

Flavors of Friuli

A Culinary Journey through Northeastern Italy

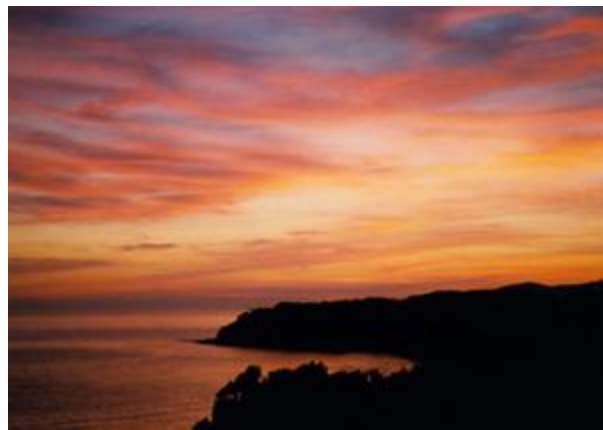
Rediscovering Paradise in Castiglioncello

May 22, 2019 by Elisabeth Antoine Crawford

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When asked to recall my most perfect memory of absolute bliss, I immediately picture myself floating on my back in the tranquil sea off Baia Santa Lucia, the sun beating down on my face and limbs, the buoyant water sending my thoughts drifting into oblivion. Several years prior, I had spent two months as a student at the dance festival Pro Danza Italia, and I had now returned to Castiglioncello—located on the Tuscan coast just south of Livorno—to teach a Pilates workshop at the same festival.



All the teachers were given lodging at Villa Santa Lucia, a spacious home perched high on a cliff, with thatched-roof gazebos spilling down the hillside to a sandy cove below. Like an unwanted stepchild banished to a fairytale tower, I was given the closet-sized room on the roof. Although it had no bathroom (I had to go down the outside stairway to get into the main house), my roof-tower room was truly paradise. The door opened directly onto the roof, an open terrace with panoramic views of the sea. I remember watching sunsets fill the sky with

shades of fuchsia, periwinkle, and crimson, and I often woke during the night just to see the moonlight sparkle over the horizon.



During my free afternoons, I would spend hours at Bagni Italia—a beach club on the town’s largest bay, Baia del Quercetano—lunching on fresh marinated anchovies and tender fried calamari, then relaxing in the sun on a rented lounge chair. When the summer’s heat became too intense, I could cool off in the gentle waves. On the way back to the villa, I would pause for a late afternoon snack, which always entailed at least three flavors of gelato at nearby Gelateria Bocelli (owned by singer Andrea Bocelli’s second cousin Rossano).

Nearly a decade later, I found myself dreaming of Castiglioncello’s rocky coves and sandy beaches, so I returned once again, seeking to relive some of those early, carefree memories. This time I stayed at the pink Hotel Baia del Sorriso, overlooking the bay where I had years ago spent so many afternoons sunning and bobbing in the waves. My old haunt Bagni Italia was no longer serving a full menu (or perhaps things were not yet in full swing, seeing as I had arrived just at the cusp of high season), and I was disappointed to find that Signor Bocelli had sold his gelateria (I’ve heard a rumor that he is now a butcher in nearby Rosignano). But I was consoled by the fact that, being a decade older, I could afford to treat myself to some spectacular restaurant meals...and I had planned my trip to coincide with the annual Festa del Pesce.



The “Festival of Fish” began forty years ago as a casual get-together between a few hungry friends and a pot of fried fish. As curious passers-by were invited to join the party, word spread throughout their tiny, coastal hamlet, and soon this innocuous meal had grown into a full-fledged bash. The event was repeated the following year...and the year after that, gradually evolving into what is today an enormous feast for tens of thousands of visitors.

Held annually on the second Sunday in June, the Festa del Pesce celebrates the beginning of the summer season with music, street markets, and—most importantly—plenty of seafood.



The scene is Caletta, a peaceful town nestled between the comfortably trendy resort of Castiglioncello and the more industrial Rosignano Solvay. This charming slice of the Tuscan coast is lined with pine forests, turquoise bays, and a rainbow of umbrella-dotted beaches. Farther north, the winding coastline ascends to a stretch of rugged cliffs, while to the south lies the town of Vada and its vast Spiaggia Bianca, where the sand is implausibly white. A short distance inland, the hill town Rosignano Marittimo offers a sweeping view of the verdant countryside and endless shores.



On the menu at the Festa del Pesce, I found a number of local seafood dishes, including *porpo bria'o* (octopus cooked in red wine), *cozze alla pescatora* (mussel stew), *risotto ai tre scogli* (shellfish risotto), *crepelle alla calettana* (seafood-filled ravioli), *penne alla bua de 'orvi* (seafood pasta named after the nearby bay Buca dei Corvi), *spiedini di gamberoni* (grilled shrimp kebabs), and *cacciucco alla livornese* (Livorno-style seafood stew). The main attraction, however, was the *frittura*, a mix of fried calamari and shrimp. The *frittura* was cooked in a massive frying pan that spanned 13 feet, held 160 gallons of oil, and fried 1000 portions an hour.



As the festival coincided with the year's first heat wave, the beaches were packed with bronze sun-worshippers sporting miniscule bikinis and nearly naked toddlers learning to swim. Instead of joining the crowds, I decided to take a walk along the *lungomare*, the seaside promenade that winds around tiny coves from Caletta north to Castiglioncello's promontory, Punta Righini.

As I approached Baia di Portovecchio, I was stunned to see a shipwrecked Lebanese vessel looming over the tufa rock beach. (The abandoned ship has since been demolished.) At Baia dei Tre Scogli, the promenade was briefly interrupted by the *pineta*, a cliff-side park lined with pine trees and home to a children's playground, a movie theater, and tennis courts. At the north end of the park, I climbed down a set of stairs to Baia di Castiglioncello, arriving just in time to watch the embarkment of a festival-sponsored sailing regatta.



The final stretch of the *lungomare* circled halfway around the Punta Righini. Along the way, I passed La Baracchina where I had dined the night before. Located on a stretch of rocks jutting out into the sea, the restaurant gave the appearance of a casual beach shack. In the evening, however, the interior was enhanced by elegant yellow and white linens and the romantic glow of candlelight. Floor-to-ceiling windows encircled the dining area and let in a refreshing breeze. While tucking into a deliciously grilled sea bass, I had been mesmerized by the 180-degree view spanning the electric, pink-and-blue horizon and the darkening coastline punctuated by gleaming specks of light.



When the paved promenade ended, I continued exploring further—walking over and between boulders, following a makeshift path to its ultimate end at a privately owned beach. When I could go no further, I backtracked through the town, stopping to admire two of Castiglioncello’s landmarks: the Torre Medicea, built by the Medici family during the 16th century as a guard against the raids of Saracen pirates, and the Castello Pasquini, built centuries later by art critic Diego Martelli to house his entourage of writers, poets, and Impressionist painters. In recent years, the castle has provided a stage for numerous dance and theater performances, including ones by Pro Danza Italia.



Still craving some beach time, I headed back to my hotel for a swim. While Hotel Baia del Sorriso does not have an actual beach, they do provide a concrete landing with a ladder for easy access into the crystal clear water. As I leisurely swam from one end of Baia del Quercetano to the other, I felt that sense of sun-drenched elation return. Although I will always miss my rooftop tower and private beach at [Villa Santa Lucia](#), I discovered that bliss could still be found in Castiglioncello.