

Discover La Dolce Vita

Experience the Gold Medal Plates winning auction trips

Written by: Laura Goldstein

Photos: supplied by Laura Goldstein

Actor **Marcello Mastroianni** had to wander the sordid streets of Rome looking for the illusive meaning of life in Fellini's 1960s film, *La Dolce Vita*. Today, our love of food, wine, celebrity and travel still impassions us to discover "The Sweet Life" — exemplified in all of its many connotations in the Gold Medal Plates (GMP).

Gold Medal Plates is the brainchild of Toronto husband and wife team, Stephen Leckie and Karen Blair. They experienced their eureka moment in 2003 while watching an announcement on CTV that Vancouver had been awarded the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Why not pair up Canada's crème de la crème in sports, food and wine to create the ultimate fund-raising event?

"We recognized how athletes and chefs had a lot in common, always pushing their own boundaries," explains GMP co-founder and CEO, Leckie. "The foodie movement was exploding all around us with the popularity of food channels, celebrity chefs and reality shows. When we started Gold Medal Plates we realized we also needed exotic destination trips actually led by Olympic athletes and Canadian musicians to further entice public support (seven Auction trips this year with over 500 participants.) The Canadian Olympic Foundation's, 'Own the Podium' became our beneficiary, the Canadian Culinary Championships our nationwide competition, and 10 years later we've raised over 7.2 million dollars!"

"I get to see the world by the seat of my pants," laughs three-time Olympic match sprint cycling champion, Curt Harnett reminiscing not about competition, but his adventures at the GMP Auction Trip, Under the Tuscan Sun, in which he has participated for three years. "Although cycling isn't mandatory, there are many 'Type A' personalities on this trip who actually trained for a year either running, spinning or riding, building up their stamina. We even had a woman who had struggled through bouts of cancer treatment and went on this cycling trip just to challenge herself. But I love that they can relinquish some of that control and enjoy those postcard moments too," confides Harnett.

"Marni (Vancouver's own Marni McBean, three-time Olympic gold medalist in rowing) organizes everybody according to cycling abilities: cappuccino, macchiato, espresso and DOUBLE espresso for the real diehards and we'd go off exploring wineries and the winding country roads of Chianti," says Harnett.

Gearing up for Tuscany again this year, McBean is joined by Olympic gold medal cross-country ski champion, Chandra Crawford and hockey legend, Russ Courtnall.

After an exhilarating day of cycling, participants head back to the enchanting Borgo San Felice Relais & Chateaux converted from an ancient Chianti village surrounded by towering oaks and olive groves. General manager, Achille Di Carlo, feels a special kinship to GMP — not only is it the fourth year the hotel has participated, but he travelled to the regional Canadian Culinary Championships in Vancouver last year to experience the event in action. "The chefs were unbelievable," he enthuses and is convinced the Michelin Star system will arrive in Canada soon. He adds, "Canada is our 2nd biggest market for our Brunello Campogiovanni, rated in the top 100 by Wine Spectator."

Appointing Blue Rodeo front man and Juno Award winner, Jim Cuddy, as entertainment advisor to GMP has not only insured the participation of top musicians like Sam Roberts, Sarah Harmer, Ed Robertson of Bare Naked Ladies, Barney Bentall and Great Big Sea's Alan Doyle, but the man is a serious oenophile (that means he can sample Chianti Classico in Tuscany and still ride a bicycle!).

Di Carlo is also a big fan of Jim Cuddy's impromptu wine talks and tastings at Borgo San Felice. "I talk more about wine appreciation," admits Cuddy, "and the importance of pairing it with fine food."



Chile has one of the most spectacular landscapes in the world for hiking- from the driest desert to the fiords, lakes and Andes Mountains. There are over 2,000 km. of established trails in the Sendero de Chile project linking them from north to south



Adriatic Trip: Lead singer, Alan Doyle Great Big Sea and Hockey Night in Canada's Ross McLean, enjoy a glass of wine in Croatia.



Adriatic Trip: Chef Todd (Perrin) and his cod bring new meaning to cooking with fresh ingredients in Croatia.

Quite a challenge, considering the hotel's vast wine cellar of 14 different labels and vineyard production of 1.2 million bottles per year including their Brunello di Montalcino, and Il Grigio Chianti Classico Riserva. Paired with traditional Tuscan cuisine such as rebolita, a hearty vegetable soup with bread; the famous Chianina steaks (the beef is locally raised and cured); copious amounts of pasta; and Borgo San Felice's mousse al Vin Santo, a towering vanilla cream and fruit confection perfumed with the Tuscan dessert wine, it's no wonder that cycling is a big part of the trip!

"Of all the auction destinations, I think Tuscany inspires the most music," says Cuddy. "Last year, my sons Devin and Sam played the cocktail hour then joined us at the piano bar with Barney (Bentall), Ann Lindsay and I every night. At the end of the week all of us performed in the main piazza of the village under the stars. Surrounded by lights in front of the chapel that dates back to the Middle Ages — it was spectacular."

At the entrance, guests are greeted by two 130-pound cheetahs

from a nearby rescue and rehabilitation wild-life reserve. Later, the pungent, gamey smell of spring wart hog, springbok gazelle and kudu antelope steaks cooking over rooikrans, a hardwood that burns

slowly and keeps meat tender, wafts through the air. Giant prawns, abalone and split Cape Rock lobsters, each a half kilo in size, sizzle on the braai. Welcome to the Asara Wine Estate & Hotel, Stellenbosch, South Africa where National Geographic meets understated luxury.

General manager, Pete Gottgens, the former personal chef to Nelson Mandela, wants GMP guests to "literally get their feet in the dust and the soil of the vineyards of the estate that dates back to 1691." To do so he's arranged a long wooden table among the grapevines, laden with white linen, candelabras and settings for 80. At dusk, an authentic, five-course feast, traditionally cooked in Dutch cast iron caldrons wrapped in straw and paired with Asara's world-class wines, will be served. A local African children's choir serenades under the stars joined by Canadian performers Jim Cuddy, Sam Roberts, Ed Robertson and gold medal Olympic cycling champion, Simon Whitfield.

"We know that a lot of wine connoisseurs and collectors are on this GMP trip," says Gottgens, "Asara boasts an incredible vaulted Vinoteque of 32,000 bottles and vintage wine collection including Vin de Constance 1986 a re-created dessert wine made famous by Napoleon of which we have 21 consecutive vintages. As a special surprise, Asara owner, Markus Rahmannwill will open a 1968 Verdun Cabernet Double Magnum that retails for \$15,000!"

Getting up before 6:00 a.m. to fresh food shop is not unusual for Chef Todd Perrin, the owner of The Chef's Inn, St. John's, Newfoundland. But when your kitchen is actually a galley the size of a closet on a Croatian gullet schooner sailing the Adriatic, going ashore to markets in medieval villages and catching your own fish for lunch, gives new meaning to shopping locally!

"It's impossible to overhype this incredible adventure with Gold Medal Plates," says former Top Chef Canada competitor, Perrin. Hockey Night in the Adriatic, now in its third year, is a deliciously raucous experience, sailing from Split, Croatia through the Dalmatian islands hosted by Ron MacLean, hockey greats Russ Courtnall and Paul Coffey, and Great Big Sea's, Alan Doyle — spinning yarns, singing and telling jokes, playing acoustic guitar and even tap dancing. Tap dancing?

"But what a challenge to cook on this trip," admits Chef Perrin. "I prepare things like a traditional Newfoundland fish stew with double-smoked bacon, lots of fresh seafood or even wonderful locally raised lamb, available when we go into port. I keep seasoning simple with lemon, salt and pepper, beautiful local olive oils. But then I have to shuttle all the meals on a zodiac to the six gullets anchored at a rendezvous point. We drink tremendous local wines, brandy and even moonshine! Do you know that some of the oldest grapes cultivated are from that part of Europe?"

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"It's so much fun and informal, says Perrin (who also happens to be Alan Doyle's brother-in-law), but you really have to be there to hear all the juicy anecdotes!"

Having already conquered Tuscany, Curt Harnett decided that following the sacred routes of the Tour de France up the imposing Mont Ventoux with GMP's trip to Magical Provence in May would tick off another box on his personal bucket list. He and his wife are also making the trip a surprise birthday present for son, Skylar who, at 22, is already learning to appreciate fine wines.

And who best to share his passion for the superb Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Gigondas and Côtes du Ventoux of the famous Côtes du Rhône region of France than Canadian wine guru, David Lawrason. He will explore some of Provence's most famous vineyards and charming dégustations along the way, joined by the Harnett's and Olympic hockey gold medalist and Battle of the Blades champion, Tessa Bonhomme.

Encompassing a beguiling Medieval village dating back to the 14th Century, Relais and Chateau Hotel Crillon le Brave is owned by Canadians, Peter Chittick and Craig Miller. They discovered the original property as students leading bicycle tours for Butterfield & Robinson in 1988.

"How can you govern a country that has 246 varieties of cheese?" once quipped former French President Charles de Gaulle.

He must have included Madame Vignier's locally made goat cheese from her fromagerie in Carpantras and a staple at Crillon le Brave. "It's a very relaxed atmosphere here but good food and wine are all part of that," says general manager, Sébastien Pilat.

"After a long day of cycling or antiquing, guests can enjoy a glass of pastis and play a game of pétanque (the French version of boules.) Later we gather around the pool, surrounded by the terraced gardens. The chef roasts a rack of lamb in our outdoor fireplace with tomatoes and rosemary; pistou soup; aioli and fougasse (Provençal flatbread) stuffed with tapenade, and the musicians (Ed Robertson, Melissa MacLelland and Luke Doucet) performing — it's a great atmosphere."

"To me, 'The Sweet Life' means doing the things you want to do, not what you have to do," concedes gold medal Olympic downhill ski champion and "crazy Canuck", Steve Podborski.

That includes his second year of hosting GMP's Auction Trip to Chile, a country of stunning contrasts in landscape and a wine lover's paradise. Whistler-based Podborski, who is Chef de Mission for the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games, joins Olympic gold kayak champion, Adam van Koeverden, and musicians Barney Bentall and Sarah Harmer on the GMP adventure.

Podborski is no stranger to Chile. He trained in Portillo in the Andes in 1973 with the Canadian Alpine Ski Team and went on to win several consecutive World Cup titles.



Adriatic Trip: The beautiful city of Dubrovnik, Croatia

"It's full on meatatarian heaven there for a guy like me used to a protein diet. We did some wonderful hiking and cycling tours on coaster bikes with Jim (Cuddy) through the Colchagua Valley sampling their world famous Syrahs and Malbecs last year, then wine tastings at Vina Casa Silva where we enjoyed a delicious lunch and also watched teams playing polo. We went to so many wineries I had to wring out my liver at the end of trip," he says affably.

**WHEN ONE EATS,
ONE SHOULD NOT FORGET
WHO TILLS THE FIELDS.**

- chinese proverb

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Big White Kelowna Adventure Trip

Host of CCC Grand Finale, Olympic Gold Medalist (Kayak) Adam van Koeverden with last year's Champion, Chef Marc Lepine, Atelier Restaurant, Ottawa. Chef Lepine created the 7-course feast at GMP's Big White Adventure Kelowna Auction Trip this year.



Definitely a "Type A" personality on the Tuscany cycling tour

Performer, Barney Bentall & Olympic Cycling Champion, Curt Harnett share a toast to the Tuscany trip at Borgo San Felice.



Tuscany Trip

Performer, Jim Cuddy, talks about wine appreciation to GMP guests at Borgo San Felice. "Always experience wine with good food and don't feel intimidated," he says



Borgo San Felice Cantina- The hotel's vast wine cellar houses 14 different wine labels and vineyard production of 1.2 million bottles per year including their famous Chianti Classico Riserva .



Adriatic Trip

Adriatic Gullets: Chef Perrin shuttles all his prepared meals on a zodiac to hungry guests aboard Croatian gullet schooners.



GMP participants dining locally in Croatia.



South Africa Trip

Asara Wine Estate & Hotel- Located just 25 minutes from Capetown in a spectacular mountain & lake setting, the estate dates back from 1691 and boasts a wine cellar of 32,000 bottles including a vintage dessert wine made famous by Napoleon.

Two cheetahs from a nearby rescue wildlife centre greet GMP guests at the Asara Wine Estate & Hotel, Stellenbosch, South Africa.



Exotic game such as wart hog, springbok gazelle, and antelope steaks are roasted on a braai, over a hardwood called rooikrans that burns slowly and keeps meat tender.

Split Cape Rock lobsters cooked on a braai.





Olympians, Marni McBean and Curt Harnett take a breather while leading GMP cyclists on the winding roads of Tuscany. "The camaraderie among GMP participants on these trips is amazing and many have built lasting relationships," says Harnett.



Jim Cuddy with sons and fiddler, Ann Lindsay jamming in the bar at Borgo San Felice. "The Newfoundlanders on the GMP trip convinced them to keep it open after 1:00 a.m., then introduced us to the Olympic sport of female leg wrestling!" said Cuddy.



GMP Entertainment Advisor, Blue Rodeo frontman, Jim Cuddy and Barney Bentall perform at the concert in the piazza to celebrate the GMP week in Tuscany.

Chile Trip



Operated for several generations by the Silva family, wines ages in specially conditioned cellar rooms, many underground; 2000 bottles an hour are produced in their state-of-the-art bottling room.

Olympic Gold Medalist, Steve Podborski originally trained in the Andes with the 1973 Canadian Alpine team. This is the 2nd year he has hosted the GMP adventures in Chile.



The Colchagua Valley, Chile is considered one of the premiere regions of the world for the production of Syrah, Carmenere and Malbec.



Chile Vina Casa Silva & Polo Grounds- The Casa Silva Winery is one of the most unique in the Colchagua Valley, where GMP guests not only sample the incredible wines over lunch but watch a polo match from the Club House.



Provence Trip

Photos by Michelle Heimerman



Canadian wine guru, David Lawrason leads a GMP wine tasting in the world's most famous wineries in the Cote du Rhone region, Provence.

Provence is famous for hundreds of delectable cheeses, many unpasteurized and therefore not available in Canada.



A fountain in the terraced gardens of Crillon le Brave.



Crillon le Brave boasts stunning views of the Luberon Valley in the shadow of Mt. Ventoux.



Gold Medal Plates brings people together on so many levels, and as Olympic champion Curt Harnett so succinctly expresses, "Most of us on any of the GMP trips have established long-term friendships that never would have been possible anywhere else. Isn't that what 'The Sweet Life' is all about?"

For information on how you can experience "The Sweet Life" on Gold Medal Plates Auction Trips 2014 contact Lisa Paisin, Director of Hospitality and Travel. lpaisin@goldmedalplates.com.