

See Naples and LIVE



by C.Flisi

The first time I visited Naples, I had not heard the expression, “*Vedi Napoli e poi muori.*” It wouldn’t have made sense to me anyway, not as Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe intended when he immortalized the saying in 1786.

Back then, Naples was at the height of its Renaissance glory under the rule of the Spanish Bourbons. It was one of the largest cities in Europe, as well as one of the wealthiest and most sophisticated.

Caravaggio and Bernini were among the artists extending its reputation as a center of art and culture.

It was a “don’t miss” stop on the Grand Tour, and the saying implied that once you had seen Naples, you might as well stop there, because no other place could match its splendor.

But what did I know? I was newly-arrived in Italy with minimal knowledge of this country’s history, north or south. *Spaccanapoli* was the only thing that came to mind in connection with Naples.

I expected buxom ladies singing on balconies as they hung the laundry out to dry, and the laundry itself would flutter like banners in the wind. The men would all be twirling pizza dough in narrow streets as they sang “O Sole Mio” in operatic voices.

So when I passed the Piazza del Plebiscito, flanked by three splendid palaces—the Royal Palace, Palazzo Salerno, and Palazzo della Prefettura—and a church, the Chiesa di San Francesco di Paola, I was stunned.

All the more so when I stopped for a café at nearby Gran Caffè Gambrinus, with its lavish paintings and neoclassic architecture: it rivals similar historic salons in Paris or Vienna that are more famous but no more beautiful. Plus, the café is better here . . . for those who like it strong and rich.

The overall architectural beauty, the opulence, was totally at odds with my hard-wired image of Naples as a poor city of humble origins with, yes, colorful characters and amazing pizza, but not such marbled magnificence.

So much of Naples flies in the face of stereotypes.

Its cuisine doesn't stop with pizza. I love the paccheri and sfogliatelle, mozzarella di bufala and pomodori San Marzano, burrata and impepata di cozze, and I am CRAZY about friarielle, known in other regions of Italy as cime di rapa.

All simple products, grown or produced locally with passion; their unique taste cannot be duplicated anywhere else.

The province of Naples has more Michelin-starred restaurants (30) than any other province in Italy. (By way of context, Rome is second with 20 and Milan is in fifth place with 16). One of those restaurants is headed by a woman, Marianna Vitale, despite the city's reputation for machismo.

Although Naples is known for crime and corruption (Camorra, anyone?), it is historically a city of courage and honor.

Naples rebelled against its Spanish rulers in 1647 and against the French in 1799.

It was the first Italian city to rebel against German conquest in World War II. When the Allies arrived to liberate it in 1943, they found the city already free.

Italy's longest-serving and longest-lived president in modern times is from Naples, as his name proclaims—Giorgio Napolitano.

Every time I visit Naples, a local will always remind me to watch my wallet and shun flashy jewelry, but by now, those are rules that apply anywhere in the world. I stay alert and avoid certain areas, just as I would in Rome or New York, and have never felt threatened.

What I do feel here, and *not* in those other cities, is a warmth and vibrancy palpable on the streets.

Naples sprawls beneath Mt. Vesuvius, the live volcano that infamously destroyed Pompeii in 79 AD.

It is a constant reminder that nature can take away as quickly as it gives, so the city's residents live their lives with operatic exuberance.

Vedi Napoli e poi muori is a multi-layered truth.