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Taste of Tuscany

If you want to learn Italian cooking, this is a place to do it, writes Gillian Cumming, who hopes her torta will be perfetto

"ALLORA!" This was one Italian word we'd grown quite familiar with. And issued by our cooking instructor, it had us snapping to attention.

Six of us, all women, were standing around the huge marble-topped island bench in the cantina of Casa Ombuto on Day 4 of our week-long Italian cooking course at Poppi, deep in the autumnal hills of Tuscany in northern Italy.

We were looking at Chef Paola, a majestic and handsome woman, and hanging off every pearl of wisdom.

"If you have your period, then you

don't-a make-a the pasta," a straight-faced Paola told us.

This was too much! So we let off a few more belly laughs, adding to the many clogged up during Chef Paola's intensive four-hour cooking classes, where our mission was to learn how to prepare several Tuscan courses for that evening's meal. *Delizioso*.

But this current gem issued by Paola, the cause of our great mirth, was indeed born from centuries of Italian gastronomy, so it could not be ignored.

"When a woman is-a too stressed,

then it's not-a good for the pasta dough," Paola explained.

It made sense. For as we had learned while making our own pasta for the very first time, the dough needs to be gently worked by hand—massaged, kneaded then stretched over a rolling pin—gently, gently, over and over, until perfect ("Perfetto", as Paola often praised).

"Thinner, thinner, G-ll" (that's me, with the accent heavily on the hard G), urges Paola, taking the pin to masterfully demonstrate an art learnt from childhood.

So there we were—two Americans, two Dutch, a Brit and an Aussie—having the time of our lives over seven days at this 32ha luxury villa estate and cooking school, tucked into the hills of the Casentino Valley,

about 1½ hours by car south of Florence and just 4km from the medieval village of Poppi.

It took a few hours of research on the web to decide on Casa Ombuto as the place to fulfil the long-held dream of learning to cook traditional Italian fare while holidaying in Italy.

I was looking for hands-on culinary instruction, an idyllic rural environment and rustic digs that would be unabashedly luxurious.

Casa Ombuto scored on all counts. And I can also report the experience excelled all expectations.

This is a slick operation, the brainchild of Holland-based Pippa Ward-Smith, an entrepreneur who holidayed in Tuscany then took the risk of turning an old villa into a five-star resort and cookery school.

Italy



Delizioso: White-clad chef Paola (opposite page) leads the class; (clockwise from left) rustic restored property; its pool; a visiting cheese specialist; the writer makes pasta



Pippa operates a second resort, Torre del Tartufo, where three-day and week-long courses also run.

The dream begins as soon as you enter the gates of Casa Ombuto, off the beaten track and overlooking the thickly forested hills.

A car is strongly recommended, though transport to and from the villa can be organised.

Manager Barbara Helmer greeted us warmly after we—my husband stayed for the first two nights—pulled up.

After being shown our spacious two-bedroom apartment in the renovated stone villa—traditional Tuscan terracotta floors, wooden beams, living room and marble bathroom, set in picture-postcard gardens with resort-style heated pool, jacuzzi and wood-fired hot tub—we joined our companions for the week at the cantina.

The stone-floor cantina, half-kitchen half-dining room, oozes rustic charm. Although a new addition to the property, its rough stone

walls and arching ceiling meld beautifully with the centuries-old villa.

At one end of the dining room is a huge fireplace that is half as deep as it is wide. Furniture and decor sensitively selected by Pippa add to the seductive ambience.

The test of quality in the apartments included comfortably firm mattresses and fine Busatti bed linen (we visited the factory and watched century-old looms in action



in the medieval village of Anghiari on our excursion day).

In such a perfect location, spending our afternoons in the kitchen seemed only natural. And Paola, a chef who for 10 years ran her own restaurant in the neighbouring village of Bibbiena, was the perfect teacher.

We cooked and dined on what we'd learnt on Sunday and Monday, Wednesday and Friday. I'd never seen so much garlic.

Dishes taught to us by Paola included traditional Tuscan ragu (meat sauce), salsa verde (green parsley sauce that's brilliant on toasted bread or dribbled over barbecued meats), torta di carciofi (artichoke tart), guinea fowl with vin Santo and porcini mushrooms, fagottini di branzino allo zafferano (pasta stuffed with sea bass with saffron sauce), ribollita (bread soup), wood-fired pizza (with toppings, always remember that less is more), tiramisù, panna cotta and chocolate gelato. Always at hand was our personal copy of Paola's *Casa Ombuto Recipe Book*, in which our teacher encouraged us to make notes.

True to expectation, ingredients we used were bought fresh each morning from nearby markets (with many herbs and fruit picked that morning at Ombuto).

Meals were always accompanied by wine, discussed and matched to each dish, and liqueurs. Grappa, limoncello and sambuca flowed freely.

Tuesday morning we were collected by minibus driver and our cheery guide for a full day's excursion around the province of Arezzo, visiting a pecorino and goat cheese farm, the San Fabiano Estate winery of Count Borghini Baldovinetti, the Ravagni oil mill (where the Ravagni family has been making olive oil since 1421), the famous Busatti linen factory and, briefly, in Arezzo, birthplace of Michelangelo.

Thursday was our free day, exploring Poppi and neighbouring Bibbiena in search of ceramics and shoes (nobody makes boots like the Italians), as well as the delis and supermarkets.

Like I said, a dream come true. Bellissimo!



CASA OMBUTO

DETAILS The week-long Italian Cookery Course at Casa Ombuto costs (all-inclusive) at today's rate of exchange about \$4300 per person (double occupancy), \$4600 per person (single occupancy) and \$3000 (non-participating guest, double occupancy). Cooking classes can take up to 12 people and courses run from late April to October. For details, and to book, go to the website at www.italiancookerycourse.com