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Kenny Dunn: the Founder and Ceo of "Eating Europe" Tours

Interview with Kenny Dunn, the founder of the largest tour operator specializing in culinary tours and activities across Europe

Italian Hours

by Lucy Gordan

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Kenny Dunn, Founder & CEO "Eating Europe"

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Kenny Dunn was born in Upper Dublin, a suburb north of Philadelphia. In 2009 he moved to Rome with his Mexican wife and in 2011 he founded "Eating Europe", which has agreements with the industry's leading distribution platforms including Expedia, Viator, and Tourico: "Our mission is to leave travelers with an unparalleled, non-touristy, food-related experience in undiscovered neighborhoods of the most fascinating cities in the world," Kenny Dunn says.

Unlike **Marjorie Shaw**, my first ex-pat interviewee, Kenny Dunn was not born in Rome. He grew up in Upper Dublin, Pennsylvania, a suburb north of Philadelphia. With a Bachelor's degree in marketing and finance from Penn State University and a Master's in development

management from American University in Washington D.C. in 1997 Kenny founded and was the CEO of his own company MarketVision in New York City. Focusing on event marketing promotions targeted at the US university sector, he managed successful marketing campaigns for AT&T, Motorola, Citibank, Discover, Bank of America, and Fortune 500. In 2009 Kenny moved to Rome when his Mexican wife, who worked at the UN in New York, got a job at the Food and Agriculture Organization, headquartered in the Eternal City.



Mastro Donato

Two years later he founded **Eating Europe Tours**, which has become the largest tour operator specializing in culinary tours and activities across Europe. From its first tours in Rome, guided by Kenny, "Eating Europe" has expanded to London, Florence, Amsterdam, and Prague. Kenny's LinkedIn profile tells us, "Eating Europe" "has agreements with the industry's leading distribution platforms including Expedia, Viator, and Tourico; and preferred partnerships with major tour operators such as Carnival Cruise Lines, Globus and Rick Steve's Tours. The company has received media coverage in the *NYTimes*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Forbes*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *BBC*, [to name a few]. Since 2011 "Eating Europe" has welcomed over 80,000 clients who've left over 5,000 positive reviews on

TripAdvisor and other review online sites.” Its tours are recommended by Lonely Planet, Rough Guide and Fodors Guidebooks.

I first heard of “Eating Europe” in 2014 from Wibke Carter, the company’s PR Manager. She’d been the PR Manager of the German National Tourist Organization in New York City, which is how I knew her. Wibke invited me on one of the first tours in Florence. Recently along with 7 other clients, I participated in the company’s first-ever tour, the daytime “Taste of Testaccio”.

Originally the port of ancient Rome, Testaccio until 20 years ago a working-class neighborhood turned chic, gets its name from the artificial mound of *testae*, fragments of broken amphorae, discarded here. In short, the mound was the port’s garbage dump. For during the first two centuries after Christ Rome was the world’s largest city with a population of at least one million people. *Wikipedia* tells us: “It has been estimated that the mound contains the remains of 53 million olive oil amphorae, in which 6 billion liters or 1.6 billion US gallons of oil were imported.”



Suppli

With our super-knowledgeable guide Giuliana we visited a bread and pastry shop, *Panificio Passi*, to sample *pizza marinara* and *pizza con patate*; the winebar *Masto* for samples of local cheese, prosciutto and wine; the restaurant *Mastro Donato* for a paper cone filled with fried vegetables and apples; the neighborhood's new market where at Marco's stall I sampled my most delicious ever *suppli*, a Roman rice ball filled with melted mozzarella and fennel seeds; the Protestant Cemetery where the English Romantic poet John Keats and other foreign dignitaries are buried; the former slaughterhouse, which functioned from 1888 to 1975 and made the neighborhood famous for food, especially the Roman specialties made with the *quinto quarto* or innards; the restaurant *Velavevodetto* (which in Roman dialect means "I told you so") for samples of pasta: *cacio e pepe*, *all'Amatriciana*, and *carbonara*; and finally *Giolitti*, a historical artisan *gelateria*. After the tour, I met with Kenny Dunn.



Giolitti

You came to Rome in 2009 to work at the World Food Programme as a Resource Officer, right?

“Actually, my wife works at the similar but much larger UN agency, the Food and Agriculture Organization. She was transferred here from the UN in New York. We moved here for her job. Afterwards, once already in Rome, I got a job at the World Food Programme.”

What does a Resource Officer do?

“Basically, it was like being a fundraiser. I only worked there for two years and since then have devoted my professional life to “Eating Europe”, setting it up and now running it and expanding our tours.”

Where did you get the idea for “Eating Europe”?

“I used to live right across the street from this gelateria *Giolitti* here in Testaccio. You know how you have a lot of friends who come and visit. One of the things I loved doing with friends was taking them along and showing them where I had coffee and I bought my fruit and vegetables at the market and bread at the *panificio* and meat from the local butcher. After a while, I started to say to them: “As for the Colosseum or the Vatican, you guys can go on your own and tomorrow I’ll take you on a neighborhood walk.” The *deus ex machina* happened on a trip back to New York. In the fall of 2010, I joined one of Scott’s Pizza Tours as a customer. Yeah, they’re a great success and Scott is a phenomenal guy. He’s been written up everywhere. There’s even a video about him. He works in all five boroughs. When I came back to Rome, I became to think about how I could do tours similar to Scott’s here in Rome. It was a combination of “Hey, I kind of already do this with my friends so, following Scott’s model, I organized the places I wanted to highlight and turned it into my business.”

Which was the first “Eating Europe” tour?

“The daytime tour in Testaccio since I lived right here and guided the first tours myself. The first tour of 12 unsuspecting guinea pigs took place on the hot, overcast morning of July 2, 2011.”



Prague beer tour – Kenny with guests

And then? How did the program expand?

“Then I gradually hired more and more guides, and then we did the Testaccio tour at different times of the day before opening our tours in Trastevere. Lastly, we started the cooking class. Then I asked myself: “Why only do this in Rome? We should do it in another city so I hired someone for London. After London came Amsterdam, then Prague, then Florence, and now in June, we are opening up one tour in Paris. So at the moment we have 8 different tours in Rome: “Taste of Testaccio”, “Trastevere for Foodies”, “Twilight Trastevere Food Tour”, “Vatican Area for Foodies” (by request only), “Rome’s Sunday Food Tour”, “Testaccio’s Supper Stroll”, “Italian Wine and Food Pairing Class” and “Rome’s Evening Wine and Food Stroll”. In Florence we have three tours: “The Other Side of Florence Food Tour” across the Arno River from downtown in the Oltrarno district, once inhabited by artists and the working class, “Authentic Florence Home-Cooking Class” and “Florence Sunset Tour”; in London four: “London Old Docks-Historic Pubs, Food and Beer Tour”, “East End Food Tour”, “Twilight Soho Food and Cocktail Tour”, and “Brick Lane-Flavor of India and Beyond”; in Amsterdam two: “Jordaan Food and Canals Tour” and “Jordaan’s

Food Tour”; and four in Prague: “Prague Food Tour”, “Craft Beer and Food Tasting Tour”, “Prague Evening Food Tour” and “Prague Cooking Class”. You can learn all about them by clicking on our website. They all last between 3 and 4 hours. It’s even possible to buy them as a gift certificate for friends and family. Each tour is limited to 12 participants and it is possible to book your own private tour.”

What’s your mission?

“As it says on our website: We are giving people a taste of Europe they won’t soon forget by exposing them to real food, people and neighborhoods. Our mission is to leave travelers with an unparalleled, non-touristy, food-related experience in undiscovered neighborhoods of the most fascinating cities in the world.”



Panificio Passi

How many guides do you have in Rome?

“23 right now. They’re free-lancers. Counting myself we are four administrators here in Rome.”

Elsewhere?

“Depends on the city, but around ten in each city. All together we have some 60 guides and over 130 artisan food partners.”

How do you choose your guides or do they choose you?

“No, we choose them. Our tour guides are such an important part of the company. We have them submit a video. We then meet them. We have them do a role play where we’ll actually get to see them in action. We say: “Imagine you’re on tour, how would you present this subject.” A lot of our time goes into finding the right people to be our guides. It’s a combination of their knowledge of the city, of the local cuisine, how congenial is their personality, their ability to tell a story. That’s one of the first things we ask: “Tell us a story”. So much of the tour is putting together different stories.”

How do clients learn about you?

“From our site on the internet and by word-of-mouth at first. Now we work with travel agencies, cruise lines and corporations too. We go to trade shows in Europe and the United States. Sometimes our clients turn out to be travel agents and afterwards work with us.”

Which is the most popular tour?

“The twilight Trastevere tour is definitely our no.1-seller.”

Have you been on all your tours?

“All but two: the evening tour in Florence and the pub tour in London. It’s not because I don’t want to. I just haven’t had a chance.”



Testaccio Market

Do you have a favorite?

“The tour you just went on: “A Taste of Testaccio”. It’s my baby.”

Do you have a client who’s been on all your tours?

“Yes, we’ve had several. We’ve sent them a certificate. Others have been on at least one tour in every city.”

Do you decide the destinations of each tour or is it a group effort or by suggestion?

“Once we find a destination or partner we try to stick with it. We try to build relationships with our partners. We’ve been working with *Giolitti* for seven years, ie. since the beginning. We have a very strong relationship with them and they are a big part of the tour. However, sometimes we realize that a change would make the tour better or that we’re looking for a different experience. Some places change ownership. There are all kinds of reasons for which we might have to make a change.”

Who is we?

“We have 16 people on administrative staff; four including me are in Rome. All of us at “Eating Europe” love to travel. I’ve been to about 40 countries. We all know what it’s like when you go to a new country and you’re an outsider especially if there’s a language barrier. For so many people especially in today’s world, they are really looking to get a taste of life in that particular city. It’s one thing to see the Vatican and the Colosseum, the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben or the Anne Frank House, but how do people live in Rome, London, or Amsterdam? What do they eat? What was Prague like under communism and what’s it like now? What we are trying to do is to help people discover those insiders’ places and the things you must eat in each city like the *suppli* in Rome or authentic goulash in Prague. That is what we are looking to do on all of our tours. Some might have a different theme, might have an evening or a market theme, but all of them aim to give the participants a taste of local life as you are going on a journey in a certain neighborhood in a certain city.”



Peposo at I'Raddi in Oltrarno

On your website you have a box about forthcoming tours. The box shows a picture of Venice. You once had a tour of Venice that you discontinued; are you planning to reinstate

it?

“Yes, Venice has been a little elusive, but we have some people working on reinstating it by the end of this year. We have a new operations manager.”

I believe that your PR Manager Wibke Carter, whom I know from when she was the PR Manager for the German National Tourist Organization in New York, told me that Paris will be your next new tour destination. When will that be and where will it go?

“We are still working on it. It’s too early for specifics. Our mission is always to help our guests discover life in a particular city: the markets, the shops, and the restaurants in a neighborhood. We just hired the operations manager in Paris, but we’re looking to open at least one tour there by June.”

On your website you have a “Food Lover’s Guide to Rome”, what about for the other cities where you have tours?

“We have a Food Lover’s Guide to each of our cities.”



Puntarelle

Do you have a favorite Roman dish?

“My favorite Roman restaurant is where you went to taste the three different types of pasta, *Flavio al Velavevodetto*. My favorite Roman dish *spaghetti all’Amatriciana*. Growing up in America, Italian-American dishes is food very much tomato-sauce-based. Therefore my favorite Italian dishes are still tomato-based. When I’m away from Rome a little while *spaghetti all’Amatriciana* is the dish I miss the most. Gosh, also on my list are *coda alla*

vaccinara, fried artichokes, *puntarelle*...Because it's a salad I might not put it on the top of my list, but I love *puntarelle*."

When you started the tour in Florence, Wibke invited me to come; I was the only participant who ate the Florentine specialty *lampredotto* or tripe sandwich. Is it hard to convince participants to try an unfamiliar food?

"We thought we should present *lampredotto* because it is such an important part of Florentine cuisine especially street food. We thought that many people might not try it like on our tour, but most do and often say it's one of the highlights of their tour. That's kind of our mission, what we're hoping to do, we're trying to surprise and delight people. We hope to delight and surprise long-term residents like when you said: "I've never tasted a *suppli* as good as this one" or someone else "I never thought I could bring myself to try *lampredotto*, but it's delicious"."



Lampredotto at La Simone

What's your favorite region in Italy for its food?

“Puglia especially the wines and obviously the seafood. The cheese in the Alto Adige. I love going to different regions of Italy and seeking out the regional specialties. Everything in Italy changes in such short distances.”

Do you like to cook?

“I love to cook.”

What are your specialties?

“If you are talking about Rome, *cacio e pepe*, shepherd’s pie. I’m a big kind of brunch person. On weekends I like to make pancakes, omelets, French toast, and home fries, which I do really well. Those are dishes I miss from the States. I don’t actually cook that many Roman dishes. At home, I tend to make more Asian dishes, stir fries or curries, dishes that are hard to find in Roman restaurants. Last night I made my own hamburgers for example because I miss the authentic US ones. However, I’ve done a series of cooking lessons at Gambero Rosso cooking school because, if I ever move away from Rome and I don’t know if or when that might be, I want to come away knowing that I learned a lot about Italian cooking and I have. However, when I’m here I concentrate on making Asian and US dishes.”



Kenny Dunn

What do you love about Rome?

“The climate, the food obviously, the geography. For example, three weeks ago I drove an hour and twenty minutes to Campo Felice in the Abruzzi to ski and in a couple of weeks, I’ll probably be driving in less than an hour to the beach. In other words, I love Rome’s geographical situation, ie.: Near the mountains and near the sea too. I really love the culture, the history, although I miss many things about the US. What I really enjoy and cherish about Rome is the slower pace of life, the most relaxed approach to life. In the States there are so many rules. If you go out to lunch in Rome, you probably take at least an hour and order some wine. It’s not like just picking up a sandwich and running back to our desk in the US. Again that’s like speaking to the culture, the pace of life.

Rome is so well-situated for going everywhere in Europe too and obviously, I love being in

Europe. For certain Rome gets a lot of negative press, but even so, more and more tourists come every year. Rome is still Rome. You can talk to any one of our clients, and I don't think anyone leaves Rome or perhaps only a few people do without wanting to come back. Most people are enchanted by Rome in spite of its faults. I think if you are here for three or four days, you are not paying attention to the overflowing garbage bins being unemptied, or the dog crap in the streets. You are being enchanted by the architecture, the food, most of the year the weather, and the history. Rome is a living museum. You are eating lunch across from a 2,000-year-old building. There are not too many places like Rome especially if you are coming from North America or Australia. Every period of history from c. 800 BC to today is visible here. Rome's history is also so integrated into daily life. It's not like going to Stonehenge from London and then going back to modernity. Rome's modernity is entwined in its history."

What do you love about Italy?

"I love traveling throughout Italy because within a very short distance everything, the food, the colors, the customs, the dialects, the history, changes. Italy is so regional that every place is different. Just think of the differences between Puglia and Tuscany."

What do you dislike about Rome?

"All the things that Italy is notorious for: things not working as they should. In Rome we all know that that garbage collection, public transport, street maintenance is problematic. Public services don't function well. Going to the Post Office is not an edifying experience. It's not customer-service friendly. Corruption is a common problem. Getting frustrating by "why doesn't this work better". At the moment Rome is going through tough times financially so a lot of the services that Romans need to rely on don't have the funding. If you live here you feel that as well as the lack of civic sense."

What do you dislike about Italy?

"The lack of civic sense and pride in some, but not all, parts of Italy. The illegality of so many pensions especially for "invalids" who are not sick, of people leaving the workplace to do their grocery shopping."

What do you miss about the United States?

"I miss most of all my family and friends, for me that has always been the biggest compromise of living abroad. From the food standpoint, I miss the variety of ethnic choices like really good Thai and Indian food and interesting fusion."

If you could start three new tours anywhere in the world and were guaranteed that they'd be successful, where would you choose?

"Since our company is "Eating Europe" logistically-speaking destinations should be. However, it's a big world and we could expand to another region. As far as cuisines go Japan and Southeast Asian are some of my favorites. However, looking at things realistically and logistically, I would stay in Europe and probably open up in Istanbul, although right now politically it's not the best time. Maybe Lisbon. "

In Italy?

"Palermo with its fantastic markets. Maybe Naples."

If you move away from Rome, where would you like to live?

"I don't know. I often ask myself that question. I think the longer you stay in a place, the harder it is to imagine where else you would go. When you are younger, you have less roots, less to hold you down. I love Amsterdam, but I don't know if I could deal with the weather. It's a great place. I love the lifestyle, people biking around. Things really work there; it's a high-functioning, vibrant, city. On a nice day, it's a beautiful city with its canals."

Would you ever consider moving back to the United States?

"Yes, but as I said the longer you've been in a place the harder it is to move away. Philadelphia would be the obvious choice because that's where my family and a lot of my close friends are but doing what? Philadelphia and D.C. have had a real resurgence. A lot of people my parents' age, instead of retiring to some community in the suburbs, are moving into the city. It's become a hot destination with a great food scene and a number of great restaurants. When I was growing up there were like two. I haven't lived there in so long that, although I love visiting, it's hard to imagine starting my life again but I'm not closed to the idea."

[Lucy Gordan](#)

Lucy Gordan

Italian Hours

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