

## Italian Lesson

September 9, 2016 | Wendy



I gazed out the window as our plane began its descent into Florence. Firenze, I said softly, noticing how the Italian word tickled my tongue. Rows of silvery olive trees and gnarled grape vines striped the land below. La bella paese. That's what Italians called their home—the beautiful country.

Our destination was Casa Ombuto, a Villa tucked in the hills of Tuscany, and would be home for a week as we attended Mediterranean cooking school. There were five of us traveling together, all middle-aged women who shared a love of cooking and considered themselves to be more than competent in the kitchen.

The first morning I awoke early and made my way to the main building. Breakfast was displayed on a wooden counter—an

assortment of Italian meats and cheese, pastries, fresh bread, broiled tomatoes, aromatic fruit. But it was the coffee machine that caught my eye.

After three espresso, I was excited to get started. We gathered around a long marble island, all in our Tuscookany forest green aprons. The agenda was to prepare a five-course meal we would eat together that evening.

Up first: the pasta course. Ravioli di Ricotta de Spinaci al Burro e salvia or Ravioli with Butter and Sage. Our chef, Laura Gusti, distributed long, thin rolling pins to each of us.



The proper way to prepare pasta dough was to start with a mound of flour. After forming a deep well in the center, we were instructed to crack an egg into it along with two tablespoons of olive oil. We watched attentively as Laura demonstrated how to blend the egg and oil with a fork. Next we were to slowly incorporate the flour into the egg mixture.

Looked easy enough.



We eagerly made our mountains of flour. I beat the egg and oil with verve and was ready to begin adding the flour. I glanced around at my friends' pensive faces, all focused on the task at hand.

"Oh," I said as my egg breached the wall of flour and slipped onto the counter like a flow of lava.

"Wendy," Laura said. "You must start over."

Reluctantly I picked up the trash can and brushed the failed attempt into the bin. Donna had already begun to roll her dough, using long, crisscrossing movements with the wooden pin. I started again. Another breach. Ingrid was carefully slicing hers into perfectly shaped squares. Barb had begun placing small spoonfuls of the ricotta mixture onto her glistening sheet.

After four attempts, Laura suggested I give up. I was crestfallen. How does one fail at cooking school? I had been nurturing others with delicious meals my entire life. Cooking was my thing.

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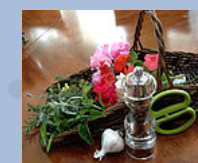
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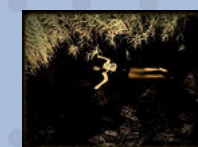
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Laura patted my back. "How are you at bruschetta?"

As I picked up my last lumpy mess, I balled it up, and dropped it in the can with a loud thud. The room grew quiet. I looked up. Nancy's eyes danced. She tried to stifle a laugh but couldn't. I felt a small grin turn up my lips. And then the room exploded into laughter. My stomach muscles ached before the roars finally subsided.

"You American ladies can be so serious." Laura adjusted her chef's hat and smiled. "Maybe it's time for a little wine."

As we gathered around our meal that evening, I was awed by the beauty before us. Italians use simple, fresh ingredients they are able to convert into culinary masterpieces. Although my friends and I had prepared every dish before us, the final product was breathtaking.



The wine flowed that night and our faces glowed in the candlelight. As the week went on, I noticed my body eased of tension, I smiled harder, and gesticulated more. I recently found the journal I kept while in Italy and discovered the following entry: Women of my age have lived long enough to develop scars. We have learned to put others first and suppress our longing. We stuff, we smooth, we tend. But in Italy, we opened. We loved, we tasted, and we lived, with a gusto only *la bella paese* can arouse.



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