

“Mi Faccia Felice” — Make Me Happy

CTPA IN EATALY - March 24, 2014

On Monday, March 24, 2014, two CTPA groups, one at 10 a.m. and one at 11 a.m., journeyed to Chicago’s Eataly to **Learn, Eat, and Shop**. Eataly is a **unique concept store and dining venue**, one of only two in the United States. The Chicago Eataly is dedicated to Ernest Hemmingway, an Oak Park native, who between 1918-1954 spent a goodly amount of time in Italy and especially in the Veneto enjoying the culture, the cuisine, and especially the *vino*.

In 2007, Oscar Farinetti, aka, “the Little Flower” a very successful entrepreneur and industrialist founded the first Eataly in an abandoned vermouth factory in Torino, Italy. Currently, there are 27 stores in the world—ten in Italy, 13 in Japan, one each in Dubai, Turkey, New York, and Chicago. The stores outside the USA are much smaller in size than the ones in Chicago and New York. “Our” Eataly encompasses 63,000 square feet on two *piani* (floors). The store is open seven days a week from 10 a.m. until 11 p.m. The Lavazza Café, located at the west end of the store, is open from 8 a.m. until 11 p.m.

The guide for the first group was Emily, a USA native, who lived in Italy and studied in Bologna, the city that is the home of the oldest medical school in western Europe and where *Pasta Bolognese* was invented, guided us skillfully and knowledgeably through both *piani* (floors) of Eataly. We were informed that the best time to bring a group and to enjoy the store without it being overly crowded were Monday-Thursday before 4 p.m. Weekends are extremely crowded and at times it can be difficult to maneuver through the throngs enjoying, shopping, and learning.

The Chicago Eataly opened on December 2, 2013 and is located in the building that once was home to ESPN Zone and Disney Quest. During the first week, visitors and shoppers purchased with abandon and the store had to close for one day to restock its shelves!

There are 23 *ristorantes* including mini-counters and six sit down areas to dine, relax and enjoy the ambiance. The ground level dining area offers the Gran Bar Lavazza, whose strong coffee reminded me of the espressos at Italian coffee bars (a necessity for guides and visitors); the *Caffeè Vergnano*; the *I Panini*—featuring grilled sandwiches; the Nutella, which offers this wonderful chocolately hazelnut spread in creative ways; the *Rosticceria* presenting a variety of carved Rotisserie Panini of meats and chickens; the *Focaccia*—breads; *Venchi Chocolate*—chocolates; the *Pasticceria*—pastries; and *Lait Gelato Alpina* and *Il Gelato*—Italian ice cream and gelato.

Upstairs dining includes *La Piazza*, the most popular area—for pizzas and pastas; *Il Pesce*—a fish centric restaurant and market; *La Carne*—offering meats to satisfy any carnivorous palate; *Le Verdure*—an eatery devoted to Italian-style vegetable dishes; *La Birreria*—a brew-pub featuring house-brewed craft ales and imported and local beers; *Vino Libero*—“free wine” is Eataly’s Enoteca and Aperitivo Bar where you can savor and enjoy a glass or two of the best Italian wines with a quick bite.





The Pizzas are produced in two golden hive-like wood-burning ovens imported from Italy. Temperatures reach 800-1000 degrees and you can have your made to order pizza delivered in about ninety seconds. The pizza makers are all natives of Naples, Italy, and they produce upwards of 1,000 pies per day. Eataly has approximately 700 part and full-time employees. Their bakery produces 1,200 loaves a day. The store offers more than 100 olive oils, only extra virgin, with none of the olives grown outside of Italy. Emily showed me a bottle of balsamic vinegar oil from Modena (the absolute best, on the shelf under lock and key) that sells for \$200 for a small bottle. I passed.



Eataly has a cooking school taught by in-house chefs who were trained by Lidia Bastianich. The classes range from 90 minutes to two hours. The classroom students (only) watch the preparation and cooking and eat the results. The charge for this is \$75-95 per person including *vino rosso* or *bianco*. Local produce is used as much as possible, but during the spring, summer, and fall seasons, produce from Italy is available. The store stocks over 500 different labels of Italian wine and of course offers wine tastings. You want cheese—the cheesemonger told us that 75 percent of the cheeses are from Italy and the rest are artisanal from the United States and Canada. If you want Velveeta—Eataly is not the place to find it.

The fine dining venue named *Baffo* (which means “moustache” in Italian) is currently open only for dinner. In April it will be open for lunch on weekends and probably by June open for lunch daily. The name draws its inspiration from Oscar Farinetti, Eataly’s founder, who sports a moustache almost as well groomed as that worn by CTPA CTG guide Wayne Galasek. The *ristorante* seats about 60 people. The store also includes a Rizzoli Book Store that offers more cooking and wine books than I have shelves to hold.

Eataly offers **walking tours to the public every Wednesday morning** for up to 10 guests from 10:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m. at \$35 per person plus tax. The tour offers various bites of fresh mozzarella, housemade bread, Neapolitan pizza, and housemade gelato. Our special tour groups, conscious of getting in shape for the tourist season, only sampled a spoonful of fantastic gelato.

It would be difficult for a large group to tour, learn, eat, and shop en masse. However, I think that people could explore on their own and then meet in one of the eating areas to discuss their experiences. Foreign visitors might enjoy the ambiance and the reminder of their home countries especially those from Italy. If you choose to eat, forget about calories. Take your clients on a long walk and explore Chicago. The Italians have a custom called a “*passaggiata*.” This refers to leisurely strolls usually in the late afternoon and evening. The women dress smartly and the men usually have a light sweater draped over their shoulders to be put on if the evening becomes chilly.

If you do “foodie” groups, this is a must stop! Others will enjoy and learn, eat, and shop. A welcome addition to Chicago. *Ciao*.

Edward Mazur CTG, CTPA Secretary

(Photos by Donna Primas CTG)