



Francesca Montillo, a Very Energetic "Lazy" Italian!

Francesca Rizzi (September 09, 2016)



Conversation with the founder of a new startup in Boston, "Lazy Italian Culinary Adventures" tells her story...

Francesca, what's the meaning of "lazy" in the name of your company?

Honestly, I think it's kind of catchy, and I think others do as well, as everyone I speak to about my business always asks about the name! It relates well to my teaching philosophy when it comes to my cooking classes. The reality is that people in the U.S. do not have the time that home cooks in Italy have to prepare elaborate meals. By the time we get home from work, we're tired and beat up from a long commute; we need more "lazy" recipes that allow us to provide good quality, delicious, and healthy home-cooked meals for our families and that don't require hours in the kitchen or an elaborate ingredient list.



I like to keep it simple, let the ingredients speak for themselves. Some recipes out there are just too elaborate for every night dinners. I'd like to remove that hesitation, brought on by complex recipes, that people have about cooking and get them more comfortable in the kitchen. If you propose recipes to people that are easy to prepare, not too time consuming, "lazy" - if you will, people are more inclined to buy into it. Our culinary tours are anything but lazy though! Lots of cooking, eating, and learning!

What's your vision of home cooking and how does it connect to real, authentic Italian cuisine?

I am not much of a restaurant goer. I recognize that I am spoiled because both my parents and older sister have always been great cooks, and I love to be in the kitchen myself, so for me, going to a restaurant is not much of a treat at all. I prefer eating on my own table, savoring the fruits of my labor; it's just more satisfying to me. I really hope that with my cooking classes, I inspire people to do more home cooking. It's a great way to connect with family, build traditions, and spend quality time with your loved ones. Italian cooking is as much about the food as it is about the experience around the table. Eating with family strengthens family bonds, creates memories, and every night can be a celebration if you're around the table with the people you care about. As far as recreating truly authentic Italian cuisine here in the US, it can certainly be very challenging. Italy is about quality whereas the U.S. is about quantity. My recipes are "Italian inspired" and tailored to the working population in the U.S. You can prepare really great meals here, and we do every day, but I think if you really want a 100% truly authentic Italian dining experience, you'll have to go on one of my culinary tours for that! Everything tastes different in Italy, the flavors are extremely intensified. I always say that one has not tasted what real tomatoes taste like until you've picked one off the vine, in the month of August, in southern Italy!

Cooking is your passion, but what's your primary occupation?

During the day, I'm the Administrative Director of the Center for Resuscitation Science at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, one of Harvard Medical School's teaching hospitals. But on nights and weekends, I'm the proud owner of Lazy Italian Culinary Adventures, my new business venture that started at the end of last year. My goal is to someday work on my business on a full time basis.

Let's hear a bit more about you. You grew up in Southern Italy to a family of avid home cooks...

I spent the first 11 years of my life in a small town in Calabria, Italy. My dad was a produce merchant, my mom was a stay-at-home wife and mother, and I have an older sister who was actually born here in the U.S. My parents moved back to Italy after her birth and I was born thereafter. Our family owned some land near our home filled with olive trees. I have such great memories of "helping" (in any way a child can!) pick the olives from the trees or the ground and fill our buckets.

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I also have great memories of coming home from school and my mom having prepared a small feast for our lunch. Our elementary school was directly across from our house, and I swear I could smell her cooking from my classroom! My imagination for sure, brought on by my anticipation! My dad was a produce merchant, so whatever was not sold during the day would frequently become dinner! Fresh fruits and vegetables were always plentiful in my house. My dad was a great cook as well; he loved preparing dishes that involved eggplants, peppers, mushrooms, or zucchini. To this day, I love zucchini blossoms, which are such a rarity here in the U.S., but I get my fill on my trips back during the summer. I really missed the home cooked lunches when we moved here from Italy and my mom went to work! Though she always packed nice lunches that were the envy of my classmates. Imagine a 5th grader eating braciole for lunch: yes, that was me!

Food is a big component to Italian life. Sundays, in particular, are small celebrations in themselves. I remember walking to church on Sunday mornings, and you'd know what everyone was having for lunch by the smells coming out of their windows! You could tell who was frying meatballs, who was



having lasagna, or who was frying cutlets! I swear I can still smell the fresh brewed espresso coming from just about every window. To this day, Sunday is my favorite day of the week; I think it's because of all these great memories created on Sundays while in Italy.

**You teach locally at several adult education centers.
Tell us about your teaching experience...**

I absolutely love teaching at the adult centers. I let the students really do all of the cooking, and I just provide instruction. It's the best way to learn how to cook. A wide range of folks sign up for these classes, so we have anyone from college students cooking on their own for the first time, to experienced home cooks looking for new ideas as well as a fun evening to socialize. I've had students who have formed friendships, and there's usually an exchange of email addresses by evening's end. I had a class once in which we cooked "Lazy Italian" pasta dishes, and we prepared a very simple dish of spaghetti al pomodoro. One of my students had never made a simple tomato sauce; she was so impressed with herself that she ended up drinking the sauce out of a paper cup, just like a coffee! She was pretty proud of herself! Moments like those are what I look forward to when teaching. I saw her months later at one of my baking classes and she said she'd made the pasta recipes numerous times since taking the class. I love that!

You also offer local private Italian cooking classes either in your clients' homes or your own in the Boston area.? How is it going?

The private classes are going nicely; they frequently turn into social events almost more so than a cooking class. It's a bit of a different dynamic than public classes since the folks already know each other. Generally, the host will want to hold an evening get-together with her friends and do something different than a night out in the town. It's amusing to me to go into people's homes and get an idea of what they cook and how they eat. I like inspiring them and giving them new ideas. A lot of people say things like "I didn't know you could do that"; people create these rules for themselves when it comes to cooking, which I think is a shame because it stops people from heading to the kitchen. I don't like teaching with rules. If you like the flavor, and it tastes good to you, then go for it.

(6) Let's discuss your new "adventure." How did you decide to offer weeklong culinary tours to Italy?

The tours came about very organically, really. I took what I loved most, which is travel and Italian cuisine, and I merged the two. I have wanted to own my own business that involved Italy for probably, no exaggeration, the past 20 years. I've always loved my native land, and the highlight of any year for me is usually my trip back. I'm going to be 40 next year, which I think is a great time for any woman (or man!) to reinvent themselves and start something new, and this was a natural progression. Realizing that even at 40 I likely have more work years ahead of me than behind me was really a realization that it wasn't too late to work towards my goal of starting something new. I am really excited for 2017; I have great expectations, and I am seeing a lot of interest already.

What will really be unique in your offer?

There are obviously other people offering tours to Italy these days, as Italy really is a happening place! From the research on my competition, I have found that many people now travel to Italy for a weeklong vacation and are just so enamored with Italy's beauty that they decide to bring people there and voilà, their business is born. That's great that Italy leaves such a great impression on people and certainly respectable, but being a native, having family there, speaking the language fluently, and knowing how Italy and Italians work gives me and my clients and an advantage. There are also a lot of 'cut and paste' tours - tours offered year round by large organizations that are generic, in large groups, and leave much to be desired when it comes to a personal touch. We will also plan on staying in just one location during the week, Four-star accommodations, pack and unpack just once. Some other tours will have travelers bounce from hotel to hotel and during the course of a week, you will be spending a lot of time packing and unpacking. When I designed my tours, I decided to stay in one location and offer day trips. I think it's a much more relaxed way of traveling, and it allows one to get to know the area well. I also plan on keeping the number of



participants small so that we will have the possibility of traveling like an extended family, more than a traditional large tour. Our cooking classes will be private with wonderful meals following, just like a dinner in any Italian family. I'm really excited to be bringing people to my native land, I want them to feel welcomed and at home, even if only for a week.

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