



THE AMERICAN ACTOR WITH HIS EYES ON ITALY

BY ANTHONY SCIARRATTA

When PJ Byrne isn't working alongside Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio, he daydreams of the month he spent on an olive oil farm in Italy. Byrne has starred in over 40 films since the early 2000s. *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Babylon* actor made his bones in Hollywood at a young age. Now, he has his eyes on Italy.



Actor PJ Byrne in the Comune di San Lupo in Campania, Italy.



PJ and Jaime Byrne in Italy with their daughters, Madison (R) and Libby.

Byrne was born in Maplewood, New Jersey, and raised in the town of Old Tappan. His grandfather came to America from Santa Croce, Sicily, with the first wave of Italian immigrants in the early 1900s.

“My grandfather was one of 10,” said Byrne. “He made his way to Paterson, New Jersey, and became a pipe fitter at Hoffman LaRoche.”

Byrne has always felt a strong connection to his Italian culture, and his earliest and fondest memories of growing up Italian were picking vegetables from his grandfather's garden. Specifically, it was the fresh tomatoes that stuck out to him the most.

“His garden was his pride and joy,” said Byrne. “I don't know if I will ever taste a tomato that magical again. It made my cheeks tingle.”

No tomato Byrne has tried to grow on his own has been able to match those grand Jersey tomatoes of his grandfather. This is a memory Byrne has tried desperately to recreate,

but he always falls short. No matter what he seems to do, the taste of his tomatoes never seems to compare to what came out of the soil of his Pop's backyard.

“I've tried to get a variety of seeds from Canada that were shipped in from Sicily,” said Byrne. “Maybe the mass production of produce in America is to blame. Now the only place I was able to find something on par with that taste was when I was eating them in Italy. That being said, if you know a place in the States...I'm on my way!”

These childhood memories stayed at the forefront of Byrne's mind, and especially now that he has a family of his own. Byrne makes sure his children are aware of their Italian ancestry and even dedicated a month of their lives to explore southern Italy.

“Authentic Italian culture is dissipating a little bit,” said Byrne. “My goal is to help revitalize it as this is something I really want my children to appreciate and have as a part of their lives.”

For an entire month, Byrne moved with his family to an olive farm in San Lupo, a hill town in the province of Benevento in the Campania region of southern Italy. In San Lupo, Byrne was able to see firsthand the production of olive oil, and he dreams of bringing the region's special, unprocessed olive oil to America one day. He notes the Italian food industry as a whole is committed to using few if any additives or preservatives in its food production.

“When people say the food there just tastes different,” Byrne said, “there’s a good reason for that.”

Byrne feels many parents in America share that same desire for a healthier lifestyle for their own families. “The whole Benevento region is just a magical place. When we say the Midwest is the breadbasket of America, I believe Benevento is the olive oil utopia of Italy. This is part of the legacy I want to leave my children,” said Byrne. “I want people to be able to enjoy good food without the concerns of harmful additives. If there is an Italian importer that wants to enjoy the olive oil of San Lupo or Molise, give me a call!”

The experience living in San Lupo was so positive that it inspired Byrne and his family to apply for dual citizenship, and citizenship is just one phase of Byrne’s plan to eventually combine each of his passions: His love for his family, for Italian culture, and the creation of films.

“The real dream is to bring my work to Italy,” said Byrne. “To be in Rome, Milan, or Sicily as an Italian citizen producing a film or TV show alongside an Italian film crew.”



Jamie and PJ Byrne signing their Italian citizenship papers.

The dedication to an Italian lifestyle can be challenging for some. In Italian culture, the family unit is the most important part of life, and Byrne realizes that.

“During the pandemic, there was one point where I was gone for 10 months out of the year, and to not be around your wife and kids for that long is rough,” said Byrne. “So now in the summertime, I want to be able to take my family with me when I work. I want my family to live in Italy with me, to learn the language, and enjoy a really immersive experience,” said Byrne.

Until Byrne finds a way to bring his work to Italy, he’ll continue to work toward bringing Italy to Los Angeles.

“The majority of Italians in Los Angeles are pretty spread out,” said Byrne. “But there’s one place where they continue to come together, and it’s called the Garibaldina Society.”

The Garibaldina Society was named in commemoration of the famed Italian general, Giuseppe Garibaldi. The original aim of the Garibaldina Society, like many other Italian societies and organizations in America, was to create a support system for Italian immigrants adjusting to life in America. The

society has been an integral part of the Italian community in Los Angeles since 1877.

“You would never think one of the oldest Italian organizations in America would be based in Los Angeles,” said Byrne.

Byrne is an active member of the society, which has become a pillar of the Italian community in Los Angeles. Whether it’s pasta dinners or bocce games, all are welcome to celebrate Italian culture even if they don’t have any Italian ancestry.

“For me and my family, the Garibaldina Society is a great place,” said Byrne. “It gives my kids the chance to be around these incredible Italian Americans in their 70s and 80s who can share their life experiences.”

Even though Byrne’s extended family is across the country, the Garibaldina Society continues to make him feel right at home. Through the society, they even met an Italian baker who was raised in his grandparents’ hometown of Paterson, NJ, and moved out to Los Angeles.

The Garibaldina Society will satisfy Byrne’s Italian itch for the time being, but he still has his eyes set on Italy.

“Now, I’m in a place where I can pitch some projects of my own,” said Byrne. “Let’s just say one of them might be in Italy.”

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