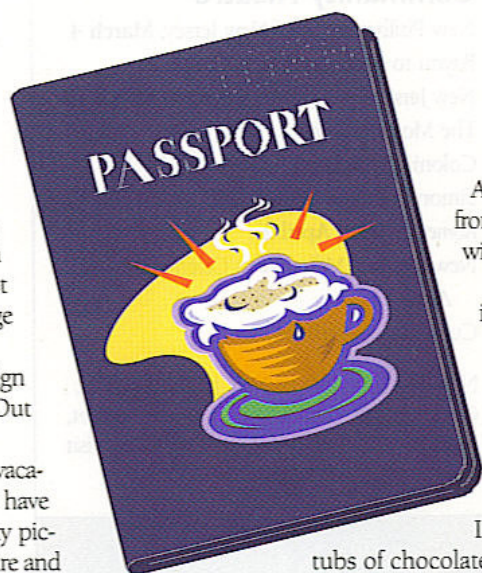


# The Unexpected Vacation



I was on my way to work one morning when I found myself falling asleep at the wheel.

Time for a cup of coffee, I mused, and with this notion in mind, I swung my car into the first deli driveway that crossed my path, where a large red-and-white billboard greeted me.

"Bartolomeo's Italian Delicatessen," the sign announced. "Hot and cold sandwiches. Take Out and Delivery. Imported Foods."

If I had known I was about to go on a mini-vacation, I might have better prepared myself. I might have packed an overnight bag, brought along an empty picnic basket, thrown on a straw hat, or stuck some lire and my passport in my pocketbook. Instead, as I walked into the deli, I was struck with awe and delight. I had entered an Old World store, with rich characters and even richer foods.

How many times had I driven by this place? How could I not have known such a treasure lay in my path? I began wandering through the aisles.

On my right was a row of brown cardboard cartons, each filled with heaps of fresh produce. Red, round, ripe tomatoes tantalized my senses, while nearby tall freezers filled with square boxes of stuffed ravioli (olive and pimento, salmon and ricotta, and portabella mushroom) beckoned.

Around the corner, cans and bottles of lemon- and orange-flavored Italian soda lined refrigerator shelves. Wooden shelves were stacked with sealed plastic bags of pasta in a variety of shapes. There were layered boxes of chocolate, hazelnut, vanilla and almond-flavored biscotti. Italian biscuits, pasta sauces and olive oils in long, round and hourglass-shaped bottles marked "virgin, refined, imported." It was a dizzying spread that made me want to plan a picnic in a field of sunflowers that very afternoon.

I took a look around at a host of characters, which included employees and some of the other customers. First, there was the "wife," a young Italian-American woman who had been greeted at the door by shouts of excitement from two young men. One of the men was unloading loaves of Italian bread and focaccia into a display case. The other sliced fresh Parmesan and mozzarella cheese for his customer—an elderly woman in a blue floral dress, her gray hair tied in a bun and her black shoes shining against the tiled floors. I had to blink to remind myself I wasn't in Italy.

"Hey, howyadoin'?" the bread man shouted. "Hey, wife, you're just in time," the deli man hollered. "WorldWarTwooze breakin' out back here."

The only music I heard in the background was Cher's song on the radio, "Do You Believe?" Okay, so maybe I was still in New Jersey.

I left the cold-drink section and ordered a cup of coffee. On the counter, I spied a thin slice of cake in a sandwich bag. "What's this?" I asked.

"Apple-cinnamon. It's real good. Just baked," the deli man told me.

At that moment, a short, white-haired man emerged from the kitchen in the back, his green apron speckled with patches of flour. How could I resist?

Coffee and cake in hand, I stepped away from my impromptu pit stop and into the cloudy, humid morning. As I drove away, I thought of the small neighborhood grocery stores I had frequented in Florence and Venice only three summers ago. They were operated by fathers and sons and wives and visited by old ladies in knee-length dresses and little boys with lollipops and sticky fingers.

I thought of the boxes overflowing with peaches and tubs of chocolate and hazelnut gelati. I thought of old men playing cards on stone picnic tables in secluded piazzas, of outdoor amphitheatres that showed movies once a week, and of boarded-up restaurants with signs that read: "Closed August."

I remembered churches with bell towers and courtyards where men gathered for a lunchtime football game, of pigeons gorging on seeds and stale bread outside impressive structures, and trains pulling into empty stations. I recalled a Sunday afternoon nap in a room in Venice where the view was not that of a handsome gondolier, but of clotheslines. There, the dominant sounds were not those of opera librettos, but of forks and knives clinking against china plates.

I blinked and found myself in my car as it came to a full stop. I looked out of the window and recognized the familiar parking lot at work. Had I traveled so far away and then back in just three minutes?

It occurred to me, just then, that the act of traveling is more a wandering outside your prescribed comfort zones than about packing a bag and going to a distant location. A journey can begin with a simple detour, a random U-turn or a sudden stop. You pull off a highway and find wild irises growing in a ditch.

Suddenly, you're transported to your elementary school playground. You park your car halfway to the bank and decide to walk the rest of the way.

Or maybe you come upon an antique shop hidden behind a library. For the next five minutes, you rifle through photograph albums and wander through the corridors of your grandfather's old house.

Or, if you're like me, you stop at a neighborhood grocery store for a quick caffeine fix and suddenly find yourself traipsing across Europe.

Sometimes the best trips we take are the ones we take unexpectedly, the ones where we don't have to physically travel very far. They are the ones that allow us to return to locales we thought we'd forgotten, where we can once again savor the tastes, sights, smells and sounds. To take it all in once again.

*Editor's note: on most days Bartolomeo's Italian Delicatessen is found at 425 Grand Avenue in Palisades Park, (201) 346-0008. ●*