



We have no illusions about anyone learning Italian in time for a short vacation. The Red Cat has been trying to get it straight for ages and still has a long way to go. Like most European languages, Italian is grammatically difficult, with articles, adjectives and nouns that change with gender and number, and vast verb declensions, but there are some things that ease the burden. First of all, Italians are generally very accommodating when it comes to trying to understand what it is you're struggling to convey, unlike the natives of some other nearby countries. Another thing that's helpful is that unlike Greek, Arabic or Chinese, the written word is readable by the English speaker, at least there is some known relationship between the characters written and the sounds that are likely to result. Unlike English and French, where the correlation between the written and spoken language is accidental, or at best occasional, Italian pronunciation is logical and fairly consistent, so once you know the rules, it is fairly easy to pronounce what you read. Although there are lots of dialects in Italy, most of the time, Italians pronounce what they're saying. Ends of words are rarely truncated the way English speakers in England, New England, the US South, and black ghettos, drop final "R"s, leading to things like ratha, deah, mutha or gangsta. We don't know any French but although the language has the same Latin roots as Italian, it seems that a vast number of vowels and "x's" can be placed at the end of a word with little apparent effect, as the words dissolve in an indistinguishable nasal sound. Italian words end in vowels. While they rarely chop them, unless it helps the flow, Italians will add vowels to the end of foreign words and names, so that, for example, Robert usually comes out as Roberte (pronounced Roberteh), which of course would be the better sounding Roberto if simply kept in Italian. As if to compensate, they adopt compound English words into Italian by dropping the second word, so that nightclub becomes *night* in Italian, basketball becomes *basket* and Coca cola becomes *coca*, to cite a few common aberrations.

Just as Italians have trouble with English vowels, in trying to distinguish between ball, bell, bill, bowl, bowel and bull (or mother and mutha for that matter), English speakers have serious trouble making the distinction between single and double consonants, in fact we simply don't. Italian words are usually divided into many small syllables and a double consonant means one syllable ends on the first, and the following syllable starts with the second. This can be more important than you might think as there are many words with different meanings, which differ only by a single or double consonant. *Anno*

means year, while *ano* means anus. You ask someone how old he is by asking how many years he has. You get the idea.

While you aren't likely to get into conversation in Italian, you may want to ask where something is, or more likely, tell a waiter what you want on a menu, so a few basic pronunciation tips are in order:

- The letters "c" and "g" are similar in that both have hard and soft sounds. When followed by *a*, *o*, or *u*, the sound is always hard. Instead, to get a hard sound with an *e* or an *i*, the letter *h* is inserted. Thus *che* sounds like *k* and *chi* is always "key" as in architect. The sound of "ce" is what in English we would usually write with a "che", as in check. *Porchetta*, a roast pig, is pronounced like the pork that it is rather than a small porch. (Note: *ino/ina* and *etto/etta* are diminutive suffixes, which can be applied to most nouns.) With "gin" there is no confusion as it has the same smooth sound in either language, and "ghetto", being an Italian word, is the same as in English, and the sound is the model for all Italian words including a "ghe".
- "Gn" is for English speakers what "th" is for Italians, i.e. an impossibility, especially at the beginning of a word. Gnocchi come to mind. I don't like them, perhaps because eating them is something like speaking their name. The sound can't easily be described but spaghetti are better anyway. To get a rough idea, try replacing the *gn* with a *ny*, or *nyocchi*. That's not quite right, but it's as close as you're likely to get.
- Another nightmare sound is "gli". In the middle of a word it isn't so bad, as in "maglione" (sweater) or "migliore" (better), which are pronounced more or less as mah-l'YOH-neh and mee-l'YOH-neh. The *g* doesn't sound like either a hard or a soft *g*, but rather something more like a *y*. However, "gli" by itself is the article for certain irregular male plural nouns and is something we've struggled with for forty years. Oh well, we've known Italians who've tried longer than that to say "the" and it still comes out as "de" or "ze".
- Americans have come to learn that pizza has a "t-s" sound in the middle but are tempted to forget when confronted with a "zz" in less familiar words. Don't!

As for the important questions you might ask, thereby launching a torrential response, for which you won't be prepared, they are:

- **how?** *come?*
- **where?** *dove?*
- **when?** *quando?* and
- **how much?** *quanto?* or
- **how much does it cost?** *Quanto costa?* The response to the response to the latter will either be "*va bene*" (the Italian equivalent of OK) or "*troppo*", (too much).

We mentioned some suffixes above. There are others. A cat (*gatto*) is a *gattino* if still a kitten, but if he becomes really big, he's a *gattone*, and if ugly, he's a *gattaccio*, which we regard as an oxymoron, but that's another story. If it's a cat that comes into your yard to beat up your cat, he's a *gattaccio*. A beautiful cat is *bello*, but if he's very beautiful, he's *bellissimo*, unless female, in which case *bellissima*.

Carrying around an Italian dictionary or phrase book isn't likely to do you much good. However, we would suggest that you study something like a Berlitz phrase book for a few hours or days before coming to Italy, to try to understand the pronunciation. Internalize it. You don't have to learn all the words, although the more you can learn, the better. Just try to understand how Italian words are pronounced, and do not try to read Italian words as though they are English. It may seem like Italian has a lot of really long words. However long they may be, they all break down into a series of short, rapidly, but distinctly, pronounced syllables. Short words, like *come* or *dove*, are divided into two syllables with the second starting with a consonant, thus *co-me* or *do-ve*. The most difficult part is in figuring where the accent goes. As an example, we'll just rob one out of the Berlitz phrase book: impermeabile, which means raincoat. It breaks down into im-per-me-a-bi-le, or as Berlitz scientifically puts it: eem-pehr-meh-ah-bee-leh. Try it a couple of times. That's not really so hard! Think how you would explain to a non-English speaker how to pronounce a typical English word like *Worcestershire*, and the logic that defines the pronunciation. Then, just thank God you're trying to figure out Italian and don't have to learn English as a foreign language.
