

Memorable relationship follows serious frustration volunteering on Italian farm

By Ryan Moran



Giuseppe is a legend.

I corralled and hog-tied a goose with him at sunrise one morning, did my best to hum along when he sang his favorite Italian tunes, and shared bottle after bottle of his home-brewed wine over the two weeks I spent on volunteering on his farm in rural Italy. I learned more than I ever expected, and most of the lessons aren't specifically related to farming.

Initially, this patriarch sure seemed like a grumpy old shit for the first couple days. I was convinced he preferred working with women, as evidenced by his demeanor toward the two other volunteers, both women. With me, he was short, cold and slightly abrasive early on. This was constant, from working in the fields to the

kitchen.

It should be noted that we both understood just a few words of each other's languages. He'd give me a task to be done, then take back control seconds later as if I were doing it wrong—I'm talking tasks as simple as frying potatoes at one point. Usually he seemed frustrated, resulting in me definitely being frustrated. At times I wanted to yell, "What the hell do you want from me, old man?"

I made matters worse with my negativity early on. Truth is, I was damn tired and worn down from lack of sleep when I arrived. **My insane welcome that involved police didn't help.** This attitude I had spilled over into my introduction to farm life. I know now he wasn't simply going to hand out approval without me working for it. I'm grateful for the struggle. During my stay, he simultaneously taught me to bust my ass, and to slow the hell down, to put on my grind mode face, but always keep laughter within reach. He works damn hard, but knows the value of enjoying life with a light heart and breaking bread.



He seemed present for every moment. Maybe it was his methodical steps as we climbed from the fields toward the stables carrying crates full of greens and plums, or his refusal to use a god damn peeler for potatoes or carrots—which really isn't that modern. We instead used a knife. He's funny that way. Nevertheless, he rises with the sun and every hour is spent moving his feet until an inclusive and entertaining lunch. Then it's nap time. And he's on the move constantly again until we come together for dinner.

What started out as somewhat rocky relationship evolved into Giuseppe taking me on his visits with his 90-something-year-old friend. The man's name was Ernesto.

He called me Jesus while air-stroking his nonexistent beard. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but sitting in that country house in a small kitchen made me feel a part of something completely unfamiliar. It felt special.

When his other friend Emilio came by to help patch the above-ground pool about a week into my stay, Giuseppe pulled me from my assigned tomato plant project to join them for this new task. It was gratifying, him wanting my help specifically. When we finished, both men voiced their appreciation and shook my hand. I didn't know these dudes. I generally like to be accepted, but I hadn't really considered if whether these two men liked me would matter much. And yet, Giuseppe's approval struck a chord.

It could be because of his passion for his yard. That's always something I saw in my own father. When he got sick last year my brother and I ended up doing the majority of his yard work. I felt that similar sense of pride after finishing a job with Giuseppe. Plus, there's something fulfilling about that "atta boy" pat on the shoulder from a distinguished fella.

On one cloudy morning with a rare rain, Giuseppe and I had a great time together on what would become a "vino day". This dude sang with sincere enthusiasm on our way to his wine cellar. It's funny though, during regular work hours he would never let me see his excitement for too long before giving me a task to do.

His cellar is a dark, concrete cave under someone else's house on a steep road barely wide enough to fit a car. Large demijohns, a glass, narrow-necked bottle holding 3 to 10 gallons of liquid, that were full of wine and wrapped in wicker take up most of the space. We brought 12 smaller jugs to fill and bring back to the farm.



He makes rosé. It's light and easy to drink with every meal without feeling tanked. He loves it. "Mi amore," Giuseppe said, caressing a jug with a loyal grin beneath his weathered John Deere hat.

I don't know this prideful man in much depth. I dig some of his style, though. He had me questioning what convenience means without struggle-induced fulfillment. Nearly everything we did required more steps than I'm used to. But he seemed to really feel every day.

For my last night, we made it count. It was just Giuseppe, three volunteers and a guest at a dinner table that usually saw north of 12 heads. We drank wine and grappa with a side of gut-busting laughter as Giuseppe did Mussolini and Trump impressions. I woke up at 5:45am the following day to walk nearly an hour to catch a bus to Rome. He was up and looked at me like I was crazy when I said I was walking.

"Mia automobila, no problema," he said.

I stashed a letter I wrote in Italian for him underneath the remote next to a tiny TV in the kitchen where he watched the news late at night. The eagle eye spotted it, of course. I guess you could say handwritten notes have become a bit of a trademark for me after being hosted by local families. Until this time, they've always been

discovered after I was gone. I'm really glad Giuseppe found this one quick.

As we were prepared to leave, he came outside and while walking towards me he pulled the note from his shirt pocket with a massive smile. Twice more on the way to the bus he pulled the note and hit me with a sincere "grazie". We finished the send-off properly with our first hug and dual-cheek kiss of the adventure.

I could hardly understand Giuseppe and he for sure didn't understand me. It took him about 10 days to call me by my name. Until then, he just referred to me as "ragazzo" while swiping his right arm, referencing my tattoos. But through his thick glasses were eyes that communicate thoughtfully and every look had intention. Every squint had purpose when directed towards me. Can't forget those Italian hand gestures, too.

We hardly needed words with all that combined.

My introduction to volunteer travel was wobbly and at times I wanted to bail. But I learned and grew in ways that left me excited to share my experience. I would encourage you to check it out for yourself (Workaway is a great resource). Not for a free bed and square meals, which is a really nice bonus, but for a unique opportunity to potentially step out of your comfort zone and achieve a different level of appreciation.

