



PHOTOS BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

■ The countryside in the Chianti region of Tuscany. The region is known for its rolling hills, centuries old villas and mouth-watering cuisine.

Cooking with Italian soul

Three-day stay in Tuscany inn culminates with culinary class

BY BRIAN BERGSTEIN
The Associated Press

PANZANO IN CHIANTI, ITALY — Deep in the Chianti wine country, I guided a rented Volkswagen over a nearly mile-long dirt road, past vineyards and olive trees and down a steep, narrow and gouged stretch that made the car's shocks groan.

Maybe the dusty bouncing would have been less severe if I had taken the rutted path a little slower. But that would have required containing my excitement about the destination: a Tuscan inn with cooking classes.

Italy is a beautiful, friendly place, with an insane assortment of things to do and see. But when my wife and I spent three weeks there this spring, one of our most exciting activities was eating.

We were blown away by fresh pasta with one-note accompaniments, such as truffle oil or mushrooms. We marveled at the deep flavors of dried meats, pun-



■ The dining room at Fagiolari in the Chianti region of Tuscany, Italy.

gent cheeses and rich red tomatoes. Things I would not eat at home, such as wild boar and rabbit, became new friends.

One problem, beyond pants that no longer fit, is that if you really like to cook, eating amazing food forces you to reconsider your own kitchen strategies. It's as if the people in the restaurant are throwing down a gauntlet, saying, "Oh yeah? You think you

make some good beef stew? Beat this."

So the opportunity to take a cooking class — especially in Tuscany, the hilly northern region whose landscape of medieval villages and farms has changed little in centuries — was too good to pass up. Here we could learn from the masters — get inside the inner sanctum and see how the magic happens.

■ See TUSCAN E2
■ Also see if you go E2