

January 1, 2026

La mia gioia,

Yes, Italy, you are my joy! What a difference you've made in my life.

While traveling through Rome, Florence, Venice, Milan, and Bergamo, and staying with two different families in the provinces of Udine and Bergamo as part of an IFYE (International Farm Youth Exchange) delegation in 1981, I fell in love!

The art of the Renaissance masters captivated my senses. Food was more than sustenance; it was a celebration to be enjoyed with others. The people welcomed me with vibrancy and invited me into their community. Languages that defy reason for a nation to come together, and yet the richness of the dialects is maintained. At the same time, your people speak Italian - words and pronunciations that convey rich, fertile meanings that tempt every sense. And, the men, especially one young man. Ah, la buona vita.

The passion I felt for you set my course at the tender age of 18. Returning to America after six weeks in Italy, I excitedly declared to Mama, "I don't want to marry an American!" I was convinced I couldn't have a well-traveled exotic life if I did.

I fantasized about marrying a young man I'd known for only two and a half weeks. He and I wrote heartfelt letters. I took them to an elderly Italian woman, the wife of the local pizzeria owner. I blushed as she read what he hoped to do when we met.

An ocean apart and too young, our love was not meant to be. However, Romeo opened my eyes to a new landscape, a life that reached far beyond the farm I grew up on in Missouri.

At 62, I look back on a life well lived, having raised three children born on three different continents. Our home was a mini-United Nations, with four countries of birth, including their father. No, I didn't marry Romeo. My first husband was a foreign national I met in college — Spanish-speaking rather than Italian.

Our marriage began with a cross-state move from Missouri to New Jersey. Then we crossed oceans. We spent 11 consecutive years abroad from 1992 to 2003. Sadly, we never called Italy home, though it was a close call. An offer was made for Milan, but Caracas was the wiser professional move.

While visiting his cousins in South America in the mid-1990s, I received the nickname Pata Caliente, or "hot foot." I was living the exotic, well-traveled life I wanted, constantly planning the next adventure. The bug planted when I first set foot on your land was thriving.

In October 2023, while visiting my son in Wisconsin and taking a virtual writing course with a NY Times food and travel writer, I was assigned to write a love letter. I hemmed and hawed because I didn't know what to write about. Food - I love Italian food, but rarely eat it after developing Celiac disease in 2013. Travel - there were too many possibilities.

I was afraid of placing emphasis on one country, thinking it might shrink my world. By this point, I was well-traveled, having visited 45 countries and 44 US states. In 2024, I would complete all the continents except one: Oceania.

While I hesitated to fully embrace a love that had lasted since I was a teenager, I accepted my undeniable first love. Italy. With each word, I captured the spirit of your people, the warmth, the fervor for life, the ease of falling in love again and again, the richness of your culture, food, and tempo. Shedding tears as I relived those memories and rekindled the passion, I was 18 once again. I was full of hopes and dreams, ones that not only included adventure but were deeply embedded in the spirit of community, something my life had not yielded consistently.

Since writing my love letter to you, my beloved Italy, I've returned yearly and am studying Italian. I dream of moving there, embracing the life of la dolce vita. My world is not smaller; instead, it feels more complete, as I recognize my desire to return to your splendor again and again.

I visited twice in 2024—the first time to reconnect with friends from my 1981 trip. I was overwhelmed by their warmth and enthusiasm for seeing me after 43 years. They welcomed me into their homes, celebrated our bonds, and gave graciously of their love, which healed my wounded soul that has craved community since leaving our expatriate life.

While visiting Bagnaria Arsa, I stayed with a former host sibling, Luigino. We shared meals, reminisced, and laughed. On my final night in Bagnaria Arsa, I discovered a deeper connection to Italy and my values. Back in 1981, under a star-filled sky, Luigino inspired accountability as he spoke about what it meant to be a man, just as he did in 2024. I realized that his dedication to family and community was interwoven in the way I interact with others.

Two months later, I shared my love of your wonders with my parents. I have talked about you for decades. Mama fell in love without knowing you. It was a dream come true and a trip of a

lifetime. Mama was enthralled by DaVinci's Last Supper and wept when she gazed at Michaelangelo's Pieta. The Sistine Chapel took her breath away. Your culinary delights brought endless smiles. My parents met friends from Fara Olivana, where I stayed with a host family. Mama smiled, looking on as I nestled in a hug with my friends - I was with an extended family.

I have a treasure trove of memories from my visits; however, sharing my love of your lands with my parents, especially Mama, is my favorite. It was our last trip together - she died in May 2025. How grateful I am that I love a place so much, and that I could share the experience with Mama.

Quanto sono fortunato a vedere e conoscere i tuoi meravigliosi doni.

Te amo, Italia!

Bella

LaShell Tinder

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