

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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★★★

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## AMECCA FOR ITALIAN FOOD

Go to the mountain town of Norcia for the pork and stay for the truffles and cheese. **PAGE J1**



## DEFENSE

Derrick Mathews

## ALL-GREATER HOUSTON

See who made the list of the best area high school football players. **PAGE C4**



## OFFENSE

Dustin Garrison

**INSIDE**

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**PARADE**

## OPRAH'S DREAM

The talk show queen says she knows what the public wants from TV — and her new network will deliver it.



By **JOANNE KING HERRING**

# New plan for an old cause

The force behind *Charlie Wilson's War* is at it again — trying to bring Afghanistan and its people into the 21st century

By **ZAIN SHAUK**  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

**F**ORMER President George H.W. Bush thought he was agreeing to 15 minutes with Joanne King Herring, but an hour later he was shooing away his next commitment, riveted by her ideas for Afghanistan.

The two were in his office for a private meeting, with ABC news anchor Diane Sawyer and a television crew waiting for him outside. Herring, a vibrant 81-year-old whose prior work to spark CIA action in Afghanistan was depicted by Julia Roberts in the 2007 film *Charlie Wilson's War*, wanted their support for her new effort, one that was neglected long ago.

An hour earlier, Bush said he couldn't offer anything but would hear her out. Now he was asking what he could do. "I want you to call Obama," she replied.

So goes Herring, the determined advocate for a solution in Afghanistan whose charm and Southern drawl are back in action for an old cause. She has a 500-page plan to support a coalition of nonprofit organizations for.

Please see **HERRING**, Page A10.



Exclusively in your print edition.



**PALPABLE ENTHUSIASM:** Joanne King Herring admits she once was "worn out" by Afghanistan, before a chat with friend Caroline Firestone reignited her interest in turning the country around.

KAREN WARREN / CHRONICLE

By **ROBERT PEAR**  
NEW YORK TIMES

## OBAMA ENACTS POLICY ON END OF LIFE

■ New regulation in Medicare will offer doctors pay to discuss options on terminal care

WASHINGTON — When a proposal to encourage end-of-life planning touched off a political storm over "death panels," Democrats dropped it from legislation to overhaul the health care system. But the Obama administration will achieve the same goal by regulation, starting Jan. 1.

Under the new policy, outlined in a Medicare regulation, the government will pay doctors who advise patients on options for end-of-life care, which may include advance directives to forgo aggressive life-sustaining treatment.

Congressional supporters of the new policy, though pleased, have kept quiet. They fear provoking another furor like the one in 2009 when Republicans seized on the idea of end-of-life counseling to argue that the Democrats' bill would allow the government to cut off care for the critically ill.

The final version of the health care legislation, signed into law by President Barack Obama in March, authorized Medicare coverage of yearly physical examinations, or wellness visits. The new rule says Medicare will cover "voluntary advance care planning," to discuss end-of-life treatment, as part of the annual visit.

Under the rule, doctors can provide information to patients on how to prepare an "advance directive," stating how aggressively they wish to be treated if they are so sick that they cannot make health care decisions for themselves.

While the new law does not mention advance care planning, the Obama administration says it will.

# East End's 'go-to' woman not shy about activism

■ Community's Castillo-Hulsey fosters parks and nags politicians

By **ALLAN TURNER**  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Jessica Castillo-Hulsey sometimes calls herself a widow, even though she's only divorced. Asked her age, she confesses she's 58, then admits she's just turned 60.

When the topic comes to what she's done with her life, she tells the biggest, good-natured whopper of all: "I'm just a simple homemaker."

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

This is the second in a series of profiles of people in the Houston area who are devoting their lives to help make our community a better place.

■ **COMING MONDAY:** Houston's own dog rescuer

she says. "That's all I am."

Few of Castillo-Hulsey's neighbors — even fewer in city government — would buy that last assertion. Castillo-Hulsey, whose eyes sparkle with devilish mirth and whose energy would be the envy of



**HER VOICE GETS HEARD:** Jessica Castillo-Hulsey was among the first advocates for this skateboard park she helped promote at Eastwood Park, one of her many achievements.

JAMES NIELSEN / CHRONICLE

**Boneless Beef**  **Coca-Cola Soft Drinks**

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2010

**SIP OF THE WEEK**

**2007 FRANK FAMILY VINEYARDS NAPA VALLEY ZINFANDEL**

■ **THE DRINK:** 2007 Frank Family Vineyards Napa Valley Zinfandel  
 ■ **WHY IT'S HOT:** The blessed arrival of cool weather — finally — makes it perfect for enjoying a hearty, robust zin, and this is a luscious one, full of red fruit and chocolate notes with a spicy under-taste and firm tannins providing good structure. It's a sexy wine, if not quite, to its credit, a decadent one.  
 ■ **PROFILE:** Winemaker Todd Graff has blended in a little cabernet (9 percent) and petite sirah (7 percent) to add nuance. The wine was aged for 15 months in a mix of new and used. About 6,200 cases were made.

■ **FIND IT:** \$29.53 at Spec's.

■ **P.S.:** Anything off the grill or from the smoker will pair perfectly. And it's great for just sipping in front of the fire, too.

— DALE ROBERTSON



JAMES NIELSEN / STAFF



Le specialità di Filotei

- PROSCIUTTO DI NORCIA
- CIAUSCOLO I.G.P.
- SALSA TARTUFATA
- OTTIMO PECORINO
- AMARO E GRAPPA AL TARTUFO

WHERE YOU BUY IT: A typical norcineria (pork butcher shop) in Norcia, Italy.

J.C. REID PHOTOS

**FASHION**  
**BABY, IT'S COLD OUTSIDE**  
 THIS JESSICA SIMPSON PEACOCK, BELOW, \$99 AT DILLARD'S, IS ONE WAY TO GET THE LOOK.

J5



» **GO GRAY:** Designer Michael Kors showed a duster-style coat for the season.

GETTY IMAGES

DILLARD'S

# NORCIA:

## A mountain mecca for Italian food

» **TRAVEL: PORK IS KING** in this small town nestled in the subranges of the Apennines

By J.C. REID

**W**E'D been traveling for most of a day — flying into Rome from the U.S., renting a car at the airport and then driving three hours north into the hills of Umbria. Our destination was Norcia, a small town located on a high plateau — some 2,000 feet above sea level — in the Valnerina, a wildy fertile valley enclosed by fog-shrouded hills and nestled up to one of the more impressive subranges of the Apennines — the Sibillini Mountains.

We drove into the Porta S. Lucia, one of the gates through the still-standing 14th-century walls that ring the city, and wedged our woefully underpowered-for-driving-in-mountains Ford Fiesta into a spot on the narrow street in

Please see **ITALY**, Page J6



**PICTURESQUE:** The Church of St. Benedict in Norcia, Italy, is a great place to take snapshots.

**TEXAS**



FOUR SEASONS RESORT

**GET OUT IN IRVING**

Dallas suburb proves worthy of a visit in and of itself. J3

**FAVES**

**RICH LEVY DISHES ON HIS FAVORITE VIETNAMESE RESTAURANT**

■ **WHO:** Rich Levy, executive director of nonprofit literary arts organization Inprint

■ **WHAT HE LOVES:** Van Loc Vietnamese restaurant, 3010 Milam

■ **WHY HE LOVES IT:** A creative writer and vegetarian always on the lookout for a good tofu place, Levy has been eating at Van Loc several times a week for nearly a decade. He likes it for its

Please see **FAVES**, Page J5



GARY FOUNTAIN

**FOOD**

**A PERFECT PAIRING**



Tango & Malbec tempts visitors with authentic South American food and wine. J2

JOHNNY HANSON / STAFF

**MAN PAGE**

**THE YEAR IN MEN**

A look at the guys who shaped our lives in 2010.

J4

# ITALY: TOURISTS GO TO NORCIA FOR THE FOOD

CONTINUED FROM PAGE J1  
front of our hotel.

We got out and took a deep breath. The cool air was infused with the fragrance of burning wood from the city's fireplaces and kitchens, a characteristic of this part of central Italy that would color and flavor many aspects of our four-day visit here. Blinking away the cobwebs of jetlag, we peered up the street into the town's main piazza, which was surrounded by the obligatory church, town hall and museum, all of which orbited around a big statue in the center. Statues in the middle of piazzas are a dime-a-dozen in Italy, featuring the usual suspects such as Garibaldi, Emanuele and Cavour. But this one was different. This was a statue of St. Benedict, the patron saint of Europe and the inspiration for Benedictine monasteries the world over. This, too, would color our visit to Norcia.

For now, we were ready to check into our hotel, the Palazzo Seneca, a new Relais & Chateaux resort owned by a Norcian family — the Bianconis — who have run hotels in this area since the 1850s. Housed in a 16th century Umbrian palace that the family spent six years and untold millions remodeling, our newly renovated room with all the technological bells and whistles (HDTV, Wi-Fi) would be our base for exploring the city of Norcia and the surrounding area.

We had come to Norcia for the food. Norcia is known as the pork capital of Italy, presided over by the norcinos — pork cutners — and their retail shops, called norcinerias. If being the city of pork wasn't enough, Norcia is equally known for its tartufo nero (black truffles) — those pungent relatives of mushrooms that grow underground and can only be rooted out by truffle-hunting dogs. Throw in a long tradition of cheese-making, as well as a bounty of local produce and grains, and Norcia reveals itself to be a relatively unknown



**ON THE SQUARE  
PATRON SAINT**

Statue of St. Benedict in Norcia, Italy.



J.C. REID PHOTOS

**FLAVOR:** Executive chef Flavio Faedi of Vespasia Restaurant makes spezzatino, right, at Palazzo Seneca.

mecca for food lovers.

An initial walk through town revealed row upon row of norcinerias, all with different personalities as manifested in the colorful norcinos who owned them and were more than willing to woo a couple of American tourists into their shops with free samples. (Few spoke English, so food was an effective lingua franca.)

Entering a norcineria is like entering a pork-lover's Disneyland: Towers of Prosciutto di Norcia — cured pig leg that's more savory and spicy than its better-known cousin, Prosciutto di Parma — compete for space with cordwoodlike stacks of salami (cured pork sausage). Incredibly, huge glass orbs filled with priceless black truffles — which would normally elicit gasps of delight from globe-trotting gastronomes — are hardly noticeable among the pork extravaganza.

Our appetites whetted, we headed back to the hotel. Palazzo Seneca offers typical activities and services such as spa treatments and massages, as well as activities specific to the region such as Umbrian cooking classes and truffle-hunting expeditions into the surrounding hills. We signed up for a cooking class and spent a morning in the kitchen of the hotel's acclaimed restaurant, Vespasia.

I asked executive chef Flavio Faedi why Norcia's pork products were so highly regarded in Italy.

"The natural environment has a lot to do with it," Faedi

said. "At this altitude, as well as our distance from large cities, the air and water are pure. Many of the pork products are air cured, and they take on the aroma of indigenous plants and trees — juniper, rosemary, oak."

Indeed, the smoky fragrance in the air that we noticed when first arriving in Norcia was recognizable in many of the products we tasted.

At Vespasia, Faedi oversees a menu of traditional Umbrian/Norcian dishes executed with contemporary techniques, using locally sourced ingredients. In our private, two-hour cooking class, we learned how to make, among other things, spezzatino — a stew traditionally made of beef or pork. In his version, Faedi uses venison, specifically Roe deer indigenous to the area. It's cooked using a technique similar to sous-vide, then diced and added to cipolle (onions) and patate (potatoes) from



**TREATS:** Salami in a norcineria.

the nearby town of Cannara. A reduction of the local Montefalco wine is added, as well as chopped olives, to create a delicious update on a favorite Italian dish.

After lunch, we walked to the main piazza and the statue of St. Benedict. If pork provides the corporeal and economic sustenance of Norcia, then St. Benedict provides the spiritual nourishment.

Along with his twin sister St. Scholastica, Benedict was born in Norcia in A.D. 480. The Church of St. Benedict is rumored to have been built on the ruins of their house.

The Benedictine monastery here is relatively recent, having returned only 10 years ago after the original order was driven out by Napoleonic decree in 1810. Many of the monks here are from the United States.

The monks maintain a full liturgical schedule — with readings, prayers, chants and masses throughout the day, most of them open to the public. We opted to attend the Compline, or final prayers of the day, at 7:45 p.m. and were led down into the church's crypt, where the monks performed prayers and Gregorian chants. Having attended operas and symphonies throughout Europe, this was one of the most moving and spiritual performances I've ever attended.

For now, Norcia remains a relatively tourist-free zone and the attractions of the area — the cuisine, history, and nature — are all spectacular. Also, if you can get there (rental car is really the only way for most tourists),



**SERVED:** Palazzo Seneca breakfast spread in Norcia, Italy.

**GETTING THERE  
IF YOU GO**

■ **Transportation:** Although it is possible to get to Norcia using a combination of trains and regional buses, for most tourists the only practical option is a rental car. The Milan and Rome airports have the usual selection of rental agencies. A car with a GPS is a must.

■ **Stay:** Palazzo Seneca (palazzoseneca.com). Try visiting in winter (low season) when rates are especially reasonable

■ **Eat:** Vespasia Restaurant, inside Palazzo Seneca.

■ **Do:** Church of St. Benedict and Monastery.

the cost is reasonable. In our two week stay in Italy, Norcia was one of our least expensive destinations. Of course, the fact we were traveling in November — low season — helped.

As we drove out of Norcia, our car weighed down with prosciutto, cheese and wine and our spirits raised by Gregorian chants, we rolled down the windows, breathed in the mountain air tinged with the scent of burning juniper and oak, and vowed to return.

J.C. Reid is a travel and food writer living in Houston.



**TOP 10  
CENTRAL AMERICAN  
BEACHES**

Heading south this winter? Here's ShermansTravel.com's list of the best Central American beaches.

- 1 **Ambergris Caye,**  
Belize
- 2 **Barra de Santiago,**  
El Salvador
- 3 **Bocas del Toro,**  
Panama
- 4 **Hopkins,**  
Belize
- 5 **Mal Pais,**  
Costa Rica
- 6 **Piacencia,**  
Belize
- 7 **Roatán,**  
Honduras
- 8 **San Juan del Sur,**  
Nicaragua
- 9 **San Juan del Sur (outskirts),**  
Nicaragua
- 10 **Santa Teresa,**  
Costa Rica

—KRISTIN FINAN