

Opinion: Chasing 'La Dolce Vita' in Italy through Connecticut connections

[Marcia Simon](#)



View from the Palazzo Mustilli in Sant' Agata de' Goti (Vita Villaggi)

Life on the Connecticut shoreline is pretty sweet, but la dolce vita lives in the heart forever.

The Italian countryside has never stopped calling for two shoreline residents who coincidentally share an interest so strong they built businesses around the foods of their childhoods and the wines of Italy's fertile agricultural regions.

Oddly, these two people have never met, even though Maria Nuzzolillo lives in Clinton and Dan Burgio lives in Westbrook.

Vita Villaggi provides an immersive hands-on culinary experience (Vita Villaggi)

Maria and her husband Dan (It's another coincidence that two different Dans appear here) create hands-on farm-to-table culinary vacations in the Sannio region of Campania where Maria grew up. She calls this area a hidden gem of natural beauty, rich history, ancient architecture and some of Italy's finest wines. Maria left Italy and started a life as a patent attorney in the United States. Her kitchen became her happy place, making pasta and using recipes from her childhood that she now shares in culinary workshops and special events. Dan recognized her longing for a culture and lifestyle that grew to be special in both their hearts, so he surprised her on their 10th wedding anniversary by buying a house in Campania. They both retired from the legal profession and now split their time between the Connecticut shoreline and Italy where they host an off-the-beaten-path vacation experience through their company Vita Villaggi (Village Life).

[Vita Villaggi](#) guests meet the wine growers, pick the olives for the oil, "hunt" for truffles and make fresh mozzarella sourced from local sheep and cows. Accommodations are often in the 17th century Palazzo Rainone Mustilli in Sant' Agata de' Goti. The location received unexpected praise in 2025 when two Emmy-nominated film producers from New Jersey stumbled upon the palazzo and were so enamored with the spot they chose to use it for their film *Amore nel Sannio* (Love in the Sannio), which is scheduled for broadcast

on PBS stations nationally.

Meanwhile in Westbrook, just one town away from Maria's Connecticut home, Dan Burgio, who was born and raised in Sicily, also feels the calling. He has been working with Italy's wine industry for decades, and so has his wife Anne who is a certified wine educator. They recently launched [Excursions by Burgio](#), offering wine vacations that delve deeply into Italy's winemaking traditions centered around enogastronomy (the art of pairing wines with regional cuisines) in Tuscany, Piedmont and Sicily. They bring guests to meet their contacts at grand estates as well as off-the-beaten-path vineyards for tastings and talks with vintners as part of the overall experience.

"Italy offers a mentality that begs you to slow down. Meals are a big part of that and wine, in turn, is a big part of meals," says Anne.

"Slow travel" is on the rise. People are growing weary of seeing just the over-touristed hot spots. Travelers increasingly welcome guidance to experience the dreamy destinations they see in movies. And with the price of airfare to Europe, more travelers are opting for longer stays to get more value from their vacation.

Vita Villaggi now partners with [Friendly Group Travel in Westbrook](#) to create customized short stays in Rome and Naples, which have the two closest airports to the Campania region, to add a few days before or after their culinary journey. The Amalfi Coast, Venice, Cinque Terre, Puglia and Sicily are also easy add-ons with Italy's efficient high-speed rail system. For example, the Intercity Notte sleeper train from Rome to Palermo is a 13-hour ride that leaves Rome in the evening, crosses the Strait of Messina via ferry, and gets you into Palermo well-rested to start the new day.

Ceramics from the Amalfi Coast include vibrant colors of lemon yellow and ocean blue (Marcia Simon)

Italy has been among the top vacation destinations worldwide, with the number of visitors expected to grow for the summer and fall seasons of 2026.

. [Marcia Simon](#) is a Connecticut-based travel writer and advisor with special interest in sustainability and green travel. Contact her via email: welcome@friendlygrouptravel.com, or call 860-399-0191.