

ELENA CONTI

I was born and I still live in [Udine](#), a lovely town of slightly fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, located in the north-eastern corner of Italy, equally close to the ski-slopes of the Carnian Alps and to the beaches of the north Adriatic Sea and with a beautiful landscape of hills all around. This makes a perfect setting for those who, like me, like the outdoor activities.



I am the proud mother of two children: Marco, 24 years old, soon to graduate in Physics on such a complicated topic that I cannot even recall the title of his thesis; and Valeria, 20 years old and a brilliant law student. Of course, I also had a husband for a while, but he's an ex now.....

I studied Biology at the University of Padua, where I graduated in 1989 with a thesis on cell biology, developing in-vitro systems to assess the cytotoxicity of chemical compounds. Then I moved to the field of biotechnology, with a doctorate research project aimed at enhancing the production of bacterial exopolysaccharides of pharmaceutical importance (hyaluronic acid, alginate) by means of genetic engineering and fermentation technologies. My research was sponsored by a pharmaceutical company located near Padua, [Fidia Farmaceutici](#), and included a 12-month placement as a visiting researcher at the Institute of Cell Biology at the University of Edinburgh, which I remember as one of the most exciting times of my life.



Back in Italy, in 1994 I had the opportunity to take a research position at Polytech, an institute located in Area Science Park, Trieste, a leading consortium for science, innovation and technology. There I experienced a vibrant international environment. My research was still aimed at developing new fermentation technologies, this time to enhance the production of polyunsaturated fatty acids – with my group we filed a few patents for solid state fermentation – and I was finally acquainted with those “creatures”, with which I would have had to deal for many years ahead: the fungi!!!!

In 2002, it was time for a change, I was very glad to accept a new job at [CATAS](#), a testing and certification institute for wood and furniture, with the challenging task of setting up a laboratory to test the efficacy of wood preservatives and obtaining the ISO 17025 accreditation for the test methods. Now, my background was obviously quite far from the wood preservation field. Actually, my only useful skill was cultivating fungi!! I must say that I felt a little bit lonely at the beginning, since this was a totally new field for CATAS, and I didn't have any colleagues to compare notes with. However, CATAS had good networks with other testing institutes, and soon afterwards I met Sabrina Palanti, who had just taken up her position of head of the preservation and biodegradation laboratory at IVALS in Florence, and who gave me some useful tips to start up. We've been good friends since. Then I had my full immersion experience at the biological testing lab of the [Institut für Holztechnologie](#) in Dresden (IHD), where for two weeks Wolfram Scheiding and his team



tutored me and taught me what I needed to know to run a testing laboratory under accreditation scheme. Thank you Wolfram, Katharina and Kordula! I had a great and fruitful time in Dresden!

At that point, it was 2003, I wished to extend my professional network. It was the year when the COST Action E37 had started: what better opportunity to increase my knowledge and my contacts? And why not apply to become a member of IRG WP, the leading worldwide research group in wood preservation? I attended my first COST E37 and the IRG Conference in Ljubljana in 2004.



What an unforgettable experience! I remember that I was standing in the crowd, mostly of strangers, during the IRG reception on the first day, when a distinguished gentleman approached me and introduced himself as Jöran Jermer. "You must be Elena, our new member from Italy. Welcome to IRG!" And very welcome I have felt ever since. I mean, I had been to scientific conferences before, but I had never experienced such a friendly atmosphere as among the wood scientists!



Well, eventually my job turned out to be more focused on testing and on standardization activities than on sheer research; in fact, most of the sponsors of our tests are not interested in spreading information about their products, with few notable exceptions which allowed me, for instance, to contribute to the wood durability database of IRG. I have also participated in interlaboratory trials with other European institutes to validate new test methods or to assess the reproducibility of the established ones. Whenever I could, I have attended the IRG conferences, which work for me like an injection of fresh information, as well as the occasion to socialize with the wood people.



Besides the laboratory activity, which over the years has expanded from the wood sector to cover all the materials used in the furniture industry that are liable to biodeterioration (textiles, plastics, paints,...), I am involved in the standardization work in the wood durability/preservation area, both at the national level, where I am convener of the UNI working group GL2, Wood treatments, and at the European level, where I participate in several working groups of CEN TC38, and as convener of WG 22, Performance, assessment and specification. I am still with CATAS, and unlikely to change....



And outside work? I am not a fan of extreme sports, but I do like a challenge. I have recently achieved my first level SCUBA diving certificate, and I am now continuing with further specialties. My mom says that I am too old for this, but I don't feel old at all!!!

I love skiing, and swimming, and outdoor activities in general. I went to a horse-riding school when I was young, and I like to go for a horseback ride if I have the chance. I love to sing, and I joined a choir for a while, which unfortunately has now disbanded. I need to find a new one. Singing is so liberating! I really enjoy going to the movies, which I do quite regularly, at least once or twice a week.



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I love animals of all kinds. There was a time when we had one dog, two cats, a baby pigeon and a rabbit with her litter of 5 all in our apartment at the same time!!! Now that I have only one cat, and I complain that she sheds hairs, I wonder how I could manage then with that zoo! To remind myself of what a huge commitment it is to have animals at home if you live in an apartment downtown, whenever I can I volunteer at the local dog shelter. This for now prevents me from having another dog, but I'm not sure for how long....

