

Italian Heritage Month to be marked in Aurora in celebration of culture and community

A Ferrari will be parked in the middle of Yonge Street on June 1 ? but it won't be a traffic jam; instead it will help usher in Viva Italia: a month-long celebration of Italian and Italian-Culture in Aurora.

Viva Italia: A Month of Celebration, Culture and Community is the brainchild of Rosa Calabrese, owner of the Royal Rose Gallery, located in the heart of Aurora's downtown core.

From a simple desire of a first-generation Canadian to celebrate the multifaceted culture of Italian communities around the world, Viva Italia has been brought to fruition in conjunction with Re/Max's Osborne Goddard Team and Ital Florist, and it has also brought about partnerships with the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, the Aurora Soccer Club, the Aurora Film Circuit and many more.

?Last year, we exhibited a show called The Quiet Immigrant Project, which showcases stories of women who immigrated from Italy to Canada post-World War, in the 1950s and 1960s. It was well-received by the community and I discovered that there are quite a lot of Italians living in the area, which I didn't quite know before,? says Calabrese of the initial concept. ?For this year, we just decided to expand the celebration of culture.

?I think in celebrating any culture, the elements are the same: you always want to showcase the best of the traditions, the food, the arts, so we spoke to key members of the community that could help us achieve and showcase that.?

The Ferrari will be just one of the many elements Viva Italia will bring to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's annual Street Festival on Sunday, June 1.

Working with the Chamber, the Viva Italia team has secured 20 booth spots along the front of the Royal Rose, which is on the west side of Yonge Street, just south of Wellington, and the display will span Aw, Shucks in the north to Piazza in the south ? both restaurants that have Italian owners, Calabrese notes.

?There will be two fabulous restaurants, and all along there will be Italian products and people,? she says, adding among the people will be Italian chef Daniela Sfara. ?For example, we have a gentleman who imports olive oil from Sicily, from a family farm, so it's the freshest olive oil that you can get. Olives are picked and pressed within like three hours, so that will be good. We have Italian run businesses like Ital Florist. They have been a big sponsor of the festival as well. [The family] immigrated from Italy and started this business, so they will have a beautiful display of flowers. We also managed to get a Ferrari, so that will be on display ? it's a little different, but it's iconic Italian. We will also have local artisans, jewellery-makers, and businesses that promote Italy. If you wanted to travel to Italy and create a boutique travelling experience, we will have people here who can help you do that.?

Celebrations will continue the next day, Monday, June 2, with the raising of the Italian flag by Mayor Tom Mrakas at Aurora Town Square. A formal proclamation will be followed by keynote speakers and refreshments ? think espresso and amaretti cookies ? back at the Royal Rose Gallery.

The gallery will also play host to a brand-new art exhibition co-curated by artist Aurora Pegano, which will be the subject of an opening reception on Thursday, June 5, from 6 ? 9 p.m.

?We decided to team up for the exhibition and really showcase Italian traditional stories, life, and really reflect on the immigration process as well through the Quiet Immigrant Project,? says Calabrese. ?It will be a lovely, immersive way to experience the culture.?

A feast for the senses will follow on Thursday, June 12, with a ticketed food and wine tasting at Aw, Shucks, co-hosted by the restaurant and Royal Rose.

'Food is such an important part of the Italian culture. It seems we're always gathering around the table,' says Calabrese of the four-course meal, complete with live entertainment. 'It will be a fun night gathering with everyone.'

Celebrations go from the kitchen to the pitch on Saturday, June 14, when the Aurora Soccer Club hosts a special game with entertainment and food trucks to mark Italian Heritage Month ' with fun for the whole family.

On Monday, June 16, the Aurora Film Circuit will host a screening of *The South*, winner of the 2024 Canadian Ethnic Media Award for Best Documentary, followed by a question-and-answer session with filmmakers and members of the cast.

'Andrea Ramolo created a documentary based on the southern Italian traditions of music and dance,' says Calabrese. 'And she's local ' so, I thought what better way to showcase this than at this Festival, and it's really important to highlight local Italians as well. Andrea and cast members will be there to answer questions and it will be fun to hear from them and interact with them.'

Autori and Amaretti: Celebrating Literature, Language & Culture will help close out the Festival on Thursday, June 19 ' co-hosted by Laura Libralto, curator and director of the Quiet Immigrant Project at the Royal Rose Gallery from 6 ' 8 p.m.

The event will feature authors from the Italian-Canadian Writers Association, who will perform readings, with books on hand.

'It really focuses on firsthand accounts of their journeys, celebrations and traditions,' says Calabrese. 'I think there is a unique Italian-Canadian identity shaped by post-war immigration, discrimination and adaptation, and I think there is a lot of Italian immigrants and also immigrants of other cultures in the area. Canada is built on immigrants, and my hope is to, because I'm Italian, I'm first-generation Canadian, I'm exploring my culture, my background, my past, everything that has shaped me, share it with the community.'

'There's definitely conceptions of Italian-Canadians and Italians in Canada, especially in Ontario, and when you say 'Italian,' you might think Vaughan, Woodbridge, St. Clair ' but there's more to it than that. There's more than just pasta and pizza. It's an immigration story, struggles, and it is in the past, but that immigration story is so relatable to everyone.'

'I hope this Festival is well-received by the community and I hope to grow it every year.'

By Brock Weir