

VETRI DI MARE

By Judith Altruda



Sea glassing in Italy

One day while scrolling through the listings of a glassing group on Facebook, a wire-wrapped seahorse caught my eye. Crafted from deep teal Italian sea glass, lashed together with fine copper wire and dotted with small beads, it was exquisite.

The seller, Ornella di Filippo, resided in Vasto, on the Adriatic shore, where my father's family once lived. I messaged her with a photo from my grandfather's album captioned "the place where I was born" and she instantly recognized the building in the picture. She sent me photographs of his family home on the outskirts of town. It seemed incredible to learn that my father's family originated from a sea glass town.

When I found out that Ornella operates an Airbnb in Vasto, it was the beginning of a glassing journey that would take me to my

ancestral beaches, and also to two of Italy's most iconic islands, Capri and Elba.

Homecoming

Vasto is located on Italy's east coast, in the Abruzzo region. It ranges from the Apennine Mountains to the Adriatic coast. Uncrowded and affordable, with a diverse cuisine and world-class Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine, the town is a foodie's delight. On the outskirts of Vasto, I recognized the gates of my grandfather's home and caught a glimpse of a blue house at the end of a long, tree-lined drive.

Ornella and her husband, Marco, greeted us with open arms. They drove us into the oldest part of town, the *centro storico*. Across the *piazza* a large stone building stood, abutting a castle. They did not need to tell me it was the place of my grandfather's birth. I recognized it from the photograph, but it still seemed



unreal until I touched the cold stone edifice. Just then, a white-haired woman walked by with a small brown dog. Knowing the woman was from one of the oldest families in town, Marco told her about my pilgrimage. She smiled and said my grandfather's brother, Luigi, had been the godfather to her husband!

Our hosts treated Dennis and me to a home cooked meal, joined by their children, and after dinner, I gave Ornella a pair of earrings made with Ft. Bragg, California, sea glass. She gifted me with one of her amazing seahorses on a chain, which immediately went around my neck. We toasted to sea glass and friendship.

Salsedine

We awoke to torrential rain, but Marco and Ornella loaned us boots, jackets, and other essentials for beachcombing in the rain. I inhaled the sweet smell of flowering acacia trees blended with aromatic eucalyptus and the salty air. Ornella told me that the Italian word for this smell is *salsedine*.

The clatter of the sea over cobble is music to any glasser's ear, and this is what I heard as we descended a dirt path. We were the only people on the *spiaggia* (beach).

My grandfather wrote of Vasto. "Sometimes, on clear days, I could see distant phantom-like shapes of brigantines sailing on the horizon carrying, I was told, lumber and grain and minerals. But to my youthful imagination, they were manned by scimitared crews and laden with silks and spices and jades." I thought of him standing on this very beach, and hoped somehow he would know I was here today.

I crouched down to look through the scallop shells strewn amongst the cobble and found my first piece of glass, a deep teal, followed by a large frosted olive green and then smaller blues and whites. My feet sank



into the gravel as I walked along and then I saw...a pale green cat's eye marble! My heart surged as I bent to pick it up.

I scanned the beach for my friends, waving wildly. Ornella and I compared our finds. She had a beautiful piece of chunky lavender glass and a handful of green, teal, and aqua. Marco found an exceptional red and blue marble. Ornella confided that her husband finds the best glass. I had to laugh because my previous sea glass hosts in England and Japan had said the same thing about their husbands. After a lunch of freshly caught prawns, rock fish, mussels, and scallops, served with pasta and the local wine, we poked around in antique shops and visited the site of ancient Roman baths.

Colors

I remarked on the variety of the glass and asked about its origins. Ornella told me this was once a landing place for ships' cargo until a modern port was built at Punta Pena in the 1950s.

The oldest glass is black, from containers used over the centuries to shield olive oil or wine from light. Teal blue and green glass mostly likely came from electrical insulators. Aqua and sea foam Codd marbles came from *gassosa* (sparkling beverage) bottles produced by the Di Iorio Beverage Company in Molise in the early 1900s. Cobalt glass is from medicine bottles or vodka bottles, and brown glass is from bottles used for beer or medicine.



La Spiaggia

The next day we returned to the same beach as the sun emerged to chase away the last of yesterday's rain. The sea changed from iron grey to dazzling turquoise streaked with deeper blue. Waves swept back and forth over the rocks with shushing regularity, as if the beach was breathing.

I watched as a white-haired man attached a rope to a fishing dory and pulled the boat in from the surf. He displayed a live seahorse in his outstretched hand for me and afterward, he released the tiny creature back into the sea. I pointed to Ornella's sea glass horse, which I wore on a long chain. Marco told him that the horse was made from *vetri di mare* (glass of the sea). The old fisherman chuckled with amusement and commented,



"Why would anyone care about sea glass?"

I learned later that this is the general attitude of most Italians.

Arrivederci

From our seats on the upper level of the bus, we waved to our hosts. Packed in my suitcase were bags of sea glass, rocks, and shells. Beautiful as they were, the experiences of the past three days were the real treasure. We headed for Naples and the Amalfi coast, to

meet another sea glass collector, Rebecca Di Donna. She has a remarkable collection of sea glass, tiles, and pottery gathered along the Amalfi coast.

Later that week Dennis and I took a charter boat to Capri. I put Rebecca's glassing tips to use as soon as we landed on the gravelly beach at Marina Piccola, scouring the rocks beneath the

restaurant's deck, collecting two large handfuls of small to medium-sized glass.

Exile on Elba

We rode a ferry to Italy's third largest island, Elba, the place of Napoleon's first exile. Dennis's cousins, Erika and Maria, drove us along roads climbing high above the sea and stopped at a cactus-covered lookout point to view the islands of Corsica and Montecristo. Among the most beautiful beaches was Innamorata (the lover's beach) a secluded cove, perfect for lovers' trysts and au naturale sunbathing. The glass was not plentiful, but what I found was jewelry quality.

We checked the beach near the more populated Portoferraio. Dennis and his cousins helped me look for *vetri di mare*, and I came home with pockets full.

Glassing in Italy

Compared to Seaham, Fort Bragg, or Japan, Italy is a different glassing experience. You may be the only hunter on the beach as *vetri di mare* is not a sought-after commodity by most Italians. The best time to go is the Spring before the tourist season. With research and imagination, you can find glass and sea pottery at seaside resorts, ports, and restaurants. Even better is having a local host or guide, and I must say *grazie mille* to Ornella, Rebecca, Erika, and Maria for their time and generosity.



Besides the marble, my most prized piece is a dark olive green heart, found in Vasto.

The beauty of sea glass goes beyond classifications of color, shape, size, and rarity. It's a time and space connection to ancestors, culture, and history. Whether used to make art or mindfully collected, its value goes beyond silica, sodium, and calcium.

To quote Humphrey Bogart in the *Maltese Falcon*, my father's favorite film, it is "the stuff that dreams are made of."

Read more and see more photos from Judith's travels at <http://blog.judithaltruda.com/>

Ornella's guest house is "il vecchio ulio," named for an old olive tree that grows in the patio. She speaks several languages, including English, and will take her guests on beachcombing trips. <https://www.airbnb.it/rooms/5397453>