

Untold Italy Episode 65 - Uncovering Umbria's Towns and Villages

[00:00:00.060] - Katy

This is the Untold Italy travel podcast, and you're listening to episode number 65.

[00:00:12.050] - Josie

Ciao and Benvenuti to Untold Italy, I'm Josie.

[00:00:15.140] - Katy

And I'm Katy, and we're here to help you plan your trip to Italy.

[00:00:18.980] - Josie

Between us, we have many years of travel experience and we want to help you uncover your own as yet untold stories and adventures in Italy.

[00:00:27.030] - Katy

Each episode, you'll hear practical advice, tips and ideas to help you plan your own trips to the magical land of history, stunning landscapes and a whole lot of pasta.

[00:00:35.870] - Josie

We'll have interviews from experts and focus on local destinations and frequently asked questions about travel in Italy.

[00:00:42.980] - Katy

Thanks for listening and make sure to subscribe to our show.

[00:00:46.070] - Josie

Now let's get started on your regular dose of Bella Italia.

[00:00:59.940] - Katy

Benvenuti Ciao a tutti! Hope you're all well and still dreaming of strolling down cobbled streets gelato in hand on this episode we are visiting some of the beautiful towns of Umbria, and my hope is that you can close your eyes and imagine that you're there, taking in the views and enjoying the scent of spring blooms in the air. This is Katy, your host, and I'm thrilled to be talking about the beautiful towns and villages of Umbria today.

[00:01:25.448] - Katy

For those of you who aren't familiar with this area, Umbria is a central region of Italy that flies a little bit under the radar. Wedged between Rome and Tuscany, it's a place where you

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find rolling hills, lakes and picturesque hilltop towns just like the ones you've been dreaming of. It's home to the cities of Assisi, Orvieto and Perugia and countless pretty stone villages that have existed for centuries. We talked about traveling the wine Roads of Umbra in Episode 19 of Untold Italy, but I wanted to know more. So I invited our guest, American author and traveler Michelle Damiani, who lives in one of those pretty villages, Spello, onto the show. Michelle has a wonderful story about how she came to live in Spello for a year with her family and their experiences of village life. She wrote about it all in her book, *Il Bel Centro*, named in the top 10 fascinating books about Living in a Foreign Country by Huffington Post. Since that book was published, she's gone on to create a series of novels set in Umbria in a fictional town called Santa Lucia. Michelle is a natural storyteller, so I'll let her tell you her story and all about this very special part of Italy that captured her heart in her own words.

[00:02:40.770] - Katy

Benvenuti Michelle! Ciao and welcome to the Untold Italy podcast.

[00:02:46.440] - Michelle

Grazie - it's nice to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

[00:02:48.360] - Katy

Great to have you here, Michelle. Now, I gave our listeners a little bit of a brief introduction and insight into your background. But I'd love them to hear in your own words about your story and how you came to be in Umbria.

[00:03:01.770] - Michelle

Sure. Happy to. So a long time ago, my husband and I wanted to live abroad at some point. And then on an anniversary, we said, why not just go do this thing? We just had a baby. We thought in five years, let's go do it. So we did. We figured out where in Italy we'd want to be. We landed on Umbria because we figured it's close to some major cities that we like, which turned out to be vastly unimportant. But it didn't matter because it landed us somewhere which we ended up falling in love with. So we moved in 2012 with three kids. We had a 13 year old, a 10 year old and a 5 year old and two cats. We moved to a little town called Spello. It's a village a little bit south of Assisi. Our kids went to public school and we just had a blast. We came back and I had had a blog during the year and I turned that blog into a book. It took me about two years of hardcore editing because I write a lot. And so, to gather all that down to some semblance of the story was tricky. So I did that, wrote the book, published that in 2015. And then during that time I got a video message from my Italian teacher who I just fell in love with when we lived here. He was like our joint grandfather. We just love him to pieces. And by way of a friend of mine, he had sent a video message and in Italian he said, I notice you're not writing anymore. And I understand that because you're not here. But if I can offer you a piece of advice, invent something. And so I did. So I came up with this four novel series that takes place in the town that all my readers are like, "this sounds suspiciously like Spello". No it's not, it's a town I made up, that's on the Le Marche/Umbrian border.

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[00:04:48.060] - Katy

And it is a real town. Is it Santa Lucia?

[00:04:50.580] - Michelle

No, no - I completely made it up, but it's just based very hardcore on spell out. So the same one-eyed dog appears in my memoir that appears in the novel series.

[00:05:04.080]

What an Adventure? For our listeners the book is called Il Bel Centro and it's a wonderful novel and it's just really great to hear the different perspectives. So Michelle writes about leaving abroad both from a practical and an emotional standpoint. I think it's a really, really great book to sort of get both perspectives, because I think sometimes - if you're thinking about doing that, you sometimes focus on the practical things, but sometimes it's those emotional connections that stir us the most.

[00:05:31.770] - Michelle

Exactly

[00:05:33.300] - Katy

Like your friend. He sounds wonderful - your Italian teacher.

[00:05:37.800] - Michelle

Yeah, he's lovely. It's been hard to see him during the pandemic. We're back now. I think I neglected to mention that. So we're back for this year. But he's eighty something years old and so the pandemic is a problem. So we've hardly seen him, which has been sad.

[00:05:54.460] - Katy

You mentioned you've come back. So I know you were deciding to be round the world trip. That was obviously - very obvious that that wasn't going to happen. But you decided, no, I needed an adventure I need to keep going. So what did you decide to do?

[00:06:08.430] - Michelle

Yeah, well, you know, I had taken a year off of work. My daughter had already signed up for a gap year between high school and college. We had unenrolled my son from school and we had this vision of doing something. And so when the pandemic came down, gosh, we toyed with all sorts of different ideas. We toyed with just roaming around the United States, like playing outside, like, is that a thing? Could we do that, like go from Idaho to Montana and just like splash in creeks? Because that's all that we were doing in Charlottesville, Virginia. Anyway, we thought about turning our little yard into a farm. We just needed to shake it up, right? And then somewhere along the way, it occurred to me that my husband and my kids have citizenship. They got it when we lived here before through my husband's great grandfather, who emigrated from Abruzzo to the United States and didn't relinquish his citizenship before he had my husband's grandfather. So he got his citizenship that way. And I think somewhere along the way, I realized that citizens were still allowed to come back and then it changed to

citizens and their families were allowed to come back. And so that's the avenue that we pursued. And so we returned to Spello. And it's actually been really interesting. There are moments where I'm sad, but they're really fleeting, like, oh, we were supposed to be in Spain and then it's gone because the church bells rang and I'm so present here and it's magic here. It's so hard to feel resentful or regretful at life that has clocked me a five minute walk from my favorite bakery in the whole wide world. So it's all good.

[00:07:39.210] - Katy

Beautiful. I think this pandemic has really shown us what's kind of important, and I can't think of a better place to be to wait it out really than a beautiful little village in Umbria. So let's talk about Umbria. And a lot of people know its neighbor Tuscany, pretty well. And I guess you mentioned that you chose to move there because of the nearby cities. But was there anything specific about Umbria that really drew you in?

[00:08:06.940] - Michelle

Yeah. So part of it is I knew it was going to write a book. I love books about people who changed their lives for a year, and it feels like everybody's done that in Tuscany. So I felt like Tuscany was just not going to happen. Plus, it's more expensive. Some people call it Tuscany-shire because there's just so many expats living in Tuscany already. And I know that that's not true for the whole of the region. But it had that kind of vibe. And we wanted something that was going to feel a little bit more of an opportunity to connect with local people and old ways. And we had been to Umbria that was the other thing. It felt like when we were here before, it just felt like a good enough spot. And so that's what we decided to do. My husband and I came up with a list of a couple of places we had looked up rentals. So we knew houses that were walking distance from school, which is important to us. And we went through all of them. And then when we landed in Spello we were like, this is so it! A lot of the towns were really quiet. They felt like I had to, like, hush my voice as I walk to the street because I didn't want to create a stir, you know? And then when we landed in Spello, it was hubbub. There were kids getting on the school bus. There were old men playing cards. There were families eating gelato. And I thought, this is a town I want to live in.

[00:09:29.120] - Katy

Oh, that does sound like fun. Is it a nice piazza with some nice bars around there as well? That's what I'm always dreaming of.

[00:09:38.950] - Michelle

The piazza here is fine. I would say it is not the selling feature. The selling feature, though, is that a lot of, Italian towns in general, I don't think this is just in Umbria, there's a ring road for traffic. And a lot of the services in those towns, bars, post office, schools, pharmacies have fled to where the ring road is for convenience purposes. And what that's done is it's created this death in the center of these towns. And that's the place that Spello has succeeded. There is no ring road. And when I spoke to the vice mayor during that year that we lived here, he he said that's intentional. Like people keep saying, let's just move the school to the bottom of the hill so the busses can get any easier and people can drop off their

kids easier. And they say absolutely not. That's the surest way to kill a village. And it's totally true. So I wouldn't say one side of the piazza has this very Mussolini era architecture. It's the post office and the middle school. It's not pretty, but the three other sides are nice. There used to be lovely trees. They took them out and nobody really knows why. Some people say they died. Some people say, I have no idea. All I can say it's fine.

[00:10:49.600] - Katy

So what is it? I've seen lots of photos of Spello and if you haven't seen lots of photos of Spello, if you're listening, go on Instagram and just pop it in because you'll see it's got these beautiful stone buildings and lots of pots of geraniums. That's what I think when I think of Spello.

[00:11:10.270] - Michelle

Yes, most people do. Most people do. The flowers are the big attractive feature of Spello. And if you look on Instagram, it's all the flowery alleys. And one thing I realized during the year that we were here before is I thought they were doing that kind of for those Instagram photos, you know 'Let's gram this alley'. But then I realized Spelloni flower to please themselves, man. I mean, there's these tucked away alleys just bursting with flowers. And I think part of it has to do with the main festival likes Spello's claim to the world tourist map is the Infiorate, which is this festival that happens every year, not in the pandemic. So definitely did not happen last year. And everybody's saying it's not going to happen this year, but it is the celebration of Corpus Christi, I believe. So it's the celebration of the Eucharist. So what happens is on that day, a priest walks through town holding a kind of staff that holds a piece of the host and he walks through town carrying it and people flank him on either side with big drapes and he has to walk on flowers the whole way around town. So his feet, therefore, the host do not contact the Earth. It's very important. So this began a long time ago with just two things, Fennel and ginestra, which I think is Spanish. For him, it's a yellow flower which smells a little bit like jasmine. It's quite pretty. So they would make these designs - they were pretty simple, but now there are very elaborate. I mean, the one that we worked on with our Infiorate team 8 years ago was of a Rafael painting, and it's - it is insane, they start months before with heading up to the hills and gathering flowers and de-petaling them and coming up with designs. And they all do it differently. Some of them have a design that's written on a banner that's glued down to the street and they put the flowers on top. Some of them have iron forms that they drop the petals in to make the proper shapes. And then they each team gets a maestro, a very talented artisan artist person who can work with the very fine seeds. And I don't know what they are, just like just small pieces of flower to make the shading so that you have faces that look like faces. These look like legit paintings, but they're all made from flowers. And I think that this is a huge part of Spello. So the big thrust of it happens the night before People to work all night long. The priest walks through in the morning and then over the course of the day, the flowers just drift away. And it's amazing. Yeah, and the whole town smell that night is very powerful. And the whole town smells like fennel and jasmine and coffee because people are handing you coffee all night long. All night people were like handing me plates of pasta with asparagus in it that they show me a picture they just gathered in the hills like this big armfuls of asparagus. Or handing out cake and always with some coffee. So there's just a wall of people walking through. And it's

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really interesting because they'll stop and they'll say, well, what happens if it rains? And I heard the people around me my Infiorate team who's obviously been doing this for generations, said, well, then God saw it. It's just this very embracing, happy, joyous day. And I think that those flowers just soaked into Spellani DNA and they just put the flowers everywhere all the time. This is a very long answer to your question.

[00:14:39.310] - Katy

Oh and I appreciate it. My goodness, my daughter, she loves flowers and growing flowers. I think we'll definitely have to put that on her wish list of things to do. I think if I tell her about it, she'll probably demand to be going straight away. It sounds beautiful.

[00:14:54.340] - Michelle

It is really beautiful. It is really beautiful.

[00:14:56.530] - Katy

On so many levels, not just of flowers, but obviously the community aspect of it as well. And does it get a little bit competitive, though?

[00:15:03.700] - Michelle

Probably. But we missed it, that just that part didn't hit me at all. I didn't even know that it was a competition. So I clearly was not picking up on it. And I think it's more of an elbow you in the ribs kind of competition, like we're going to beat you this year, not like the Palio in Siena or something like that. It's good natured. It's exciting, though. It really is.

[00:15:26.350] - Katy

So what time of year is it? Spring, obviously, because the asparagus.

[00:15:30.310] - Michelle

Yeah, it was. Let's see, it coordinates to Easter. I can't remember exactly how, but it's google-able for sure. But just like Easter varies every year, so does this.

[00:15:40.660] - Katy

So just logically this. So the fields around Spello must be filled with flowers, right?

[00:15:46.810] - Michelle

Not really. But over the mountains there are fields of them. So kids will miss school to go up to the hills and collect flowers. There's a place really close to Le Marche, close to Norcia that is known for poppies in the early spring. And then the lentils and there's another flower, in late summer. It had great swaths of purple and orange. It's really stunning. I think they get some of their flowers from around there. Some of them are store bought for sure, like you see them the night before, like ripping the plastic off of bouquets because they're just short. Some of them pride themselves on those flowers.

[00:16:26.870] - Katy

Oh, it just absolutely sounds magical. Wonderful. And that's the main event for Spello for the year is it?

[00:16:33.480] - Michelle

It is. It's the huge one. I think they make like thirty percent - the bars make like thirty percent of their money or something like that. It's an insane amount just on that two days because they're open until like 4:00 in the morning and then they open again at 6:00 in the morning and then you walk in the bar, have just like towers of pastries.

[00:16:53.230] - Katy

Oh goodness.

[00:16:54.490] - Michelle

I loved it so much that I hired somebody to do drawings to create an adult coloring book of the Infiorate, which never quite finished. I think I have like twelve of them, not enough to put into a book, but I've been toying with this idea of like putting them on my website as like a downloadable thing. So that's still in process because of the fact that it is - there's so much artistry to it and so much emotion to it and just so much beauty.

[00:17:22.210] - Katy

Yeah, I think that's one really special thing that always comes through when - it doesn't matter which region usually you're talking about, it's that care and attention that people put into everything that they're doing, whether it's cooking, whether it's building a picture out of flowers or making some craft, it's just amazing. I think somehow in our societies, maybe we've lost touch of some of that. We want everything instantaneously. But like all good things come to those who wait and practice makes perfect. I don't know how many clichés I can roll out, but all of those things.

[00:17:57.220] - Michelle

There's a reason that they're tropes because they're true. Good things do take time for sure. The other big festival that happens in Spello is the L'oro di Spello - it's a celebration of the pressing of the olives. Spello like much of Umbria, is surrounded by olive groves. There's an adage that says on one side of the valley is where you get the wine, in Montefalco and on our side of the valley is where you get the olives. So at the time of the pressing, which is sometime usually in late November, early December, again, that also changes every year. I think just based on the harvest - they have this festival. My Italian teacher first told me about it. He said that there is going to be olive trees moving through town with fish and oranges on them. And I thought my Italian is bad. Like, clearly, I have no idea. I thought I was getting better. And I think I'm actually deteriorating. But that is exactly what it was. That people put these olive trees on tractors and then move them through town. And they are literally spangled with things that look like bagels, which I still have not figured out, dried fish, oranges, sausages. And there's people sitting on the tractor with it, like playing the accordion or a bunch of children singing or people handing out the Vin brulé, which is like a warm spiced wine. It's very, very, very old. Like the old men are singing these folk songs and you

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can tell their body because they're laughing, but they're in dialect. There's no way in the world I'm understanding it, no matter how good my Italian gets. But it is very, very clearly connected to the past. And that incorporation of the past in the present is so important in Italy. I think that is what keeps it slower.

[00:19:33.700] - Katy

Absolutely. And the younger generations involved in the festival as well?

[00:19:39.460] - Michelle

Uhu definitely. For like for the Infiorate, the middle school has its own, they do their own carpet of flowers. So when we were doing it, my son at the time when we lived here before was kind of jostling between the one that we were working on with our Infiorate team and then running back and forth to the middle school one. So they're involved that way for sure. And then with L'oro di Spello, I know they're part of it because they're singing in the back and dancing and they're involved. They don't have a piece to control, but like they do in Infiorate, as far as I can tell.

[00:20:13.780] - Katy

And how many people are in Spello? How big the town?

[00:20:16.630] - Michelle

It's about eight thousand, but that is the whole community, which is larger than than the town itself. And that includes a lot of the borgo, which is the area at the bottom. It's sort of if you imagine a person wearing an apron over the countryside, it's like the apron part is the borgo. So in the Centro Storico, the historic center of Spello, it's just it's two thousand. And that's broken up into three neighborhoods, the northern part, the center part, and then the the bottom part, which is towards the borgo. And it's interesting, if you walk through Spello, you can see chains hanging on the side of the wall that used to be strung across the street at night and guarded so that nobody came and made mischief with the ladies of that certain neighborhood. Isn't that funny?

[00:21:04.390] - Katy

It sounds a bit Shakespearean.

[00:21:07.090] - Michelle

Yeah, there's a lot of Juliet balconies too.

[00:21:11.980] - Katy

Oh, my goodness. That's fascinating. Do they still have that tradition today or is it OK?

[00:21:17.500] - Michelle

It's all good. But the neighborhood matters. The neighborhood really matters. All through Italy, you'll see obituary boards where they put a poster commemorating somebody who's passed away and the neighborhood will do their own. So when somebody passes away, you'll

see a poster that maybe the family is putting up for that person. But there is also one that the neighborhood puts up for that person. So the neighborhood that you are raised in and live in, it matters as it does all over Italy. All of these towns have these neighborhoods. Often they have a competition between them.

[00:21:52.990] - Katy

Yeah, absolutely. Look, it's just sounds like a gorgeous place. And so is it built on a hill. And has it got like a really great view from the top there.

[00:22:01.600] - Michelle

Oh, yes, definitely. Yeah. I'm living at the almost the very top right now and the view outside my window, I'm not going to show you because it would make you mad at me. It is so beautiful, particularly now. I mean, Umbria is known as the green heart of Italy. And you can see why right now, particularly the grasses are there's a verdant dragon green and then the olive trees are this kind of silvery green. So it's just this tapestry of different kinds of green. It's quite extraordinary.

[00:22:28.660] - Katy

How beautiful. I don't know how you ever left!

[00:22:31.090] - Michelle

I know.

[00:22:33.310] - Katy

But I can see how you would - why you went back too. There is something so soothing about being in nature right now for sure.

[00:22:40.630] - Michelle

Yeah. Yeah. We can't leave our town because of the, well, Italy is in a quasi lockdown. And so we've been really enjoying the fact that Spello sits on a hill that backs up against Mount Subasio, which is the same mountain that Assisi is on. So there's access to all kinds of hiking trails. And we found, this last weekend, we were hiking along and we found Ponte Marchetto - a bridge that was built in the Middle Ages. And there's bridges all along this path that were built in the last sometimes couple of hundred years. But they seem quite old with waterfalls and gorges and it was beautiful. And then I found out that that water was used a couple of thousand years ago, they would funnel it into the amphitheater in Assisi because the ancient Romans had that love of having boat races. You've probably heard this about the Colosseum, that they would fill it with water and have boat races. That's what they would do in the amphitheater in Assisi. They would fill it with water from these gorgeous, fascinating.

[00:23:39.010] - Katy

Those Romans! Goodness me, we think we're so clever now. They had it all worked out. They didn't even need the Internet.

[00:23:46.720] - Michelle
Right. I don't know how they did it.

[00:23:48.820] - Katy
I don't either. Oh, my goodness. And so I know you're a bit of a foodie as well. And I was reading - it's about this time of year when they start bringing up the Colomba. And I know that you started to have a little bit of an obsession with that particular type of cake when you're in Italy.

[00:24:06.580] - Michelle
It is soo good. I think it was invented just to help ease people's transition from Christmas, because Christmas is when we get the Panettone, the Pandora and Colombo is a lot like Panettone. So, I mean, I was pretty sad grieving, let's just say eight years ago and Christmas season ended. And then there's this little spike during Carnevale when you get all these different kinds of cookies and frappe, which are these sugary fried pieces of dough, and then I was sad. Because then it ended. And then all of a sudden there's these dove shaped cakes that are pretty similar to Panettone, but with this crackly sugary crust that is quite divine.

[00:24:50.010] - Katy
Mmmmm goodness me, and I love the fact that it's so seasonal as well, like it comes and you have to you have to have a bit of anticipation. You have to wait. You have to wait for this cake to come and it's only going to be there for a short amount of time. Look, we've ruined it here, like we have some hot cross buns, but they just have them year round now. And you don't have the sense of 'ph it's hot cross bun time'. But they don't do that in Italy.

[00:25:13.620] - Michelle
No, they don't. They don't. And it beginswe, well we always move here in the summer. So for us, it really begins or we remember that and we realize that during the grape harvest season when they have Pan al Mosto which is bread made with grape must, it's not something I've ever had before. It tastes a little bit like grape juice, but not. It's just a little bit different from it. It usually has raisins and maybe like a seed in there, like aniseed. And it is like toasted. It is so, so wonderful.

[00:25:48.710] - Katy
Oh, my goodness. And do they have - well I could talk about sweets for ages - but do they have particular pasta dishes from there as well?

[00:25:57.210] - Michelle
From here, yes, there's a few. So let's see what are my favorites. One of them is Gnocchi al Sagrantino - I mentioned the wine on the other side of the valley, that side on the ancient grape that was discovered by Pliny the Elder back in Roman times and kind of lost and then rediscovered in modern history. And they brought the vine back. And it's tanic and big and juicy and it's really, really very lovely. So they make gnocchi that has that that's cooked down with a little bit of guanciale or pancetta, a little bit of pork in there, of course, everything in

Umbria is pork and some cream and you toss it with the gnocchi. And it is it's kind of sweet and savory and earthy and bright and quite delicious. So that that's one that you'll only find here. Another one you'll find out other parts of Italy, but they really, really value it. Here is the tagliatelle with a ragu that's made from Cinghiale, which is wild boar, which is very popular around here, too. Stews made of wild boar are very popular. So sometimes the sauce is white and that's more unusual in other parts of Italy and sometimes it's red, which is more familiar. But that's also quite popular with the tagliatelle, which is the egg pasta that's cut on the flat about maybe a couple of centimeters wide.

[00:27:18.420] - Katy

Mmmm. That sounds delicious. And a bet here's some really good wine to go with that - I know you mentioned the Sagrantino. Beautiful. And is that the red variety. Is that right?

[00:27:31.410] - Michelle

Yeah.

[00:27:31.410] - Katy

Do they have any white ones in Umbria.

[00:27:34.020] - Michelle

There are outside of Orvieto I think? That's where the Grechetto comes from. I just had that last night, actually, I could be wrong about that. I mostly drink red. So that's the one I'm more familiar with.

[00:27:45.180] - Katy

I'm a big red drinker as well. I like a Montepulciano D'Abruzzo actually. That's my favorite at the moment. Spello sounds a bit like a dream, but if you ever venture away from the village, is there any other towns and villages you like to go to?

[00:28:01.050] - Michelle

Well, there's this custom in Umbria and maybe it's all over Italy, but how would I know if this is the only place I've lived? That Sunday is a day where people leave, people go have a family meal, a family adventure. And so people will say 'buona Domenica' Happy Sunday, they will say it on Friday. As you're saying goodbye. They don't say happy Saturday. They say Happy Sunday, because Sunday is the day that's really bookended for this sort of experience. And so Sundays are the days when a lot of people come to Spello or anywhere because that's what they're doing. And so we adopted that and we started going places on Sundays before the lockdown happened and now we can't. So I love doing that. And I'm writing this book now about Umbria. And I have this whole section, 'buona Domenica' about places that we've been on Sundays. You know the meal and the town and just the experience of having this day that's reserved for just settling in a little bit, reconnecting. It's quite lovely. So one of the places that I really like I actually just mentioned was Orvieto, which is across the valley from us almost to Tuscany. And in fact, when people on travel forums are asking for what's a good day trip, that gets me out from like Florence or Rome, people often mentioned Orvieto because

it's different. It's not a city. It is a well, it is, but it's very small. It's not like Rome or Florence. It's more like a big town. And it's sitting high on these two bluffs. So you see it. Their approach to it is very dramatic. Just standing out there like holding center now, watching. It's it's really very extraordinary. And when you're there, there's this very intimate vibe, I think, because there isn't anything around it. I mean, there is, of course, at the bottom of the bluff, they have their own version of a borgo. But when you're in Orvieto itself, it's very self-contained. The food is extraordinary, there's this place that we love, Trattoria del Moro Aronne - and it is one of those places where you order a half bottle of wine and they just pump the whole bottle and you're just expected to drink, half of it. And everything we've had from there is amazing. We first had goose, there was a kind of a taste revelation for me. As it turns out, there's a town across the valley from us where we have some good friends who own a restaurant and that town is known for goose. So now we've had a lot of goose and it an under sung meat, as far as I'm concerned. But Orvieto is the first place we had it and everything we've had at this place is just sublime. There's great gelato and what they have, it's a big claim to fame is two things. One is the cathedral, which doesn't have this big approach to it, which a lot do. So you kind of stumble into this piazza and you're hit with this enormous facade, with these mosaic pieces that were made in a nearby town called Piegaro, which is a sweet, sweet little jewel box of a town that back in the olden days when Venice kicked out the people who - the glassmakers, they said you can't do it on the island anymore. We're getting we're getting too many fires. You have to go to Morano. A lot of them are like, oh, no, I won't do that. So they left and they ended up settling in Piegaro where they made glass. So it's a big glassblowing community and they made the tiles for this cathedral in Orvieto. So everything in Umbria just kind of connects in that way, which gives it that sort of intimacy that just feels really resonant. So there's the cathedral - that's lovely. And the other interesting thing about Orvieto that's really interesting is their Etruscan in history, which people often think of Etruscans from Tuscany, but there is a lot of Etruscan cities into Umbria. And for those who don't know, the Etruscans are like the precursor to sort of the ancient Romans. But they were way more advanced in a lot of ways, like women could, in ancient Etruria do things that they couldn't in ancient Rome. They could ride horses, they could read, they could have parties, they could leave. They could kind of be their own boss, in ancient Etruria. So these ancient Etruscan cultures are really interesting. And in Orvieto they have an underground tour. They have an ancient well, they have an Acropolis. It's a fascinating city.

[00:32:11.680] - Katy

Yeah, it's actually one of my favorites. That's the only real place I've been to in Umbria and I just fell in love with it, actually, because, like I said, it's got that intimate feeling and you can walk around the walls and get the views of the countryside and just little restaurants, trattorias.

[00:32:28.810] - Michelle

And and they're really good. There's a lot of really good restaurants, a lot of really good eating there. And it is one of the more known places in Umbria because of that. But still it is under touristed. So it is still a nice place to to get away. Everyone I've ever sent there has

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been like, oh my God, I love this place. Some people have moved there. I mean, it's really it's really very, very lovely.

[00:32:53.480] - Katy

We went there in November 2019. It was so nice because it was a crisp autumn or fall day. And then those all the castagne sellers out there and the beautiful smell of these roasted chestnuts coming wafting down the street. And the leaves were obviously changing at that time, too. So it was very pretty. It was very nice.

[00:33:15.670] - Michelle

Autumn in Umbria is one of my favorites. The air smells like wood smoke. There's often the smell of the end of a pork chop, kind of caramelizing. Chestnuts. Definitely there's a lot of that. It's almost like you can smell the grapes being crushed. It's heavenly.

[00:33:31.510] - Katy

Yeah, it really is. Oh orvieto. Yep. Take me back. I wanna go back there and tell me more. I need to know more about these towns. I love this glassblowing town as well.

[00:33:45.820] - Michelle

Piegara yeah. And they have they have a chestnut festival also. That is really fun. It's tiny but it's very compact with its, its cuteness and it also has beautiful views.

[00:33:57.670] - Katy

Because it's around the area, you've got lakes as well haven't you? As well as the mountains.

[00:34:03.160] - Michelle

That's exactly what I was gonna say - so Piegara is right outside of Lago Trasimeno which people who are coming to Umbria don't think about. But it is, it's a treasure in this region. So it's a large lake, not a kind of like you can swim in, but it's beautiful. And so there are these old villages that are around it. And sometimes in there's a couple of islands where there are old, pre, medieval, even communities, they're very historic. They're very beautiful. There's a lot of history. Hannibal came through with elephants at some point. All kinds of wars fought on that lake. And I mean, anybody who is interested in history, that's a good place for it. But really, just the sense of these long views, you know, you're in one of these villages and you look across and it's kind of misty and open and kind of opens up perspective. It feels really, really nice. And you can get some fish, which I enjoy.

[00:34:55.840] - Katy

Mm. Lake fish. Delicious. Yeah. It's really interesting. I often say this on the podcast, but being Australian we don't really have these big lakes - it's more of a puddle. We do have some lakes but it's nothing like what you have in Europe or in America and like if you're looking as well, if you're interested in going to a lake in a mountain district, you don't have to go as far north to the more popular ones like Como and Garda - you've got Lake Trasimeno right there. And it's a beautiful lake.

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[00:35:24.720] - Michelle

It's not Lake Como but it is, it is beautiful.

[00:35:28.180] - Katy

Yeah it is. And I think that - I really think it's really great to appreciate just these different regions. But what they are and they have so many unique features and customs and cultures and it's just - I love it! So back to Spello. Is there anywhere else you've been on your buona Domenica?

[00:35:47.170] - Michelle

Yes, yes, so there's a couple more I would mention, one is Bevagna, which is down the hill from where we are between us and Montefalco, which I mentioned before with the Sagrantino. But many people love Montefalco and it's a beautiful village. I think that Bevagna appeals to me more just because it's really different from the rest of Umbria in that rather than being on a hill, it is on the flat, which if you didn't think about it, you would just walk around and be like, something's different and I can't think of what. And then you realize this because you're looking UP at the hills rather than looking down on the valley. And it does create this slightly different perspective. It has a canal that goes around the edge of it, which adds this kind of rustle of murmuring water, which is also pretty special. But what I love about Bevagna is that it's there's not very many tourists at all. And so it has retained a lot of its local vibe. So right around dusk, you'll see old men and old women bringing out their green plastic chairs to put them on the corner so they can sit on the corner and watch everybody walk by. The piazza is full of people. The streets are full of people. It's local people who live in Bevagna, which gives it an interesting flair and this old flair and that one of the things that it's known for is a medieval festival that they have in the summertime. And in this one there's these different neighborhoods in Bevagna, like I mentioned before, these Italian towns often do this - and they compete on who can do the best display of all kinds of medieval occupations and crafts. So when you're walking through, you'll miss a lot of that because it just looks like a fair of all these different disappearing, vanishing crafts and arts and in ways of being, right? So there's lots of old potters and we saw people making illuminated manuscripts or dying wool or just even smaller stalls like some guy was doing writing. And my son at the time wanted to know, did the guy use charcoal and water like my son did? And I said no, because that fades away. He uses like walnut and he was talking about that the what they would add to the walnuts to crush them, to create an ink so that they know right there in the weeds with this knowledge that they are so, so enthusiastic about sharing. So you really get an understanding of what this town was back in medieval times. And even when the festival is not going, there's a couple of those stalls that are open to all - not all the time, but all year long. So the candle making one happens year round. And also the apothecary, I think is open all year round. But besides the medieval aspect, there was a woman, I think about 20 or 30 years ago who is digging in her garden in Bevagna and noticed the strange tile and then started digging like opening up the space. And it turns out her house was sitting on a Roman bath. So they excavated the whole thing. And so you can go see this Roman bath, like with these tile floors of fantastical aquatic creatures and gods and goddesses. And it's just sitting under the earth in Bevagna.

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[00:39:08.770] - Katy

This tiny village in the middle of the middle of the boot.

[00:39:12.400] - Michelle

Right. Exactly. Exactly.

[00:39:14.920] - Katy

Fascinating. I love it. It's so good! Bevagna, Montefalco, Orvieto - we're going! Everyone's ready to go I think.

[00:39:24.850] - Michelle

One place is different from all of those, but I really feel worth mentioning is Foligno. So Foligno is a small city close to us. It's our closest, it's like five kilometers away but the dialect is totally different. We had that when we lived here eight years ago. We had to take our son to the hospital. He's obviously fine, but at the time we didn't know it and we were telling our landlord, we had no idea what they were saying. And we think our Italian is pretty good. And my son's at that point, he was fluent and they were like, yeah that's because of the dialect. I'm like, it's five kilometers away. How can a dialect be that different. But it is. In any case. It's an interesting place because it's a workaday town and they don't really care about tourists. Tourists are not on their radar at all. So that's bad and good, right? So it has less of a vibe of the butcher or the flower seller calling you in and tossing you things and singing aloud. You're not going to get that quite as much in Foligno. But what you do get is people living their everyday lives in these colorful buildings that are it's a little bit more modern. It's not medieval, so it's more kind of renaissance period. And so the buildings are stucco full of color. There's a lot of interesting history there. And they also have I think they're called Rioni there, the neighborhoods like they do in Siena, and they also have their own horse competition, like Siena does, only nobody goes except for people around here, and it's less death in this one, like the horses aren't killing themselves going around that piazza like they do in Siena. Instead, they're doing this, figuring of 8 where they have to use their lance to pick up a circle in the middle of the field - is like a wooden sculpture that's holding a ring. And the horse has to zip around and the rider picks up the ring and then they put on a smaller ring. They do it over and over and they're timed and it's fascinating. And they have the week beforehand - there's parades, there's Taverne and Taverne are these pop up restaurants that happen in festivals all over Umbria. But in Foligno, they have their own dedicated spots because they have so many festivals. And it seems like in Foligno there's a festival every week, a festival for primo piatto, which are like pastas, gnocchis and soups. There's ones for women. I mean, there's like a festival all the time. And so they have these pop up restaurants, which you can eat local like super super local historic foods for dead cheap. It's fascinating, but each neighborhood has its own and they're really, really proud. They all have their little neckerchiefs now, have their little, you know, their own ways of supporting their neighborhood. And then they go out to this horse race and they are like, you know, just cheering - it matters for them in this really intense way.

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[00:42:15.100] - Katy

Oh, that sounds like so much fun. I love it! Foligno's been making doing pop ups before anyone ever heard of them.

[00:42:22.840] - Michelle

Exactly. Exactly. The other thing that's cool about Foligno is it's on a train line, which a lot of Umbria is not, or you have to take a bus to the train. So to have the train right there walkable five minutes for any part of Foligno is nice.

[00:42:36.700] - Katy

That's a really good point, because I because was going to ask you about that, too. So, like, it sounds to me that you probably going to need a car to get around most of the places in Umbria.

[00:42:47.050] - Michelle

A lot of them you can train. Spello also has a train station, but it's about 20 minute walk from the base of Spello and Spello is on a pretty steep hill. So to get to the what we call the centro proprio, the very center you're going to have to hike. It can be a little bit tiring. I don't really recommend the bus system. So you can totally do trains. You just have to budget for extra time. But frankly, when you're doing it that way, it can be a lot more relaxing. You can kind of adopt this. I'll get there when I get there, which is nice.

[00:43:18.040] - Katy

OK, that's good to know. And it sounds like a little bit of Italian would be quite useful.

[00:43:23.440] - Michelle

Plenty of people speak English. I know plenty of people who come here with with no Italian whatsoever. I think it's less fun, though, because it's fun to try it out and just it's like speaking in code. And when someone understands you, it feels like you won the lottery. And they are so appreciative when you try. And I have found personally to ask somebody "wait what is this called?" and to practice it until you can say it with them is the the most profound way to endear yourself to a populace like to know to say out loud, I don't know, you tell me. And then they do. And you're like, oh, I can do it now. They get pleased for you.

[00:43:58.590] - Katy

Oh, I love it, that's gorgeous. Beautiful. Well, you know, I think there's one good thing about Spello, because if you have to do that twenty minute hike up the hill, then you are definitely going to deserve a gelato or a piece of Colomba.

[00:44:11.410] - Michelle

That is definitely true.

[00:44:13.240] - Katy

Oh, Michelle, I know we all want to come and join you, Umbria, and just go walking through those streets and through the fields of poppies and making beautiful floral designs just oh my goodness! How can our listeners and readers, because we have our blog too, to stay in touch with you and your writing and hear about all the latest installments from Santa Lucia.

[00:44:34.600] - Michelle

So on my website, which is www.michelledumisani.com that's my MICHELLE DUMISANI dot com, there's a link on the site where you can sign up for my newsletter and I'll keep you apprized of where I am in the world and also travel tips and food tips and recipes. And when you sign up you get a free novela, which is how you can discover Santa Lucia and decide if it's a place you want to visit for longer. That's that four book series. And I'm currently working on my second book about Umbria, which is going to be about the things that we talked about, the wine and the food and the towns and the bakery. There's a big section on that. And a lot about the olives, which are pivotal to the personality of Umbria, really. So you'll find out when that's happening. And a lot of my blog posts now, I'm incorporating them into richer chapters that are going to be that book. So you can get kind of a preview of that.

[00:45:35.200] - Katy

It's really worth signing up too. I've been subscribed for a while now, and I also would recommend Michelle's Instagram because she gives you some lovely little insights into what's going on out the countryside. There's some beautiful walks you've been on lately. It have been kind of stalking you. So what is your Instagram handle again?

[00:45:55.360] - Michelle

It is @theroadnottaken from my website, though. There's links to all of that. The Road Taken was a book I wrote. Let's see how many years ago? Three years ago. Because when I wrote about Il Bel Centro, I started getting all these people contacting me about how they could move to Spello and I thought that was my dream. But you should do your thing. I mean, if Spello is your thing, that's fantastic. But if you use somebody else's blueprint, you build somebody else's house. And so I wanted to write this book to help people figure out what their dream is and how to make it happen in terms of family travel. So my road taken Instagram pages, it's travel heavy with some family stuff thrown in because my children are older now. So not cute toddlers running off into beachside sunsets.

[00:46:40.720] - Katy

Oh, it's wonderful. To Michelle, thank you for joining us from beautiful Spello today.

[00:46:46.150] - Michelle

Thank you so much for having me.

[00:46:48.610] - Katy

It's been so much fun. And you know what? You should come back and tell us when your books launch will just deep dive into the food, because I think we both enjoy that.

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[00:46:55.610] - Michelle

Oh, absolutely. I could really keep you here all day. You're going to be so sorry you suggested this.

[00:47:02.020] - Katy

Not at all. Not at all. Grazie Mille. Thank you for joining us.

[00:47:07.030] - Michelle

Thanks for having me.

[00:47:10.730] - Katy

Yes, Umbria is everything I imagined and more. I've only been to Orvieto, and it was so lovely that I immediately planned to return six months later. Unfortunately, that didn't happen because of covid, but that just gives me a little more time to prepare. As Michelle mentioned, it's very easy to visit Orvieto on a day trip from Rome or Florence or en route to either city, and that's exactly what I did. And it was a beautiful half day exploring this really pretty town.

[00:47:39.350] - Katy

For the next time, I think I'll aim for that incredible flower festival, which is held in late May or June every year. What a stunning spectacle that must be. We'll put all the details of the festival. Plus, the towns Michelle mentioned into the show notes at untolditaly.com/65 for episode 65. You'll also find Michelle's website and a link to her books there, if you're interested in taking a further escape to Spello and the towns of Umbria. We have loved having Michelle on the show today and it was at the suggestion of some of our listeners. If there is someone you would like to hear from on Untold Italy, then please let us know by dropping us a line to ciao@untolditaly.com and we'll do our best to get them on the show. For those of you who have been following along on the Italy Travel Planning Facebook group, I am building up the courage to pitch Stanley Tucci to ask him why his television series is only available in the United States. It really does seem unfair that the rest of us miss out because from the snippets I've seen, it's amazing. So if you are in the United States and you haven't watched the show, I recommend that you do.

[00:48:43.790] - Katy

That's all from Untold Italy for today. We'll be back next week with more Italian secrets and ideas to help you with your trip planning. If you enjoyed this episode, we'd love it if you gave a rating on review because that helps others find us and keep dreaming of Italy while we can't be there. Ciao for now!