

A ROUGH GUIDE TO ITALIAN HILLTOP VILLAGE LIVING

in the ancient region of Tuscia

Italian Village Works™

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NOTE Regional traditions may vary village to village and city to city.

Many of the following practices have stood the test of time, but we'll also share a few that have become either flexible or outdated as global influences change Italy.

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Arrive Before Landing

This guide speaks about Italian culture in Tuscia, a region in central Italy known for its rich history; much of it will apply to other areas of Italy as well.

For almost 3,000 years, the people of Tuscia have been slowly perfecting the art of living well.

There is (usually) sound logic behind each custom, with an emphasis on habitualizing a higher quality of life.

Before long, Italian idiosyncrasies will course gracefully through your veins—next to the wine.



"On my first visit to Italy, I found a lovely little bar with a beautiful view from its terrace, where I found a table. When I went up to the bar to order, there was a local man paying for his cappuccino.

When it came time for me to pay for *my* cappuccino, the barista charged me more than the local! I didn't argue, but I also regretfully didn't return the barista's smile.

I stewed over my delicious beverage, waiting for my expat friend, Lexi, to join me. Lexi had lived in Italy for 30 years, so I knew she would understand.

Listening to my sob-story, she began to laugh. Why? Because in Italy, it simply costs more to take your coffee at a table than to stand at the bar. How embarrassing!

“Lesson Learned.”

Needless to say, I had become what I always despised: the clueless tourist. It's no wonder foreigners sometimes earn the reputation of being rude. Well, lesson learned.

I let go of my expectations and began chipping away at my ignorance. Since then, learning about Italian culture has made me a happier person, a calmer traveler, and a semi-professional cappuccino drinker."

— Stephanie Slater, IVW Co-Founder

“Etiquette;

a fancy word for simple kindness.”

—Elsa Maxwell

Wherever you're staying
—Castle, B&B, Hotel—
remember that it's actually
someone's home.
Be the Guest you'd like
to host.

Friendliness is a Choice

When passing someone on a village street or walking into an establishment, a smile and greeting are always welcomed. When you wave, don't hold your hand still, as this resembles a fascist salute.

Elders are Essential

Elders are respected, loved and an active part of life in Italy.

Common practices include standing when they enter; holding the door; offering to carry bags up hills; letting them go first in line, etc.

Respect is Returned

Locals are happy to treat Guests with the same respect that they receive.


A Home is Not a Hotel

Turning off lights when you leave for the day; closing windows if the AC is on; shutting shutters during the day when it's hot outside; and being considerate of the space are always appreciated.

Ask Permission

Italy is picturesque, but Locals are not animals in a zoo. If you want to take a picture, ask permission!

'Posso fare una foto?' {May I take a photo}? More often than not they will say 'Si', but if 'No' is the answer, that is the answer.



Eat &
Drink
Like a
Local.

I.V.W.

“A tavola non si
invecchia.”

— Italian Proverb

{ At the table you
don't get old. }

Eating is a central part of life in Italy. As Italians rarely eat alone, this old proverb implies that when you are surrounded at the table by friends and family you remain young at heart.

The more you defer to local customs, the more you will be embraced at the table! There are endless practices, flavors, and rules around food.

The following chapter explores some of the fundamentals.

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MEALS

Breakfast is very light, maybe a cornetto, a small un-buttery pastry, and a caffè.

Lunch is never eaten before noon, at the earliest.

No cappuccino or milk after 11:00 a.m. Only black coffee, or espresso for the remainder of the day.

Don't put ice cubes in your drink.

Don't drink water when you are eating soup. They are different temperatures and will affect your teeth.

Italians may eat up to 5 times a day. You don't have to, though it's certainly tempting.

If you are eating with family, everyone chimes in to critique the food. "Too much salt, not enough salt, what is that flavor? Why did you do that? Next time do this." Don't be alarmed at the intensity, it's all in good fun and keeps the quality of the food up to snuff. Unless you are a very good friend it's best to keep all your comments favorable, which won't be too difficult with a home cooked meal in Italy!

Typically when you're sitting around a table to eat, dig in as soon as your plate is put in front of you. Don't try to be polite and wait until everyone is served, then the food would get cold and insult the cook! However, there may be occasions when everyone waits for the host to sit and declare "Buon appetito" before beginning. Follow everyone's lead and you'll be fine.

There will be many opportunities to raise a glass and toast around the table, "Cin Cin!" It's considered bad luck to cross glasses so go around and not over the clinking of glasses of others. It's considered good luck to look people in the eye as you touch your glass to theirs.

MEALTIMES

Colazione {Breakfast} 5:00 ~ 9:30a

Bread, pastry, fresh juices with caffè. Don't expect a full out hot breakfast. Chances are you would be too full from last night's dinner to want much in any case!

Merenda {Snack} 9:30 ~ 11:30a

A thin square of pizza with red sauce and oregano or a roll with meat.

Pranzo {Lunch} 12:00 ~ 3:00p

Wine or water. Primi, a first course pasta dish or rice. Secondi, a second course meat or fish with vegetables and a starches like potatoes. An amaro to help digest, and caffè.

Merenda {Snack} 3:30 ~ 7:00p

Fruit, yogurt or gelato. Something to hold you over until dinner if much to your amazement you find yourself hungry.

Cena {Dinner} 7:00 ~ 11:00p

Vino or Aqua. Soup with tortellini. Frittata with vegetables like zucchini. Polenta with sausages. Cheese and fruit.



“The trouble with eating Italian food is that five or six days later you’re hungry again.”

— George Miller

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MEAT, FISH & CHEESE

A meat course will come after a pasta course.

A panini {sandwich} has bread and meat and/or cheese. No mayo, ketchup, mustard. An insult to the flavor of the meat!

Don't put grated cheese on a dish with seafood. Cheese overwhelms the delicate flavor of the fish. Schifo {nasty}.

When you are eating meat, use your dominant hand to cut and your other hand to eat. For example, if you are right handed, cut the meat with the knife in your right hand, and the fork in your left.



“Life is a
combination
of magic and
pasta.”

— Federico Fellini

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GRAINS

Pasta is eaten as a course alone. By itself. Solo.

In this region you don't do that complicated twirling pasta on the spoon thing. Just eat it.

Which pasta goes with which sauce, meat, fish, or vegetable is set in stone. A long noodle does not like a chunky sauce, you need a noodle with nooks & crannies for that. Don't put sauce on tortellini! Tortellini is only for soup. Don't question it and don't ask for something else. It will all be delicious anyway!

The bread is salt-less and dense in the Tuscia region. Therefore slices are sometimes eaten with a drizzle of olive oil and salt on top.

Don't expect to eat pizza for lunch at a pizzeria! The ovens are only stoked later in the day for cooking pizza for an evening meal. You may purchase pizza by the slice "al taglio" during the day.



“ Chi mangia
bene, viva
bene. ”

{ Who eats
well, lives
well. }

— Italian Proverb

I V . W TM

FRUITS & VEGGIES

Eat your salad after the meal, not before.

Fruits and vegetables from the garden are ready when they're ready. So when the zucchini is ready, expect to have fried zucchini flowers, zucchini fritters, penne with zucchini and pancetta, zucchini frittata, summer minestrone with zucchini. Zucchini zucchini zucchini.

Then when the tomatoes are ready...

When shopping for fruits and vegetables at the market, or in a smaller store, you will be expected to point and say what you would like without touching the produce. It is considered unsanitary. The vendor will then bag it for you. You may find bigger stores now with plastic gloves or scales for self-serving so scope out the scene in each store to see what others are doing.



“Count the
memories, not
the calories.”

— Anonymous

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DESSERT

Never eat the cake warm just out of the oven as it is believed you might get diarrhea.

In Italian households they usually don't eat desserts after meals unless it's a special occasion (Sunday may be considered a special occasion), but of course in restaurants it's okay; it's like a special occasion.

Italian sweets are generally lighter with less butter and sugar so you may actually have room for one!

Gelato. Gelato. Gelato. Look for places where the tubs are not piled too high, and the colors are too bright. Though still yummy, the ingredients are less pure. You'll be expected to choose two or more flavors in a cup, even in the smallest size. If you buy a larger size, try 3, 4 or 5 flavors!

A photograph of a wine cellar. The walls are made of rough, textured stone. Several wooden barrels are stacked on shelves. A wooden staircase with a metal handrail leads up from the foreground. The lighting is warm and focused on the central area.

“In vino
veritas.”

{ In wine
there is truth. }

— Italian Proverb

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SPIRITS

Have beer or soda with pizza, but not with dinner. Wine is served with dinner. Typically there is mineral water offered with a choice of acqua frizzante {bubbly} or acqua naturale {still}.

The wines you drink are from the grapes that grow locally with typically two or three varieties at most.

Don't drink on an empty stomach. Food is always offered with alcohol.

Italians find it disrespectful and unpleasant to be drunk in public. If you feel you've had enough, leave your wine glass full otherwise it will be refilled by whomever notices!

Oftentimes a digestivo—after dinner liquor—will be offered after a meal. If you have already paid the bill and the waiter puts a selection on the table it's free!

Sounds, Sights & Settings

SOUNDS

You're going to hear bells. Every hour. Every half hour. And sometimes, every 15 minutes. It varies from village to village. Sometimes the bells will chime a song for different occasions. A slow, deep low tone if someone has died, or a more joyful, long chime for Sunday Mass. In any case, you will know what time it is.

There are lots of sounds to enjoy in the village! Roosters crowing, apes—small 3 wheel trucks—putt~putting up and down the hill, children laughing & running around, workers yelling out instructions, friends enthusiastically exchanging gossip at the bar. A cacophony of life!

Life will quiet down between 1~4 pm; you will hear everyone wishing a "buon pranzo!" {good lunch} to each other, so don't be afraid to join in on the sentiment. Stores are closed, but bars rarely close. It is time to eat and enjoy a riposo {rest}.

Every week you will hear an open-sided truck winding up into town to sell wares or a variety of fare. If you've forgotten the day of the week you will know the product from its melody. One day it may be the fish vendor who will park and open the sides to reveal a selection of fresh seafood and lake fish from nearby Lago Bolsena. Or, it's vegetable day, or meat, or clothing and dry goods. Whichever day it is, you will see a bundle of women gathering around laughing, chatting and haggling.

SIGHTS

You will see somewhere in the town a black bulletin board with announcements containing the names of anyone who has died recently and when their funeral will take place.

On a sunny day, you'll see a colorful array... of underpants. There are no dryers in the villages, as not only do they use too much electricity, they also shorten the life-span of the clothing. Laundry is hung from lines on balconies and draped on folding racks outside doors.

Wooden chairs or benches sit outside beside many doorways, creating space for neighborly discourse. Though many will go to the local bar to hang out and chat at the beginning and end of each day, older people tend to catch up on the latest gossip and keep each other company right outside their homes.

There are many varieties of animals and birds to witness. It's not unusual to spot wild boar, skunks, foxes, or porcupines meandering around the forest or crossing country roads. Expect to encounter domesticated dogs roaming the villages on their own as well—they're used to humans, but remain quite independent.

SETTINGS

Almost every town has a 'bar'. The bar is the central hub and is much more than what Americans think of as a bar. It's where everyone gathers for café in the morning and late afternoon. It's also where you go for drinks at night. Some have gelato and pastries, gum, mints, phone cards, and slices of pizza. Most have outdoor seating—remember, you pay less standing at the bar— some have tv's, and some have foosball tables. Each one is different. What they all have in common is a space to gather and share information. If you need to find something out or want something done this is *the* place.

As varied and as individual as the town itself, the piazza—a public square—is the hub. In some towns the piazza is surrounded by small shops, the town hall, the bank, the post office and a bar or two. Others are encircled by family homes. Oftentimes there is a miniature playground for the kids and benches for the grownups. They can be large and open, or small and intimate. Some towns have two; an upper and lower, or a larger and a smaller. A Saturday night town dinner, a Friday morning open market, a place to park if your car doesn't fit down a road, a place to catch the bus, a place to gather and watch a game on TV, a place to walk your dog or where to look for someone if they're not home.

The small towns are filled with specific shops—in the smaller villages, be prepared to make the rounds. You won't find aspirin in the grocers, you have to go to la farmacia {the pharmacy}. Chicken, beef or pork will be at la macelleria {the butcher shop}. Need bread or pastries? Go to la panetteria {the bakery}. Need batteries, string, tape or maybe a beach chair? Try la ferramenta {the hardware store}. It may take a little longer to do your shopping but think of all the locals you will have the pleasure of meeting!

Phrases

It's good to have at least a few Italian phrases at your fingertips. Generally, local Italians are encouraging, and appreciate it when you make an effort to speak their beautiful language; they may become so enthused they begin talking rapidly, asking you lots of questions!

The more you engage with people, the more you will want to have fun with it so having a phrase book with you can be handy. The following pages provide a few to get started with.

Grazie {Thank you}

Grazie mille! {Thank you very much!}

Prego {You're welcome}

Prego can also be used to let someone go ahead of you. For instance someone in line who has fewer items to buy than you, or an elder that you let enter ahead of you into a doorway.

Piacere! {Pleased to meet you!}

Piacere is appropriate after two strangers have exchanged names. Repeating their name often in a conversation—as they will do with yours—will prepare you to remember it when you inevitably run into them again on the village streets.

Come Sta? {How are you?}

Molto bene, grazie. E lei? {Very well, and you?}

E molto bello qui! {It's very beautiful here!}

Scusi {Excuse me}

This will be used a lot. Whether trying to get someone's attention or squeezing by in a small space it is polite to acknowledge the other person.

Be a
Guest,
not a
tourist.

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