

New Haven Register

Guilford pair shares a love of food & wine

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You might say that Matthew Scialabba and Melissa Pellegrino of Guilford have a delicious marriage.

It's certainly a marriage based on their love of food as well as each other. And throw in a dash of adventure combined with a willingness to travel and work long hours — and you start to get a sense of what their life is like.

They share an occupation as well: Both of them are culinary school graduates who love Italian food and wine. They have apprenticed at a Roman bakery, they have studied winemaking at a vineyard and have worked and cooked together at several Italian “agriturismi,” which are working Italian farms with accommodations and restaurants attached.

And now Scialabba and Pellegrino have authored a cookbook, “The Italian Farmer’s Table,” published by Globe Pequot, \$19.95. It contains 300 recipes and 150 photographs and is an account of four months that they spent in northern Italy, working on farms and learning the ins and outs of country cooking.

“We got the idea when we were part of a work exchange program in Italy in 2003, working on organic farms,” says Scialabba. “We did lots of things, including working on a grape harvest on an olive farm, and in a brick oven bakery.”

“We really wanted to learn about bread, and so we knocked on bakery doors until we

found one that would take us,” says Pellegrino with a laugh.

When they got back to the States, they worked as private chefs and then came up with the idea of writing a cookbook about their experiences in Italy.

“We wanted to go back and do research for the book,” says Scialabba. “The trend in America was evolving toward sustainable agriculture and farm-to-table food, and this was already taking place in Italy. So we did our research and found farms that we thought would be a nice fit. Some were nice, some were rustic, and all were places that Americans could go and stay at.”

They wrote letters to the farms and explained that they were two cooks who spoke Italian and that they wanted to write a book about agritours of northern Italy, and asked if they could come and learn recipes and techniques. Then they set up an itinerary and stayed four nights at each farm and then moved onto the next.

“We were in the kitchen cooking every night,” says Pellegrino. “We met such nice people who helped us learn so much. At one place, they took us out in the field and showed us the organic techniques. We learned to make sausage. We made cheese, we went truffle hunting.”

It was far from a vacation. Scialabba says, “When people hear about it, they say how great it must have been. But we were working hard at the same time. Each of the 30 farms we visited had its own personality that we adapted to. And it was an all-encompassing education. People shared their recipes and took us around and showed us the surrounding areas. We learned a lot.”

After four months they returned and put together a proposal and started querying publishers. When Globe Pequot Press in Guilford decided to buy the book, they were thrilled.

And then the real work began.

“It was a matter of making all the recipes and testing them to make sure they worked,” says Pellegrino. “And some of the ingredients they used in Italy weren’t so available in the U.S., so we had to find substitutes that Americans could find. We were free-lancing and doing catering to make money, but meanwhile we were spending every spare moment organizing the book and testing the recipes. We handed in the book a year to the date from the time we’d left for Italy. That had been our goal: to do the traveling in four months and spend the next eight writing the book. And we did it.”

Today, Pellegrino works as an assistant food editor for a magazine called Fine Cooking, and Scialabba works for an Italian wine importer. They’re touring through the area, doing readings and signings and sometimes offering tastings of their creations.

As for the future, now that they’ve met their goals, Scialabba says they hope to be able to

return to Italy, to visit farms in the other regions of the country, and bring those recipes back as well.

In the meantime, Pellegrino says, “We’re doing a bit of what we did in Italy. We are looking at local farms and vineyards, thinking about how to incorporate what we learned in Italy. There, generations are returning to the farms, rediscovering what worked before. You see grandparents, their kids and grandkids all working together. It’s great.”

- For more information, or to see recipes and photos from their trip, visit www.theitalianfarmerstable.com.

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