

## Lex on the Beach: La Mia Bella Famiglia

Written by Alexis DelChiaro

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**I am an Italian girl through and through. My Italian roots run very deep. My ancestors on both my mom and dad's side are from Italy and the culture has always been a huge part of my life.**



On my little girl bookshelf, an Italian dictionary sat next to my English dictionary. (My Nonno, grandpa, and Nonni, grandma, spoke Italian to my brother and I since we were babies.) As a child, I thought hunting for Easter eggs in artichoke plants was totally normal. (My great grandfather started artichoke farming in California and the business stayed in the family for several decades.) Every holiday/birthday/anniversary/baptism with my huge family is both raucous and chaotic. (Sometimes, at family gatherings there are people whose names I don't even know. I secretly wish we could wear nametags.)

Anyway, with such a strong connection to the Italian culture, I figured a visit to the homeland was a must. I'd been once before about 10 years ago, but come on it's Italy!! Do I really need an excuse to go back? My whirlwind trip started with a stop in fabulous Roma. Did you know that after a whale washed ashore along the Italian coast, the Ancient Romans constructed a fake whale inside the Colosseum and when the mouth opened, 50 bears came out to fight the Gladiators? Talk about show stopping!

Next, I was off to Tuscany for a visit to Florence, Chianti and Lucca. All beautiful places, but the walled city of Lucca holds a special place in my heart. It's where my family is from and still lives! Stepping inside the walls of Lucca is like stepping back in time. The narrow cobblestone streets are filled with little old women riding bicycles and fashionable couples walking small dogs. It is just darling. Once in Lucca, I was excited to meet up with my cousin Isabella. She and I are cousins a few times removed and we've only met once before, but in my family that doesn't matter. She welcomed me to her home with open arms; as if we'd been close our entire lives. That's the funny thing about family, or atleast my family anyway; it doesn't matter how much time goes by, or how many miles lies between us, there is always a bond. And that's just what we did for the next few days- we bonded.

Isabella arranged a dinner party with close friends so that I could really get to know Lucca. She showed me the sights of her walled city, the famous Cathedral of San Martino and the Volto Santo inside it. Isa drove me to the small town of Mantuolo to spend time with Flora, her grandma who is also my Nonno's cousin. (Flora doesn't speak a word of English and I wished I'd started my Italian language classes earlier.) Isabella guided me through the streets of artsy Pietrasanta and introduced me to a bright orange cocktail called a Spritz. We cheers'ed over a glass of her father's homemade limoncello and promised to keep in touch.

I believe that we will keep in touch. It may only be a short email now and again, but hopefully someday soon it will be another visit. Isa is always welcome in my home, wherever it may be, and I know the feeling is mutual. That's the brilliance of a family dynamic. You can argue or disagree or even go for the silent treatment, but at the end of the day, they are still your family. To me, it's one of the only true guarantees in life. My family will always be there for me and I for them, whether it's in California, Italy or somewhere in between.