johns and Georges and Toms and Bobs.*

I imagine If Jesus had been an Italian, his name would have been something like Jesus Antonio (after one of the first monastic saints), Massimo (because it is a great name) Pietro (for the rock upon which his church would rest), Thomaso (for all the doubting disciples), Constantine (for the Emperer that took Christianity from a small sect to the religion of the entire empire), Paulo (for his most important marketing saint), Decembro (for the month of his birth) Machievelli (for the future Prince), Francisco (for the future Saint Francis), Egypto (where Mary and Joseph went into exile), Bethlehelmo (where he was born) Christo.

Jesus Antonio Massimo Pietro Thomaso Constatine Paulo Decembro Machievelli Francisco Egypto Bethleheho Christo. Now there is a name for Italians to be proud!

For three weeks, I faithfully went to the Piazza Ungaria, bought some cigarettes that would stockpile for months, took the change in the form of candy that I would never eat, smiled at Luigi who always smiled first, and made an entry in my notebook over a splendid cornetto and cappuccino, reading very old news in the Daily American. The most important part of this story is that I no longer felt like a sucker. I was gradually changing from a “straniero” (foreigner) to an Italian without even noticing it.

(this is an important philosophical, though very irrelevant, comment)

Ask any Italian to prioritize his/ her most important things in the world and here is what will come up:

- 1. Family and friends*
- 2. Vino and Pasta*
- 3. Where we spend our vacations*
- 4. “Noon-ers,” the real reason for Latin siestas the world over.*
- 5. The unexpected, but welcome “sciopero,” or bus strike, workers strike, bank strike, strikes of unimaginable dimensions...*

...and somewhere around 12, the notion of “job” will appear. The only reason that “job” is placed so high is that “where you live” is number 6. That makes so much sense in the hierarchy of importance in the very brief time we are allotted on this planet that it makes me weep unto my Italiaphilia.

Time passed. Being in Italy was better than I could have ever expected. I mentioned that we had an apartment overlooking the Villa Borghese, the main park in Rome, and behind in the distance, St. Peter's Cathedral. At a certain time of the year, the sun actually sets over the dome of Saint Peter's and I would watch it happening while sitting on my balcony sipping some local Chianti. By now I could curse fluently in Italian, thanks to my eldest daughter's expert tutelage. I also had hand movements perfectly orchestrated to my still limited, but vociferous linguistic abilities.

(an interesting, but more or less irrelevant comment)

On a business trip to the USA, I passed through the inspection at Leonardo da Vinci Airport. I had decided to take my Berlitz tapes with me so that I could play them while shaving at the hotel in the mornings. The guard looked

at the tape recorder with suspicion and the military man with attack dog nearby pricked up their ears. The inspector said, "Far funzionarlo" or "Play it!" thinking that if it were a bomb, I would not likely detonate it here.

So I pushed the play button. It was a pure coincidence, but it was right in the middle of a sexy dialogue between the aforementioned lovers "al bar." What came out of the speaker was, "Graaaatie" in a big, Italian basso voice. The startled guard said immediately, "Prego," (don't mention it). The military guy in fatigues and attack dog laughed out loud at the coincidence. Both of them, I think. In your wildest imagination could this have happened in, say, Stockholm or Switzerland?

Ah yes, all good things must come to an end. I had to move. I had to abandon my scenic apartment, the city of noise, my love fest with this country, to go on.... we were moving to France because of my new job....and utterly sad at leaving this place of places. I nevertheless sauntered, actually skipped a few times, towards the Piazza Ungaria, three year notebook of transactions in hand and an enormous bag of candy in a briefcase, entries and dolce "change" meticulously kept over this period swinging at my side, whistling something from "La Traviata."

The sun was up, women were hanging clothes out on lines from the tenement balconies, merchants were delivering food to shops. This was a morning to remember.

I turned into the tobaccaria. Luigi smiled. I smiled. He asked, "Sigaretti, signore?"

"Si, prego" I answered in my, by now, impeccable Roman dialect. "Dieci cartone di sigarette." He arched his brows questioningly. After all, ten cartons is a hell of a one time purchase even for my penchant for lung cancer. But he looked around at the shelves and reached for ten cartons of French death sticks. I took them. "Due cento mille lire, per favore," he said with his now familiar smile, probably reserved for this particular foreigner that he did not know had somehow morphed into a genuine Italian.

I had figured it out! I could order a Quatro Stagione pizza without laughing. I could call people creatively bad names. My latest curse went something like this: "Your grandmother's butt smells like fourteenth century gorgonzola." I had hand gestures that were completely authentic. Taxi drivers could no longer take me from the airport to my house by way of Monte Carlo and get away with it. In short, I had become savvy.

I sat my briefcase down on the bar, opened it and brought out the bag of candy. Flourishing a great (I imagined) swashbuckling, Anthony Quinn-like sweep of my arm, I deposited it on the counter, and said with my acquired, absolutely authentic and practiced Italian smile of my own, “Questo e il mio lire, signore, questo, e questo” and stood back to admire the volcanic Italian eruption to come momentarily. I deposited my ten cartons of ghastly mentholated French morgue enticers from Gaul in the briefcase, closed it with a great deal of orchestrated arm waving, and proceeded to twirl the combination locks.

As God is my witness, this was the finest moment of my life.

Luigi stopped smiling. He peered at me in disbelief. He opened his mouth. He closed it. He opened it again as if to say something, and....he stalked past me to the door, walked just out in the sidewalk, stomped back to peer at me again, took in my smug, shit eating grin, stomped back to the sidewalk and screamed “Poliziaaaaaa!” at the top of his well seasoned Italian lungs. He kept shouting, jumping up and down simultaneously. Passersby stopped to look at him. In America, he would have been instantly judged insane, but here, in the Piazza Ungheria, in Rome, nobody thought anything other than Luigi was being...well, Luigi. They were curious. A crowd began to gather as he started a rapid fire staccato diatribe, laced in expletives.

I knew all the words. My daughter taught them to me, I am proud to say. He was red in the face, pointing to me as I sat in a bar stool awaiting the Carabinieri, smoking one of the venomous French fags. I was not to be intimidated by such words as “Stronso.” I assuredly had heard the English equivalent of “Va Fanculo” and it made perfect sense to attach the former to the latter. Shouting for a person to have anatomically impossible intimacy with oneself and lacing this improbable wish with a descriptive of that self same person’s head made of one’s bodily eliminationswell, we have all had ample opportunities to say similar things in plain English.

(this is not a totally irrelevant comment)

The Italian cop is a wonder to behold. They are all beefy, self assured bullies modeled after Mussolini, dressed in these outfits that would be laughing stocks in any other place in the world. Shiny leather knee high boots. Brown khaki knickers tucked into the boots. A weapons belt that rivals This Old House worker’s tool carriers.

And a cape. A CAPE for God's sake. How can you not have affection for Italian cops strutting around with big chins, shiny boots and capes?

Luigi continued his diatribe, getting angrier by the minute as I calmly sat at the bar, smoked one of the lung retching French gas sticks and read the Daily American about the Yankee/Red Sox game of two weeks ago.

Finally, before Luigi choked on his own drool, a Policia appeared, swished his cape over his shoulder and listened. From time to time, he would look over at me, frowning, then back to Luigi as spittle flew towards him like snowflakes from the torrent of accusatory, deprecatory and overly wordy denigrations complete with truly impressive hand gestures.

Finally, the policeman put up his hand as if to stop traffic and sauntered over to me. He looked me up and down and said loudly as if I were deaf, "E vero, signore?" I smiled, handing over my log of candy payments. Pointing to the large bag of candy on Luigi's counter, I said, "Si, signore politia. E vero"

He looked intently into my eyes, paused and then took me by the shoulder, marched me over to Luigi now surrounded by dozens of entertained Romans, every one of them gesturing and laughing and all talking at the same time. He looked a brooding look at me, sternly looked at Luigi, hands on hips, face red with righteous indignation.... and, while the entire entourage suddenly fell deathly silent nearly fell on the sidewalk laughing. He said in Italian, Italian that I understood perfectly, holding his sides, "Luigi....the 'straniero has you. You are truly fucked." He laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks. The crowd began to laugh. Finally he stopped, looked at the crowd, said something to disperse them and turned back to me.

He clapped me on the back, shook my hand and ushered me back to the bar. We had a "sambucca con moscha," a licorice tasting liquor with three coffee beans in it. The coffee beans are supposed to be crunched while drinking. He poured three drinks, distributed nine coffee beans among them. Unfurling his cape with a flourish, he solemnly extended one to me and one to a very petulant Luigi.

"Luigi," he said...and now I'm translating roughly. "Luigi, explain to the gentleman what the beans are for."

Luigi rolled his eyes and said in perfect English, “The three beans are for *pane*, *amore* and *fantasia*.... bread, love and....imagination? fantasy? I hope you die an excruciating and prolonged death from those dreadful cigarettes.”

And we all laughed until we wept, we three Italians.