

# Italy in Springtime is the Place to Be for Maine Farmers

by Nancy Terrell Hall

Where do farmers go on vacation? According to Janet Spear, they like to visit other farmers. Janet is a veteran tour leader who specializes in designing trips that focus on agriculture. She has organized tours around visits to all sorts of farming operations, from strawberry growers in Spain to ethanol production facilities in South America. This spring Janet led a group of Maine farmers on a tour of Italy.



**Our group at the Colosseum in Rome**

The group of 23 flew from Boston to Rome on March 29. After their overnight flight they spent their first day relaxing and exploring the city on their own, visiting some of the many local food markets that dot the city. The next day they enjoyed a guided tour of many famous places of ancient Rome—the Forum, the Colosseum, Circus Maximus, and the Pantheon—all before lunch! The afternoon featured visits to Vatican City, the basilica of St. Peter’s, and the Sistine Chapel.

The next day the group left Rome and traveled to the beautiful region of Tuscany and the Chianina Valley. The morning included an unscheduled bonus stop in the picturesque medieval village of Pienza, where the famous Pecorino di Pienza sheep-milk cheese is made. Arriving in time for lunch at Agriturismo Il Rigo in the village of San Quirico d’Orcia the group toured this family farm which produces organically grown wheat, pulses, and broad beans on rotation. They also visited a nearby olive grove to see how olives are harvested and cold-pressed in the family’s old mill. Then they went on to Tuscany’s main city, Florence.



**Janet at the Lorenzo Market in Florence**

Two nights were spent in Florence, and days there were filled with sightseeing in this city renowned for its Renaissance art and architecture. A guided tour featured such sites as Accademia Museum to see Michelangelo’s famous statue of David, the Pitti Palace, Giotto’s Tower, and Piazza della Signorina, among others. Other points of interest included some of the city’s fabulous open air markets, including the two floors of San

Lorenzo Market, Florence’s busiest market, built in 1874. A highlight of the visit to Florence was an optional three-hour cooking class in which participants learned to prepare a three-course Italian meal and then they enjoyed the results of their work complete with a glass of Tuscan wine.



**Janet at the cooking class**



**Chianina cattle**

Cooperativa Agricola II Foreto, a large cooperative farm begun in 1977 by a diverse group of students, workers, and teachers looking for a different way of life. This large, successful operation raises prized Chianina cattle, produces all their own hay and cattle feed, and also has a large cheese-making operation, and other enterprises. In the afternoon the group traveled through the Apennine Hills and plains of the River Po to arrive in Venice.



**Our group at the cheese factory**

The day in Venice was filled with a guided walking tour which included many famous sites including St. Mark's Square and basilica, Doge's Palace, Bridge of Sighs, Rialto Market, among others. An optional evening gondola ride was a memorable highlight of this city visit.

Day 8 featured a visit to Verona, one of the largest and most prosperous cities in northern Italy. Highlights here included a visit to Juliet's house, the Arena di Verona, and the city's famous old herb market. Afternoon was spent in a visit to Lake Garda and Cantina della Valtenesi e Della Lugana, a vineyard and farm doing organic cereal cultivation. This winery had a portable bottling operation which could travel to other vineyards to bottle their wines as needed.



**Sidewalk cafe in Verona**

On the final day before travel back to Boston, the group traveled to Milan. Their tour of this city included La Scala museum, where they just happened to catch part of an orchestra rehearsal. Also that day they toured an olive oil production facility and learned that the *tapanade* or residue from olive pressing is a prized delicacy and that the pits are used for fuel.

At the farewell dinner on the final evening, the group expressed their appreciation to Janet for her leadership with this tribute, "Thank you for taking such exceptional care of us on yet another exceptional trip. We appreciate all your efforts to make this trip to Italy memorable and enjoyable. Ciao, all your Maine farmer friends.