



“A”
is for
Amore

DIANNE HALES

Introduction

My infatuation with Italian began decades ago on a mostly mute maiden voyage to Italy. Everywhere I went, animated men and women talked to, at, and around me. Their tantalizing words practically danced in the air, but I couldn't decipher their meaning.

“Mi dispiace; non parlo italiano,” I apologized. “I’m sorry. I don’t speak Italian.”

Yearning to communicate, I immersed myself in Italian classes, movies, videos, and conversation groups. My linguistic adventures eventually inspired *LA BELLA LINGUA, My Love Affair with Italian, the World’s Most Enchanting Language*.

One of my earliest formal lessons focused on the Italian alphabet. Although its 21 letters look identical to their English counterparts (minus j, k, w, x, and y), they don’t sound the same—especially the all-important vowels.

An Italian “a” slides up from the throat into an ecstatic “aaaah.” Its “e” cheers like the hearty “ay” at the end of hip-hip-hooray. The “i” glides with the glee of the double “e” in bee. The “o” booms like an English “o” on steroids. The macho “u,” stronger than its wimpy English equivalent, lunges into the air like a penalty kick in an Italian soccer match. Even a sweet little “c” can be as soft as a whispered *ciao* or as sharp as a gleaming *coltello* (knife, which starts with a hard “k” sound). [[ItalyMadeEasy](#) offers a video lesson on how to pronounce the letters.]

The differences go beyond pronunciation. The phonetic English alphabet begins with “A as in alpha” and proceeds through “F as in foxtrot” to “Z as in zulu.” Italians identify letters by cities. Depending on the speaker’s region, “A” may be paired with Ancona or Agrigento; “B,” with Bari or Bologna; “C,” with Capri or Como.

To me, each letter of the alphabet brings to mind, not a place, but a word that represents a different aspect of Italian life and culture. And so I’ve created *“A” Is for Amore*, a letter-by- journey through the Italian ABCs. If you are studying Italian, it may complement your grammar or vocabulary lessons. If you’re an Italian speaker or teacher, you may enjoy a different perspective on *la bella lingua*. And if you’re an armchair

adventurer, you can travel from *amore* to *vino* to *zeta* even if you don't speak a word of Italian.

“A” Is for Amore is my love letter to Italy, its people, and all of my readers, with great appreciation for your support.

Buon viaggio!

About the Author

Dianne Hales is the author of *La Passione: How Italy Seduced the World*; *La Bella Lingua: My Love Affair with Italian, the World's Most Enchanting Language*, a *New York Times* best-seller; *Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered*, an Amazon best book of the year; and *La Bella Lingua: La mia storia d'amore con l'italiano* (in Italian). Her other books include *Just Like a Woman*, *Caring for the Mind*, and thirty editions of a leading college health textbook, *An Invitation to Health*.

The President of Italy has awarded Dianne the highest recognition the government can bestow on a foreigner: honorary knighthood, with the title of *Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà Italiana* (Knight of the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity), for her contributions to promoting the Italian language.

For more information, visit Dianne's [website](#). You also can join other Italian-lovers at the [La Bella Lingua group](#) on **Facebook** or follow Dianne on:



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“A” Is for *Amore*



Love

During Grand Rounds at a university hospital in Pisa, an earnest young physician presented my psychiatrist husband with a diagnostic dilemma: Agitated young men, sometimes babbling or crying, were flooding into emergency rooms. Although they complained of being too restless to sleep and too distracted to work or study, medical tests found nothing physically wrong. What could be the culprit?

My husband listed the usual suspects, such as drug abuse and the manic stage of bipolar disorder.

“No,” the Italian doctor said, “In our experience, it is usually love.”

At this moment I realized that, although it translates as “love,” *amore* is not the same. Umberto Eco defined it as a state of “devastatingly unhappy happiness,” part affection and part affliction. Its *colpo di fulmine* (lightning bolt) can set off spasms of infatuation of such Richter-scale force that they transform a love-struck suitor into a *cascamorto* (“fallen dead”—or, in my dictionary, a “nincompoop” making “sheep’s eyes” at a beloved).

In English a heart “breaks” just like a dish, but Italian provides a specific word for its shattering: *spezzare*. A broken heart, as Italian cardiologists have documented, can prove fatal if it fulminates into *sindrome da crepacuore* (death by heartbreak).

Yet despite its dangers, *amore* has embedded itself deeply in the Italian soul. The patron saint of lovers is Valentino, a Catholic priest in third-century Rome. The pagan emperor, believing that bachelors made better fighters, outlawed marriage for soldiers. Valentino, sympathetic to young couples eager to wed, defied the decree and continued to perform weddings.

Thrown into prison, the cleric developed a friendship with a young girl—perhaps his jailer’s daughter—who came to visit him. Some say they fell in love; others claim that he cured her blindness. Before his execution, he sent her a note signed, “*Tuo Valentino*” (Your Valentine). Lovers around the world have been using the phrase ever since on February 14, the holiday Italians call *il giorno della festa degli innamorati* (the day of the feast of the lovers).

The oldest written version of the world’s most famous love story, the tragic romance of Romeo and Juliet, dates back to 1476, although it was set in Siena and the star-crossed lovers were named Mario and Gianozza. Around 1530 a more sophisticated writer renamed the lovers Giulietta and Romeus (later Romeo) and relocated the tale to Verona. Shakespeare plucked his plot from English translations of these tales in 1595.

Disheartened by the many Italian love stories that end tragically, I went searching for a happier tale. I found a reputedly historical account of a young woman in fourteenth-century Florence who “lived twice”—thanks to the power of *amore*.

Ginevra degli Amieri, the spirited nineteen-year-old daughter of a rich merchant, loved and was loved by the commoner Antonio Rondinelli. Her family, according to the custom of the time, arranged a marriage to a well-to-do Florentine. After her wedding, Ginevra fell into a deep depression, stopped eating, and lost energy and weight.

One morning her husband found his young wife lying motionless in bed, eyes closed, unresponsive to everything around her. Fearing the plague, he quickly had

Ginevra's lifeless body carried to the parish church, where her parents sobbed through a hasty funeral.

In the dank family tomb, Ginevra suddenly awakened and called out for help. No one heard her. Somehow, she freed herself from the grisly vault. Dressed only in a flimsy shroud, she staggered to her house and called out to her husband. He thought he was seeing a ghost. Terrified, he shouted that he would buy more Masses for her soul and ordered the servants to bolt the shutters.

Ginevra crept to her parents' home, where her mother sat weeping by the hearth. Certain that a phantom had appeared before them, her sorrowful parents prayed that the sad little wraith would rest in peace and locked the door.

Summoning what little strength was left in her wasted body, Ginevra dragged herself to the house of the young man she had loved and called his name. At the sound of her voice, Antonio rushed outside and carried her, almost frozen, to his bed. With his tireless care, Ginevra slowly regained her health.

When her husband learned of Ginevra's return to life, he demanded restitution of his rightful "property." Antonio, determined never to lose his beloved again, pleaded their case before an ecclesiastical court.

Death had ended Ginevra's first marriage, the vicar ruled, and so she was free to marry the man she loved. United at last, the couple lived happily ever after—proving that *amore* can triumph over church, state, narrow minds, and stone cold hearts.

“B” Is for *Bello*



Beautiful, lovely, wonderful

One evening in Florence on the way to a friend’s for dinner, I stopped at a florist’s shop to buy a bouquet of Spring flowers.

“*Grande?*” asked a teenager with a face Raphael would have painted.

“*Certo!*” I replied. “Sure.”

He and his grandfather assembled an astonishing array of long-stemmed blooms, wrapped them in bright paper, and festooned them with ribbons. Since the bouquet was almost as tall as I am, I had to hold it upright in front of me and peer around the edges to see where I was going. As I threaded my way through the bustling streets, the crowds parted. “*Bella!*” “*Bella!*” I heard voices cry. At that precise moment, I felt utterly, molecularly, incontrovertibly Italian: I was carrying beauty.

Italians prize *il bello della vita* (the beauty of life) and hope that every venture will *finire in bellezza* (end in beauty). They hope, even in the darkest hours, that *il bello deve ancora venire* (the best is yet to come). The Italian standard of courtesy and style known as *bella figura* applies even to life’s end. *Fare una bella morte* means to die a noble or good death.

Italian, *la bella lingua*, has no greater—or more ubiquitous—compliment than “*bello!*” Something lovely is *qualcosa di bello*. Someone nice is *una bella persona*, beautiful from the inside out. Dante first dubbed Italy *il bel paese* (the beautiful country). Beautiful singing—*bel canto*—took flight in Italian opera. Italy’s designers clothe *il bel mondo*, the fashionable world.

In the Renaissance, *la bellezza* (beauty) was valued above all else—especially in the marriageable daughters of Florence’s prosperous merchants. A society that reviled ugliness as a reflection of moral and social inferiority spelled out precise standards for female beauty: A forehead smooth and serene, broader than it was high, with a good space between the eyes (large and full, preferably dark, the whites slightly blue). A face bright and clear, the chin round (ideally with “the glory of a dimple”), the mouth small, the lips red. A neck long and white. Hands plump and creamy. Breasts firm and round with rosy nipples. Torso slender and willowy.

A hunger for beauty still inspires the pursuit of even its most ephemeral forms. I witnessed this first-hand in the ancient stone village of Spello in Umbria. For the Springtime feast of Corpus Christi, its residents, after gathering and drying flower petals for weeks, worked through the night to transform their cobbled streets into vibrant masterpieces.

By morning the town was *infiorata*, flowered with detailed scenes of heaven, Eden, Madonnas, reproductions of Michelangelo’s and Botticelli’s works, stunning abstracts, and vivid landscapes. Crowds filed past, oohing and aahing in admiration. Then the bishop carried the Holy Eucharist, symbol of Christ’s body, over the floral carpet. By late afternoon the wind had scattered the petals. Beauty had come—and gone.

Why did so many labor so hard for such a fleeting moment? For the same reason, a local priest explained, that Italy’s artists paint and sculpt, its musicians play and sing, its architects build, and its poets write: They want—they need—to create beauty and share it with the world.

Che bello!

“C” Is for *Cucina*



Cooking, cuisine, kitchen

For centuries there was no *cucina italiana*. Every region, often every village, in the long-divided country developed distinctive ways of baking bread, growing olives, aging cheese, and shaping pasta.

The wives of Ligurian fishermen created *la cucina del ritorno*, “homecoming cooking,” including a *torta marinara*, a savory flan, to welcome their men back from the sea. Sardinian bakers rolled flat breads so thin that shepherds could carry them in their pockets. Different regions still use slightly different recipes and names for the fried pastries served at *Carnevale*: *cenci* (rags), *chiacchiere* (gossips), *lattughe* (lettuce leaves), *nastrini* (ribbons), and *nodi degli innamorati* (lovers’ knots).

After Italy’s unification in 1861, the “new” Italians continued to cook and eat like the “old” Pisans, Venetians, Sicilians, or Neapolitans they had always been. One man

almost single-handedly overcame these regional divisions to create a truly national cuisine: Pellegrino Artusi, born in 1820 in Emilia-Romagna. Relocating to Florence, he amassed a sizable fortune as a self-styled banker, trader, and most of all, in his words, a passionate seeker “of the good and the beautiful wherever I find them”—particularly in kitchens.

Once he retired at age 50-- *già ricco* (already rich), his biographers note—the lifelong bachelor transformed his kitchen into a culinary laboratory. A portly man with a bushy white walrus moustache, Artusi cajoled recipes from chefs, cooks, and female acquaintances. In time he compiled 475 recipes into a thick volume worthy of its impressive title, *The Science of Cooking and the Art of Eating Well*.

No publisher wanted his homespun cookbook. After a string of contemptuous rejections, Artusi dedicated his book to his two cats and published 1,000 copies himself in 1891. It took four years to sell them. But despite this sluggish start, *L’Artusi*, as the book came to be known, became a literary phenomenon and a landmark in Italian culture.

In its pages Artusi reclaimed dishes thought to be French, such as crêpes, which he traced to Tuscan *crepelle*, and béchamel sauce, a derivative of the ancient Roman *colletta*. Translating from dialects and using a light, engaging style, he also introduced regional recipes, such as *piselli col prosciutto* (peas with ham) from Rome and *stracotto di vitello* (veal stew) from Florence that many Italians in other places had never tasted.

Italians certainly liked the new tastes he introduced. For the 14th edition, bulging with 790 recipes—many contributed by readers--Artusi, who lived to age 91, added a celebratory preface called “The Story of a Book that Is like the Story of Cinderella,” the saga of a scorned manuscript that became one of the best-selling literary works of the time.

Written just a few decades after Italy’s unification, *L’Artusi* bolstered his countrymen’s faith and pride both in their new nation and in *la cucina italiana*.

“D” Is for Dante



Dante Alighieri

Italy's foremost national hero is not a king, general, or political leader, but a poet.

Born in Florence in 1265, Dante lost his mother at an early age and endured an unhappy childhood. As a boy, he glimpsed a lovely girl named Beatrice in a local chapel. Despite Dante's unrequited, undying crush, the two rarely met and barely spoke. Both wed others in marriages arranged by their families. Dante's wife bore him several children, but neither she nor his offspring merit a mention in his works. Beatrice remained his only muse.

Drawn to Florence's raucous political life, Dante served as one of the town's priors, or city councilmen. In 1301 civil war ripped Florence apart. In Rome on a papal mission, Dante escaped the bloodbath by his political foes but faced trumped-up charges of misuse of public funds. If he ever were to return, he would be burned at the stake.

Everything Dante had worked for disappeared overnight. At age 36, he was penniless, friendless, powerless, homeless--as he put it, “a ship without sails or rudder, driven to various harbors and shores by the parching wind that blows from pinching poverty.” He would remain an exile for the rest of his life.

Around 1307 Dante began work on a literary tour-de-force of 14,233 eleven-syllable lines organized into 100 cantos in three volumes: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Refining his Tuscan vernacular into a rich literary language, Dante portrayed a fantastic universe that stretched from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven.

La Commedia (a publisher in Venice added “*Divina*” later) begins on Good Friday in the year 1300. “The pilgrim,” his first-person narrator, loses his way in a dark wood, travels deep into the earth, and enters a funnel-shaped hell with nine concentric circles spiraling down into an icy center. “Abandon hope, all you who enter here,” reads its infamous welcome sign.

In this abyss of darkness and fright, the pilgrim sees and mentions by name 128 sinners, meets 30 monsters, takes two hair-raising boat rides, faints twice, and witnesses the damned being whipped, bitten, crucified, burned, butchered, deformed by repulsive diseases, transformed into shrubs and snakes, buried alive in flaming graves, skewered into rocky ground, frozen in ice, and immersed in mud, excrement, boiling blood, or pitch. Most grotesque, submerged in hell’s deepest cavern, is three-headed Lucifer, the evil heart of darkness.

The pilgrim manages to escape from Hell, then slogs through Purgatory before Beatrice raises him through the spheres of Paradise. His epic ends with a canto that T.S. Eliot described as “the highest point that poetry has ever reached or can ever reach.” Its final line acclaims “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

The *Inferno*, which began to circulate around 1313, was an instant sensation. Throughout Italy people gathered in the central piazza of towns and villages for readings of the *Divine Comedy*. Peasants memorized melodic lines and shared them as they worked the fields.

Dante's legacy has proven to be timeless. In his memoir of imprisonment at Auschwitz in World War II, the writer Primo Levi recalled reciting from memory a canto from the *Divina Commedia* to a young man who wanted to learn Italian. As he pronounced the poet's words, Levi felt that he too was hearing them for the first time, "like the blast of a trumpet, like the voice of God. For a moment I forgot who we were and where we were."

Reaching across the centuries, Dante was able to shine rays of light into an especially dismal ring of hell.

“E” Is for *Espresso*



Italian Coffee

According to folklore, coffee was discovered by some Ethiopian goats.

One night a shepherd noticed that his goats, even the older ones, were jumping and leaping into the air. Upon investigation, he realized that they had been eating the red berries of a local shrub. He sampled the berries himself and shared them with friends, who tried roasting them and immersing them in hot water.

The Arabs called the drink *qahwah*, suggesting something stimulating and exciting. The Turks transformed this to *quahve*. Around 1450 the first coffee shops opened in Constantinople. In 1638 specialty shops in Venice began serving *kahavé* made from Arabian “seeds.” Venetians flocked to these *caffè* to meet friends, gamble — and flirt. Soon so many illegitimate babies flooded orphanages that the state banned women from entering a *caffè*.

In other cities the *caffé* proved to be a hotbed of a different sort. In the late 1800s the young intellectuals who created Futurism operated out of Florence's Giubbe Rosse (named for the waiters' red jackets). For decades Rome's Vezio *caffé*, decorated with portraits of Lenin and his cronies, served as unofficial headquarters of the Communist Party.

The machines used to make coffee have a different history. In 1901 Luigi Bezzera, a Milan businessman, wanted to cut the time his employees spent brewing coffee. He invented a *macchina espresso* (fast machine), which produced an individual cup of coffee in mere seconds. After going broke trying to market his newfangled coffee maker, Bezzera sold the patent in 1905 for the equivalent of \$8 to Desiderio Pavoni, who set up kiosks selling "la Pavoni-Caffè Espresso" across the country. The Italian coffee "bar" was born.

Italian customers ask, not for an *espresso*, but for "*un caffè, per favore.*" This is one shot of *espresso* in a tiny cup, usually *corto* (short), with a lovely head of light brown *crema* (or *schiuma*). Other options include:

**caffè doppio* – double shot espresso

**caffè macchiato* – *espresso* "spotted" with a little steamed milk

**caffè ristretto* – *espresso* with less water

**cappuccino* – *espresso* infused with steamed milk, drunk only in the morning

**caffè corretto* – *espresso* with a drop of anise liquor or *grappa*

**acqua tinta* — "colored water," an Italian description of *caffè Americano* (also called *caffè lungo*)

You can also enjoy *espresso* at home—thanks to a *caffettiera* (coffee pot) invented by a creative engineer. The idea came to Alfonso Bialetti when he was watching his wife do laundry. As boiling soapy water percolated upward through the primitive washing machine, Bialetti wondered: What if the same process pushed boiling water through ground coffee?

His aluminum stovetop *espresso* machine, known as the Moka, made its way into almost every Italian kitchen. Its mascot — *l'omino coi baffi* (the little mustachioed man), a caricature of Bialetti — remains a national icon.

The steps for making an espresso in a Moka are always the same: Pour water into the bottom half of the coffeepot (*la caldaia*). Insert the flavorful grounds (*polvere odorosa*) into the filter. Screw on the top (*l'avvitamento*). Turn on the burner. Then wait for the characteristic gurgling. Once you pour the brew into your cup, inhale the intense smell. Stir in sugar if you like. Drink in slow sips.

Can there be a better way to start a day?

“F” Is for Firenze



Florence

Firenze derived its name from a Latin word meaning “to flower or flourish.”

In the thirteenth century the sleepy wool town on the Arno blossomed into the economic and cultural center of the medieval world, second only to Paris in population and prominence. The citizens of this cultural hothouse would invent the Renaissance, which, as the author Mary McCarthy observed, “is the same as saying that they invented the modern world.”

The ultimate masterpiece in a city of masterpieces is Florence’s cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore. People often assume that *Il Duomo*, as it’s called, translates as “the dome.” But *duomo*, from the Latin *domus* for home, means house of God.

Florence’s town fathers decided to build a new cathedral in the last decade of the thirteenth century to accommodate the city’s surging population—and to surpass in size and grandeur the churches of its rival city-states Siena and Pisa. The first stone was laid in 1296; the huge nave and chapels were finished in the early 1400s.

The design called for a cupola bigger than any the world had seen. No one could figure out how to build it. For more than half a century rain and snow fell through a 143-foot hole in the ceiling. Finally Filippo Brunelleschi came up with a dome-within-a-dome plan based on the design of the Pantheon, the architectural wonder of ancient Rome.

Winning the commission for this task proved almost as challenging as the work itself. When the project's trustees demanded that Brunelleschi reveal the technical details of his plans, he responded with an egg. Whoever could make it stand on end, he contended, deserved the contract to build the dome. When all his rivals failed, Brunelleschi took the egg, cracked its bottom on a table, and made it stand upright. His competitors argued that they could have done the same thing because it was so obvious. That, Brunelleschi countered, was the reason why he refused to show them his blueprints until he became the Duomo's *capomaestro*, or principal master builder.

Construction of Brunelleschi's dome began in 1418 and continued until 1436. Time and again, faced with a seemingly insurmountable difficulty, Brunelleschi invented something entirely new: a hoist, a crane, even a way of installing stoves on the dome so his workers could eat well without wasting valuable time descending to the street. (He reportedly watered their wine to keep them sober.)

Brunelleschi's dome, which weighs 37,000 tons, required some 4 million bricks. Built without a supporting wooden framework (unthinkable at the time), the construction inspired awe among the Florentines, who quoted a line from Dante's *Divine Comedy*—*de giro in giro*, circle by circle—as they beheld its soul-stirring ascent into the Tuscan sky. Upon completion of its crowning cupola, the townspeople proudly began introducing themselves with the phrase, "*Io son fiorentino del Cupolone*" ("I am a Florentine of the Big Dome").

To appreciate just how big the dome is—142 feet in diameter, 300 feet high—climb the 463 steps between its two vaults to the narrow gallery above the cathedral. Just avoid the dizzying mistake I made: Don't look down.

“G” Is for *Goloso*



Crazy about a Food

Dictionaries translate *goloso* as gluttonous. I disagree. Yes, it stems from the same word--*gola* (throat). But like swine, gluttons snarf up everything edible. A *goloso* may be a *buongustaio* (food lover), a *buonaforchetta* (hearty eater), or a *ghiottone* (gourmet) but typically craves a particular food, such as *cioccolata*, *nutella*, *suppli* (Roman rice and cheese balls), or, in my case, *fiori di zucca* (fried zucchini flowers).

Michelangelo was *goloso* for a favorite of the stonecutters of Carrara called *lardo*, the subcutaneous fat layer of a pig's abdomen—salted, aromatized, spiced, aged in marble for six to twelve months, and melted over hot bread. The composer Gioacchino Rossini inspired—and enthusiastically devoured—various recipes *alla Rossini*, such as cannelloni made with a rich mix of veal, butter, cream, béchamel, and Parmesan. “Appetite is to the stomach,” he wrote, “what love is to the heart.”

The Italian lust for food dates back to ancient Rome, where citizens savored exotic delicacies such as flamingo tongues, roasted swan, cherries from Asia, pistachios from

Syria, and dates from Egypt. According to culinary lore, Nero was *goloso* for flavored snow from nearby mountains—the original gelato.

A love of both food and language played a pivotal role in the creation of Italian as we know it. In the late Renaissance a group of irreverent young Florentine intellectuals set out to separate the literary equivalent of wheat from chaff. The members of *L'Accademia della Crusca* (the Academy of Bran) playfully gave themselves names related to cooking and baking, such as *Lievito* (yeast or leaven) and *Grattugiato* (grated).

Working diligently for decades, they produced *Il Vocabolario della Crusca*, the first great dictionary of officially recognized words in Italian -- or any European tongue. Every year the *Crusconi*, a true band of *golosi*, would gather for an annual *stravizzo*, a term they defined with understatement as “eating that happens together with pleasant conversation.” The menu from one *stravizzo* featured veal, tongue, prosciutto, pigeon, chicken, capon, lamb, meat rolls, soup, several varieties of pasta, artichokes, Parmigiano, strawberries, pears, peaches, and biscotti, accompanied by *stuzzicadenti* (toothpicks).

When not cooking or eating, *golosi* are talking about food. In decades of eavesdropping, I’ve listened to Italians, who can taste the sun in Sicilian tomatoes and the wind in Ligurian olive oil, expound on what they are eating, are thinking about eating, have eaten, might eat, will eat, would rather eat, wish they had eaten, or eat only the way *Mamma* makes it.

Why does food so enrapture Italians? Quite simply, because it matters—not just nutritionally but historically, culturally, and emotionally. In Italy, eating does more than sustain life: it embellishes daily existence. Flavors cajole the taste buds. Textures caress the tongue. The soft center of a *pagnotta* (a round loaf of bread) feels like a puff of cloud in your mouth. The sound of a Florentine *bistecca* sizzling on the grill tingles the ears. The plate itself poses like an edible still life. *Anche l’occhio vuole la sua parte*, Italians exclaim. The eye also wants its part, its share of delight.

To Italians who truly appreciate food, “a successful dish is a pleasure superior to erotic bliss,” writes Elena Kostioukovitch in *Why Italians Love to Talk About Food*, “a

sublime joy that ... elevates existence to a height beyond which there is nothing more to be desired.”

To all the *golosi* in the world, I say, “*Buon appetito!*”

Hooray for the Italian “H”



Acca

“H” or *acca*, as the eighth letter of the Italian language is called, makes no sound.

This “voiceless consonant,” as my dictionary describes it, serves as the initial letter in four forms of the verb *avere* (to have): *ho* (I have), pronounced “oh”; *hai* (you have), pronounced “aye”; *ha* (he or she has), pronounced “ah”; and *hanno* (they have), pronounced “ahn-no.”

The humble Italian “h” also appears after the consonants “c” and “g” and before the vowels “e” and “i” to harden their sounds—very different from English pronunciation. *Ci* (with multiple meanings, including here, there, and us) is pronounced “chee,” while *chi* (who) sounds like “key.”

The unpronounced “h” makes appearances in several everyday expressions, including:

Ahi! – Oh dear!

Ahimè! Ohimè! – Alas!

Eh! – Ah! Well!

Oh! – Oh! Ah!

Ohibò! – For shame!

Other “h” words migrated untouched into Italian from other languages, including *harem*, *handicap*, *hamster*, *happening*, *hardware*, *helium*, and *homeland*. There’s also the sound made by an Italian *asino* (donkey), which brays “*hi ho!*” rather than “hee-haw.”

The very fact that “h” carries so little linguistic significance in Italian inspired some popular sayings: *Non capisco un acca* translates as “I don’t understand an ‘h’”—or, less literally, “I can’t understand a thing.” *Non vale un’acca* means “It’s not worth an ‘h’”—or has no value. Yet even the unassuming *acca* deserves some respect, as we learn from a delightful children’s story.

“*C’era una volta un’Acca.*” (Once upon a time there was an H), begins *Un Acca in Fuga* (An H in Flight) by Gianna Rodari. The other letters taunt the humble H, saying: “*Lo sai o non lo sai che nessuno ti pronuncia?*” (Do you or don’t you know that no one pronounces you?)

The *Acca*, angered by such teasing, runs away, and terrible things happen:

**Le chiese* (the churches), without an “h,” collapse.

**I chioschi* (the kiosks), become so light that they fly through the air, scattering newspapers everywhere.

**I cherubini* (the cherubim), for whom taking away the *Acca* was like taking away their wings, fall from the sky.

**Le chiavi* (the keys) cannot open the doors so people must sleep outdoors.

*Not a single rooster can *fare chicchirichi* (go cockle-doodle-do) in the morning.

**Le chitarre* (the guitars) lose all their chords and cannot make music.

**Il Chianti*, without its *Acca*, takes on a disgusting taste, and *i bicchieri* (the glasses), becoming “*biccieri*,” shatter into thousands of pieces.

In the story, *Acca* is found trying to sneak across the border to Austria without a passport. Everyone begs her not to leave. The desperate citizens of Chiavari even offer her a seaside villa. *Acca*, who has a kindly heart, agrees to stay — to the great relief of the words *chiacchierare* (to chat) and *chicchessia* (whoever) and of all who need *occhiali* (eyeglasses).

"Hallelujah!" I say. Without the *Acca*, I and the other members of the Hales family would dwindle into "ales"!

“I” Is for *Isola*



Island

Every island has unique sights, sounds, and flavors. Its natives may speak a dialect practically unchanged for centuries. Its tables offer specialties made with same-day-fresh ingredients and spiced with herbs that may not grow anywhere else. Local liqueurs always seem to capture each island’s unique blend of sun and salt air.

Sicily offers all this—and more. “To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all,” Goethe contended, “for Sicily is the clue to everything.”

According to legend, Italy’s largest island takes its name from a mythic princess with almond eyes and mahogany skin. In a time before time Destino (Destiny), wrapped in a black cape, appeared at the castle of a king and queen. All the people in their kingdom would perish, he warned—unless they sacrificed beautiful Sicilia. When they entreated him to spare their daughter, he agreed—but only if she left her homeland.

On her fifteenth birthday Sicilia, dressed in a white gown and a crown of jasmine, was pushed out to sea in a small boat. After days with only the sun, moon, wind, and stars as her companions, she landed on a white beach. Suddenly a prince appeared, the sole survivor of a plague that had killed his parents and people. Destiny had brought him to

this place to await the beauty who would become his wife. Their children filled their island kingdom with laughter.

The topography of Sicily, scoured by thousands of years of wind, water, and volcanic fire, defies conventional descriptions. A poet called it “a sea petrified,” a kaleidoscope of colors, shapes, and textures. Some 620 miles of coastline—931 if you count its offshore islands—curve, bend, jut, rise, twist, and stretch into salt flats that change color in the setting sun. Tawny wheat fields spill into sweet-scented groves of almonds, oranges, and lemons. Sunbaked hills stretch toward craggy mountains. Towering above looms Mount Etna, Europe’s most active volcano, molten lava frozen on its flanks, its peak as barren as a moonscape.

Everywhere on the island abandoned buildings slump, many farmhouses with empty windows, like carcasses of giant beasts with eyes gouged by vultures. When I ask what happened to the residents, Sicilians respond with a shrug. Centuries of invasion and conquest—by Phoenicians and Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans, Goths and Byzantines, Arabs and Normans, Germans, Spaniards, and French—have left their mark on the people as well as the land.

In Agrigento’s Valley of the Temples, among the best preserved of ancient Greek monuments, the settlers of Magna Grecia worshipped all-powerful Zeus, brave Apollo, and the demigod Hercules in temples even larger than those in their native Greece. The first citizens of the thriving town of Agrigento cherished one deity above all others: the earth mother Demeter, goddess of all that grows, who bequeathed on this favored land the riches of fertile fields.

Demeter doted on her daughter Persephone, whose loveliness captivated Hades, the god of the underworld. One day, as she gathered blossoms on the shore of Lake Pergusa near Enna, he lured the girl near with some blooms of rare beauty, then snatched her into his subterranean realm. Frantic with fear, Demeter searched everywhere for her child. When she learned of Persephone’s abduction, she furiously condemned Sicily to total sterility.

Without Demeter's benevolent grace, the seasons halted, vines withered, and fields turned brown. To save the starving people, Zeus intervened and decreed that Persephone return to her mother. But since the girl had eaten some of the pomegranate seeds Hades had offered her, she would have to return to his lair for part of each year. During these bleak months, Sicily grieves with Demeter.

Every spring the island welcomes Persephone's return with floral fireworks. While snow still caps Mount Etna, almond trees—a mythological symbol of fertility—burst into white blossoms. Wildflowers riot along the roadways and poke vibrant petals through the ruins at Selinunte, a major port that flourished as a center of trade and art for centuries until its destruction by its Carthaginian foes in 409 B.C..

On a breezy day I scramble with Pina, a local guide, around broken pillars and huge blocks of stone to a perch above the slate-blue sea. She counts herself lucky to have been among the last generation that worked the nearby fields. As a young girl, Pina would run across her grandparents' farm "totally free." Her grandfather plowed with a donkey. Her grandmother bartered her garden crops for household necessities. "We didn't need money. We didn't need anyone else. We had the earth."

Even today this passion for the soil, this profound appreciation for Demeter and her gifts, endures. "I am proud to be a child of the people who came here and conquered and survived," Pina tells me. "This sea was their sea, and it is mine. This land was their land, and it is mine. I feel their passion in my veins."

Could she imagine ever living anywhere else but on Persephone's island? Pina's dark eyes well up, and she shakes her head. We sit in silence, amid the fallen gods and their temples, listening to the wind and the waves, an island serenade.

"J," known as *i lungo*, is seldom used in modern Italian, except for a name like Jacobo and in certain dialects.

"K," or *kappa*, occurs only in foreign words and abbreviations such as *kg* (for *kilogramme*) and *km* (for *kilometre*).

“L” Is for Leonardo



Leonardo da Vinci

The quintessential Renaissance man was born in 1542 near the town of Vinci. Nothing about this artist and architect, musician and mathematician, scientist and sculptor, engineer and inventor, anatomist and author, geologist and botanist was ever ordinary.

The illegitimate son of an unmarried country girl and a prosperous legal professional, Leonardo began his training in Florence as a young teen. From an early age, he sketched, designed, painted, and sculpted like no one else. He looked like no one else, with carefully curled locks in his youth and a prophet's chest-long beard in age. He wrote like no one else, in his inimitable "mirror script" that filled thousands of pages. He rode like a champion, so strong that a biographer claimed he could bend a horseshoe with his hands.

"I wish to work miracles," Leonardo wrote. But his miraculously creative designs were often so technically complex that he couldn't complete them. Despite some major works, he never carved a niche for himself in Florence. Lorenzo de' Medici, its

uncrowned prince, commissioned the versatile artist to create a special gift, a silver lyre in the shape of a horse's head, and deliver it to Francesco Sforza, the fierce warlord who ruled Milan.

Il Moro (the Moor), as burly, big-chinned Sforza was nicknamed, was impressed. Leonardo was captivated by the prosperous big city of more than 80,000 residents that pulsed with energy and an invigorating spirit of intellectual innovation. The artist—"the most relentlessly curious man in history," in art critic Sir Kenneth Clark's description — plunged into a universe of new fields: anatomy, architecture, astronomy, geography, geology, mathematics, medicine, natural history, optics.

In time Leonardo secured his dream appointment as court painter and engineer, overseeing a bustling bottega of artisans. "Although without fortune," the art historian Vasari noted, "he always had man servants and horses, which he loved dearly, as well as all sorts of animals." So great was his affection for creatures great and small that Leonardo became a vegetarian—a rarity among the meat-relishing men of his day.

Over almost two full and fulfilling decades, Leonardo calculated the ideal proportions for a human figure, based on the geometry of the ancient architect Vitruvius. He dreamed of soaring like an eagle and drew plans for gravity-defying "flying machines." He filled notebooks with lists, diagrams, and pithy observations and designed prototypes for an armored tank and a submarine. In *The Last Supper*, Leonardo brought to painting such remarkable realism that Christ and his apostles seemed to breathe as they dined together.

In 1500 a French invasion of Milan forced Leonardo to flee to Florence. Over the next few years, he would join the employ of the infamous Cesare Borgia as an engineer, spar with the upstart sculptor Michelangelo, attempt unparalleled artistic feats, and suffer ignominious failures. Through these years and beyond, he lavished time and attention on a portrait of Mona (Madame) Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo. Italians call the painting *La Gioconda*, which may translate into the "playful or laughing girl" or merely be a variation on her husband's name.

Once again political upheavals forced Leonardo to move. Around 1516 he settled in Rome, at an age when he was beginning to feel the bite of the “hard teeth of the years.” Still fascinated by the workings of the human body, he continued his anatomical studies— until they drew the pope’s ire, and he had to seek another home.

No place in Italy offered Leonardo refuge; no Italian patron sought his services. In 1516, at age 64, Leonardo found a final safe harbor in a handsome manor house adjacent to the chateau of the French King Francis I in Amboise. In this serene setting he continued to think, advise, dictate, and teach. Some of the last drawings of Leonardo’s life—whimsical sketches of cats, dragons, and fanciful animals— capture his enduring playfulness. He died there on May 2, 1519.

The world’s fascination with Leonardo has never faded. His name remains synonymous with genius; his *Mona Lisa*, the most recognized painting of all time; his works, the inspiration of generations of admirers. Why? Leonardo provides an answer in his own words: “Beauty in life perishes, not in art.”

For more on Leonardo, **here is a video** that I wrote and presented in collaboration with the London-based **Corona Crisis Collective**.

“M” Is for *Moda*



Fashion

“You don’t dress like a journalist,” says the taxi driver in Milan.

At first, I think he’s complimenting my natty gray check jacket, black tailored pants, and smart, if sensible, ankle boots.

“Now there’s a woman who knows how to dress!” he says, pointing to a leggy model in stilettos, a short skirt, and a fashion-forward puffy leather jacket, with an oversized handbag that probably cost more than my entire outfit.

By comparison, I look like a nun. I redeem myself a bit by mentioning that I am going to La Scala that night. The *autista* nods his head in approval, but his face quickly darkens.

“What are you going to wear?” he asks anxiously

“*Un tubino nero* (a little black dress). *Armani—alla moda* (in the latest fashion)!”

“*Décolleté?*”

“Yes,” I say, smiling at his French, “It’s cut low.”

“Wear a . . .” I don’t recognize the next word, so he scoops his hands up his scrawny chest to create a mock bosom and exclaims as he drives off, “*Faccia una bella presentazione!*” (Make a nice presentation!)

This was the moment when I realized that, although I could speak Italian, I wasn’t fluent in Italy’s other language: *la moda*. In Italy clothes don’t merely cover the body; they send messages to express, impress, attract, amuse, define, and seduce.

This tradition dates back to ancient Rome. In the third-century A.D., Rome’s sybaritic rulers installed a silk factory in their imperial palaces at Constantinople to manufacture the delicate fabric—forbidden to commoners—for their togas. In the Middle Ages, Florence’s renowned weavers and dyers used secret techniques to produce cloth in rainbow hues and luxurious patterns that became the rage of European courts.

Renaissance artisans created the most dazzling fashion statements the West had ever seen. The ladies of a prosperous household, according to an early fashion chronicler, changed styles “even more than the shape of the moon” as they vied to parade the longest trains and fullest skirts.

La moda italiana as we know it emerged from the bleak aftermath of World War II. Giovan Battista Giorgini, a businessman who supplied Italian products for American department stores, propelled the non-existent Italian fashion industry into a global phenomenon with three English words: “Made in Italy.”

On February 12, 1951--the birth date of modern Italian fashion—Giorgini presented the first exhibition of a collective of Italian designers in Florence’s glittering Villa Torrigiani, his family home. The next year almost 200 American buyers and journalists flocked to see the latest Italian styles. The coalition of designers fractured after a few years, with some showing in Rome and others in Florence. Eventually Milan, an industrial center close to the factories producing the raw materials of fashion, emerged as the capital of *la moda italiana*.

Fashion met film in Rome, which gained fame as “Hollywood on the Tiber.” American directors hired the Italian designers known as *le Sorelle Fontana* (the Fontana sisters) to dress stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Ava Gardner. The three siblings, who

founded Rome's first fashion house in 1943, designed the strapless stunner in which Anita Ekberg waded into the Trevi Fountain in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*.

Another Italian, Valentino Garavani, lifted *alta moda* to a level of refinement that once was exclusive French turf. "Valentino was the last true couturier," says Matt Tyrnauer, director of the documentary. *Valentino: The Last Emperor*. "He was one of the first designers to make himself the inspirational figure at the center of the story he was telling." Jackie Kennedy wore Valentino for her wedding to Aristotle Onassis. Julia Roberts and Jodie Foster accessorized their Valentinos with Oscars at the Academy Awards.

In 1980 a single film, *American Gigolo*, catapulted both Richard Gere and the man who dressed him, Giorgio Armani, to stardom. Armani revolutionized men's fashion when he redefined a single garment—*la giacca*, the jacket—by stripping away its traditional padding and stiff underlining. Branching into women's wear, he used classic male tailoring and fabrics in suits, slacks, and dresses that offered women ease and elegance in their new professional roles. His design empire grew into the most successful Italy ever produced.

"We don't have military power in the world," a businessman in Milan once told me, "We don't have political or financial influence. But we have the Pope, and we have Armani."

One represents the Church; the other, the style that can only be made in Italy.

“N” Is for Negozio



Shop

The word “shopping” has migrated unchanged into the Italian language, but what makes *lo shopping* in Italy so enjoyable are the places where you browse and buy. Rather than big department stores and malls, Italy boasts thousands of *negozi* (shops), often owned and run by the same family for generations.

Here is a sampling of stores and what you can buy inside:

**Antiquario* -- antiques

**Calzoleria, negozio di calzature* -- shoes or shoe repair

**Cartoleria* -- office supplies and stationery

**Edicola* -- kiosk with newspapers, magazines, comic books, etc.

- **Enoteca, negozio di vini, vinaio* -- wine
- **Farmacia* -- pharmacy
- **Ferramenta* -- hardware
- **Gioielleria* -- jewelry
- **Libreria* -- books
- **Merceria* -- knitting, sewing, laces, buttons, small items
- **Negozi di abbigliamento intimo* -- underwear, pajamas, stockings
- **Negozi di arredamento* -- furniture
- **Negozi di casalinghi* -- household items (pans, espresso machines, irons, etc.)
- **Negozi di fiori, fioraio* -- flowers
- **Negozi di giocattoli* -- toys
- **Pelletteria* --- leather goods
- **Profumeria* -- beauty products
- **Salumeria* -- deli items (cheeses, olives, cured meats, etc.)

Un negozio di alimentari (grocery store) does not compare with a huge American supermarket stocked with everything from soap to steaks. Italians get their bread at a bakery (*forno* or *panificio*), their meat at a butcher's shop (*macelleria*), their fish at a fish market (*mercato del pesce, pescheria*), and sweets at a pastry shop (*pasticceria*). They also follow different shopping rules that can quickly get a tourist in trouble.

The first mistake I made was touching produce with my bare hands. The horrified grocer in Venice wagged a finger at me and frowned. I meekly pointed to the apples and carrots on display and let him make the selections.

Another mistake was toting a *busta* (plastic bag) of tomatoes straight to the cashier. She glared at me, handed me the sack, and pointed me in the direction of the produce section. There a kind soul showed me how to find the number assigned to each

item (“3” for tomatoes, for instance) and enter it on the automated scale. Within seconds the machine calculated the weight and price and spat out a sticky tag that I pressed onto my *busta* before returning to the cashier, who rewarded me with a smile.

Opening hours (*orario d’apertura*) vary, depending on the type of shop and the region. Almost all shops close for lunch (*per pranzo*) at 1:00 p.m. and may post a sign reading “*chiuso per pranzo*” or “*chiusura pomeridiana*” (afternoon closing). When open, shops often display a sign saying “*aperto*” (open) or “*entrata libera*” (free entrance).

When you enter a shop, the sales clerk or shop owner may ask, “*Posso aiutarla?*” (“May I help you?”) or simply say, “*Mi dica*” (“Tell me”—what you want.)

If you’re browsing, you can say, “*Sto solo guardando*” (I’m just looking) or “*Do solo uno sguardo, grazie*” (I’m just giving a look, thank you).

If you find something you like, ask how much it costs (“*Quanto costa?*”) and if you can use your credit card (*carta di credito*). If you decide to take it, say “*lo prendo.*” And because it’s important to have a receipt for purchases in Italy, be sure to get a *scontrino*.

“O” Is for *Opera*



Opera

Opera lirica, a splendid confection of music, words, drama, costumes, sets, special effects, and complete suspension of belief, could not have emerged in any other country. “Italian opera is the ultimate expression of the collective Italian genius--the Italian sun captured in sound,” says *Maestro* Mario Ruffini, a composer and conductor in Florence. “It stems from the Italian nature, the Italian voice, the Italian soul.”

In the twilight of the Renaissance, a group of Florentine poets and musicians re-created something that hadn’t been heard since ancient Greece—a stage drama set to music. One evening in the late 1590s, they performed *Dafne*, the story of the innocent maiden turned into a laurel tree to escape Apollo’s lustful pursuit, in the elegant Sala delle Muse in Florence’s Palazzo Tornabuoni (where I’ve had the extraordinary thrill of

presenting my books). The enthralled audience had no idea they were listening to the first *opera in musica* (work in music).

Opera's true father was Claudio Monteverdi of Cremona, Europe's foremost composer of madrigals, love songs for several voices. The premiere of his *Orfeo* (*Orpheus*) on February 24, 1607 at the Gonzaga Palace in Mantua marked the debut of both the first modern opera and the first modern orchestra.

The new musical sensation spread throughout the peninsula as quickly as motion pictures would in the twentieth century. However, no city embraced opera with greater fervor than Venice, which built the first public opera theaters. By 1700 Venice had presented nearly 400 different operatic works.

Milan staked its claim as music capitol of Italy on August 3, 1778, with the opening of Il Teatro alla Scala. Newspaper reports described the theater as “*magnifico, innovativo,*” with tiers of ornate boxes and a compressed gallery of cheaper seats called *loggione*. Soon every city in Italy boasted at least one opera house; travelling companies brought operas to towns and villages.

Three Italian composers—Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti—boosted opera's popularity with the vocal fireworks that came to be known as *bel canto* (beautiful singing). Then opera found its Michelangelo: Giuseppe Verdi, “Peppino,” as Italians fondly called him. In more than thirty operas, the *maestro* of *maestri* helped meld the patchwork of independent states and occupied territories into a unified nation.

As nationalism grew in Italy in the mid-1800s, its advocates shouted, “*Viva V.E.R.D.I.!*” and scrawled the letters on walls across Italy—not only in homage to the composer, but as an abbreviation for “*Victor Emmanuel Re D'Italia,*” the Piedmont king who had promised to liberate Italy from its occupiers. *Attila*, one of Verdi's lesser works, included a line that stirred millions of patriotic souls: “You may have the universe, if I may have Italy.”

The first Italian composer to sweep me off my feet was Giacomo Puccini. This irascible *bon vivant* was, as one biographer commented, perfectly equipped, mentally, emotionally, and musically to make his spiritual home “in that place where erotic passion, sensuality, tenderness, pathos, and despair meet and fuse.”

Describing himself as an instinctive composer with “more heart than mind,” Puccini wanted to express *grandi dolori in piccole anime*” (great sorrows in little souls), as he put it. He was forever searching for a libretto “that will move the world”—all the while pursuing lovely ladies, fast cars, and the wild geese he hunted at his beloved Torre del Lago near the Tuscan coast.

The word that Americans most associate with Puccini, thanks to Luciano Pavarotti and the Three Tenors’ concerts, is “*Vincerò!*” (I will win!) from the aria “*Nessun dorma*” in *Turandot*. Everything about this tale of a man-hating princess whose suitors lose their heads as well as their hearts, is over the top—the score, the singing, the sets, the even-less-logical-than-usual libretto.

Puccini died of complications of throat cancer treatment before completing *Turandot*, although he left dozens of pages of notes for its end. At its premiere at La Scala on April 25, 1926, Toscanini put down his baton in the middle of Act III and said to the audience, “Here the opera ends because at this point the maestro died.”

Subsequent performances have used a pleasant, if anti-climactic ending fashioned by the composer Franco Alfano. Almost everyone agrees that Puccini would have come up with something grander—but who knows?

“What a sad irony,” observes William Berger, author of *Puccini without Excuses*, “that the whole magnificent tradition of Italian opera should end, not with a bang or a whimper, but a big, fat question mark.”

“P” Is for *Pasta*



A “paste” of flour and water formed into noodles

“We have created Italy,” one of its founding fathers sighed after the unification of the nation. “Now we must create Italians.”

It seemed an impossible challenge. How could Italy’s long-divided people ever unite to salute the same flag in a national language all could understand? “It will be pasta, I swear to you,” the acclaimed general Giuseppe Garibaldi predicted, “that will unite Italy.”

He was right. Pasta, in its seemingly infinite varieties, did indeed bring Italians together—and then proceeded to conquer more people in more countries than any dish from any cuisine. One of the glories of this signature food is that wherever we eat it, we ingest a bit of Italy’s culture too.

Pasta’s origins date back to mythological time. *C’era una volta* (once upon a time), the muse Talia inspired a man named Macareo to construct a metal container with many tiny holes from which long strings of dough emerged as if by magic. He immediately cooked

these *maccheroni* and served them to some hungry poets. Talia entrusted the secret of this wondrous device to the siren Partenope, who founded the city of Naples in the sixth or seventh century B.C.

Based on scientific research, we know that the early Romans subsisted on a diet of barley porridge and a pasta-like dough mixture called *langanum* or *lagane*, which may have been the earliest form of a lasagna noodle. After disappearing during the Dark Ages, pasta reemerged in an early travelogue written around 1154.

An Arabian geographer described the production and drying of thin noodles he called *itriyya* (an Arabic word that Italians translated into *vermicelli*, or little worms) in a village in Sicily. Sailors probably transported this durable food to Genoa and Pisa, where *maccheroni* and *vermicelli* appear in personal wills and inventories. These documents clearly refute what Italians consider a preposterous claim—that pasta didn't arrive in Italy until 1295, when Marco Polo introduced noodles from China.

Pasta became so popular in Naples that its citizens, once called *mangiafoglie* (leaf-eaters) for the green vegetables in their diet, gained the nickname *mangiamaccheroni* (macaroni-eaters). Street vendors called *maccaronari* cooked spaghetti on rustic stoves and sold them, seasoned only with grated cheese, by the handful.

Engravings and photographs from the late eighteenth century show young Neapolitans dangling the long strands high and dropping them into their open mouths. “The difference between the king and me is that the king eats as much spaghetti as he likes,” an old Neapolitan saying goes, “while I eat as much as I've got.”

Pasta, with its hundreds of shapes and sizes, has spawned a lexicon of its own: *orecchiette* (tiny ears), *vermicelli* (little worms), *strozzapreti* (priest stranglers), *mezze maniche* (half sleeves), *ditaloni* (thimbles), *lingue di suocera* (twisted mother-in-law tongues). The tomato was a relative latecomer to Italian cuisine, arriving from South America in the 16th century. Northerners cultivated these “golden apples,” *pomi d'oro*, for decoration. The poorer Southerners added them to so many pasta dishes that Artusi, in his landmark cookbook, dubbed a busybody priest “Father Tomato” because he poked his nose into everything.

When pasta officially reached England after “the peace of 1763,” as one historian recorded, it quickly earned a place in London’s swankiest new restaurants. However, their bewigged foppish clients--along with dandified British tourists besotted with all things Italian—were mocked as “macaroni,” a taunt that made its way into the verses of “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”

“Q” is for *Questione*



Question, inquiry

Wherever you go in Italy, you don't need to have all the answers. But it does help to know how to ask some basic questions. Here is a quick guide:

Who? (*Chi?*)

English speakers declare their identities with a straightforward, “I am.” Italian uses the phrase “*mi chiamo*” (I call myself), as in “*Mi chiamo Diana.*”

Who “you” are is trickier. You are always “you” in English, regardless of age, gender, rank, or number. In Italian you might be *tu, te, ti, Lei, La, Le, voi, vi*, or (if you happen to be royalty or a pontiff) *Loro*.

As a general guide, you should greet strangers, waiters, shop clerks, and casual acquaintances with *Signore* (Mister), *Signora* (Madame), or *Signorina* (Miss). When

appropriate, use *Dottore* or *Dottoressa* for anyone with a *laurea* (a university degree), *Professore* or *Professoressa* for scholars or physicians, and *Architetto*, *Ingegnere*, *Avvocato*, etc. for professionals (architect, engineer, lawyer).

What? (*Che? Che Cosa?*)

We always want to know “what’s that?” (*che cosa è quello?*), “what’s happening?” (*che succede?*), “what for?” (*per che cosa?*), and “what’s the matter?” (*che cosa c’è?*).

"*Cosa prende?*" (What are you having?) a waiter may ask. In English, you might say, “I want” (*voglio*), a word one of my first Italian teachers dismissed as “only for babies.” A grown-up says “*vorrei*” (I would like), as in “*vorrei un menu*” (I’d like a menu).

“*Che fai?*” (What are you doing?) is something you often hear parents ask a child. To ask a stranger the same question, use the polite form: “*Che cosa fa?*”

Where? (*Dove?*)

However well you know Italy, you will still need to ask questions such as “*di dove...?*” (literally “of where,” as in your home town), “*da dove...?*” (from where, as in where you flew or drove from,) and simply “*dove...?*” (where you are going).

You’re also likely to ask *dov’è* (where is...):

*the bathroom? (*il bagno* or *la toilette*)

*the entrance? (*ingresso* or *entrata*) or exit (*uscita*).

*the cashier? (*la cassa* or *il cassiere*).

*a hospital? If you need immediate medical care, go to the *pronto soccorso* (emergency room) at the nearest *ospedale*.

*a good restaurant? There’s nothing wrong with asking, “*Dove posso trovare un buon ristorante?*” (Where can I find a good restaurant?) but you will get a more honest evaluation if you ask, “*Dove si mangia bene?*” (where does one eat well)?

How much? (*Quanto?*)

Quanto is used mostly for counting, but it also can refer more abstractly to things that you can't quantify. "*Quanto ha sofferto!*" How much he suffered!" Italians say of a hapless soul who may have lost "*tutti quanti, tutto quanto*" (everybody, everything).

Quanto, combined with *mai* (never) and an adjective, comes in handy for all sorts of exclamations: "*Quanto rumore!*" (So much noise!) I've complained in loud restaurants. "*Quanto mi manchi!*" (How much I miss you) I say to a faraway friend. And of course, I've sighed, "*Quanto ti voglio bene!*" (How much I care about you!) to those I hold dear.

When? (*Quando?*)

Sometimes *quando* is all you need to ask. If you want to find out "until when," ask "*Fino a quando?*" If you're curious about "since when", ask "*Da quando?*"

The whole world began asking "when" in 1962 when the Italian pop song "*Quando, Quando, Quando*" became an international hit, with a catchy tune and lyrics like these:

Dimmi quando tu verrai,

dimmi quando... quando... quando...

l'anno, il giorno e l'ora

in cui forse tu mi bacerai...

Tell me when you will come

Tell me when...when...when

The year, the day, and the hour in which

Perhaps you will kiss me.

“R” Is for *Roma*



Rome

Deep in mythological time, Venus, goddess of love and beauty, spied a handsome prince in the vicinity of Troy. Dressed as an earthly princess, she seduced him and then slipped away. Nine months later, Venus presented the Trojan prince with the son they had conceived.

Revealing her true identity, Venus made her lover pledge to keep their secret. He didn't, and as punishment, her father hobbled him with the strike of a lightning bolt. She also predicted that their love child, whom she named Aeneas, would sire a race that would rule the world.

In the twelfth century B.C., after a ten-year siege, Troy fell to the Greeks, who had deployed their “Trojan horse,” a mammoth hollow structure with soldiers hidden inside. As the city burned, Aeneas escaped with his lame father on his back and his young son at his side. After detours and dalliances, Aeneas made his way to central Italy.

The tribal king of the Latins welcomed Aeneas, who asked to marry his daughter, already betrothed to a local general. Aeneas and his rival squared off, and Venus's son won the princess's hand. In time, Aeneas ascended to the throne of the kingdom of Alba

Longa on the Tiber. The crown passed through eight generations until a jealous younger brother overthrew his reigning sibling. To block any rivals, he killed his nephews and confined his niece Rhea Silvia in a temple to the goddess Vesta, where a vow of chastity would prevent her from conceiving an heir.

Mars, the lusty god of war, blithely upended this plan. On a sunny day he caught a glimpse of the beguiling virgin who, resting on the banks of a stream, had “opened her bosom to catch of the breeze.” Overcome with desire, Mars swooped from the heavens and “left her rich with twins.”

When Rhea Silvia gave birth to two boys of uncommon beauty and size, the angry monarch ordered them drowned. But a slave, taking pity on the infants, placed them in a basket in the Tiber that washed ashore at what is now the Palatine Hill.

The babies were rescued by a *lupa*—probably not the she-wolf of legend but a woman known by a nickname given prostitutes. She brought them to the cave of a kindly shepherd, where they grew to manhood. Once they learned their true origins, Romulus and Remus overthrew the usurper who had stolen their grandfather’s throne.

The twins decided to build a new kingdom of their own on the Tiber but quarreled over its location. They called for augurs to settle their dispute. When six birds appeared above Remus on the Aventine, the hill he preferred, he seemed to be the winner. But then a dozen birds circled over Romulus on the Palatine, clearly favoring him and his chosen site.

Romulus began marking the perimeter of his city. Taunting his brother, Remus jumped across the boundary. His outraged twin killed him.

“This,” Romulus swore, “will be the fate of any who dare to violate this land.” And so, on a date fixed in history as April 21, 753 B.C., Rome—conceived in rape and baptized in blood—was born.

Over the centuries the Palatine Hill, with its tranquil setting and splendid views, attracted rich and powerful residents, Octavius, later adopted by Julius Caesar, was born on this sacred site in 63 B.C. When the Senate proclaimed him Augustus, Rome's first emperor, he moved to a house near the small structure known as Romulus's hut. His

successors, the emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius, built much grander homes atop the Palatine. Visitors to these mansions called them *palazzi*—the root of the word for "palatial" residences in French (*palais*), Spanish (*palla*), and English (*palace*).

Rome changed everything, bringing civilization—laws, roads, urban planning, public works, even indoor plumbing--to an untamed world. Although the glory of ancient Rome faded, the imprint of the Roman empire remains on everything from coins to monuments, tombs, and temples.

The manhole covers of Rome are still emblazoned with *S.P.Q.R.*, the Latin abbreviation for *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, "the Senate and People of Rome." Contemporary Italians irreverently joke that the initials really stand for "*Sono pazzi questi romani.*" (They're crazy, these Romans.) This admonition has never inhibited the millions of visitors to the Eternal City who have been happily "doing as the Romans do" for more than two thousand years.

“S” Is for *Santi*



Saints

Catholics everywhere pay homage to the legions of saints—as many as ten thousand by some estimates—as inspirational pillars of piety. But in Italy, these blessed men and women seem more like big brothers and sisters.

“Qualche santo ci aiuterà!” (Some saint will help us!), Italians reassure me when a car breaks down or a suitcase goes missing. I imagine these spiritual first responders on speed dial in heaven, jumping into action at a moment’s notice.

Certain saints have taken various professions under their wing. Veronica looks out for photographers; Antonio Abate (Anthony the Abbot) for pizza makers; Cosmo and Damiano (Cosmas and Damian) for doctors; Francesca Romana (Frances of Rome) for

taxi drivers. Even body parts merit celestial guardians: Agata (Agatha) for breasts, Lucia (Lucy) for eyes, Biagio (Blaise) for throats.

Italians mark the passage of the year with saints—from Silvestro (Sylvester) on New Year's Eve, to Giuseppe (Joseph) on March 19 (Italy's Father's Day), Giovanni on June 24, Lorenzo (Lawrence) on August 10, and the entire Catholic pantheon on Ognissanti (All Saints' Day) on November 1. Saints' names adorn Italy's streets, piazzas, neighborhoods, towns, hospitals, prisons, theaters, schools, banks, wines, hams (as in San Daniele prosciutto), and even a season (Saint Martin's Summer, *l'Estate di San Martino*, a warm spell in early November named for a Christian soldier who cut his cloak in two to share with a shivering beggar).

But the saint who holds a special place in Italy's heart is its national patron, Francesco d'Assisi, born in 1182. The son of a prosperous textile merchant and ringleader of a gang of hard-drinking, carousing young men, Francesco seemed an unlikely candidate for sainthood. When the city-states of Perugia and Assisi faced off in one of their frequent clashes, the twenty-year-old playboy, dreaming of chivalric glory, volunteered for the fray. Captured by enemy troops, he was tossed into a squalid underground cell in Perugia for a year before his father could arrange a ransom.

The traumatic experience shattered his health and transformed the callow youth. Francesco pulled away from his rowdy gang to meditate in the mountains and pray in the dilapidated chapel of San Damiano in Assisi. One day he heard the Christ on the crucifix above the altar instruct him to “repair my house, which you see is in ruins.”

Francesco, taking the instructions literally, hauled bales of precious cloth from his father's shop to a nearby market town to sell and tried to give the proceeds to the pastor. His incensed father charged his son with theft. At a public hearing before the bishop of Assisi, Francesco turned over the money—along with every stitch of clothing he was wearing. As the naked youth explained to the bishop, he now had only a heavenly father.

Francesco formed a band of “begging brothers,” who built simple huts in the forest around a rustic chapel known as the Porziuncola (Little Portion), now enveloped by the grand Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Angelo. Wearing rough robes cinched with rope and

crude wooden sandals, Francesco and his brothers preached their gospel of love and peace among paupers, lepers, and other social outcasts.

Despite debilitating illnesses, Francesco delighted in being a child of the universe. His rapturous *Canticle of the Creatures* praises with unbridled wonder Master Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, and Brother Fire. Francesco's lyrical verses transformed his spiritual passion into the first major work in the Italian language.

Francesco's health deteriorated over two decades of preaching and fasting. At age forty-four, blind (following cauterization of his eyes to treat an infection), emaciated, and racked with pain, he died in a dark, low cavern near the Porziuncola.

Despite a steady stream of tourists, Francesco's humble chapel, infused with centuries of heartfelt pleas, remains one of my favorite places to kneel and reflect.

"Your prayers will be answered," a kindly friar told me on my most recent visit.

"I hope so," I replied.

"I know," he said, explaining that when God asked what he would like in return for his devoted service, Francesco requested only that those who come to this chapel and "pray with a devout heart will obtain what they ask." My prayers for a friend with breast cancer were indeed answered—for which I thank Italy's beloved patron, God, and the state-of-the-science care she received.

“T” Is for *Tempo*



Time, Weather

Il tempo carries dual meanings in Italian: time, as in *tenere il tempo* (keeping time), and weather, as in *prevedere il tempo* (predicting the weather). Both strike me as different in Italy than in other places.

In English time flies. In Italian it tightens (*il tempo stringe*). “*Il tempo è tiranno*” (time is pressing), a boss or teacher may warn, urging you to *stringere i tempi* (pick up the beat). While English speakers play for time, Italians earn it (*guadagnare tempo*) or take it (*prendere tempo*). And rather than killing time, they cheat it (*ingannare il tempo*).

Italians believe in *dare tempo al tempo* (literally giving time to time or letting things take their course). Several expressions—“*c’è un tempo per ogni cosa*,” “*ogni cosa a tempo debito*,” or “*ogni cosa a suo tempo*”—translate more or less into “there’s a time for everything.” This doesn’t mean you should let time slip by. “*Chi ha tempo non aspetti tempo*,” advises an Italian proverb. (If you have time, don’t wait for time—in other words, if you can do something now, don’t postpone it).

You may have plenty of time (*aver tempo da vendere*—literally time to sell), be in step with the times (*essere al passo coi tempi*), or be behind the times or old-fashioned (*aver fatto il proprio tempo*). Italians refer to spare time as *tempo perso* (lost time) and a loafer or time-waster as a *perditempo* (time-loser).

“*Da quanto tempo?*” (Since when?) you might ask in Italian. Sometimes the answer is *tempo fa* (long ago) or even *prima del tempo* (before time). Italy has endured for such a long time that Italian requires four verb tenses to describe the past: *passato prossimo*, *trapassato prossimo*, *passato remoto*, and the *imperfetto*, or imperfect—“the most Italian of tenses,” one of my teachers contends—for unfinished business. Business can remain unfinished for a long time in Italy. A researcher tells of requesting a book from the catalogue of the Vatican Library, only to receive a notice stating, “Missing since 1530.”

If an Italian exclaims “*Che bel tempo!*”, he is more likely referring to beautiful weather than to a lovely time. “*Tempo permettendo*” (weather permitting) is a phrase you often hear, along with complaints about *brutto* or *cattivo tempo* (ugly or bad weather).

Weather doesn’t just happen in Italy -- it “makes” (with the verb *fare*). In winter, *fa freddo* (“makes” cold). In summer, *fa caldo* (hot). On mild days, *fa bello* (it’s beautiful). Some days *c’è il sole* (it’s sunny); on others *c’è vento* (it’s windy) or *nuvoloso* (cloudy). Winter brings *tormente* (blizzards), *neve* (snow), *ghiaccio* (ice)—and *ghiaccioli* (icicles).

The operatic drama in the Italian skies has inspired the florid language found in my favorite part of an Italian newspaper: the daily *previsioni* (forecasts). For years I practiced my Italian by reading them aloud to my husband, who didn’t understand the words but quickly comprehended their meaning.

Headlines blared: “*Piogge in arrivo!*” (Rains are coming!) “*Forte maltempo da Mercoledì a Venerdì.*” (Strong bad weather from Wednesday to Friday.) On another day we were warned of “*un rapido peggioramento*” (rapid worsening) with “*una forte perturbazione atlantica*” (a strong Atlantic disturbance). Most alarming was a “*profondo vortice ciclonico in una delle peggiori configurazioni per tutta l'Italia*” (a severe cyclonic

storm in one of the worst configurations for all Italy), creating “*fortissimi venti*” (the strongest possible winds).

Both time and weather, in every time and place, are constantly changing. But *con ogni tempo* (in any weather), Italians so heartily embrace *darsi buon tempo* (having a jolly good time) that they coined one of my favorite words for an easy-going, fun-loving individual: *un buontempone* (a big good-timer)—someone who realizes that the joys of living each day to the fullest are *senza tempo* (timeless).

“U” Is for *Uomo*



Man

"I am going to interview a professor about Italian women," I explain to the curious Roman taxi driver (*autista*) as we swerve through the ancient city streets.

"È buona," he assures me. "For Italian woman today, life is very good." He pauses a moment and adds, "Maybe it's too good. Women go to university. They have jobs. They make money. They buy their own houses. They can do whatever they want."

"And Italian men?" I ask. "How do they feel about this?"

"Signora," he replies, rolling his eyes upward as if invoking divine intercession, "*abbiamo paura*"—a phrase that literally translates as "we have fear."

Whenever I repeat this story, women laugh heartily, and men smile edgily—except in Italy, where *gli uomini* (the men) solemnly exclaim, "È vero!" (It's true!)

And I wonder: Could the suave, sophisticated, ever-so-confident *uomo italiano classico* (classic Italian man) be an endangered species?

Of course, there have always been many types of *uomini*: a *uomo di mezzi* (well-to-do man), a *uomo povero* (poor man), a *uomo d'affari* (businessman), a *uomo di mare* (man of the sea), a *gentiluomo di campagna* (country gentleman), a *uomo d'ingegno* (a clever man), or a *uomo di poche parole* (a man of few words). Any may aspire to become *un grand'uomo* (a great man), but none wants to end up *un uomo qualunque* (just some guy) or, worse yet, *un uomo da nulla* (a good-for-nothing) or *un signor nessuno* (a Mister Nobody).

A Renaissance man of letters and refinement, Baldassare Castiglione, wrote an entire treatise, *The Book of the Courier*, on the characteristics of a true gentleman-- a manly man, physically accomplished and proficient in arms and horsemanship, who speaks well and displays seemingly effortless excellence, whether in a debate, a duel, or a dance. This is the essence of *la bella figura*, “acting” the gentleman, always playing a role in the world’s eye.

Castiglione’s bible of refined behavior was translated into Spanish, German, French, and English; 108 editions were published between 1528 and 1616. The British writer Samuel Johnson called *The Courtier* “the best book that ever was written about good breeding.”

To me, the quintessential modern *uomo Italiano* will always be Marcello Mastroianni, a poor boy from an industrial town south of Rome who insisted that he had always hated his looks. He catapulted to stardom when Federico Fellini cast him as Marcello Rubini, a jaded gossip reporter chasing scoops—and skirts—on the sultry Via Veneto in *La Dolce Vita*.

Married for more than four decades to the mother of his Italian daughter (as he put it), he lived for years with Catherine Deneuve, the mother of his French daughter, and carried on often-tempestuous affairs with Faye Dunaway, Jeanne Moreau, Brigitte Bardot, and other leading ladies. On-screen, Mastroianni played against type—as an impotent Sicilian cuckold, con man, drunk, lawyer, patriarch, assassin, homosexual, rapist, magician, novelist, police commissioner, director, beekeeper, priest, union

organizer, dancer, professor, Russian aristocrat, and film's first pregnant man. In all, he appeared in a staggering 140 motion pictures.

Mastroianni scoffed at the earnest preparation of American actors for what he called *un gioco* (a game). No one ever saw him studying a script, yet he always knew his lines.

"Acting is a pleasure, like making love," he told a reporter. "Correction: lovemaking can be an ordeal."

Quips like this helped earn Mastroianni and his countrymen their reputation as *uomini di mondo* (men of the world).

“V” Is for *Vino*



Wine

My husband and I own a vine in Umbria--not a vineyard, but a single vine in Vigna Lorenzo at Monte Vibiano Vecchio in Umbria.

Since centuries before the birth of Christ, grapes have grown in this field, on a hillside that catches every ray of light from dawn to dusk, sheltered from harsh winds, its soil rich and its air pure. As we perch on sun-warmed stones overlooking rows of vines in stately formation, Maria Camilla Fasola Bologna, whose family has lived in the hilltop *castello* for more than a hundred years, tells me its story.

More than two thousand years ago, a young widow named Vubia and her two sons cultivated grapes on this hill. In 218 B.C. the fearsome Carthaginian general Hannibal crossed the Alps into Italy and pushed south, destroying everything in his path. Rome's

legions marched north to confront the invaders, conscripting every male who could fight along the way. Vubia's teenage sons were forced into service.

At Lake Trasimeno, less than 25 miles from Vubia's home, Hannibal's troops charged out of the fog in a surprise attack, pushing the Roman forces into the water. Within hours, thousands of men died—some drowning in their heavy armor, some wounded in hand-to-hand combat. The water of the lake turned red with their blood.

When she heard the terrible news, Vubia ran to her vineyard to pray to Bacchus, the god of wine, vines, and those who tend them.

“If you bring back my children,” she pleaded, “I promise to give you the other precious thing that I have, which is the wine from these grapes. I will never sell it again. It will go only to your temple.”

For long days and nights, Vubia prayed. Then, on the little road that survives to this day, she saw two figures. Even at a distance she recognized her sons—bloody, dirty, tired, hungry, but alive. She rushed to fold them in her arms.

Vubia kept her vow to Bacchus, built a protective wall with a gate around the vineyard, and consecrated its grapes to the god of wine. For centuries afterward, the vineyard has survived upheavals of every sort. Its current owners continue to honor Vubia's ancient promise. Instead of selling the wines from Vigna Lorenzo with their other varietals, they have entrusted the vineyard to investors like my husband and myself.

“I call the owners our gladiators, because they protect our land and our vision,” says Maria Camilla. “The mission we share is to keep a little part of the world, blessed by nature and the work of men, safe, with great respect for life—all life.”

Wine has pulsed like lifeblood through Italy's long past. Greek settlers brought vines to the colony they called Oenotria (land of wine) as early as the ninth century B.C. A Sicilian legend claims that vineyards sprang up under the feet of the Greek god Dionysus (Bacchus's counterpart) as he danced along the foothills of Mount Etna.

The Etruscans perfected the techniques of the cultivation and production of wine. By the second century B.C., after their defeat of the Carthaginians (renowned for their wine-making), the Romans expanded wine production and began exporting wine

throughout their far-flung provinces. During the devastating Dark Ages, monks preserved *la viticoltura* (viticulture), principally for production of *vino da messa* (sacramental wine). Wine production increased in the following centuries, but the quality of the local wines was not high.

The first Italian regions to focus on the improvement of their wines were Tuscany, which developed *Chianti Classico*, and Piedmont, which applied techniques of French viticulture to cultivate the grapes known as *Nebbiolo*, named for the “little fog” that blankets the area in certain seasons. Modern Italy, with terrain that ranges from snow-tipped Alps to sun-baked islands, produces a huge variety of wines and vies with France as the world’s largest wine producer.

The best way to appreciate the art and science of producing a fine wine (*un buon vino*) is a *degustazione* (tasting) at an Italian winery, an experience that requires a vocabulary of its own, including descriptives such as:

**abboccato* – medium dry

**amabile* – medium sweet

**amarone* – dry (literally bitter)

**dolce* – sweet

**frizzante* – fizzy

**secco* – dry

As you raise your glasses, remember the classic Italian *brindisi* (toast): *Cin-cin!* (pronounced chin-chin)! Cheers!

“W”, “X” and “Y” are used only in a few foreign words, mostly of English origin, such as: waterproof, watt, whisky, X-raggi (X-rays), yacht, yak, and Yankee.

“Z” Is Called *Zeta*



Z

Of all the letters of the Italian alphabet, *zeta* may be the most zany—an English word derived from *Zanni*, a form of Giovanni or Gianni (John) and the name of a classic character in *La Commedia dell’Arte* (comedy of the “art” or profession of acting). In this centuries-old form of street theatre, buffoonish *Zanni*, wearing a mask like the one above, kept trying, rather lamely, to pull off *la zannata* (a clown’s trickery).

The very last word under the very last letter in my Italian *dizionario* makes me smile: *zuzzurullone* (or *zuzzerellone*), which once translated as “tomboy” but now applies to any playful person—someone likely to whistle (*zirlare*) and frolic (*zurlare*).

Italian imported two “z” words—*zanna* and *zampa*—from the Germanic tribes who invaded the peninsula more than a thousand years ago. *Zanna* (tooth in German) translates in Italian as fang or tusk, as in *le zanne del cinghiale* (the boar’s tusk). *Zampa* (foot in German) means paw or claw in Italian, as in *le zampe del gatto* (the cat’s paws) or *camminare a quattro zampe* (walk on all fours). Italians call bell-

bottomed pants *pantaloni a zampa d'elefante* (elephant-foot pants). Those of us who wore them in the seventies now find ourselves with *zampe di gallina* (crow's feet).

In the Renaissance Italian chefs pioneered the use of heaping amounts of *zucchero* (sugar), long treated as a seasoning like salt, to create divinely sweet dishes. The most decadent *dolci* were invented within the walls of monasteries and convents. Nuns in the Sicilian cloister called Martorana perfected the making of marzipan, which they shaped into figurines for feasts such as All Saints Day and Christmas.

These days *zucchero* can refer to more than a *zolletta di zucchero* (cube of sugar). The singer known as Zucchero, born Adelmo Fornaciari in Emilia Romagna in 1955, is one of Italy's biggest international rock stars. The raspy-voiced crooner sounds like Joe Cocker (especially on his cover of "You Are So Beautiful to Me") and looks a tad like him too. Pudgy, with long wispy hair, he favors pork-pie hats and three-quarter-length coats. His 1988 album *Blues* became the highest-selling recording in Italian history and made him a household name in Italy and Europe. Although less well known in the United States, Zucchero recorded with B.B. King, Miles Davis, Eric Clapton, Sheryl Crowe, and John Lee Hooker—as well as with Andrea Bocelli and Luciano Pavarotti.

Every Italian has a favorite uncle (*zio*) or aunt (*zia*), including one who may be an old maid (*zita, zitella, zitellona*). A mischievous *zolfino* (spitfire) might call a fussy old bachelor a *zitellone* and a foppish dandy a *zerbinotto* (derived from *zerbino* for doormat). A *zotico* is a clumsy, uncouth, clownish dunce who might wander about (*andare a zonzo*) and get lost. A person exhibiting *zoticaggine* or *zotichezza* (boorishness) qualifies as a *zoticone* or a *zoccolone* (from *zoccolo*, for wooden shoe or clog).

A blockhead can be dismissed as a *zuccone* (literally big pumpkin) or *zucca vuota* (empty pumpkin). A *zavorra* is a worthless piece of garbage who *non conta uno zero* (doesn't add up to zero). Something filthy or sordid is *zozzo*, while a *zozzone* is a scruffy, untidy slob

If you use these insults too freely, someone may caution, "*Sto zitto!*" ("Hush! Keep quiet!"). You don't have to be *zitto-zitto* (quiet as a mouse), but you don't want to *spargere zizzania* (literally spread weeds, or start trouble). If you do, you could end up

in a *zuffa* (brawl, scuffle). But at least you wouldn't be dismissed as *la solita zuppa* — the usual, predictable, boring old soup.