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A trip to southern Italy reveals a little bit of Hammonton

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This year I had the opportunity to visit my mother's cousins in Casal Velino, located approximately two hours south of Naples by train. From this little gem of a town, scattered in the hills overlooking the Mediterranean, my maternal grandparents emigrated in the early 1900s and settled in Hammonton. Here they raised five children, farmed six acres, and sold the produce on their roadside stand, the 206 Farm Market that still exists today.

One of my first stops in Italy was the municipal office of Casal Velino to research the birth and marriage records of my grandparents, Angelo Monzo and Maria Cappuccio. Finding the information was easier than I expected. No records on computers here, just a room lined with rows of oversized books, organized by year, and a very friendly gentleman by the name of Alberto who was most eager to help.

In the pages of the register dated 1888, I found my grandfather's birth details. In the 1914 register, I found my grandparents' marriage documented. In these same books, I recognized many names I knew from Hammonton: Penza, Crescenzo, DeMarco, Pinto, Lista.

Italians everywhere like to eat, so it was no surprise that several of my relatives own and operate restaurants. At i Moresani, a farmhouse holiday destination, guests can go horseback riding, take cooking or yoga classes, swim in the pool, and eat home-cooked meals. In the dining room, warm, sundrenched colors and the familiar aroma of homemade Italian cooking surrounded me. Here, I met for the first time my grandfather's nephews Antonio and Carmine, niece



Courtesy photos

Above: Alberto Patti assists with locating historical records at the municipal office in Casal Velino, Italy.

Right: Rows and rows of books line a room in Casal Velino's municipal office, holding clues to the lives of local residents from the 1800s and 1900s.

Melina, and their families. I took a bite of a fresh seafood salad and thought of a recent visit to Hammonton's Illiano's Ristorante Italiano.

For lodging I selected Laconda Le Tre Sorelle, the perfect place for a quiet and relaxing holiday. From the terraces, there is a beautiful view of the coast and the village of Casal Velino. The restaurant, run by cousins Franca and Biagio Monzo and family, is an upscale food and wine experience not to be missed. The cannoli, filled with fresh ricotta cheese and pear, served in a puddle of melted dark chocolate, was the highlight of all the desserts I enjoyed that week. Here, the familiarity came in the crisp white tablecloths, elegant yet easy-going atmosphere, fabulous wines and the Vespa parked beside the restaurant. It was déjà vu-Hammonton's Annata's Wine Bar.

On Sunday afternoon at Isola Verde, as I finished an espresso in two mouthfuls like the locals and tried my fifth flavor of gelato in as many days, I watched people pass by.

Teenagers scooped the loop in their cars...young adults jogged and listened to their iPod...older couples strolled hand-in-hand...all similar sights to be seen while dining alfresco on Bellevue Avenue at Hammonton's Marcello's Restaurant.

Around the corner, people shopped at Pinto's specialty grocery store. The fresh meats, cheeses and other Italian specialties brought me back to the days of Olivo's market on Central Avenue in Hammonton and today's popular Inferrera and Bagliani markets.

There's nothing more Italian than sharing good food and wine with friends and family. Perhaps my friend who traveled with me expressed it best, "I'm going to go into a food coma, but what a way to go." We ate it all-old world Italian, Sicilian style, and a little bit of Greek and French influence thrown in. From the paper-thin pizza that reminded me of Mr. Bruni's original pies, to the homemade pasta of Casal Velino's Zio Cristoforo, operated by cousins Stefano and Angelo Crescenzo, where guests enjoy simple,



regional Cilento cooking, I connected the past and present through food.

With Italian families, food and wine, come celebrations, and what's an Italian celebration without a procession? In Casal Velino, February 3 marks the celebration of Saint Biagio. Known as the protector of the throat, he performed many miracles on people. The most famous story is that he saved a child who was choking on a fishbone. In honor of St. Biagio, celebrations go on for seven days prior to the main event—a procession of the statues of saints from the church, paraded through town with followers, similar to Hammonton's Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Society Festival on July 16.

This year, participate in

Hammonton's Mt. Carmel Festival. Attend some part of the weeklong celebration in honor of our ancestors who left their birthplace so long ago and helped shape what Hammonton is today. These courageous people learned to grow blueberries in place of the olive groves of their homeland. They opened restaurants and markets. They worked in the tailor shops or pursued a trade. In recreating the familiar home and lifestyle they had left behind, they created a small town with a flourishing economy for their family and future generations.

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