



The Chicago Farmer

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TCF Study Tour soaks up Italian sun, culture and farm knowledge

By Jim Ward, TCF member and Study Tour coordinator



A grove of olive trees with 300 year old trees was a Study Tour destination.



The Study Tour group visits the Village Hall in Lamon and learns about Borlotti beans, displayed on the table, that are grown in the area.



One of the scenic sights our travelers viewed.

When the big Delta 767 touched down at the historic city of Milan, Italy, it was the 12th time one of our TCF Study Groups had landed on foreign soil to taste a different agriculture setting. We had no idea at the time that our hosts would go to such lengths to show us their operations and announce our presence in the Internet media. But it all happened in the eight day whirlwind visit.

Our energetic guide, Aurora, met us and immediately took us to downtown Milan, one of the world's fashion and manufacturing centers. We saw the magnificent shopping mall, the first in the world and still an architectural treasure. Close by was Cathedral Square, where we ate our lunch and could see the spires reaching to the sky.

A little time for window shopping, then off to our east coast headquarters at Hotel Augustus, near



Enjoying Venice, beautiful weather and a gondola ride.

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Mission Statement

The mission of The Chicago Farmers is to provide those with an interest in agriculture a means to enhance knowledge, profitability, stewardship, consumer awareness, and fellowship.

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One of the water buffaloes that produces mozzarella, ricotta, soft cheese and yogurt on one of the farms visited by The Chicago Farmers.

Venice, to get unpacked and enjoy a great dinner. Up bright and early on Tuesday, we headed north toward the Italian Alps to visit the small mountainside town of Lamon to learn about “white beans” (officially known as Borlotti beans) grown by a consortium of farmers in the area.

The city officials greeted us in the town square and ushered us into the board room of the Village Hall. There, on the table, was a display of the precious beans that had been found in Central America by Spanish explorers and brought back to Italy as a gift to the Pope! The natives of Lamon had been lucky to get some and cultivated them with care through the ages.

The walls of the Village Hall were decorated with murals telling the story and soon HER honor the Mayor appeared to add to the welcome. Our guide had a hard time keeping up the translation as we exchanged greetings. How could this small village and 336 consortium members have successfully kept the “white beans” popular over centuries? By dedication to quality and control is their answer. Refreshments and photographs followed, plus an inspection of the preparation of the poles for this year’s crop. Farewells and then we headed back down the mountainside for lunch.

Our afternoon stop was at another unusual operation—a grappa distillery. The company uses wine making by-products to create a high-alcohol vodka-style beverage in plain or flavored varieties.



The storage area where \$14 million worth of cheese wheels are aged and turned by robotic flippers.

We were invited to view the complex distilling operations and taste test the product.

The busy day concluded with a visit to an Educational Farm. They also served us a home cooked dinner in the teaching hall facilities. The director of the Foundation gave us the story of the farm’s dedication to carrying on the tradition of agriculture by training school children as to the value of agriculture’s role in the world’s economy.

Wednesday morning the executives of the Lusitania Fruit and Vegetable Market were ready for us in the conference room with a PowerPoint presentation about their modern facility. The produce center distributes 60 different products. The fruits and vegetables “sparkled” with color and freshness in a spotless setting. They posed us for pictures with a pallet of lettuce and by the time we had returned home, we were on the front page of their Internet newsletter!

This was a first for us—we had never before been featured in local media. The fast handling of the perishable products was impressive, and we could see why our salads had such a fresh taste. They handle input from 400 growers and ship to buyers throughout Italy and the European area.

We moved on to a combination luncheon and farm visit. Our hosts had a herd of 300 water buffaloes and produced unique mozzarella, ricotta, soft cheese and yogurt in their own dairy. After lunch we toured their shop and milking parlor and saw

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their “Dairy Shop on Wheels” that they had built using a large truck body.

From cheese to mushrooms: the last stop of the day was a modern steel building with highly mechanized production. What started as the owner’s hobby has developed into an integrated system of “spores to packages” method of farming. They have computerized the handling of a different type of product that doesn’t need sunlight. The windowless plant held racks of trays with mushrooms being planted, grown, and harvested by batch control. The father and son management team gave us a personal tour and shared The Chicago Farmers’ cap we left behind.

Thursday was our big day to visit Venice—world class tourist destination and famous for its canals and bridges. Getting on the island itself was a major adventure. Our bus could get us only to a taxi landing, and then our speedboat transported us to the actual island.

Our special Venetian guide had her own portable PA system so we could hear above the crowd noise. She filled us with stories of the city and the ancient buildings. St. Mark’s Square and the surrounding buildings were awesome sights. Our guide, Luigina, kept us all together as she toured us through the city’s landmarks and over the famous bridges that connect the sidewalks.

The weather was perfect for our visit, with sun glistening on the canals and the decorations on the



The balcony in Verona that is associated with Romeo and Juliet.

buildings. We ate our lunch in a restaurant on the Grand Canal as the gondolas and speedboats passed by our outdoor tables.

We sampled gelato (ice cream) cones for dessert as we waited for our gondola ride. The sleek, black vessels were all that the travel posters portray, with the gondolier perching precariously on the rear deck with his single oar for power, and steering assisted by a foot to the canal wall.

Our ride toured the crowded canals, interrupted by an ambulance boat en route to the hospital. The water level view of Venice made it even more interesting. We shot many pictures when we returned safely to the dock, with our handsome gondolier posing in his costume.

Reversing our route by water taxi, we saw one of the giant cruise liners at the Venetian dock; Venice is now a Mediterranean cruise stop served by an elevated tram.

Topping off our busy day as we headed back to our hotel was dinner at a wine-growing estate perched on a hillside. It was a great view from their dining room as we enjoyed the food and the panorama of the hillside vineyards. They served a marvelous meal followed by a tour of their wine processing facilities.

Friday we headed westward toward Lake Garda through the River Po Valley. The first stop was a rice growing farm with its own processing facilities and a variety of other crops. The whole operation was much different from our corn and soy bean



The travelers board a boat to cruise on Lake Garda.

production and we had a close-up look at the multi-stage, computer controlled set-up to create packaged quality rice.

Lunch at another “family farm” restaurant with good “home cooking,” then on to the Parmesan cheese dairy Latteria Vo Grande. Our host gave us a tour of the vast facility that was a remarkable combination of “hands on” and “robotics” processing working together. He took personal control from the production of the milk to the final ageing and labeling of his delicate product.

He toured us past the giant mixing machines and finally into the storage area where \$14 million worth of cheese “wheels” are methodically aged and turned by robotic “flippers.” To top it off, each “wheel” is branded with a source and production history.

To finish the day, we headed to our lodging for the next two nights, Hotel Vittorio, located on the Lake Garda beach. A bicycle race was scheduled for Saturday, so the contestants were doing their warm up laps as we checked in.

More impressive processing equipment came into



Venice had many lovely sights.

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view at our first stop on Saturday—olive oil pressing machinery. After a viewing of the olive trees—some of them three hundred years old—we saw the different steps in the production of olive oil. Our hosts also let us taste the different varieties and generously gave us a large bottle of “extra virgin” oil to take home. The Mediterranean climate is excellent for production of high quality oil.

Verona, the home town of our guide, Aurora, was our spot for lunch and a visit to the Romeo and Juliet residence. As Aurora explained it to us, Shakespeare’s famous drama came first, and then the locals created the home and balcony to satisfy the tourists. It was a colorful scene with the remains of an ancient Roman arena and crowds attending a holiday festival.

Next a boat cruise on Lake Garda, a popular tourist area for European visitors, particularly those from southern Germany. Many modern and ancient resort residences ring the lake. We were dropped off at a different port and our bus took us to another wine estate. Our host gave us a quick look at their vineyards, then invited us to do some tasting of their wine specialties.

The evening ended with dinner at the estate’s dining room—then back to the hotel, and early to bed as we’d be up before dawn for the trip home. Next morning we were given a “box breakfast” to eat on the bus. We did last minute airport shopping



An example of Venetian architecture.



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to use up Euros, then boarded for the flight back to JFK. It was an easy job to do our customs processing by machine and on to O'Hare and home.

Veteran TCF traveler Marilyn Mayer Wiedemann (10 out of the last 12 trips) summed up our Italian experience:

"Another great trip—rice, fagioli, homemade wine, grappa, buffalo cheese, closely held Parmesan cheese wheels piled up to the ceiling, rows of fresh and beautifully arranged vegetables in their immaculate distribution halls, and gondolas on the canals of Venice; dining on meals at the homes of local farmers; traveling with good friends. Who could ask for anything more? Great times."



An Italian vineyard.

Scholarships awarded



Mark Kendall was awarded a Chicago Farmers' scholarship. A junior studying agronomy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Mark is a member of the Alpha Gamma Rho Fraternity, Badger Crops Club, and Collegiate Farm Bureau, and he is a CALS

(College of Agricultural & Life Sciences) Ambassador. Throughout the school year, Mark works as an undergraduate employee for the Sweet Corn Research Program in the Agronomy Department. When he's not busy with school, Mark enjoys playing baseball, fishing, golfing, and farming.

Mark is from Mineral Point, a small town in southwest Wisconsin. He grew up on a 500 acre farm and is the youngest of four boys. His parents currently raise beef cattle and they grow corn, alfalfa, soybeans, and oats. Mark worked on the farm growing up and still goes home to help out

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