

Crazy for (Italian) Rabbits

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Photo courtesy Rick Gush

Rick's rabbit-friendly "Rabbitat" I'm crazy for rabbits, and I can't imagine anything sadder than keeping rabbits in tiny wire cages. For a while I was a crusader, and wrote a few magazine articles about how to build rabbit enclosures that the rabbits would enjoy. (The trick is to give them some dirt to dig in, as digging tunnels is their preferred pastime.) Here in Italy, rabbits are not so much a house pet as they are food. (Although there are a whole lot of house bunnies here as well.) Although few of the people living in the hills around Rapallo have cows anymore, a great many of them still raise rabbits to eat. The chic local cuisine restaurants offer rabbit dishes frequently, and most of the butcher stores in town also sell rabbits. It was a bit disconcerting at first for me to stroll by freshly prepared, heads and all, rabbit carcasses. When I was in my twenties, I felt that if I was going to be a carnivore, then I should take a least a ceremonial responsibility in the death of the animals I was going to be eating. I embarked upon a series of husbandry and butchery projects, and managed to variously raise (or at least help raise), kill, butcher, and help eat a steer, a goat kid, several chickens and some turkeys. I also raised and ate some rabbits, and still have vivid memories of the killing moments. (I'm a botanist from California, so of course I've experienced similar anguish about my hand in some plant deaths.) When I was writing the article for the ASPCA about good rabbit enclosures, I needed to build a new version of my "Rabbitat" in order to be able to illustrate the construction project and then photograph happy rabbits frolicking in the wonder-cage. Some friends up on the mountain behind Rapallo volunteered a piece of land for the project, so I built the enclosure up there. My favorite part of the project was hiring a few pampered house rabbits from Rapallo to come pose for pictures inside the completed rabbit luxury suite. Some days, when I was working for hours digging and sweating to make the rabbit paradise, I would cross the street at lunch time and eat in a funky restaurant with all the rustic locals. The main dish, of course, was baked rabbit, which was delicious.