

Grazie dei fiori... And for everything else

Marina Melchionda (March 14, 2009)



Philadelphia, the city that hosts one of the largest Italian communities of the US, dedicates its Flower Show to the Bel Paese. The result is a journey throughout the most popular spots of the country as seen through the eyes of Americans



Grazie dei fiori (Thank you for the flowers) was a song written and sung several years ago by the popular Italian singer Nilla Pizzi. Now we feel it is almost our duty to dedicate it to the city of Philadelphia or, more precisely, to the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society: they are the main promoters of the Philadelphia Flower Show which has been named “Bella Italia” this year. More than 45.000 square feet of gardens, floral compositions and reproductions of Italian monuments, houses and small and fascinating neighborhoods delighted visitors coming from all parts of the United States (and not only) from the 1st to the 8th of March.

Rather than being a faithful representation of Italy, the Show could be identified as a concretization of the Italian Dream, the sparkling image Americans have of Italy, the country where the magic of “Vacanze Romane” comes to life.

Guests were taken on a guided tour of the lush hills of the Tuscan countryside, the romantic waters of Venice, the artful flora of Florence, and many other distinctive landscapes of Italy. The reproduction of the majestic gardens of ancient Rome was one of the most outstanding exhibits including stately fountains and statuary, boxwood garden walls, cypress and olive trees.

Among the hundreds of companies participating in the show, the [American Institute of Floral Designers](#) [2] (AIFD) offered an original representation of Italian fashion: a 2,400-square-foot walk-through boutique set to the backdrop of stylized, hand-drawn architecture. Reminiscent of a high-end shop in Milan, it evoked the Italian way of life with handbags, shoes, dresses, hats, perfume, jewelry and art interpreted in floral designs.

The entry-way to the Show also deserves to be mentioned: visitors walked through Roman arches adorned with roses, delphinium, geraniums and petunias overflowing from urns and columns. From there they could enjoy a complete overview of the display, including entire corridors of porches, balconies and windows. They had that rustic and plain style that Americans associate with Italy. Maybe most of them seemed to be more similar to those you would find in little towns in the center and south of the United States, perhaps in Texas or in Alabama. However, at the end of the day, does it really matter?

The Americans were not the only ones who organized their representation of Italy at the [Pennsylvania Convention Center](#) [3]: Italian institutions and businessmen had their own Piazza where they showed and honored the “excellence of Italian production and manufacture”. A symbol of Italian life style, the piazza (square) is viewed in the Belpaese as a place where people of all social classes and ages meet and exchange ideas, experiences, opinions.

This has also been created in Philadelphia, where the regions of Lazio ([Sviluppo Lazio Agency](#) [4]), Campania ([Eurosportello-Special Agency of Naples Chamber of Commerce for International Activities](#) [5]) and Calabria came together to present some of the most exclusive Italian products. Among them, Piaggio’s [Vespa](#) [6], [Colavita](#) [7], Pomo d’Oro (jewelry creations by Gianluca Moschi), [Calabrese](#) [8] (a Naples based company specialized in the manufacture of ties and travel bags) and F.lli Fiorino Gloves. Architect Rosa Agliata Abruzzese managed the arrangements of the stands and the Piazza itself. She told us that “in Italy, the Piazza is the heart of the community. It is where commerce takes place, young lovers steal a kiss, a family shares gelato and grandparents discuss politics. The Piazza is Italy in every possible way; it is like a microcosm where you can find the unimaginable”. This was actually our first impression: between the gloves and the ties you could find a small stand where the “best pasta from Gragnano (Naples) was sold”. Or, again, a Vespa was parked just beside an elegant leather sofa and a booth for focaccia lovers offering samples. Maybe - why not ? - this really was the best possible representation of an Italian Piazza.

And what kind of American representation of Italy would it be without some good wine and cheeses to accompany it? This year for the first time the Philadelphia Flower Show also hosted a Wine and Spirits Shop where visitors were offered more than 100 different kinds and brands of wine, from red and white to the sparkling ones. While tasting them, the hungry lunch hour guests could also participate in a “Totally Italian” culinary lesson and demo presented by chef Joseph Chilling assisted by the students of the [International Culinary School of the Art Institute of Philadelphia](#) [9].

From what we were able to see, our fellow Americans loved everything about the show. As a matter

of fact, during the press conference PHS President Jane Pepper stated that traditionally the Philadelphia Flower Show significantly enhances the flux of tourists directed to the country to which the exhibition is dedicated. This happened two years ago in the case of Ireland, which witnessed a huge increase of the volume of tourists coming from the district of Philadelphia. Very probably, Italy will have the same luck: "Many of my friends came to visit the show", said Mrs. Pepper. "Some of them have not visited Italy yet but told me that after these beautiful representations the trip has bounced to the top of their lists".

The show, obviously, is also a panacea for Philadelphia's local economy: an average of 250,000 visitors, 700 busses and tour groups come every year from as far away as Canada. About 20% of them stay overnight in a Philadelphia area hotel and more than 60 % dine in a Philadelphia restaurant during their visit. The result is an overall impact of \$30 million that benefits small and big businesses situated in the capital of Pennsylvania

The Italian Flower Show thus seems to be the right initiative in the right place and at the right time. The new Consul of Philadelphia Luigi Scotto was nominated just two months ago and was impressed by the friendship and admiration American people demonstrate towards the Italians living in the area and Italy itself. The city's ties to Italy are not new: the district hosts the second largest Italian community of the country, after the one in New York. Mr. Scotto, who was present at the press conference that inaugurated the Show, also told us: "More than 200 Italian companies are settled in this district, contributing enormously to the economic life of the area. I feel proud to represent my country in Philadelphia, a city that welcomed me in the warmest way possible. There are several projects that I want to carry on during my mandate, among which there surely is the mission to build a new "Sistema Italia", just like the one they have in New York: together with other Italian institutions, we will promote our country's economy and culture and assist our citizens in every possible way".

The Show is actually the first step towards the fulfillment of this goal, since it is in part the result of a close partnership among [ENIT](#) [10], the Consulate and the [Italy-America Chamber of Commerce of Great Philadelphia](#) [11]. It couldn't be more appreciated by the American public and it surely enhances Italy's image here in this country.

So, again, Grazie dei Fiori....

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