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COOKING MY FIRST MEAL FOR THE NATIVES

by michael vocino

I knew this time would come. After all the “pranzos” (main meal of the day at about 1 p.m.) cooked for me, I knew that soon I would need to respond in some way.

Michele and Mariolina, his wife, came to the airport a week or so ago and picked me up and then drove 3.5 hours to bring me to Sannicandro. They just bought a small home a couple of doors from me. They have been working on it for several days, they were tired, and the night before, I told them I would prepare “pranzo” for them the next afternoon. I later regretted this, but under the influence of wine and Grappa, I wanted to show them how grateful I was for what they had done for me.

Michele was born in Sannicandro and now works for the state tobacco monopoly in Rome where he and Mariolina and their two girls now live. They actually live in Frascati which is on the outskirts of the city in the hills. Mariolina is from Perugia and they also have an apartment there which her parents gave to them so that they could visit more comfortably and often. Perugia is not far from Rome. Mariolina is a great cook, as I can attest after many meals with her and Michele over the years.

So, here I was, in Sannicandro, early the next day, wracking my brains for an answer to the question, “What to prepare?”

The main meal of the day for Italians usually consists of three courses. It begins with a pasta dish of some kind, the first course, followed by a meat or fish entrée as the second course. These two are then followed by the third which is usually a salad, cheeses, etc. All of this is followed by fruit, pastries, and usually espresso.

Knowing what the “structure” of the meal should be was a great help, and I went to the market to get whatever I needed at about 8 a.m. I thought to myself, “Nice and easy, nothing too involved to prepare.”

As I walked into the grocery there, standing off to side was a group of older women chit-chatting. I knew one of them, the owner of the grocery and she was effusive seeing me for the first time on this visit after an absence of a summer. She asked all the usual questions, which I am proud to say I understood, and then she asked me what I needed. In my still developing and limited Italian, I explained to her what I was doing—or trying to do. After a little social history of Southern Italy and how the man never does the cooking...“that’s a job for a woman,” she and I both smiled, she understood and made some suggestions, none of which I thought I could accomplish.

After piling all my choices into my knapsack for the walk home, I said my good-byes, the old women all giggled and asked that I report back to them how it went...As I left, their laughter followed me out the door. I evidently was fun for them...a man trying to cook a meal for the family.

On the way home, I stopped at the wagon of a street vendor to buy tomatoes, cucumbers and some fruit for the meal. Just before arriving at my casa, I stopped at the bakery run by a new set of owners, Incoronata and Michele. There I bought half a loaf of the most dreamy, crusty Italian bread I've ever tasted, and when here, I get to buy it fresh, and in small quantities...whatever I need they cut, everyday.

Once in the house, I unpacked the goods and began preparing what I thought might be a passable meal. Here's what I came up with...and believe me as you will see, very easy, nothing too difficult and hopefully tasty:

First course: Penne pasta. Not the big ones, but the small. I prepared it with garlic and olive oil (local, to die for) and green peas with grated cheese on the top. Also with pepperoncino and coarse salt. (I had the water boiling when Michele and Mariolina arrived and made Michele test the pasta to make sure I took it off at the appropriate time.)

Second course: I bought a very long string of sausage, made the day before and locally, with fennel. Just before it was done, I added cannellini beans (canned) to the fry pan and added some garlic...

Third course: A nice cold salad on this over 90 degree afternoon of tomatoes and cucumbers with course salt and olive oil. On the side was a large chunk of fresh mozzarella. A piece for everyone.

For the finale, I served bananas with figs with the bananas sliced and arranged in a circle around two figs for each person. I had picked the figs on the way home on the side of the road. They are wild here...and luckily I had beaten everyone else to this particular site of the delicious fruit. Mariolina had brought pastries, too, from the store called "Aregentino" ...delicious stuff...a variety of the most incredible delicacies that complimented the espresso perfectly.

We were finished, several hours later I checked to make sure that the two of them were still alive, and indeed, they were!

A mini-success! Yeah!!!!

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