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Bambino on Board

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The Butcher, the Baker, and the Cappuccino Maker: A Tuscan Fairy Tale All Our Own

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Hillary Daniels/AOL Travel

This is indeed the simpler life I've been seeking for Jana and Max, the fairy-tale setting for our much-anticipated family vacation away from Chicago.

Now, three weeks into our stay, we prepare to leave Panzano grateful for our time here, but yearning to return.

Panzano is indeed a place lost in time, with a very simple lifestyle, but its people far from provincial. The town's services and facilities are mature and sophisticated, fully leveraging the passions and skills of its talented residents.

Dario Cecchini is a world-renowned butcher – a gastronomic craftsman whose trainees come from all over the world (Kazakhstan, Japan, Canada and the United States, among many others). Jana and I spent the morning at his shop yesterday, speaking with him about his life's work while marveling at his artistry as he whittled away effortlessly at everything pork and beef.

"You must give away what you have in order to retain it," is a loose translation of his philosophy, one he lives in earnest as he embraces apprentices from around the world who come to Panzano to train under his guidance.



Dario Cecchini in His Shop, Hillary Daniels/AOL Travel

Jana and I purchased a 1 kg steak (2.2 pounds) for 28 Euros (\$42), a fully justified pricetag for a piece of meat that was exceptionally tender, flavorful and every bit as succulent as one could buy at a big city steakhouse in the Windy City.

Carlo is the town's baker, whose breads receive their trademark crunch in his wood burning oven, from which *schacciata* has become our far and away favorite. Brushed in olive oil and dusted with sea salt, it's the perfect snack or meal any time of day (arrive just past 8:30 a.m. when it emerges from the oven).

Gianluca, as [mentioned](#) last week, runs La Curva café, the town's meeting point where coffee, gelato, beer and wine are served early morning through late evening (no siesta here) to a convivial gathering of locals. He sells more than 400 coffees each day – a staggering number considering the town numbers only 1,500 residents.

The unique, homespun offerings don't stop there. A children's store sells artisanally crafted products that could easily find their way into any high-end Mag Mile store. And, a custom clothes designer hand crafts shoes (starting at \$400 US), jackets, shirts and bags, selling them in a chic boutique that sits harmoniously across the street from a fruit and vegetable *bottega* (shop). From either doorstep, you can see Panzano's 11th century church.

There's an uncompromising commitment to excellence here; a convergence of talents and passions that are both humble and confident.

Yet, what struck me most about our experience in Panzano these past few weeks is the warm reception we've received from locals. Everywhere we go, we're greeted with a smile and "*Ciao*," an earnest initiation that is extended into conversation once they see we're traveling with a bambino.



Hillary Daniels/AOL Travel

"So this is Max," a woman at La Curva said to me this morning as we entered just past eight.

She is friends with Gianluca, who had told her about Max and our morning coffee visits (cappuccino for me, Similac Alimentum for Max). She smiled warmly at Max, who returned the gesture with a high-pitched squeal and rapid kicking.

"Ahh, bello," the woman said, rubbing Max's arm. "Bello." (Either that or she said, "Pillow." But I think "bello.")

"Bello" to you, Panzano. Et mille grazie. For

helping make our fairy tale come true.

Coming Up: We head to Switzerland, for snow-capped mountain walks in the face of the Eiger.