



Another round: Alcohol views differ in Italy

Dateline: Italia

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I was surprised for a moment when my professor told me Italians stereotypically think Americans drink too much, but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

The stereotypical American group at a bar or restaurant in Italy usually orders a little too much wine with their meal or tends to buy one more pint of beer than necessary on their way to becoming loud and/or obnoxious.

And upon further reflection, I realized that on rare occasions even I have been part of just such a group of Americans at a bar or restaurant confirming this stereotype.

Typically, Italians don't drink excessively at restaurants or bars because they are not so culturally inclined. When asking my professor why Italians do things a certain way, one of his favorite responses is, "Don't ask why, that's just the way they do things here."

Even though there is not often an easy answer to questions of cultural difference, some reasons other than "that's just the way they do things here" usually can be found.

My professor pointed me in a new direction and gave me the phone number of an American counselor and psychotherapist, who has lived in Italy for 20 years and has researched the differences in drinking habits of Italian and American college students.

Signora Marianne Bellini has interviewed students from many colleges in Italy and America for her study, including some from UF, and was very helpful.

Bellini pointed out several institutional, social and cultural reasons for the differences in attitudes toward alcohol. As most of you probably know and envy, there is no age limit for buying or drinking alcohol in Italy and most of Europe.

Young children regularly drink wine with the rest of the family during meals, even if it is watered down. They grow up in an atmosphere where the emphasis is on a good meal complemented by a great glass of wine, Bellini said.

When Italian children are older, many still are surrounded by this atmosphere because they do not leave their homes to go to college, but live with their parents until they get a job or marry, she said.

"It isn't this thing that you have to get smashed," she said. "Kids will drink some at home before they go out to a disco or a concert, and they usually have a little more while they're there."

Gee, I thought, that sounds just like me, why do they think I drink too much?

That's just the way they do things here. All my questioning has not brought me one true answer of why things are different. What it has brought me, however, is a little more insight into Italian culture.

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