

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

In 2004 Egeria di Nallo, a prolific author and professor of anthropology, political science, sociology and marketing at the University of Bologna, with a group of committed citizens, founded the Association for the Protection and Enhancement of Italy's Culinary Gastronomic Heritage under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture and the University of Bologna. Although at first its members were mostly in the region of Emilia-Romagna, it soon became Italy's first nationwide community of local home cooks. Its mission was and still is to safeguard Italy's food culture by organizing authentic culinary experiences for guests — first in hundreds, now in thousands, of local homes all over Italy.

In 2014 the Association was taken over by tech entrepreneur **Davide Maggi** — creator of some of Italy's first digital startups and executive director of the Digital Marketing & Communication Executive Program at the Bologna Business School. In 2017 he set up its online platform, **www.cesarine.com**, the first in the world devoted solely to food, making it accessible to anyone who wanted to join remotely. In fact, its name literally means “Little Caesars” (the pet name for housewives of Emilia-Romagna), thus “the empresses of their homes, especially their kitchens.”

In 2018, Maggi's initiative became an innovative SME (Small or Medium-sized Enterprise) and in 2023 a non-profit Benefit Society, while in 2019 it was recognized as a Slow Food widespread community.

That same year members hosted some 10,000 guests, 80% of whom were foreigners — mainly from the USA, Canada, France, Germany, England, and Switzerland. In 2023, its community of 1,500 amateur cooks and chefs, 80% of whom are women between the ages of 45 and 50, opened their homes in some 450 locations in Italy to 50,000 guests (an increase of 65% compared to 2022) to offer not only dining experiences, but also cooking classes and food, wine and market tours. (Its most popular classes: how to make *tiramisù* and local pastas).

The most popular *Cesarine* destination has always been Bologna (in 2024, a 25% increase over 2023).

Other popular destinations are Venice, Lake Como, Florence, Cinque Terre (200% increase in 2024 over 2023), Sorrento and Positano, Bologna, Milan, Rome and Naples. Interest in Sicily is growing exponentially, with

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the most popular destinations being Palermo, Taormina, Messina and Catania. Reservations in Palermo increased last year by 60% and by 130% in Messina.

As for foreign clients, with 30,000 guests in 2024, Americans continue to be the most numerous clients, followed by Australians, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Northern Europeans, in particular Germany, France and Switzerland.

With so many destinations, offers, and prices to choose from, not to mention instructions on how to become a *cesarina*, it's essential to consult the

website (in Italian and English) mentioned above because every experience is tailor-made. Here it's also possible to book an “experience” as a gift. (For specific questions you can also telephone to +39-340-156-4661 or + 1-985-531-9607, Monday–Friday 9:30-11:30 and 16:30-18:30 Central European Time.)

The year 2024 brought additional successes. The Italian guests increased 25%; in comparison, Italy's non-*Cesarine* enogastronomic tourism increased only 12%. Very popular was the new group event “Seratine,” every Wednesday evening, for now in 10 Italian cities: Milano, Torino, Bologna, Modena, Rimini, Verona, Pesaro, Assisi, Fasano, and Catania, where the guests prepare a dish and enjoy an *aperitivo* (“Mani in Pasta,” 59 euros) or enjoy an already prepared dish and *aperitivo* (“Aperitivo Experience,” 35 euros).

Also in 2024, the *Cesarine* joined forces with *Borghi più Belli d'Italia* (Most Beautiful Villages of Italy) and with *Dimore Storiche d'Epoca* (Historical Homes) to introduce tourism off-the-beaten-track, not to mention that in June they opened their first permanent cooking school in Assisi.

Their Benefit Society also grew: giving female inmates in Bologna's jail pasta-making lessons; **Emmaus** in Alba which supports people in fragile health; and **Tortellante** in Modena, a project for young people with autism. At the end of 2024, several *Cesarine* crossed the Atlantic to introduce authentic Italian cuisine via two cooking classes for journalists and influencers, organized by **ENIT** (Italy's National Tourist Board) in collaboration with *Bologna Welcome* and *Destination Verona Garda*, at New York's Italian Cultural Institute.

With the number of applications to become a *cesarina* growing by leaps and bounds domestically, the main project for 2025 is to enroll Italians who live abroad. ○