

# Learning to cook local food at a Tuscan inn

BRIAN BERGSTEIN loves to eat Italian food and he loves to cook – so he combines the two and takes a cookery course in Tuscany, bringing home the secrets of Italian food

Deep in the Chianti wine country, I guided a rented Volkswagen over a nearly two-kilometre-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 recently spent three weeks there, 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 marvelled at the deep flavours of dried meats, pungent 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.

We discovered the bed and breakfast, Fagiolari, the same way we found most every place we stayed – on the Internet, with the help of guidebooks and message board postings from other travellers. Information abounds because so many tourists go to Italy; the Tuscan countryside seems to have recently grown in popularity (think *Under the Tuscan Sun*), and lots of places offer cooking classes, including multi-day sessions.

Our class came on the final night of a three-day stay at Fagiolari, a converted stone farmhouse. Owner Giulietta Giovannoni charges €85 per person for the class, which she has offered since 1995. That includes an apron, cookbook with 30 recipes, the dinner you learn to cook, plus generous carafes of the red Chianti wine grown on the premises. Since dinner alone at Fagiolari costs €25 per person, the cooking class essentially costs €60.

Considering that she charges that much for cooking classes, Giulietta seems surprisingly humble when I asked about the origins of her culinary wisdom.

"In Italy, the women all cook," she shrugged, and smiled.

But there is a little more to it: raised in Florence, 32km to the north, she worked in a restaurant as well as with caterers before buying the Fagiolari farmhouse, olive groves and vineyards and turning it into a five-room B&B. In Italy this kind of inn/working farm is called an *agriturismo*.

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Giulietta's success with Fagiolari inspired her twin sister, Marinella, to open a *agriturismo* of her own just outside the Tuscan hill town of Volterra. We stayed at Marinella's place before coming to Fagiolari and ate a few dishes that blew our minds.

During our class in Fagiolari, Giulietta was in the background, turning things over to her young assistant, Stefania Balducci, who also speaks very good English. She sweetly, patiently and ably guided me, my wife, a Dutch couple and two New Zealanders.

The menu consisted of pesto; zuppa di farro, a traditional Tuscan soup featuring cannellini beans and spelt, a barley-like grain; vegetables simmered in a tomato sauce; beef and pork loins simmered in Chianti wine and onions; and an apple cake for dessert.

When we arrived at 5pm, Stefania had carefully laid out the ingredients, purchased that morning, and done a few key things in advance, like soaking the cannellini beans and spelt for the soup.

As we sipped wine, Stefania showed us how to make the dishes, and had us six students take turns peeling vegetables, chopping onions and picking fresh basil in the garden.

Stefania had a few key tips that I made sure to absorb, such as how to season raw meat by cutting strategically placed holes and stuffing them with salt, pepper and garlic cloves.

Another bit of her advice: pesto

will stick to pasta better if you add small chunks of potato to the boiling water in which the noodles cook.

The Dutch couple insisted on learning how to make the pesto by hand, with a mortar and pestle, though Stefania said the results wouldn't be that different from what could be achieved with a handheld food processor. We made two versions, one each way.

By 8pm - after several glasses of wine - we spooned the pesto onto chunks of bread and debated whether the hand-ground version was superior.

I thought it had a more interesting texture but I couldn't decide if it tasted better. I had two bowls of the rosemary-infused soup, which I found hearty and full of flavour.

As for the main course, the vegetables were pretty good, not amazing, and the meat was flavourful and satisfying, though I think our hosts had sliced it too thinly before serving. The apple cake was sweet and very light.

When the plates were cleared and we shifted from wine to grappa, I decided to recommend the cooking class to others. For one thing, it was a great icebreaker that led to long and enlightening dinnertime conversation with our classmates.

Perhaps best of all, it demystified and democratised the Tuscan kitchen. The essential message was how to get good food to emerge from simple concepts and very fresh ingredients.

That's a strategy I feel comfortable trying to replicate at home - even though home, sadly, is far from the nur-

## IF YOU GO...

**VISAS:** South African passport holders need a Schengen visa to enter Italy.

**GETTING THERE:** SAA flies directly to Milan three times a week, from there you can connect to Florence. Alternatively, fly on any European airline and connect to Florence. The city is accessible by air, train or bus, as is Pisa, another popular Tuscan destination. Trains and buses also run into several Tuscan towns from Rome. The region is not very far from anywhere; Italy is not a large country.

**ACCOMMODATION:** Fagiolari, phone 0939-055-852-351, website: [www.fagiolari.it](http://www.fagiolari.it)

Podere San Lorenzo, phone 0939-058-839-080, website: [www.agriturismosanlorenzo.it](http://www.agriturismosanlorenzo.it)

Rooms begin at €75, with a 10% discount during most of the winter. Cooking classes are €85.

**COOKING CLASSES:** For information on other cooking classes in Italy, visit [www.slowtrav.com/italy/planning](http://www.slowtrav.com/italy/planning).

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