

## **ONE DAY IN PITIGLIANO TUSCANY**

The southern tip of the Maremma Toscana is made of an array of colors, huge pine trees and coast narrow roads.

Here and there I notice well-kept farm houses with children running in the yards and the smell of freshly cut grass. I am traveling to Pitigliano, a small town in the province of Grosseto, in Tuscany. The day before my arrival I spoke to Ernesto Celata, a man I have not yet met but has given me a sense of reassurance and fraternity. Ernesto is the leader of an organization called "Civiltà Giubboniana," which researches and collects artifacts of the past and blends history with legend. At first, I really didn't know what to expect since my traveling was intended to research the past of a specific heritage, but by the time I got into Pitigliano, I suddenly realized the amount of wealth and dedication Ernesto placed in his life. I approached the town from the Eastern part, and later found that it's not the most handsome. Ernesto is there waiting for me at the door of his office.

We meet for the first time, and even though I am an Italian-born, I get the sense of being in a foreign land. As he greets me, almost immediately, I perceive the sense of knowledge and love he has for his town, the place where he was born and cultivated his immense passion for history. Walking the streets of Pitigliano is almost as impressive as walking in the Forum in Rome for the first time. You get transported into the past. The noise of the daily life goes unnoticed. Ernesto notices that I am truly excited and begins with what I think he loves to do the most — speaking about the "Little Jerusalem."

"Walter," he says with a strong voice and perfect Italian, "Pitigliano is situated at 313 meters above sea level on the main road (SS 74), and proudly stands out on the top of the crest of a rugged outcrop of tufaceous rock, surrounded by deep green valleys. Rivers Lente and Meleta flow timelessly on.

The earliest traces of the town's origins date back to the eneolithic period.

Evidence of the ancient Etruscan settlement abounds in the many tombs found in the surrounding countryside. Also in a small section of the old town wall, next to the Porta Di Sotto at Capisotto, which has survived unharmed by time? It consists of large tufa block embedded in the underlying rock face which is presumed to date back as far as the 5th century B.C." "In the Middle Ages," he continues, "Pitigliano was presumed to have belonged to the Aldobrandeschi countship. The Aldobrandeschi were almost certainly of Longobards extractions settled in the area in the 8th century B.C." In 1293, after a series of events that led to the submission of Pitigliano to the neighboring town of Sovana and the division of the vast territorial patrimony between the two branches of the Aldobrandeschi family, the countship came into the possession of the Orsini family from Rome, owing to a marriage between the two families.

The count Niccolò III Orsini (1442-1510), nicknamed "Il Pitigliano," was the most distinguished of the Orsini family, largely recognized for his generosity and bravery. The Orsini family ruled Pitigliano until the year 1561 when the

population rebelled and placed itself under the protection of the Medici family, hence becoming part of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Ruled under the Dukes of the Asburgo Lorena, the town underwent an eventful period of modernization and was finally liberated from the remaining feudal system. Eventually the town became a part of the kingdom of Italy by consent in 1860. It is almost amazing how much historical knowledge Ernesto possesses. He takes a break while we are walking toward the historic center of the town, approaching Via Guglielmo Marconi. Ernesto goes on explaining that through oral tradition bears witness to the presence of small groups of Jewish in Pitigliano in the late 13th century-when many Jews started leaving the ancient basin of Rome to find open air markets in other medieval cities. Around 1560, the settlers had created a County, which became a borderland just out of the Papal State. At the turn of the century, two different Popes carried out the process of placing the Jews in ghettos. The new born community, however, did well in running local economy out of its feudal condition into a modern one. Eventually, under the De Medici ruling, many new rules were devised such as the Capitoli in 1622.

At that point local Jews were forced into the Ghetto of Pitigliano, a cluster of houses standing on the edge of the south-western cliff of the town, with two small entrances opening to the street and closed at night. The people in the Ghetto were joined by the Jewish refugees from Castro, a city which was destroyed in 1649 by the Papal Army. A further rising of the houses of the Ghetto was needed. In 1735 Gian Gastone De Medici lay down the right of all citizens of his Grand Duchy to freedom of worship, starting the process of repealing the Capitoli of 1622. Along the street adjoining the Ghetto, over the following century, many Jewish craftsman and artisans opened workshops and storerooms, so that Ghetto is still the nickname of the present day Via Zuccarelli.

The Jewish community of Pitigliano grew to about 400 people out of 2,200 populations, just before the Unity of Italy in 1860.

By 1870, however they started a slow decline, owing either to mixed marriages or to the fact that there was no Papal State anymore. Many Jews could go across what had been the Roman Catholic home country, to get to the main southern Italian regions, in order to sail to the religious goal of the Jewish historical route - the Promised Land. Nevertheless, in the days of the Italian Dispersion, the so called Sbandamento - September 1943, when the Italian soldiers surrendered to the Allied Forces, and the Nazi Army claimed to take away their new enemies mainly Jewish. The Jews of Pitigliano began hiding the original things of the Synagogue, and they started hiding themselves, too; in farms, in woods, in the grottoes by which all the cliffs of tufa around are honeycombed, protected by most people of Pitigliano, with whom they had lived in peace so far. Niney-nine percent of them were saved, and by the end of the war the Jews, as well as many of their Christian fellow countryman, couldn't go on staying in a town exhausted by war. Most Jewish people of Pitigliano would emigrate, joining the families professing the same religion in

bigger cities. The Synagogue closed in the late 50's, and after about a decade of neglect it collapsed, as it rose on the edge of a cliff, next to the Old Ghetto. Only the arch of the women's gallery and the back wall of the temple stayed up. In 1995, after four centuries from its birth, it was rebuilt. I received a lesson on history and since Ernesto did all the talking I am wondering when he'll ask me questions. He eventually does with great charisma. "Walter," he says, "how did you get involved in Jewish cooking and why does this heritage mean so much to you?" I pause for a second, and instantly fifteen years of my life in the United States reappear before me in a vivid slide of emotions. "Ernesto," I proudly reply, "I began reading on Jewish cooking several years ago as a student in college, mostly because of my interest in history. I realized that for many centuries Jews were the center of persecutions and tyranny and I wanted to showcase that their heritage was not all about sadness and tears. I believed that they had made a great contribution to the world, not just in business, trading and finances but also in the field of gastronomy. When I was growing up I spent a lot of time with my father, who was very involved in politics representing the Stars and Crown Party of the defunct Monarchy in Italy. I specifically recall an instance when traveling to a nearby town, my dad went into a store to purchase cigarettes and I stood near the car. An old man came by and asked me if I had trouble with the car, but I replied that I was waiting for my father. The man asked me who was my father, and I replied, Alessandro Potenza. The man then said, "æOh, you are the eldest of Rabbino's family." I stood speechless since I did not know what to say, it was the first time I had heard that word. It was, I believe, the fall of 1960. Minutes later my father came back, and I asked him about why the old man called him Rabbino.

My dad went on to what felt like an eternity. He said, "æSon, during the Second World War, I was stationed in the town of Bardonecchia in Piedmont, and during the Sbandamento in 1943 about 200 Jews were living there. As the Nazis were patrolling the area, the Jewish residents were hiding in small farmhouses outside the town. I thought it was safer to hide them in a Catholic church." In essence, the Jewish families were placed in a basement of a rectory whose main entrance was sealed with cement, and every day my father and others would bring food and necessities. This went on for 28 days. Eventually the Germans left, and since then my father was nicknamed "Rabbino" from the Jews of Bardonecchia. I was aware of his time spent in the military. He had served under Mussolini and retired as a Commander of the Bersaglieri after 25 years in the Italian Army. Twenty seven years later, I opened my first restaurant in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, where I began offering Jewish cuisine to my patrons. I celebrated the Passover and the Hannukah, and began offering cooking classes on the foods of the Sephardim or the Jews of Sephardic extraction, mainly from the western countries of Europe, as well as the basin of the Mediterranean sea and as far as India. Soon I realized that the foods from the Sephardic Jews were much different to the Jewish food available here in the

States, which has an Ashkenazic influence, usually from the Central and Eastern European countries. Some the recipes, such as the "Orecchi Di Aman" made at Purim (Triangle pasta filled with a mixture of prune and poppy seeds, then fried) were unknown here where we generally make something very similar called Hamantashen. Also the Italians make Muggine in Bianco for the High Holidays, and here we call it Gefilte fish.

My extensive research brought me to understand the difference of flavors of the two cuisines, and some of their regulations at specific Holidays. Some of the foods, which are considered kosher by the Ashkenazim, are permitted by the Italkim or Sephardim and vice versa. For example, rice, which is a staple for the Italian-Jews at Passover, is considered chametz, or leavened food by the Ashkenazim. Whereas chocolate, cheeses, and other milk products, so widely used by the American Jews during Passover, are absolutely forbidden by the Italkim. These were some of the reasons of my research, but I believe that the most important rely on the fact that many people are surprised to hear that there are Jews in Italy. When I say that there are in fact streets named Via della Sinagoga, or Piazza Giudea or quartieri called Giudecca, my Jewish friends remain surprised and puzzled. They are not aware perhaps that the Jews formed a small community and assimilated well into Italian society. In fact, the Jewish presence in the Italian Peninsula is the oldest in the Western Europe, and uninterrupted for two thousand years.

They lived in Southern Italy and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, since the second century B.C. and in Rome they settled in the Trastevere area, the Suburra and in Porta Capena.

Much evidence has been left behind such as the Arch of Titus which portrays Jewish slaves carrying a menorah. Jews were linked to each other through their religion and their foods, and is visible in many dishes. Jews brought eggplant and fennel into the Italian peninsula, vegetables that were considered poisonous by the gentiles. The famous fritto misto made with vegetables and fish have a Jewish background. Many dishes adapted by the Romans such as ceci con pennerelli (chick peas with bits of meat from the knuckle) or aliciotti con l'indivia (anchovies with endive), reflect the pauperization of the old Jewish community. And if in the Jewish ghetto of Rome food was exotic and cosmopolitan, it was no different in Venice where the three Synagogues, stood together in the piazza, La Spagnola , La Levantina e La Tedesca.

They represented, along with the Italian, the different styles of the Venetian Jews. The coexistence in the ghetto bore fruit in the kitchen. The levantini made rice with raisins as is popular in Istanbul today, The Iberian ponentini introduced salted cod dishes, sweets made with almonds and chocolate cakes. Together they brought into the ghetto the range of spices and aromatics from their land of origins. The ghetto of Pitigliano was no different than those in the big cities. One of the most emblematic evidence is in a street called Via Marghera, which is a small passage off Via Zuccarelli. Here at the end of a narrow vicolo, between restored Jewish homes there is the Oven of Azzime.

The oven completely excavated from volcanic rock, with two windows protected with metal grates showcasing the menorah. Inside a large marble counter top is visible where the Jewish women would prepare the sweets during Passover, as well as the matzoh. The oven itself decorated with refractory material allowing the heat to disperse evenly. In this famous location, many varieties of unleavened focacce and other fragrant sweets were prepared during holidays, and the aroma attracted many of the local Jewish and Catholic children who would stand near the entrance in anticipation of free samplings. The noise and the fragrant smell of those holidays traveled throughout the old ghetto transmitting happiness and family unity. Numerous are the dishes of the time which stood the test of time and are still part of Jewish traditions of Pitigliano, such as the Torzetto, made with sugar, water, flour and poppy seed essence, shaped like a diamond with a hard consistency. The other sweet of great significance is the Sfratto, which resemble a large cigar, filled with nuts and honey, wrapped in crumbly dough. Its unusual name derives from the 17th century when Cosimo De Medici orders the Jews of Pitigliano inside a single quarter.

At first the Jews living in the suburbs were forced to pay expensive taxes and to wear a sign, then they were forced to leave their homes and confined inside the ghetto. Officials working with the Duchy would pound the doors of the homes with a stick ordering the immediate removal from the houses. This process was, and still is, called sfratto. However, among the fine delicacies of the Pitigliano gastronomic repertoire I personally favor the "Biscotto Di Pasqua," Easter bread-like dough, shaped round or as in the old tradition in the shape of an 8, which achieves a gorgeous bronze color during cooking. It probably takes its name from a round cake or Ciambella in Italian. It's certainly the oldest sweet in Pitigliano, perhaps introduced by the Spanish Jews who fled the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th century. The richness of the culinary heritage of Pitigliano finds its roots in the local produce. The town has boasted a highly active production of fine wines. The white (D.O.C.), red, dessert and sparkling wines produced today are the result of hundreds of years of experience put together with advanced technology. The same can be said for its olive oil and its excellent earthy flavour from the cold pressed sun ripened olives. Both the wine and the oil blend beautifully with the Pitiglianese cucina enhancing its flavours. It is worthwhile tasting the "Zuppa Di fagioli" (bean soup, "Aquacotta" ( a vegetable soup served with a poached egg on top, or the famous "Buglione," a lamb stew with tomatoes, garlic and olive oil. As we move into the new Millennium, our world springs faster, but the traditions which preserve the local rural life of Pitigliano are still very much alive today. Two fine examples are "La Torciata" and "La Befana," The first takes place on St. Joseph's Day on the 19th of March. At sunset, children, teenagers and adults dressed in sack cloth and holding a flaming torch in their hands, form a procession and walk in the dark from Via Cava back toward the town. It really is an impressive sight to see.

Perhaps much more solemn than the traditional Befana, which falls between the 5th and 6th of January. Il Benfano (male) and La Befana (female) dress themselves in strange, often comic costumes and blacken their faces so as not to be recognized. They then go around the countryside visiting farmhouses and singing songs accompanied by a guitar or an accordion, in exchange for food and a glass of good local wine. My day is almost over in the tiny jewel of Pitigliano, and as I sadly say goodbye to Ernesto, the guardian of all these culinary traditions, I leave Via Ciacci with a promise to return to relive the excitement, to get transported back in time into a world that has remained untouched, filled with history and a richness of family values.

As I drive away, I grasp a final glimpse of the Jewish Cemetery on my left and although there are no Jewish families living in Pitigliano, I suddenly realize that this heritage will never vanish, and the town that once hosted a strong and vibrant Jewish community in Italy is here to stay to be witness for generations to come.

Walter Potenza