

## CIBO, DIVERTIMENTO, RISATE E APPRENDIMENTO!

by Pete Magnani

Food, fun, laughter and learning" is how Roberto Alvarez describes his Introductory Italian Language classes, which he conducts at locations throughout Pinellas County, most recently including the Beach Arts Center in Indian Rocks. He has developed a unique curriculum that combines learning language, discovering Italian culture, and enjoying a meal with fellow students

Roberto was born in Gary, Indiana. He was the first of his brothers and sister to be born in the U.S. His father was from Spain and met Roberto's mother in her hometown of Napoli, Italy. His older siblings were born there before his parents moved the family to Indiana. Italian was the household language and Roberto spoke the Neapolitan dialect from a young age.

Roberto attended Indiana University Bloomington and was an avid sports fan. He studied radio and communications and became a DJ for the college radio station, eventually doing play-by-play and color commentary for the basketball and football games. He also worked as a camera operator and later as a reporter on the college sports TV show.

In 1978, Roberto spent His junior year studying abroad in Italy at Università di Bologna, the world's oldest college in continuous operation. It was the first time he met his Italian extended family. He decided that when he graduated, he would move to Italy and pursue a career in journalism. He graduated college in 1979, and a leg injury derailed his planned move.

While recovering, he got hired at the Lake Central High School in St. John Indiana. The school had a television and communications curriculum that produced a student TV sports show. Roberto started as Control Room Supervisor and eventually ran the entire program before leaving for job as a sports reporter at a TV station in El Paso, Texas.

In 1988, Roberto came to Tampa, working for WTOG Channel 44. In his seven years there, he held a multitude of positions, working as an on-field reporter and sports anchor covering the Rays, Bucs, and Lightning. He also hosted the Coaches' Show. He left in 1995 for a television station in New Orleans

before returning to Florida in 1998.

From 1990 to 2010, Roberto traveled to Italy once every year, and since 2010 he has returned every other year. In 2002, he wanted to do something different and began teaching Italian lessons at the St. Pete Community Center. His class consisted of four 90-minute lessons over four weeks. He had the inspiration to try to move out of the community center setting and began to approach neighborhood Italian restaurant owners about holding



classes there. Students sit together and learn to speak Italian while enjoying a meal (and maybe some wine.) Now, Roberto teaches classes at several restaurants in Pinellas county, as well as at the Beach Arts Center in Indian Rocks Beach. Along with basic language instruction, he incorporates art, literature, and Italian culture into his classes. "If you want to reconnect with your heritage, converse with family, or just have a different kind of night out, this is the class for you," Roberto says. "Its food, fun, laughter and learning."

Many of his students take the class ahead of a vacation in Italy. One of his greatest pleasures is to hear from former students who made their second trip to Italy after taking his class and had a much more enjoyable time being able to speak the language. "In the airport when you first arrive, all the signs are in English as well as Italian," he says. "Once you get out of the airport, it's a different story, and you'll wish you'd paid more attention in class!"

In his classes, Roberto tries to introduce aspects of Italian culture with a goal of erasing some of the stereotypes that movies and television has created about Italians. "Italy is more than mafia and meatballs," he says. "I try undo some of the damage that TV has done and let my students know that Italian culture is more Dante than DeNiro."

In 2015, Roberto led 10 of his students on a tour of Italy. They visited Napoli, Florence, the Amalfi Coast and Rome. He even brought them for a home-cooked meal at a relative's home in Napoli. He hopes to organize another tour next year, and continue bringing intimate groups to Italy in the future.

Currently, Roberto offers restaurant-based Italian classes in Tierra Verde, Oldsmar, St. Pete, Palm Harbor, and Sarasota. His latest class at the Beach Arts Center in Indian Rocks Beach began February 24th and will run through late March. Roberto expects to begin another class at Beach Arts around April 14th. He also offers private instruction in your home or via Zoom. For more information or to register visit [www.learnitalian.us](http://www.learnitalian.us) or send an email [ralvarez@learnitalian.us](mailto:ralvarez@learnitalian.us).

