



THE TASTES OF TUSCANY

The tastes and smells of Tuscany take on a new meaning under the watchful eye of chef Franco Palandra at the Torre del Tartufo, one of Italy's leading cookery schools, reports **Pixie Emslie**



The road from Arezzo, in south-eastern Tuscany, winds its charming way through valleys, forests and farmlands. Our anticipation was high as we approached the Torre del Tartufo, where we would spend a week learning the art of cooking every Italian food, from artichokes to zucchini.

Perched high in the hills of Monte Giovi, the villa looks out across magnificent countryside with views that stretch for ever. The first thing we saw were roses climbing up the stone walls, giant hydrangeas glowing pink and blue, lavender scenting the air and glorious beds of sage, thyme, rosemary and more.

There to welcome us was manager Barbara Helmer, a graduate of the cookery school and an ardent admirer of the area, its people and its food.

The accommodation is

spacious; all 12 double rooms have *en suite* bathrooms, and some have their own sitting-room equipped with fridge and kitchenette.

In no time we had a glass of cold white wine in hand and were meeting our fellow students, who came from the United States, Australia, the UK and South Africa.

Our first meal was cooked by the man who was to be our mentor, teacher and tormentor (though always with a gentle smile) – chef Franco Palandra.

Breakfast each day, between the civilised hours of 9am and 10.30am, was a buffet of fruit, breads, cold meats and cheese, with eggs cooked to order.

The morning was ours to do as we wished – walk through the hazelnut groves, lie round the enormous swimming-pool, read a book or just sit and chat.

Lunch, at 1pm, was a happy

affair, with wine flowing as we chose from an array of dishes set out under the trees.

At 3pm, each of us was handed an embroidered apron and a handsome recipe book. Franco explained that classes would be hands-on, each of us making something different, sometimes working together, other times on our own.

I was set to making a starter, a vegetable *millefoglie*. I was provided with puff pastry for the base, then I fried thin rounds of aubergine and zucchini, yellow peppers and tomato and added mozzarella cheese, herbs and a fresh basil pesto sauce.

Other dishes we made that day included *parmigiane*, a dish of aubergine in a thick tomato sauce cooked with basil and mozzarella. Then we learned how to make *gnocchi*, or potato dumplings. The soft,

fluffy potatoes were combined with flour, grated Parmesan and spices. Franco dropped them elegantly into boiling water to demonstrate how they float to the surface once they are cooked. Then, of course, there is the sauce – this time a mushroom-flavoured delight.

Also made on the first day was *saltimbocca*, using pork loin and fresh sage. Lemon tartlets topped 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 and then set it to stand, the outdoor wood-burning oven was getting to the right 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*

The Lady, 16 to 22 October 2007

RECIPES RECIPES RECIPES RECIPES RECIPES RECIPES

THE TASTES OF TUSCANY

Tomato sauce

- 2kg ripe tomatoes
- 5 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1 carrot, chopped
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- salt and pepper
- a bunch of fresh basil

Pass the tomatoes through a food mill. Heat the olive oil in a saucepan, add all the vegetables except the tomatoes and fry until golden. Add the tomatoes to the pan and cook for a further 20 minutes. Whisk the sauce and season, then finally, add the basil.

Gnocchi (potato dumplings)

- 500g potatoes
- 130g flour
- 40g grated Parmesan cheese
- pinch of nutmeg
- salt and pepper
- 1 egg (optional)

Wash and boil the potatoes in their skins; when cooked, peel while still warm. Mash them and place on a working surface. Add all the other ingredients and mix until well incorporated. Divide the dough into three pieces. Roll each piece into the shape of a rope and cut into pieces, about 2cm each. Lay these on a baking tray and sprinkle with flour to prevent them sticking together. Cook in small batches in plenty of salted boiling water until they rise to the surface and float. Drain and serve with pasta sauce.



1. The Torre del Tartufo villa is set high in the Tuscan hills
2. Sunday lunch is a family affair enjoyed alfresco
3. Lorenzo Cipriani from the farm Casa Pallino making a batch of ricotta cheese fresh from their own sheep's milk
4. Students learning how to roll out their own pasta dough

dough for rolls and a dough for ravioli. There was much laughter as we battled to make the ravioli, which simply refused to come out in neat little squares. Nevertheless, filled with spinach, ricotta, grated Parmesan and nutmeg, they tasted delicious.

Truffles grow on the estate and we watched in amazement as a specially trained dog, Pepe, was brought in to hunt for the hidden delights under the hazel and oak trees.

The little dog rushed round, sniffing madly until, suddenly, he would yelp with delight and start digging. Instantly, his trainer was there to lift the truffle carefully out of the

ground – and reward the dog. Then he would start again. In all he unearthed about 10 of the odd-shaped fungi. Once scrubbed clean of earth, Franco carefully shaved slices off to use in some of the dishes.

The third day brought us a complete change as we were whisked off to visit some of the Tuscan farms on the local Agriturismo route.

Our initial stop was at the Casa Pallino, where cheese is made twice a day from sheep's milk. The first soft cheese, *ravijolo*, is made from the curds; then from the whey comes soft ricotta, a slightly harder cheese called *ravida* and, finally, *pecorino*, which

they age for up to a year.

From there we went on to a magnificent, privately owned castle, the Castello di Porciano, dating back to the 11th century. One of its more famous guests was Dante Alighieri, who wrote part of the *Inferno* there.

An absolute must in Tuscany is a visit to an olive oil farm and vineyard. Our hosts at Tenuta il Palazzo were Primo and Isabella de Sabbata. The vistas of olive groves mingled with vineyards stretched into the distance, while at the villa we tasted their wines and their prize-winning olive oil.

But back to cooking. The final days saw us make more advanced dishes. Under Franco's careful instruction we produced such delights as duck ragu with porcini mushroom sauce, saffron-infused risotto, wild boar, and his *pièce de résistance*, rack of lamb with melted pecorino, marinated

sundried tomato and black olives. Franco won Best Chef for this recipe at the Four Seasons Hotel in Milan recently. Puddings included a *millefoglie* with ice cream served in honey baskets.

Franco came to Torre del Tartufo as chef three years ago, after working on cruise ships for several years. He was born in Switzerland but grew up with his Italian family in Caserta, near Naples.

"I got my inspiration from my mother, who cooked, and from my neighbour, who was a chef and who encouraged me," he tells me.

At the final dinner, all 12 budding chefs paid tribute to Franco and how he had coaxed us through difficult tasks with cheerfulness and skill. They also made their farewells, knowing many friendships had been forged over those hot stoves – and would one day be renewed around the world over a good Tuscan meal. ☺



- The cooking course never takes more than 12 students and runs for one week, either at Torre del Tartufo (Loc Il Podere 56, 52010 Chivavereto, OR) or at the nearby Casa Ombuto. Costs in 2008 are around £1,455 (\$2,950) per person sharing or £1,603 (\$3,250) for single occupancy. Email: info@cookingvacationstuscany.com (www.italiancookerycourse.com).
- For information and prices on renting the villa, with or without meals cooked by the chef, visit the website at: www.torredeltartufo.com.
- To get there: Torre del Tartufo is about 10 miles from Arezzo, which is easily accessible by bus or train. (For train times visit: www.trenitalia.it.) The nearest airports are Pisa (16 miles away) and Florence (43 miles). To travel from Arezzo to the villa it is best to hire a car or take a taxi.