

The tastes of Tuscany

The tastes and smells of Tuscany take on a new meaning under the watchful eye of chef Franco Palandra at Torre del Tartufo, one of Italy's top cooking schools. PIXIE EMSLIE kneaded the pasta, tasted the olive oil and sampled the wine

The hills of Tuscany beckon gently under the warm summer sun as the road from Arezzo in the south-east winds its charming way through valleys, forests and farmlands. This is cooking country and anticipation was high as we approached our destination, Torre del Tartufo, a few kilometres outside Arezzo, where my husband Robin and I would spend a week learning the art of cooking Italian food.

The villa is aptly named. Perched high in the hills of Monte Giovi, views stretch forever across magnificent countryside. At the cooking school, roses climb the old stone walls, giant hydrangeas glow pink and blue, and glorious beds of herbs scent the air.

Accommodation is spacious: 12 double bedrooms have en-suite bathrooms, with some of the rooms including a living room equipped with fridge and kitchenette.

Manager Barbara Helmer welcomed us, herself a graduate of the cooking school and an ardent admirer of the area, its people and its food. Comfortably settled and chilled glass of wine in hand, we were soon chatting with the other international student cooks from the US, Mexico, Australia, UK and South Africa.

Eagerly we settled down for our first meal, cooked by the man who was to be our mentor, teacher and tormentor (but always with a gentle smile) – chef Franco Palandra.

From the first day the pattern of the school was set. Breakfast, at the civilised time of 9am to 10:30am, was a buffet, with an array of fruit, bread, cold meat, cheese and eggs done to order. Then the morning was ours to do as we wished – walk through the hazelnut groves, lie at the enormous pool or enjoy a sauna, read a book or just sit and chat. Lunch at 1pm was set out al fresco-style under the tree, then at 3pm reality began. We were each handed an apron, beautifully embroidered with the name of the villa, and a handsome recipe book. The kitchen boasts everything from extra-sharp knives to rolling pins and enormous pots and pans. Franco explained that the cooking lessons

would be hands-on, with each of us making something different. Sometimes we'd work together, other times on our own.

I was set to making a starter, vegetable millefoglie. Puff pastry for its base with a topping, the pastry mercifully of the bought variety as Franco said it wasn't really worth the effort to make your own. It entailed frying thin rounds of aubergine, baby marrow, yellow peppers and tomato, and adding mozzarella, herbs and a fresh basil pesto sauce. And that was just a starter.

Other dishes we made that day included melanzane Parmigiana, a Sicilian dish of aubergines in a thick tomato sauce, cooked with basil and mozzarella. Then came a moment many had looked forward to – how to make gnocchi or potato dumplings. The potatoes were soft and fluffy, and combined with flour, grated Parmesan and various spices. Franco gently dropped them into boiling water to demonstrate how the gnocchi floated up once they were cooked. Then, of course, they had to have sauce – this time a mushroom-flavoured delight. During our first day we also made saltimbocca using pork loin and fresh sage, while lemon tartlets with meringue completed the picture.

Day two followed a similar pattern except that Franco had risen early to light the pizza oven. While we rolled the dough, flattened it and set it to prove, the outdoor wood-burning oven was reaching the correct temperature. Meanwhile we rustled up a pecorino cheese flan with white bean sauce, we stuffed and cooked zucchini flowers, learned how to mix a brisé dough for rolls and then made our own dough for ravioli. There was much laughter as we battled to shape the ravioli, which simply refused to come out in neat little squares. Nevertheless they tasted delicious, with their filling of spinach, ricotta cheese, grated Parmesan and nutmeg.

Truffles are used in many of the recipes, sometimes with seemingly gay abandon. At Torre del Tartufo they are grown on the estate and in summer the black truffle is found in fair numbers. The more pungent

and rare white truffle is found during the winter months. Specially trained truffle-sniffing dogs visit the farms in the neighbourhood every week to search for the little delicacies, and we watched with fascination as Pepe hunted for these delights under the hazelnut and oak trees. The dog would rush around, sniffing madly, then suddenly start yelping with delight and start to dig. Instantly his trainer was there to carefully lift the truffle out of the ground and reward him. Then he would start again. Pepe unearthed about 10 of the odd-shaped fungi while we were watching. Once they were scrubbed clean of earth, Franco carefully shaved slices off the truffle and it is these that were used in the cooking, either fresh or as a truffle paste.

The third day brought a complete change as the group was whisked off to experience some of the Tuscan farms on the local Agriturismo route, comparable to our wine route in the Cape. First stop was Casa Pallino where cheese is made from sheep's milk. The first soft cheese, ravjolo is made from the curds, then from the whey comes the soft ricotta, a slightly harder cheese called ricada, and finally pecorino which is aged for up to a year.

From there it was on to a magnificent privately owned castle, Castello di Porciano, which dates back to the 11th century. One of its more famous guests was Dante Alighieri who stayed there while writing part of the *Inferno* in his *Divine Comedy*. Today the castle is owned by Martha Specht Corsi who is lovingly restoring the building and who has also written a cookbook aimed at the many foreign students who visit Florence.

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The final days saw us making more advanced dishes, and under Franco's careful instruction we produced such delights as duck ragout with porcini mushroom sauce, saffron-infused risotto, wild boar and – his pièce de

GOURMET TRAVEL

resistance – rack of lamb with melted pecorino, marinated sundried tomato and black olives. Franco won the best chef award for this recipe at the Four Seasons hotel in Milan recently. Puddings included a millefoglie with ice cream served in honey baskets.

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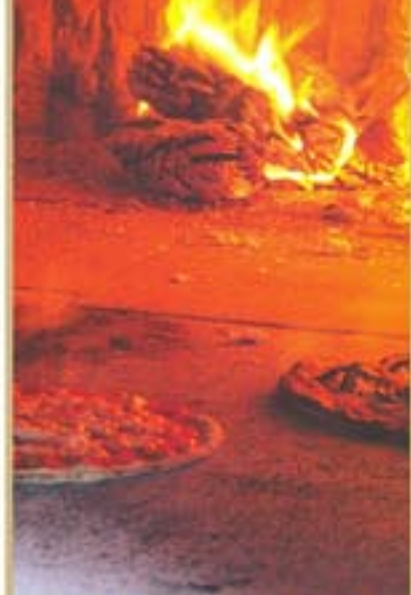
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Chef Franco Palandra



Sommelier Massimiliano Marzotti

CLASSIC TOMATO SAUCE

Serves 4 – 6 **EASY** 40 mins

- 75ml olive oil
- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 carrot, chopped
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- a bunch of fresh basil

- 1 Pass the tomatoes through a food mill or processor.
- 2 Heat the oil in a frying pan and add all the vegetables. Fry until golden, about 10 minutes. Add the tomatoes and cook on a low heat for a further 20 minutes.
- 4 Whisk the sauce and seasoning, add the basil and serve with the gnocchi.

CREAMY CHEESE SAUCE

Serves 4 – 6 **EASY** 20 mins

- 500ml milk
- 200g cheese (Gorgonzola or Parmesan, depending on desired flavour), diced
- 50g butter
- 50g cake flour
- 250ml double cream
- pinch of nutmeg
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

- 1 In a pot, heat the milk with the cheese.
- 2 Melt the butter in a separate pot, add the flour and cook for 1 minute. Remove from the heat.
- 3 When the milk starts to boil add it to the butter mixture, stir well with a whisk and bring it to the boil, stirring continuously.
- 4 Once it starts to boil, add the cream and nutmeg, and season. Serve with the gnocchi.

AREZZO-STYLE TAGLIATA WITH SPINACH PIE

Serves 4 – 6 **EASY** 30 mins

- 200g ricotta
- 400g spinach, boiled, well drained



The class practising rolling pasta



Castello do Porciano, where Dante wrote part of *Inferno*



Lorenzo Cipriani displays freshly made cheese



Enjoying lunch al fresco was a highlight of the trip



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Teresa Simmons and Joe Santilli from Miami prepare lunch



The beautiful terraced gardens with their peaceful patios lead up to the hazelnut groves

- and finely chopped
- 8 eggs
- 50g Parmesan, grated
- pinch of nutmeg
- salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

- 3 thick slices sirloin beef with bone
- rock salt and crushed pepper, to taste
- olive oil, to serve
- fresh rosemary, to serve

- 1 Preheat the oven to 150°C.
- 2 In a bowl, mix the ricotta with the spinach.
- 3 Add the eggs, Parmesan, nutmeg and seasoning.
- 4 Fill small greased and floured moulds with the spinach mixture and bake in a bain marie for 20 minutes.
- 5 Grill the sirloin for a few minutes on each side and remove from the heat. Cut the bones out and slice the meat into thin slices. Lay the meat on an oven tray and season. Increase the oven to 250°C.
- 6 Cook the meat for 5 minutes. Place on a serving platter, drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with fresh rosemary. Serve with the spinach pie.

The cooking course takes a maximum of 12 students and each course runs for one week, either at Torre del Tartufo or the nearby Casa Ambuto. Courses are conducted in English and the rates include accommodation, all meals and drinks, cooking classes and excursions. Costs for 2008 are around R22 000 per person, participating in the cooking class and sharing, or around R17 200 per non-participating partner, sharing. For information and prices on renting the entire villa, either self-catering or with certain meals cooked by the chef, visit www.torredeltartufo.com or email info@italiancooking.com or call 0044-0871-720-2665.

