Small is beautiful

There is one thing in particular which Italy does extremely well. Not pizza, not tiramisu even, but the small shop.

Our village is a medieval hill-top village surrounded by vineyards and olive groves, and yet it has two banks. (I’m using the word ‘shop’ here in the widest sense.) The bank which I use is run, with no security measures other than a double push-button door, by one young man all on his own. He is immensely knowledgeable, intensely serious and infinitely good-tempered. He offers a full banking service with a telephone link to head office as a back-up. As one would expect in Italy, the simplest of transactions requires several signatures, but somehow this doesn’t matter when you can see everything that is being done for you just a hand’s breadth away and with no intervening barrier.

True, one has to queue sometimes, and everything is done equally painstakingly for everyone. Showing impatience in these parts would be extremely bad manners. And there is no favouritism. Once a White Cross van pulled up outside the bank and the driver came in just as it came to my turn to be served. He expected to be allowed to push in ahead of me, but the bank man very politely pointed out that I was there first and served me instead.

In the heart of our village is a baker’s shop where one young lady serves on her own. She knows everybody but treats them all equally. Her unfailing cheerfulness is accompanied by a polished professionalism that never lets her lose her poise for a second.

I take my photocopying to be done in a nearby city, in a stationery and toy shop run by two sisters. Sometimes there is a queue of people and the two of them are forced to weave round each other like a pair of amorous seabirds. Their patience and good grace never flag. The care with which they copy and collate the documents does not suffer. Even the man who wants to see every ink cartridge in the shop on the off-chance that one of them will be compatible with his biro is served with diligence and politeness.

The brightest jewel of all in the crown of Italy’s small shops is the Ferramenta. These shops are a frequent occurrence, often run by families, and exist to serve the same customers year after year. Here it is possible to ask advice about anything from how to hang a mirror, to how to unblock a pipe, and be answered intelligently and expertly. The nearest equivalent in Britain is the DIY store, but there sadly it is an achievement to get any of the staff to actually attend the Help Desk let alone give any advice worth having. Too often the refrain is:

“If it’s not on the shelf we don’t have it.”

In the Ferramenta, however, the incumbent will disappear down aisles piled to the ceiling with boxes and bins, and go straight to the one gadget they think is the answer for you. They will sell individual screws or fittings rather than insisting you buy the whole packet, and will match as best they can an item that you’ve brought to show them. If they don’t have something they will suggest where you might get it. But usually they do have it.

Of course, this is how things used to be once upon a time in Britain. To an extent it is a throwback. But don’t think that here is the land that time forgot. Mobile phones are possessed and used constantly by all but the elderly; everything is EC compliant. The small shops in Italy are special because of the people who serve in them. They have found a balance between formality and friendliness, pro-activity and passivity which no training could impart. With no trace of solemnity, they make the customer feel wanted and appreciated.

“Thank you,” you say at the end of a transaction.

“Thank you to you,” they rejoin.