

feet in width and fifteen feet in depth. The entire interior space of the Pantheon measures some 142 feet in diameter, as well as in height—a perfect sphere—large enough to contain the aforementioned dome of St. Peter’s or the nave of Chartres Cathedral; yet unlike Chartres, a completely freestanding structure.

As I proceeded to the center of this immense rotunda, I found myself completing a 360 degree circuit beneath the oculus to take it all in—an idealized circle of Hadrian’s invulnerable empire and representation of heaven itself; the physical sanction of “all the gods” that Rome (under Hadrian, of course) should rule the world. But the Pantheon’s interior is more than a doorway to Rome’s imperial past, for the tombs in its pavement and niches are also windows into the Italian Renaissance and the Risorgimento under the Savoy kings.

Along the western wall above the pavement I visited the tomb of Raphael, who had requested in his will to be buried in the Church of Santa Maria della Rotonda, as the Pantheon has also been known ever since Pope Boniface IV (608–615) received it from the Byzantine Emperor Phocas and converted it into a church in dedication to the Virgin and all the Christian martyrs. Further on, toward the altar that rests against the wall opposite the entrance, I came upon the tomb of the Savoy King Umberto I, and continuing past the altar to the right, were the highly ornamented tombs of the Savoys Vittorio Emanuele II and Umberto II. The inscription for Victor Emmanuel II reads: “Vittorio Emanuele II Padre Della Patria” (“Victor Emmanuel II, Father of the Country”). All of Italy’s history—past and present, pagan and Christian—is represented here in marbled coolness beneath the great coffered dome and that eternally watchful eye—and the circle of sky beyond.

Dinner in Piazza della Rotonda

Outside in the piazza, the sky had mellowed into a deep shade of azure and the air seemed a bit cooler than it had been upon my arrival an hour earlier. I was ready for dinner, so I choose a table at one of those tavola caldas that flanked the square—the Caffè Di Rienzo. It was situated on the right as I faced the Pantheon. The umbrellas were now closed, as evening was settling in, affording one an unobstructed view of the Pantheon’s façade. Before taking a seat, I revisited the fountain in the center of the piazza for a more detailed inspection.



Pantheon at twilight from Caffè Di Rienzo.
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While the basin was completed during the reign of Pope Gregory XIII Boncompagni toward the end of the sixteenth century, the decorative work that included the central obelisk with its surrounding groups of grotesques, serpents, and dolphins was accomplished during the pontificate of Pope Clement XI Albani (1700–1721) in 1711 by Filippo Barigioni. Barigioni seems to have intended his overall design to mimic in miniature Bernini’s “Fountain of the Four Rivers” in the nearby Piazza Navona. I must admit to finding the grotesques rather comical, though thoroughly in line with the Baroque tradition of high drama that Bernini had for all intents and purposes defined. The basin itself was in the shape of a Greek cross superimposed over a square, bringing to mind the more Bramantesque Renaissance design for the floor plan of St. Peter’s.

As I peered into the crystal clear water cascading from the cherubic mouths of the grotesques and dolphins into the basin, the golden floodlights at the bottom of the pool suddenly came to life, casting a rippling illumination upon the entire set. The fountain, including the granite obelisk, seemed to pulsate in golden waves of light. At the base of the obelisk, beneath the papal tiara and crossed keys, was the inscription, “Clemens XI Pont. Max. Fontis et Fori ornamento Anno Sal. MDCCXI Pontif. XI,”

translating: “Clement XI, Supreme Pontiff, decorated this fountain and square in the year of our Lord 1711, in the eleventh year of his Pontificate.”

Enjoying a somewhat lengthy pontificate, most notable for his failure to mediate a peace between the empire, France, and Spain during the War of Spanish Succession, Clement also censored the Jesuits’ cultural assimilation methods of evangelization in China, resulting in the persecution of Chinese Christians and the expulsion of the missionaries. It was as clear as the water, which sparkled and shimmered in his fountain, that diplomacy was not his forte. Well, at the very least, he left this beautiful monument and piazza, which has added much charm to an already enchanting vista, as his final legacy.

I retreated to a table on the café’s already crowded outer perimeter that would enable me to enjoy the undulating fountain and the trickling music of the water while still observing the Pantheon’s façade, now also floodlit, in full view. But the gentle music was soon interrupted by a more familiar sound—the sound of guitar chords ringing through the evening air on the fountain’s opposite side.

As the guitar notes became louder, I noticed two “chitarriste” circling the far end of the fountain, discussing and tuning their instruments as they walked. I immediately recognized one of them—the dark-haired, bearish one who was wearing the football “Giants” baseball cap: it was Mario, the guitarist I had met in Trastevere a few nights before. His friend, gaunt with slick-backed gray hair, deeply set dark eyes, and a weather-beaten face, presented quite a contrast in appearance—if not style. When he smiled, I also noticed he was minus a few of his upper teeth. The pair of them seemed to make a set with the grotesques of the fountain, I thought.

As they discussed and debated the itinerary of their musical program, my waiter approached and bid me “good evening” with a pleasant “Buona sera, signore!” His name was “Issaia Salvatore,” or just “Salvatore,” as he preferred to be called. It would be Salvatore who eventually introduced me to the phrase “acqua di fontana” whenever I wished simply to order ordinary tap water with my meal. He was a very short, slim man of no more than forty, with twinkling, olive black eyes, slick, jet-black hair, and an ever-present, “happy to be of service” smile and quick gate. He appeared somewhat out of place before the Pantheon—as did all the waiters—in his formal, black tie attire. Before taking my order, he placed a flask of “acqua di fontana” on the table along with a small dish of picholine olives that were bathed in olive oil, rosemary, and lemon zest. Believe me, it was hard to have just one of these delectable little treats that were far less salty than most Sicilian or Kalamata olives. And the interplay

of the rosemary and lemon zest added just the right counterpoint to the fruitiness of the olives and the oil. I noticed the menu included an “insalate di mare”—a seafood salad of mussels, clams, octopus, calamari, shrimp and the like—prepared with lemon and olive oil in a raddichio leaf “shell.” It sounded like just the right appetizer after the heat of the day, cool and refreshing. As an accompaniment, I ordered a mezzo-flask of Frascati, which was appropriately chilled, and “vitello Milanese”—a paper-thin veal cutlet served with a lemon wedge—as my “secondo.” Salvatore beamed and said, “Subito, signore!” (“Immediately, sir!”) as he seemed to click his heels, pirouette, and scoot off smartly through the crowded tables. It was really quite comical, and from that moment on I christened him, “Salvatore Subito.”

The stars were starting to make their nightly appearance in that velvety blue vault of sky once more, and the lamps that protruded from the walls of the buildings in the square were now shedding their soft amber glow, slowly growing brighter by the moment. Mario and his buddy—whose name I later learned from Salvatore was “Luigi” or just the diminutive “Gigi”—were now approaching the circle of tables, ready to launch into their set. As I caught Mario’s eye, he smiled and gave me a nod of recognition. I beckoned him towards my table, and when he approached I held out a 10,000 lire note and simply said, “Quanto Sei Bella Roma.” He nodded and exclaimed excitedly, “Si, si signore! Grazie, molto grazie!” He returned to Gigi, who was giving his guitar a final tune-up, and whispered something in his ear. Gigi gave me an approving nod and that semi-toothless grin that would come to be his trademark; they knew a soft touch when they saw one!



The author with the “*chitarriste*” Mario and Gigi. Photo by Chris Doyle.

The two immediately broke into the opening chords of “Quanto Sei Bella Roma,” while Gigi also rattled out an accompaniment on a harmonica that was attached to the neck of his guitar, like an Italian Bob Dylan. Singing the lead, Gigi’s warbling voice—richly supple and dark of timbre—was olive oil for the ears. The Italian lyrics danced and swirled in the deepening twilight, while the voice that animated them contorted and strained at times to reach its limits, once again in that Arabic style of chanting so typical of the Neapolitan troubadour, as Mario sang and played a mandolin style counterpoint. Then, after the first two verses and refrains, Gigi played solo in a rumba-styled rhythm—his right hand strumming blurred triplets—while gyrating and shuffling from side to side, huffing and puffing on the harmonica. At last, the two voices soared in unison to a reverberating crescendo at the final refrain, as the piazza erupted in applause and shouts of “Bravi!” I felt honored and a little embarrassed, as both performers nodded and gestured in my direction. I noticed others in the crowd also offering me signs of approval at my informed selection of the popular folk song, so I smiled and waved back, feeling a bit like a celebrity.

By no means did these traveling minstrels offer perfection of form, as their voices struggled like two songbirds fighting to take flight against the wind. Yet, it is precisely in such imperfection—that diamond in the rough quality, if you will—where one finds the purity of soul and raw brilliance that lay at the heart of Italian folk music. In a very real sense, the untrained voice of the chitarrista echoing in the evening piazza—the “*voce della notte*”—*is* the soul of Italy itself. This was the real Rome—the real Italy—I had come to love that summer, and in the summers that followed.

As Salvatore was serving my “secondo” of tender veal following that spectacular “*insalata di mare*”—which quickly became another favorite of mine that summer—Mario and Gigi continued with more or less the same program I had heard the other evening in Trastevere. Once again, on-lookers made requests of their favorites, and again “*Volare*” seemed to be the song of choice. They concluded their set with “*Come Prima*,” and once again Mario doffed his cap and proceeded from table to table to collect the meager gratuities with a humble “*Grazie; grazie lei.*” I asked Salvatore whether he knew much about either of these men. He explained that they both had apartments in Trastevere, though Gigi was from the Campagna region near Naples where he often retreats when Rome becomes too hot. This undoubtedly accounted to some degree for his singing style, I thought. It appears that Mario, on the other hand, was a born and bred Trasteverino, and worked as an auto mechanic by day. Both had been friends forever, it seems, and spend most of their time living in the piazzas with their first love—their guitars. As for Salvatore, he was proud to be Sicilian like his

gray-haired brother-in-law Michele, the kindly “padrone” (owner) of the café that bears his name, “Di Rienzo.” Michele’s dark eyes, warm and wise, and quick smile conveyed the feeling that one was spending an evening visiting an old and learned uncle, where one was always welcome and valued.

The Piazza della Rotondo quickly became for me the heart of Rome, and as such I became an almost nightly regular at the Caffè Di Rienzo with the “Mario and Gigi show”—if not for dinner, then for a glass of wine or perhaps an espresso with “Salvatore Subito” and Michele, who soon became my good friends. Eventually, Mario and Gigi looked forward to seeing me at my usual table and would ask me to explain my absence if, per chance, I missed a “show” or two. In the years that followed whenever I returned, Michele would greet me with the embrace one reserves for a dear old friend and shake his head from side to side, exclaiming in somewhat astonished fashion, “sempre giovane!”—forever young! It’s become unthinkable for me to visit Rome and not dine at Di Rienzo’s with Salvatore, Michele, Mario, and Gigi—and, of course, that wonderful fountain before Hadrian’s Pantheon, the eternal heart of the Eternal City.

Piazza Navona

After dining at Di Rienzo’s, I retreated to the nearby Piazza Navona—the other set piece of the Campo Marzio district—for coffee and desert. Rome is a city of piazzas and fountains—from the tiny, quiet Piazza Mattei with its charming Tartarughe (Turtles) fountain, no wider than a narrow street, to the junctions of Piazzas Barberini, Venezia, and del Popolo with their swirling, hellish traffic, to the race track ellipsis of Piazza Navona, arguably the grandest of all the piazze with its central “Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi” (“Fountain of the Four Rivers”). Of all the piazze in Rome, perhaps no other best exemplifies that great descendant of the Roman Forum and progenitor of the modern European square better than Piazza Navona.

“Navona” derives its name from the corruption of the Latin word “agone,” meaning “combat,” and was once the site of the games played “in agone” or simply “n’agone,” and finally “navone”—“navona.” The piazza is situated upon the ancient remains of Emperor Domitian’s Stadium along a north/south axis—part of these remains are in fact visible just beyond the northern exit—which affords it a race course appearance, and is linked to Piazza della Rotonda to its east by way of the narrow Via Giustiniani.