



Susan Arizini owns and operates Via Bellissima, a Bryn Mawr-based boutique now celebrating its 15th year in business. Arizini is the only local importer of Italian ceramics from the Tuscan and Umbrian regions of Italy.

SUSAN ARIZINI NEVER THOUGHT her shop would ever be celebrating its 15th anniversary, which happens in June of this year. Early on, in fact, she fully expected to indulge her passion in Italian ceramics and European home décor for maybe two or three years and then move on to something else.

On the contrary, as soon as she established her Bryn Mawr-based boutique—Via Bellissima is its name—she was as smitten by her venture as newlywed couples are with one other. Her customers could very well say the same.

“Everyone comes in with a story,” Arizini says. “It’s the woman pining for her homeland, the person wanting to extend their vacation in Italy, couples planning to visit those regions. You can’t help but fall in love with them.”

A Wayne native, Arizini spent 15 years in corporate sales and sold ads for magazines, such as Harper’s Bazaar, before deciding to leave that enterprise to pursue something greater. She opened her Bryn Mawr boutique and never looked back. “I thought I would learn to play piano and speak Italian fluently and read books,” she recalls. Instead, she devotes her time to continually renewing and refining the store.

“Marketing and sales are my forte, but I also have this creative visual side I wanted to explore,” says Arizini, who earned her business degree from Boston College. Today, she is “the only local importer of Italian ceramics from the Tuscan and Umbrian regions of Italy.”

ONE OF A KIND

Via Bellissima, which literally means “the road to the beautiful,” specializes in colorful, dramatic ceramics evocative of the medieval and Renaissance eras. “You can decorate with it, entertain with it, eat from it,” she says of many of the items her boutique carries.

With an eye for quality and extraordinarily unique merchandise, Via Bellissima offers “something for everyone,

A Touch of Italy

Visitors to Bryn Mawr’s charming Via Bellissima discover a one-of-a-kind boutique seemingly transported from the heart of Italy

By Maria Martino Evans | Photography by Rob Hall

from casual grace to organic chic,” Arizini says, with prices ranging from \$15 to \$5,000.

“I mix everything as if you would see it in your home,” she adds. Items are displayed on lava stone tables, in antique European hutches, alongside candles, lamps and florals. “I like to mix it up so it’s comfy,” she says. “We also store our imports in a double garage and full basement. ... It’s like having three shops in one.”

Arizini travels to Italy once or twice a year and personally selects each item, and then has them shipped back to the United States by the container load. She imports from the likes of Gubbio, Deruta and Montefalco in Umbria, Montelupo in Tuscany, and Vietri sul Mare, a town on the country’s beloved Amalfi Coast. While there, Arizini finds unique ceramics, handcrafted accessories and gifts.

She keeps her inventory fresh by continually cultivating new sources, having touched the Old World soil more times than most Americans ever will. “Because we do all our own importing, the inventory varies with each shipment and is different every time,” she says. Over the years, she has developed relationships with more than 30 merchants in Italy. “I’ve been to their homes during olive-pressing seasons and attended festivals where they make their own prosciutto and wines.”

Each time a new item is purchased, Arizini often needs to redo an entire store display because most items are what most people would classify as “one of a kind.” Each piece is hand-thrown and painted, for example. The Umbrian region is the largest ceramics producing area in Italy, with the antique hill town of Deruta as its centerpiece. Arizini selects only items of the highest quality that have been refined many times. The terra cotta made from the dirt in this region is one of the best grades on earth. “Depending on the factory I deal with,” she says, “my ceramics are heavier and denser, and the painting is more intricate” than Americans usually see while touring.

Ceramics are merely a part of Via Bellissima’s inventory. New this year are imported flavored honeys such as truffle, pepper, mint and lemon—“flavors a chef would be attracted to,” Arizini says—and virgin olive oil she calls “the best I ever tasted.” She is able to bring these sought-after items from small manufacturers to America because of her relationships in these towns.

A NEW SPIN

“The store feels like you’re in the Mediterranean or European countryside, like in Tuscany, Provence, Portugal—they all have same colorful vibe—bright colors dyed by the sun,” Arizini says. So it is the perfect setting for special events.



In January, she invited a supplier from Italy, who has maintained his own factory for 50 years, to share his knowledge with her customers. She invited them to bring family crests or house photos to be made into distinctive platters at his factory. Personalized items, such as custom plates, tend to appeal to many of her clients, especially engaged couples. Brides also appreciate that all dinnerware is ordered a la carte.

“We don’t dictate what her place setting is,” she says. “Also, I collect the registry so she can come in after the stress of the wedding preparations has passed and mix and match patterns, tweak her pattern or add a monogram.”

This spring, Arizini will help promote a local company that conducts wine tours, including one slotted for the fall in the Chianti region of Tuscany. The trip will include tours of the ceramic factories she has worked with for many years. Her wares can also be spotted at other Wayne-based businesses, including the nearby Matador restaurant and Valley Forge Flowers’ new café and cappuccino bar. Lastly, she is also working with merchants in Italy to develop exclusive lines.

Arizini feels so at home in these romantic Mediterranean regions—and now, as a result, inside Via Bellissima—that she brings this unique Old World style to her own home in Wayne, which teems with such ceramics and European country accessories.

“My home is the same as the store,” she says. “It’s just like that vibe—very colorful, very cozy, very warm.”

Indeed, what every home should be.

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Via Bellissima recently launched its website, www.viabellissima.com, which is filled with continually updated photo galleries, news and listings of events held at the store. Owner Susan Arizini welcomes current and future customers to visit the site—and, of course, the store—often.