

A Flood of Champagne Memories

By Sam Seabright

It was a beautiful, warm and sunny day in Detroit that Saturday October 29, 1966. Early up, I excitedly got ready for the big day: Wedding Day. After the marriage ceremony and champagne reception, Brenda and I rested and departed the next day for our honeymoon in Italy.

Upon arriving in Rome, we found a beautiful hotel atop a hill overlooking the city. The next days in the rain we did the requisite sightseeing. Returning wet and cold to the hotel one evening, on the elevator Brenda overheard a couple saying that Venice, which we wanted to visit, might soon be flooded, so we decided to go the very next day.

We rented a Fiat and took the scenic route via Florence, visiting quaint hill towns, sampling the local food and wines. Arriving late in Florence, we parked the car in the street and checked into a hotel by the Arno River near the Ponte Vecchio, the bridge with leather and jewelry shops on it. Tired and happy, we looked forward to days of shopping and sightseeing, and then on to Venice. But that was not to be.

After midnight someone was banging on the door: “*il fiume! Il fiume*”, he screamed. Knowing some Italian, I knew it meant: “The river! The river!” meaning we were about to be flooded and must leave at once.

We packed up and ran in the driving rain and darkness, away from the river, with no idea where we were going. Our legs gave out and we ducked into a small hotel, checked in, wearily climbed into our second floor room, and slept.

At daybreak, we awoke to a roaring noise.

Outside our window was a raging flood. The Arno River rushed down the street pushing cars, oil drums, vegetable carts, and all kinds of debris. The water rose up to nine feet deep, almost to our floor level. It was still raining. With no heat, electricity or running water, we had cheese, fruit and champagne for breakfast. We brushed our teeth with champagne. I shaved with champagne and we washed with champagne.

Outside, the river continued to roar. We could see the train station about a block away. Tops of cars were visible, scattered in the station square. The rushing water was muddy and shiny with oil slick, as occasional fuel drums continued to pass by our window. The flood continued all day, and peaked at dusk. We dined on melon, prosciutto and champagne.

By the next morning the flood subsided, leaving only a trickle and lots of mud. We ventured out to finally see Florence—a walking tour. We saw shopkeepers shoveling mud, throwing out ruined items, and trying to get their lives back in order. We visited the main city square; people were dipping water from the fountain where Michaelangelo’s statue of David greeted us, outside the Uffizi Gallery containing priceless manuscripts and books, wet and muddy from the flood.

We decided to visit our original hotel, but it was not accessible. The street between it and the Arno was completely washed out, guarded by a contingent of *carabinieri*, the famously handsome policemen. Gone was our rented Fiat. The river rose so high it wiped out the stores on the Ponte Vecchio, leaving holes where the river tore through the walls.

We spotted a small building, the historic old Baptistry, and looked closer. The magnificent bronze panels on the Doors of Ghiberti had fallen into the mud.

Our chance acquaintances, Chuck and Mike, heard that one train—just one—would be leaving soon. We rushed back to the hotel, packed again, and hurried over to the train station. We were not too late to get a ticket to Rome, the only stop. The trip took all night, via Ancona by the Adriatic Sea, then south and west to Rome. Warily sitting on our suitcases, we were happy to be on that crowded train.

We still celebrate it after 43 years... with champagne and memories. ▼