

Op-Ed

GOD BLESS AMERICA AND VIVA L'ITALIA

A Comparison of Two Countries

- The Author Has Lived in Both Italy and America

- Now an American Citizen, She is the Daughter of Italian Immigrants, Originally to Canada

“Do not be fooled by the beauty, culture, and history of Italy. Visiting is one thing but living there is a completely different animal.”

By Joanne Fisher



I must make a premise. I am going to discuss these two countries before COVID hit, simply because these two countries had quite noticeable differences before this pandemic.

Here we are: 2019. Italy is the garden of the world, and when I tell people that I lived there for many years, they swoon and comment: “Wow, you’re so lucky!” or “Why are you in the USA?” or “Why did you leave?”

These are simple questions with not-so-simple answers.

Do not be fooled by the beauty, culture, and history of Italy. Visiting is one thing but living there is a completely different animal.

Additionally, do not be fooled by the United States, either. We (I say we, because I am now an American citizen) have our issues and lots of them—however, certain aspects of life differentiate both countries in different ways.

Let’s begin with my favorite subject, food. Italians idolize food. They spend a good part of their day talking about food and wine, about which they are very selective and discriminating, almost snobbish. Surprisingly enough, Italians do not eat a lot. But when they do, it must be cooked right, aged right and most importantly, priced right. Italians are very closed-minded about their food. They do not like foods from other countries. Italians prefer Italian cuisine over any other—and to be more on point, Italians love their mamma’s cooking. Unfortunately, today, many young Italian women do not cook because, alas, their moms never taught them. And similarly in United States, many Italian men are learning how to cook.

Americans love food and love to eat a lot of it, causing an enormous amount of people to suffer obesity and its derivative consequences: diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol and so forth. However, we Americans not only adore Italian food—it’s possibly our favorite—but we enjoy foods from many other countries from around the world. I believe that food is a main reason that the United States is called a “melting pot.” One of the common misconceptions that I find particularly amusing is Americans’ reliance on recipes. It’s very common for me to just throw something

together, such as my biscotti, or a lasagna, and have someone say, “Can I get that recipe?” Of course, I then have to patiently explain that there is no recipe, that I just threw a bunch of things together. I must say that this answer impresses my American friends, although I suspect that sometimes they don’t believe me.

Fashionista? Well, you should live in Italy, for sure! Not even in New York will you find the everyday Maria and Giuseppe dressed like they just walked off the catwalk. Even if they buy their clothes and shoes at the “mercato,” their fashion sense is impeccable, to say the least. Americans try exceptionally hard, but sorry, there is no comparison here.

How many times have you heard “use your inside voice”? Americans are extremely careful to speak softly while they are dining, even in a fast food restaurant. When my children and I first moved to Florida, my son and daughter had conversations at a higher tone than my husband’s children. One time, my stepson asked Leonardo, “Why are you always yelling?” Leo’s response was, “I’m not yelling, I’m Italian.” In Italy, an inside voice does not exist. In fact, when Italians gather in a restaurant or trattoria, they are heard in the neighboring stores, apartments and even by the “Vigile Urbano” down the street who may even decide to join in on the conversation if it interests him.

Does Italy have immigrants? Oh yes, they do but the majority are illegal, and they come to Italy expecting the Italian government to cater to their every need. Of course, it does. The Italian government has forcefully taken small hotels from their rightful owners so that migrants can live there. The owners get peanuts. Italians, in turn, are very prejudiced towards these migrants. One episode that truly enraged me was when Balotelli (a Ghanaian soccer player who was adopted by a couple from Brescia) walked onto the soccer field and the fans made monkey sounds and indigenous dance-like moves. When I saw that, as an American, I was horrified. I realized that, even though we hear on a daily basis that Americans are racist, we really are not. America truly is the Land of Opportunity—always has been, and hopefully, always will be. Of course, Balotelli’s team was penalized for such behavior, but the damage was done. He proudly gave the “one-finger salute” to the crowd, shrugged his shoulders, and made his parents proud. He is a bit of a hothead, but can he play soccer!

Speaking of sugar-coating: In general, Americans have become very polite over the years and would never think of offending anyone in any way, shape, or form. Italians, as stated above, don’t care if they offend you. They will tell you to your face that you’re fat, thin, tall, short, pretty, or—well, not-so-pretty. Perhaps, the younger generations have learned to think before they speak, but the older crowd will tell it to your face. One thing that really made my head turn in the 1980s when we moved to Italy, was the help wanted pages. Job listings typically specified that an applicant had to be attractive, good legs, pleasant voice and so on. Civil rights and anti-discrimination laws in the States would not allow for that!

Like the United States, Italy has two paces of lifestyles: northern and southern. And like the United States, the northerners are fast-paced and the southerners are very laid back, not worrying about anything. (In the United States, that has been diluted somewhat, with the mobility of Americans—something else that differentiates the two countries.) Personally, I experienced quite a shock when I moved from Canada (the Toronto area is very much like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, etc.) to Florida. I used to get genuinely irritated when we needed to be somewhere, and my native Floridian hubby wasn’t anywhere near being ready. To this day, I am compulsively punctual, and hubby is still that last one out the door. I used to complain a lot, but now I simply give him “the look.” He gets the message right now!

Families are quite different in Italy. Even though the man is the titular “Head of the House,” the reality is that women have always run the show—and still do! After the war, only men went to work, and women stayed home to cook, clean and raise the children. In America, it was quite similar. But as times change and the world becomes smaller, both countries are evolving when it comes to the family nucleus. One big difference between our two countries is that Americans tend to “kick out” their kids immediately after high school, whereas Italian children live with their parents until they move out on their own or they get married. When we visited Italy in 2018, my cousin, who is almost 50, was still living at home with his parents. My husband was quite surprised by this. The major reason for this is housing. It is very expensive to rent an apartment on your own. Most landlords won’t even consider leasing you an apartment that could be occupied by a family or future family, instead of a single person who may leave after a while, causing the landlord to search for new tenants. Plus, he can charge more for a family than a single person.

Which brings me to space.

In America, we have a saying “go big or go home.” We have big cars, big houses, big everything. Not so in Italy; because there is no space. The cars are tiny, the apartments are tiny, the courtyards are tiny, the malls are small (where they exist), and their city halls are small. The only large buildings are churches and museums. This is because museums are simply former palaces where the uber-rich, blue-blooded nobility formerly resided. When Italians visit America, they marvel at how much land we possess, how huge our skyscrapers are, how enormous our

malls are, how much wide-open spaces we have and how large our tiniest apartments are. To Italians, owning a home is like winning a lottery, whereas to us, it's part of the American Dream, attainable by anyone who works hard to better themselves.

Want to open a small business? If you live in Italy, don't even think about it. The amount of bureaucracy involved in opening a small restaurant or a shoe store or a barber shop is beyond imaginable. Any Italian who has a small business most probably inherited it from relatives who passed it down from one generation to the next. Starting a business from scratch is costly and time-consuming, and the documentation is tremendous. In America, you can simply rent a space, get some financing, pay for an occupational license, and voilà! You have your very own small business! Now, I understand that in many states, it's not quite that simple; however, for the most part it is. And if you think the IRS is difficult to deal with, you haven't dealt with la Finanza, the Italian Financial Police. That government entity is one of the most powerful in Italy. They handle all tax fraud, business and personal, contraband, building codes, you name it. I know because I've heard many detailed stories from my cousin who was a colonel and worked in that law enforcement agency for forty years.

I would like to end on a romantic note. Italian culture has romance in the air, always. Italian music, cinema, books and attitudes about relationships are very romantic and exalted. Courting a woman is still a big thing in Italy and a man will do anything to prove his love to his beloved. Americans love courting, also, but tend to be more practical. Having lived in both countries, I have noticed the difference. But you can see the difference simply by watching a classic Italian movie and a classic American one. "Ah! L'amore!" as they say in Italy.

Bottom line, I personally feel that the United States is still a beacon of hope, opportunity and individualism. These are the main reasons people from all walks of life desire to come here. Even Italians. Some of them simply fly in and end up staying. Some float in on rickety boats and rafts. Some come in through our southern border and some through our northern border. I'll bet you didn't know that, right? For over 200 years, people have risked life and limb to immigrate to America, because it is the land of the free and home of the brave. No matter how bad we think America gets, it still is the highest-ranked destination for immigrants.

Editor's Note: Joanne Fisher is a Canadian-Italian-American author who is renowned for her steamy romances, historical fictions and murder-mysteries. She loves writing Christmas novellas, giving them an Italian flair. She has penned two nonfiction travel guides, titled *Traveling Boomers*, along with the corresponding website TheTravelingBoomers.com. She has participated in various Space Coast Writers' Guild anthologies, and has even written one of her own, *Baker's Dozen Anthology*, which is free on Kindle Unlimited. She is the president of the Space Coast Writers' Guild and lives in Central Florida with her husband Dan and two Dachshunds, Wally and Madison.