

SCOOP

La Dolce Vita A middle-aged Chinese man rises from his chair and glances nervously at his fellow students. He searches for the right words, and hesitantly begins to describe his travel plans to his classmates - in Italian. His pronunciation is shaky, but his determination is clear. Gregory Chun is an experienced traveler with a passable knowledge of French and German. Now, having fallen under the spell of *bella Italia*, he spends three hours a week at **La Scuola Italiana** (2317 Fourth Ave.; 206.860.0354), an Italian-language school in Belltown.

Redmond native Tina Morelli, owner and operator of this school, believes that success in learning a language depends both on the motivation of the student and on keeping the teacher entertained. Her "simpatico" approach to students is the product of her own experience learning two languages. Reared in a family that spoke Abruzzese, an Italian dialect, Morelli says, "I cried when I couldn't understand what was happening in my grade-school class." Later, while attending the University of Washington, she learned formal Italian, which led to scholarships to study in Florence and Venice and, eventually, to a job as director of undergraduate studies in the Italian Department at New York University.

After being called back to Seattle to deal with a set of family crises, Morelli taught at a local language institute and a junior college. But she thought frequently about operating her own school, at which she could keep class sizes down to fewer than eight students. Her opportunity came in 1999, when she and her husband, Jeffrey Lee, purchased the classic Two Bells tavern on Fourth Avenue. The property included a small, separate art studio that in April 2000 became La Scuola Italiana.

Many of Morelli's students are walk-in recruits, attracted by the sign in her window. Some hope to reconnect with their family roots, searching communal registries for clues or tracking down lost relatives in tiny mountain villages. Others simply plan to travel in Italy. Referring to the book by Frances Mayes, Morelli says the number of "*Under the Tuscan Sun* students" has increased since that book recently became a best-seller.

Morelli prepares her pupils to play their part in the *conversazione*. If you, like philosopher E.M. Cioran, believe that "one does not inhabit a country; one inhabits a language," then that conversation is the essential element in understanding *bella italia*.
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