

TRAVEL

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TRAVEL PEOPLE

Italy cooking lessons are well-done

The author is a semiretired Scottsdale physician, co-founder of Caring for Women and author of two pregnancy books. Her husband is a vice president at Paragon Vision Sciences in Mesa.

By Susan Warhus

SPECIAL FOR THE REPUBLIC

My husband and I had been to Italy in the past and experienced the awes of Rome, Florence and Venice. This time, we wanted to go to the heartland of the country. We wanted to know the soul of the Italian people and experience the culture and cuisine of this magnificent part of the world.

Using the Internet, we researched many Tuscan cooking schools. We chose the Italian Cookery Course at Casa Ombuto because it offered a hands-on, weeklong program of home-cooked meals and unlimited Italian wines. A one-day excursion to a vineyard for wine tasting, a local olive-oil producer and a pecorino cheese factory was included. The program was moderately priced and limited to

15 guests to assure personal attention.

Turns out, we made an excellent decision.

We flew into Florence and rented a car.

Equipped with a map and driving instructions, we embarked upon our scenic journey toward Casa Ombuto. We twisted our way along rambling roads through the picturesque countryside, including gorgeous rolling hills brimming with vineyards and olive trees. Casa Ombuto is



Larry and Susan Warhus (right) found their Italian Cookery Course at Casa Ombuto delightful, thanks in part to instructor Paola.

COURTESY OF SUSAN WARHUS

Italy's heartland

Tuscan cooking school offers a taste of the country's cuisine and culture.



near the quaint medieval village of Poppi, 30 miles south-east of Florence.

The restored villa is on a hill and offers magnificent vistas of the surrounding forested hills and valleys. The villa itself is luxurious and combines the romantic architecture and gardens of a bygone era.

Each couple or family had a private apartment, comfortably furnished with modern conveniences, such as central air-conditioning, and upgraded marble bathrooms. A separate building, called the cantina, housed a huge modern professional kitchen and a charming dining room with a huge fireplace.

Because there were only 11 guests during our stay, we got to know each other very well. Seven of us were from America, two were from Quebec, Canada, and two from Holland.

English was spoken by everyone, including the friendly Italian staff.

Our cooking instructor, Paola, possessed a wonderful spirit. Her humor and positive attitude made our experience fun and informative.

We cooked and feasted upon such mouthwatering dishes as porcini-mushroom bruschetta, fettuccine with wild-boar ragu, pasta with pumpkin, leeks and pine nuts, and chestnut gelato. We also enjoyed pizza, lasagna, risotto and ravioli.

The last night, we received a cooking diploma. Amid tears, hugs and picture-taking, we knew that we had enjoyed an experience of a lifetime.

Details: www.italiancookerycourse.com.