

Grow Your Business And Life: Go With The Flow And Your Heart

When people learn I own an Italy cooking school tour company, they're intrigued, "How did you get started?" As you'll see in these three Italian cooking tour tales, I followed my heart, went with the flow and a series of happy "coincidences" occurred. You can apply these ideas to growing your life and your business.

Tale One: Piedmont's Barolo Wine Country In 1993 I was travelling in the Barolo wine country in northwest Italy. In a tourist office I found a flyer for local wine country hiking tours. I love hiking so I phoned the tour leader, Elio. Next year I faxed Elio for information on his June hiking weekend. Three weeks later only scant details came via fax. The tour cost very little, so I went. As we hiked, I told Elio I was researching a book on Italian cooking school holidays. He said, "I have a cooking tour itinerary for here." I looked at it, "You have four cooking lessons in four restaurants. Some of them I read about in the Wine Spectator. I want to go!" He said, "Find six people." He'd never run the cooking school tour, didn't speak English and didn't know who the clients would be. The Barolo wine country felt like a path with a heart with its gentle hills falling at all angles, covered with vineyards, fields, forests, topped with hill towns, some crowned with castles. So beautiful, so poetic! I'd hiked in tours in Tuscany with an English tour company that paid attention to good food, so I knew our type of client, but I'd never run or sold tours. I mailed press releases describing how you'd cook chocolate and hazelnut cake bathed in Moscato wine zabaglione sauce with the restaurant chef at the former summer home of King Carlo Alberto. The Globe & Mail newspaper in Toronto published the press release that attracted an entrepreneur group for our first cooking school tour in 1995. Now Elio and I offer cooking and wine tours in Piedmont, the Riviera and Tuscany.

Tale Two: Bologna & Its Countryside, Italy's Gastronomic Paradise In 1998 an animated man in Bologna, Marcello, phoned me. He'd heard of my guide to 110 cooking school holidays in Italy and said, "Next time you're in Bologna, come and see us about our cooking school tours." I filed away his contact information. Six months later Tony, an executive chef at a golf course in upstate New York, phoned me. His group of 16 chefs wanted a professional cooking program in Bologna. Nobody he'd contacted could offer a program in Bologna. I said, "I have a contact in Bologna." I emailed Marcello and with his wife, Raffaella, we created a professional cooking school tour itinerary for the chefs. When Tony said his group liked the itinerary, I went to Bologna to check out the cooking school tour operator and visit the people and places on the itinerary. In Italy I phoned Marcello, "I'll reserve a room at the same hotel I stayed another time in Bologna." "No, we'll look after that," he replied. They seemed like friendly, professional types so I'd trust them. We arranged to meet at Bologna's train station. There a man in blue jeans and a pullover appeared on his bicycle. "My wife will arrive in a few minutes with the car. Come over to our place for coffee." It was 3:00 p.m. so I had lots of time to get my hotel room. At their place as we talked for a few hours, I thought, "Where will I sleep tonight? I'll just have to trust a little longer." Finally they said, "Would you like to stay for dinner and stay the night? We have a small apartment right next door." They were down to earth, warm, fun people with years of experience in the travel business and I liked them. I was delighted to accept. That first time I stayed at their home, I helped do the dishes. A real shock for them. No other guest had ever done that. From then on, they treated me like family. I've stayed at my Bologna friends' home many times in these 10 years. After we ran the cooking school tour for the 16 chefs in 1999, I suggested we improve their existing cooking tour for gourmet tourists to make it like the chefs' tour. I'd discovered Italy's gastronomic paradise where I was fascinated on how they make treasures like parmesan cheese, balsamic vinegar and prosciutto. I'd met a cast of local chefs, food producers and local people full of joy about their work and life. A region with a big heart for food lovers! Ever since, Marcello, Raffaella and I have sold our cooking school tour in Bologna and its countryside and have expanded to Umbria and Le Marche.

Tale Three: Sicily's Mount Etna & Island of Stromboli In 1995 in Sicily I took day trips to the exotic Mount Etna lava fields and the island of Stromboli, an enchanting place with an active volcano on a black and green mountain, white houses, black volcanic sand beaches. In 2005 I finally went back to Stromboli on a fast boat from Naples and stayed three days. Then I discovered the fast boat back was finished for the season. Getting to Rome involved three hours on the ferry and six on the train. I mentally slapped myself for poor planning. A voice inside me said, "Maybe there's a reason." On the ferry I sat at a window with two empty seats beside me. On Stromboli's hillside I saw a rock formation in the shape of a big heart. Maybe Stromboli was a heart path for me. My practical side scoffed, "Rubbish! The only good conversation you had was with the hotel manager!" At the next port I got up to stretch my legs. When I got back to my seat, I saw an average looking Italian man in shorts, T shirt and hiking boots sitting one seat over from my window seat. A voice inside said, "Not a coincidence. Say something to him!" "Stromboli is very beautiful, isn't it?" I smiled. He was a guide taking groups hiking up to the volcano. I told him about our Italy cooking school tours. He offered me a ride from the port to the train station on his way home to the Mount Etna area. He was a nice man, so I accepted. Then he moved to the seat right beside me. He told me his family owned a tour company doing hiking tours on Mount Etna and Stromboli. I exclaimed, "I've always dreamed of running a cooking and hiking tour around the volcanoes at Etna and Stromboli. Would your family consider doing food tours?" We exchanged cards. At the station we shook hands. Back home, I emailed him. His family has been our Sicily cooking tour partner for two years now. What did I learn? Follow your heart, go with the flow and you'll meet the right people and make some of the best things in your life and business happen.

About the Author

Since 1995 Margaret Cowan has owned a tour company, Mama Margaret Italian Cooking Holidays. For a free report on finding the right Italy cooking tour for you, see <http://www.italycookingschools.com>