

These Are Not Your Usual Businesses



Luigi Fraboni
Antoinette Mazzaglia, of Taste Florence, shows tourists how to read a wine label at the Golden View Open Bar overlooking Florence

BOB DOUGHTY: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Bob Doughty.

FAITH LAPIDUS: And I'm Faith Lapidus. This week on our program, we meet an American in Italy who teaches travelers how to eat like an Italian. Then we take you to a Washington sandwich shop where an Iranian-American and his mother serve a world of flavors. And later we tell you about a business in California. It's called Rent a Grandma.

(MUSIC)

BOB DOUGHTY: Antoinette Mazzaglia -- Toni, for short -- is a food and wine expert. She was born in the United States but likes to say she is "one hundred percent Italian." All of her great-grandparents were born in Italy, and Ms. Mazzaglia spent a university semester studying there.

She fell in love with a man from the Tuscany region and decided to return. But she soon discovered that she was less in love with him than with the food of Florence, the Tuscan capital. She has lived in Florence for about ten years now.

Ms. Mazzaglia says she got tired of hearing visitors criticize the local food. So she decided to start a business called Taste Florence. Ms. Mazzaglia started the company four years ago with a simple goal.

ANTOINETTE MAZZAGLIA: "For visitors, when they come to the city, to not go away with a bad taste in their mouth."

That often happens to tourists looking for a restaurant after a long day of visiting museums.

ANTOINETTE MAZZAGLIA: "They're starving and they get a really bad sandwich in one of those little tourist trap places that has everything. If a place has panini, gelato, waffles – which, by the way, not Italian - and pizza -- there's a place like that right near the Uffizi -- it's probably going to be really bad. Because if you have time to make all that, you really didn't make it yourself."

Ms. Mazzaglia -- who speaks Italian -- takes people on guided visits of markets and specialty shops. They taste the so-called poor man's food based on beans, vegetables and wild game meats.

On this day, she leads a group of six Americans.

ANTOINETTE MAZZAGLIA: "Go ahead and start eating them. The one that is a little slightly more yellow, that's what they call crema. That has the egg yolk. The other one is fior di latte -- it's just milk, cream and sugar."

They try foods like Tuscan cheeses, meats and oils. Pennie DiMartino is from Long Island, New York. She came to Italy to eat food that her husband -- who is half-Italian -- does not know how to make. She tries some gelato, a frozen treat, with an eight-year-old balsamic vinegar poured on top.

PENNIE DiMARTINO: "It almost tastes like liquor, like if you put rum on ice cream. But better. It doesn't have a liquor aftertaste."

William Moore is a frequent traveler. He loves the art of Florence and Italy, but also enjoys studying the food.

WILLIAM MOORE: "You may not be able to appreciate every detail in every work of art at the Uffizi but you surely can appreciate a fantastic carbonara or what have you. We all come equipped with basic equipment -- the taste buds for that. You don't need a degree in art history to see the sort of subtle layers of this dish versus that."

(MUSIC)

Toni Mazzaglia teaches clients of Taste Florence about choosing good olive oils and wines. She says Americans are getting to know more about Italian foods by watching cooking shows on TV.

ANTOINETTE MAZZAGLIA: "Now we're starting to watch the Food Network and other fantastic networks that are giving us a wealth of chefs and programs where they travel to Italy, to all parts of Italy, and helping people understand there is a difference. Each region has its own food, each town has its own food, even across town in Florence you have two different plates."

This American businesswoman shows people how to eat and drink like Italians. Strangers in her group exchange e-mail addresses and promise to keep in touch. They learn in a day what Italians have been saying for centuries -- that the time you spend eating is never wasted.

(MUSIC)

FAITH LAPIDUS: Anyone can make a sandwich. It can be as simple as two pieces of bread with peanut butter and jelly -- or whatever -- in between. But Ali Bagheri makes a sandwich with an accent.

ALI BAGHERI: "Those of us in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe all pronounce the word sandwich 'sundevich.' So we joked around and we're like, 'SUNDEVICH!'"

Recently the Washington Post asked its readers "Who makes the best sandwiches in the D.C. area?" The winner: SUNdeVICH.

ALI BAGHERI: "We never thought we would win. We just wanted to capture a little bit of market share so our name remained on there. Next thing we know, they're coming in like, 'You won, this happened,' and then the line went out the door."

CUSTOMERS: "I heard that it got an award for the best sandwich in DC. Our neighbor told us about it." "I used to work at an Iranian-Mediterranean restaurant and it was delicious, and I remember the meat, the kubideh kabob. I've never been to Iran, but I love Iranian food, and it seems very authentic."

Mr. Bagheri is an Iranian-American who opened his sandwich shop in July. SUNdeVICH offers flavors from around the world. The menu reads like the stamps on a passport. Sandwiches are named for cities.

ALI BAGHERI: "Every city really reflects on the flavor profile. It's important that we stay true to what the inspiration was, but still put our own spin on it."

His mother works with him, but this is Mr. Bagheri's kitchen.

ALI BAGHERI: "It's funny to have the tables turned -- that watching her little by little, and now she asks me, 'Hey taste this. Is this OK? Does this need salt?'"

They use local ingredients to make popular choices like beef tongue sandwiches and kabob.

ALI BAGHERI: "We don't have a freezer. We don't have walk-in coolers. We prep what we can for the day. We sell what we can for the day. And then we start again tomorrow."

You can watch a video about SUNdevICH at voaspecialenglish.com.

(MUSIC)

BOB DOUGHTY: Todd Pliss is a former teacher. He started a company in Los Angeles called Rent a Grandma. He says he got the idea when he was teaching children in Hollywood.

TODD PLISS: "I would hear these horror stories all the time, like the sitter that almost burned down the house when she forgot there was dinner on the stove, or the nanny that fell asleep and locked the kids outside the house."

Rent a Grandma provides care for children, the elderly and pets. Prices for these services range from fourteen dollars an hour to more than twenty dollars an hour. Mr. Pliss says the women go through an interview process and background check. The business has gotten a lot of media attention. Mr. Pliss says he has been flooded with calls from women who want to work for his company.

TODD PLISS: "The economy is not good and I see that. And grandmas -- sometimes I have them crying on the phone to me. We had a grandma who's living in her car. The economy is terrible, and a lot of these grandmas can't find work."

The good news for Americans age fifty-five and older is that their unemployment rate is lower than the national average. The bad news is that unemployed older workers take longer to find a job than younger workers. Mr. Pliss says ninety percent of the women who contact him for a job cannot find work. He says among them are teachers and lawyers.

TODD PLISS: "Whether people say it or not, there's definitely age discrimination. Companies can't officially say that. But I see it a lot because these women, a lot

of them, are educated; they've got decades of experience -- not just in the nanny, child care world, but in the real world."

Women who want to apply to become a "Grandma" have to pay a twenty-five dollar processing and membership fee. The frequently asked questions on the company's website do not say anything about having to actually be a grandmother. The grandmas are advertised as age fifty-plus and English speaking, and many are shown with pictures on the site.

The service is available in Los Angeles County and a franchise operation recently started in Dallas, Texas. The company aims to expand nationally, and Mr. Pliss says parents as far away as Europe have contacted him.

Finding child care can be stressful for many parents. Anna Marie Caldwell rented one of the grandmas, Jane Mertes, to care for her three daughters when she was not home.

ANNA MARIE CALDWELL: "She was part of the family. She was helping out cooking, cleaning, helping with homework, playing with the kids."

JANE MERTES: "When you work with children you have a responsibility and an obligation to make a difference in their lives and maybe teach them something that their parents didn't know or just a different perspective."

Ms. Caldwell says hiring an older person is different from using a teenage babysitter.

ANNA MARIE CALDWELL: "They bring a lot of knowledge to the table, a lot of experience and a lot of confidence in their decision making and they're not usually as distracted as, say, a teenager or something could be."

We have a video about Rent a Grandma at voaspecialenglish.com

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FAITH LAPIDUS: Our program was produced by Brianna Blake, with reporting by Nancy Greenleese, Arash Arabasadi and Elizabeth Lee. I'm Faith Lapidus.

BOB DOUGHTY: And I'm Bob Doughty. You can find transcripts and MP3s of our programs at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.