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Sunday, February 6, 2005

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Immerse yourself in Italy, stay in Charlottesville

By **Alice Mannette/Staff**
amannette@newsleader.com

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Molte bene! That's how Hugh Westfall describes Ecco Italy, the new immersion language school in Charlottesville. Once a week since last September, Westfall has been taking courses from professor Christina Ball, first at the University of Virginia and now at Ecco Italy, which opened Jan. 19.

"The classes struck a chord with me. She makes it fun," said Westfall, who lives in Staunton with his wife, Connie. "She's so enthusiastic."

Westfall has been to Italy two times and is planning a trip in October. He will use the information that Ball provides in class to plan his itinerary.

Ball offers a number of classes, including one on travel, in which she tells of out-of-the-way towns and exquisite eateries. Because the class is conducted at Milano's, an espresso bar and eatery, and Verity blue, an Italian ceramic store, Italy comes alive.

Ecco la statua! Ecco panino! Ecco cappuccino! Eccellente! said Ball, excitedly gesticulating at the articles in the stores.

"Christina is incredible," said Fiona Hamilton-Little, who honeymooned near Lake Cuomo more than 40 years ago. Since her husband has passed away, her dream is to bring her children back



Vincent Lertz/The News Leader

Christina Ball teaches Italian language to her class at Ecco Italy, an education and consulting services in the field of Italian language, culture and travel, located in The Main Street Market in Charlottesville.

Courses

- **A day in Italy:** an eight-hour intensive Italian travelers course (includes food and wine tasting)
- **Italian for beginners:** \$225 for 15 classes

next fall and show them the beauty that Hamilton-Little and her husband had experienced all those years ago.

"It's just so exciting to be taking this class," Hamilton-Little said. She kept up with the long paragraph that Ball had the class read and translate in class. Sitting in a comfortable leather chair, her books laid out on an oaken table, Hamilton-Little proudly called out the answers. "I don't know if it's just the language or if it's the teacher, but it just comes so easily."

Jenny Gardner of Charlottesville, agreed. "*Signora*" was pasted on her chest by her fellow students as Ball handed out signs in Italian. All the students were laughing and learning. Gardner and her 12-year-old daughter, who is taking the evening class, plan to visit Rome this summer.

"We've been trying to teach our parrot to say '*Buona sera, Signorina*,'" said Gardner. It's a lot of fun."

Ball is also having the time of her life.

Ecco Italy is a dream come true, Ball said. Ball brings props, film clips, signs and costumes to class. She teaches gestures as well as slang. "I'm a clown at heart."

Mark Cave, the owner of Verity Blue, where the classes take place, is as excited as Ball and the students. Mark and his wife, Victoria, speak Italian, and like Ball, want to bring a piece of the old country to Charlottesville.

"We instantly realized that we both shared the same vision and goals," Mark said of Ball. "Our place is constantly evolving."

Verity blue is located next to the European Market on Main Street. The market houses stores that specialize in European foods including a bakery, a food market that serves fresh priscuto and a wine and cheese shop.

Ksenia Zielinski and Stefano Siciliano headed over to the market with their 14-year-old son, Raphael, after class. The family plans to move to Italy by summer and they are thrilled to be able to learn Italian. Zielinski, a native of Russia, finds the language endearing and answered questions quickly and enthusiastically as the group walked through the market.

- **Cinema Chat:**\$70 for 5 classes

- **Coming soon:**Ecco bimbo — Italian for children and Ecco Cibo — Italian for foodies

- **To enroll:**Call (434) 825-4390 or visit <http://www.eccoitaly.com/>



Vincent Lerz/The News Leader

Christina Ball teaches Italian language to her class in Charlottesville.

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Ball and Cave hope to continue to draw residents from neighboring towns, including the Valley. Ball offers a free Italian chat session each Wednesday at noon.

Libby Page, a school teacher in Staunton, is fairly proficient in Italian and can't wait to go and brush up.

"I'd love to go soon, so that I can speak Italian again," Page said.

Staunton's Mayor G. John Avoli, a native of Italy, wants to visit the class and speak with Ball and her husband, Enrico Cesaretti, who is from Tuscany.


"It sounds wonderful," Avoli said of the market and classes.


Avoli takes a group of tourists to Italy each summer to raise money for the United Way. His cousin Mario picks up the group at the airport and then they drive to the mountain villages where the mayor's sister and cousins live.

"We have a lot of fun," Avoli said.

"Someday I would like to go with the mayor to Italy," Westfall said. Westfall plans on going back to Italy at least once a year. He also plans on taking more courses with Ball. "She's so enthusiastic, it's contagious."

Originally published February 6, 2005

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