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Italia Bellissima!

Posted on [September 6, 2015](#) by [looksee99](#)



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During language class this week we had to discuss an opinion survey that was recently conducted in Italy. One of the questions was; “what do foreigners rate as the most significant aspect of Italian life”? The majority of respondents said, “ il cucina” . I agree, as I am never disappointed with what Italy has to offer. As the scenery in the regions of Italy differs, so does the cuisine. Here in Lucca, I have enjoyed some interesting and tasty local specialties which I have not experienced elsewhere. I am looking forward to many more to come in the next few weeks.

Just to mention a few of the highlights: prosciutto with white figs (peeled), cuttlefish stewed with tomatoes and spinach, tartare of veal with a tuna mayonnaise with bottarga (a cured fish roe), fresh farfalle pasta with sauteed fresh tomatoes and fresh salmon and basil, grilled and sliced rare fillet steak with parmesan cheese on rocket (sauced with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, grilled sea bass with buttered spinach and slices of crispy potato.

Not to forget the gelato. I have discovered a wonderful place where they create gelato magic and makes their own flavours – not the run of the mill fare. Interesting and unusual so in the name of research I have three scoops of different flavours!

Apart from the cuisine, the other obsession that Italians have is news and politics! I am still trying to digest the Italian slant on “news”. It swings from the latest gruesome homicide, to the refugee crisis, and a swathe of political stories in between. Maybe it does sound like just like home!

There is an abundance of news commentary programmes here. On every second channel there is some bearded bloke with too long hair, that needs both a wash and a brush, and wearing designer glasses sprouting his informed (and ill informed) opinions depending on which side of the socialist spectrum you sit. They think that Greece is a laughing stock of Europe but they do not realise that they are only one step away from the same fate. Hard work, punctuality, precision, good governance, innovation are not in the Italian vocab. Maybe that is why we love it here. The whole sense that life has gone on like this for centuries and if we don’t rock the boat, long may it continue.

The Italian way is in their DNA: old men sit in the shade, drink coffee and argue, old ladies do the shopping and complain that the bread is stale and the tomatoes are soft, young girls wear tight pants and impossibly high shoes, handsome young men wear very tight pants and a self satisfied look, and tourists are the only people to eat before 8.00pm,

Ah – Bella Italia!

Easy Recipes for Winter – Porcini and Truffles

Posted on [August 6, 2013](#) by [looksee99](#)



(https://elizabethsblogdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/img_0975.jpg)

This week has been very wintery here on the **Southern Highlands** with strong winds that drill through your body wrapping their icy fingers around your bones. This has made me retreat inside to sit in front of the fire with my cookbooks rediscovering some of my favourite recipes for winter. I particularly love to cook with mushrooms at this time of year. The shelves of my local grocer are packed with a myriad of varieties. They are weird and wonderful with their fanciful shapes and colours. **Portobello** mushrooms are the king of these as they are the size of dinner plates. Seeing them brings back childhood memories of wandering through the paddocks after the rain and picking these for a special dinner.

I think this was the first thing that I cooked with my Mum. She would let me sit with her in the kitchen and peel the skin off the top of the mushroom cap and remove the stalk. These days there is no need to peel mushrooms as they are all clean and respectable but remember these were field mushrooms so there was plenty of cow poo around. Mum would then put a large iron fry-pan on the wood stove and in it would go a huge slab of butter. When that was sizzling she would put in the mushroom and fry them off. Just before she served them she would add some fresh cream, salt and pepper and a handful of very finely chopped parsley. We would enjoy a feast of mushrooms on toast for dinner that night.

Porcini and Mozzarella Pie with Pine Nuts and Truffle

Sformatini di funghi porcini e mozzarella con pinoli

Ingredients

- 300 gms fresh porcini mushrooms (or other favourites)
- 200gms fresh mozzarella cheese (not that horrid hard stuff wrapped in plastic)
- 6 eggs
- 1 clove garlic
- 5 tablespoons cream
- 20 gms butter
- Salt and pepper to taste

Garnish

- 1 handful roasted pine nuts
- Leaf salad
- Fresh truffle

Procedure

1. Preheat oven to 140 degrees C.
2. Clean the fresh mushrooms (do not wash) and chop
3. Melt butter in frying pan and add chopped clove of garlic and fry untill golden
4. Add mushrooms and season with salt and pepper and cook with lid on until tender
5. Cut mozzarella into small cubes
6. Mix eggs, cream and salt in a bowl and add the mozzarella and cooked mushrooms
7. Grease and line the bottom of ramekins with baking paper and spoon mixture into the ramekins
8. Place ramekins in a large baking dish and gently half fill baking dish with cold water
9. Place in the oven and cook for 20 minutes
10. Serve on a bed of salad leaves and garnish with toasted pine nuts and shaved truffles.

Roasted Veal with Porcini Mushrooms

Arrosto di Vitello con Funghi Porcini

Ingredients

- 700 gms single piece of veal and flatten with a mallet (not too thin)
- 200 gms mortadella
- 2 eggs
- 1 clove of garlic chopped
- 2 stems of rosemary
- Salt and pepper
- 100gms dry porcini mushrooms
- 1 Tbs grated parmesan cheese
- Dry white wine
- Olive oil

Procedure

1. Preheat the oven to 180 C
2. Soak the porcini mushrooms in hot water for 10 minutes
3. Beat the eggs with a pinch of salt, parmesan cheese and 1 Tbs chopped rosemary
4. Heat a little olive oil in a frying pan and make an omelette – set aside
5. Drain the porcini (saving the water) and cook in a frying pan with a little olive oil and garlic
6. Lay the meat on a chopping board and cover with the slices of mortadella, then the omelette and finally the mushrooms
7. Roll up the veal, place a rosemary sprig on top and tie the meat up with string
8. Brown meat in a cast iron pan (suitable for the oven as well)
9. Add the porcini water and white wine
10. Roast in the oven for about 45 mins to one hour
11. Remove the meat and rest
12. Reduce the roasting juices and pass through a sieve and serve with the meat

I love to serve this with rosemary and garlic roasted potatoes and spinach Roman style.

Hint: To stop potatoes sticking to the pan when roasting or sautéing them, place a sheet of baking paper on the bottom of the pan. Guaranteed crunchy potatoes every time!

Spinach Roman Style

Spinaci alla Romana

This recipe appeared in The Times Magazine in an article by Judith Barrett, who adapted it from “The Food of Southern Italy,” by Carlo Middione.

Ingredients

- 3 tablespoons of the smallest available raisins, black or golden
- 4 medium-size bunches of spinach (about 2 ½ pounds), washed at least twice, but not dried, and trimmed of stems
- 1/3 cup virgin olive oil
- 5 medium garlic cloves, peeled and well crushed
- 4 tablespoons pine nuts
- Big pinch of salt
- 6 or 7 grindings of fresh black pepper.

Procedure

1. Put the raisins in a small bowl with enough warm water to cover. Soak for about 15 minutes. Set aside.
2. Put the wet spinach in a frying pan large enough to hold it all and cook over a high flame until it collapses and turns dark green, stirring constantly. Transfer the spinach to a colander and set it aside. If the frying pan is wet, dry it with a paper towel.
3. Pour the olive oil into the frying pan over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and brown it, being careful it doesn’t burn, and then remove and discard it. Take the raisins from the water, squeeze them as dry as possible and add them to the oil with the pine nuts. Turn the heat to medium and cook until the nuts turn a golden color. Be careful, because the nuts can burn easily.
4. Return the spinach to the pan, stir it with a fork and add salt and pepper to taste. Mix all the ingredients and continue cooking for about a minute. You may add additional olive oil if you think the spinach looks dry. *Serves 4.*

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Olive Oil – The Life Blood of Italy

Posted on [August 1, 2013](#) by [looksee99](#)



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Last week I met Gabriella, for lunch at a winery on the south coast of NSW not far from the village of Milton and the town of Ulladulla. Cupitt's Winery (<http://cupittwines.com.au/>) sits snugly on a hillside overlooking a lake and in the distance, the hills rise up to meet the clear blue autumn sky.

Over a delicious lunch and a glass of mulled wine (to keep the autumn chill out of our bones) we reminisced about the time that we'd first met in **Italy** in October 2012. We were both attending a week-long photographic workshop at the magic destination of Dievole (<http://www.dievole.it>) winery in **Tuscany**.

Dievole is the quintessential Italian experience. The rolling Tuscan hills are covered in olive groves and vineyards where the vines leaves are changing to vibrant reds, oranges and rusts in the crisp autumn weather; quaint hillside towns and villages; cafes where you can sit in the sun sipping strong coffee and let time pass you by; small family-run restaurants serving fresh, local produce such as autumn truffles, freshly picked mushrooms of many shapes and colours, fresh farm cheese and a variety of meat and poultry. Every meal was an excuse to try something new, a specialty of the area prepared by the chef in his/her own style, or that of his/her mother and grandmother and all the generations of cooks before them. Culinary traditions run deep in the Italian kitchen and are held in awe by those behind the stove.

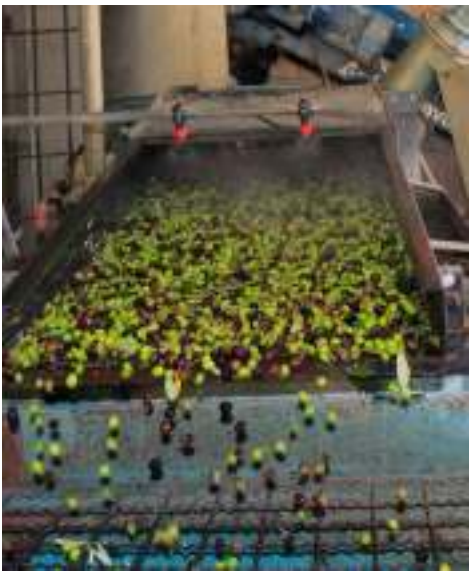


(https://elizabethsblogdotcom.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/dievole-morning-shot-5_edited-1.jpg)

Sunrise over the Vineyards – Tuscany

We woke early on our first morning to find the valleys shrouded in mist which created an ideal atmospheric “shoot” for our first photographic excursion. During the week we enjoyed many wonderful forays into the countryside, towns and villages snapping away to capture “the moment”.

One excursion I remember most fondly was visiting a nearby farm and oil press. Which was in the midst of its annual harvest and oil production. The owner gave us a tour of the press which was “all systems go” at the time as many local farmers had bought their olive crop in for pressing. At the end of the production line the oil was decanted into a variety of cans, bottles, flasks and any other suitable containers that could be mustered for the occasion.



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Olive oil is a staple in Italian cooking and runs in the veins of every Italian. We were treated to the fabulous experience of tasting the year’s production on-site. In the pressing room, there is an open fire-place where crusty bread was toasted over the coals then doused with lashings of rich, peppery olive oil fresh from the press, on top of which were placed generous slices of pancetta and pecorino cheese. This mouth-watering combination was washed down by the vineyard’s red wine.

We stood next to the fire, chatting to the hum and clatter of the machinery as the giant stone wheels whirled around pressing the olives and extracting every last drop of liquid gold.



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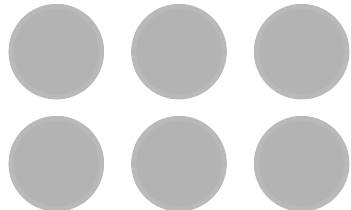
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Italy on a Plate – Pasta and Porcini

Posted on [May 8, 2013](#) by [looksee99](#)



Ponte Vecchio – Firenze shoot



Dievole is an enchanted valley not far from Siena. The name is synonymous with the vineyard that was established here over 1,000 years ago and has since been lovingly cultivated by generations of the families who have made this valley their home.

Today, Dievole is still an enchanted place. I spent ten wonderful days here sampling the wine, relishing great local food and fresh produce, enjoying warm Italian hospitality, and above all, marvelling at the fantastic and beautiful scenery; the lush valleys, the rolling hillsides covered in vines that were adopting their autumn colours of gold and red, the deep green oak forests that are home to wild boar, and the quaint stone-built villages clinging to the hillsides.

What bought me to Dievole was my interest in **photography**. I came to learn and refine my skills with a fantastic teacher – **Chris Corradino** from New York. It was a great experience to see Italy with fresh eyes and a different perspective through the camera lens.

Our week flew by with excursions to interesting and different vistas; an urban shoot in **Firenze**, exploring small villages, nosing around old buildings, capturing open spaces and dawn shoots to get that special light. We were faced with all sorts of technical and artistic challenges along the way which were quickly resolved with Chris’ encouragement. A sample of my photos accompanies this blog.

Dievole has a wonderful gastronomic history. I enjoyed many memorable meals and the opportunity to talk to the chef and waiters who are passionate about serving great food as they are about eating it. A couple of culinary highlights demonstrate the essence of Italian cooking to me – the use of fresh, local produce and letting the flavours of the food speak for themselves. In typical Italian fashion, dishes are not complicated by conflicting tastes, textures and are not swimming in sauces. Plates are simply and beautifully presented where the ingredients are king and not necessarily dominated by the person in the kitchen that put it altogether.

Pasta is a dish that illustrates the Italian food ideal of simplicity. Every locality and region in Italy has its own signature pasta and here in this corner of Tuscany, it is **pici**, also known as pinci. This is a hand-rolled, eggless thick spaghetti and a good example of “**cucina povera**” (poor man’s cuisine) — utilizing only flour, water, green Tuscan olive oil. Originating from the Val d’Orcia region (the area between Montalcino and Montepulciano). This pasta is best served with sauces such as: **briciole** – breadcrumbs, **aglione** – spicy garlic tomato sauce, **boscaiola** – porcini mushrooms, and **ragù** – a meat based sauce, game meat such as – **cinghiale** – wild boar, **leper** – hare and **anatra** – duck.

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***Cooking Tip – What is the correct pasta serving size?***

*Firstly, how much pasta you need to cook depends on a number of factors – whether you are cooking a first course of a main course, the type of pasta you are cooking, and how hungry your guests are.*  
*The general rule is that the amount of pasta to cook per person should be roughly:*

- 75g-115g / 3oz-4oz dried pasta;
  - 115g-150g / 4oz-5oz fresh pasta;
  - 175g-200g / 6oz-7oz filled pasta, such as ravioli
- ~~~~~

I have two recipes for you – one a quick and easy dish for a light lunch, and the other, is a heartier meal with complex rich flavours. You won’t be disappointed...

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**Pici con Pomodoro e Porcini** (serves 4)

- Ingredients**
- Pici pasta – fresh or dry (amount per the above guide)
  - 2 tablespoons cold pressed extra virgin – a must
  - 1 punnet ripe! cherry tomatoes
  - 2 cloves finely chopped fresh garlic
  - 250 mls dry white wine (and a glass for yourself)

- Thinly sliced porcini mushrooms (or others if you can't find porcini)
- Salt and pepper
- Parmesan cheese

**Method**

1. Prepare the pasta according to the packet instructions and for the number of serves required
2. When the pasta is just al dente drain and coat with olive oil and keep warm
3. In a frying pan heat the olive oil and toss in chopped garlic and stir for a minute
4. Splash in some white wine and cook off for a minute
5. Toss in washed cherry tomatoes and heat through
6. Toss in the cooked pasta and heat through
7. Season to taste
8. Place on a flat serving plate and arrange the sliced fresh mushrooms on top
9. Offer parmesan cheese and a crusty bread roll.
10. Perfect with a dry white wine – pinot grigio or similar

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Ragu di Anatra (Duck Breast Ragu (serves 4))

Ingredients

- 20g butter
- 2 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 2 duck breasts (3 if small) trimmed of skin and excess fat, thinly sliced into strips
- 6 slices chopped pancetta
- 1 finely chopped onion
- 2 garlic cloves finely chopped
- 1 finely chopped carrot
- 1 finely chopped celery stalk
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 tbsp. tomato paste
- 250ml dry red wine such as Chianti (and of course a glass for you)
- 600g good-quality tomato pasta sauce
- 1 cup (250ml) chicken stock
- Grated parmesan, to serve

Method

1. Heat the butter and oil in a frypan over medium-high heat.
2. Cook the duck, in batches, until browned.
3. Remove duck with a slotted spoon and place in a bowl.
4. Drain all but 1 tablespoon oil from the pan and heat over medium heat.
5. Add pancetta, onion, garlic, carrot, celery and bay leaves to the pan and cook, stirring, for 2-3 minutes until they start to colour.
6. Return the duck to the pan with any resting juices,
7. Add the tomato paste and cook, stirring, for 1 minute.
8. Add the red wine and cook for 2-3 minutes until the liquid has reduced slightly.
9. Add the tomato sauce and chicken stock, bring to a simmer, then reduce heat to low, cover and gently simmer for 45 minutes or until the duck is tender and the sauce has thickened slightly.
10. Season the sauce to taste and serve the ragu with the cooked pici

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**Do you know any foodies? Please forward my blog to them and ask them to sign up – more fab recipes to come!**

**In my next blog I visit the olive oil press for an amazing treat.**

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# Italy on a Plate – Pumpkin and Parmesan Custards – Yummy!!!

Posted on [May 1, 2013](#) by [looksee99](#)



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Italy has many festivals and **“The Festa della Zucca”** held in October in a small town Venzone – in the Friuli–Venezia which is Italy’s most North-Eastern region. Venzone is pumpkin central. The town center transforms itself into a Medieval carnival with fire eaters, jugglers and street dancers all parading in the streets which are lit by torches and candles. The locals get into the mood by dressing as nobles, knights and ladies, innkeepers, shopkeepers and merchants. The atmosphere is enhanced as the shops are decorated with pumpkins and gastronomic delights such as pumpkin pizza, pumpkin gnocchi, pumpkin crostini and more. The humble pumpkin is elevated to royal status for the occasion.

The origins of the Pumpkin Festival are legendary. The Noble of the village of Venzone wanted to beautify and fortify the town and used the townsfolk as labourers. On completion of the restoration, the workers were not rewarded including a special craftsman who was to decorate the copper dome of the Cathedral of Venzone with a golden ball. But he too was not paid for his work so he craftily replaced the ball on the golden dome of the cathedral with a pumpkin. The Noble realized that he was tricked by the artist only on the day when the ball fell from its position on the dome and smashed to the ground.

Recently I had 8 friends for lunch and like every cook, planning the meal is half the fun. Poring over the cook books, being inspired by far a way places and cuisines and salivating over sumptuous and mouth-watering food photos. However, this time I decided to cook lunch using some of the recipes that I received at the **Casa Ombuto cooking school in Tuscany** last year. You can read more about this in my other blogs.

The lunch menu was:

**Antipasto** – Filo Cups filled with Aubergine Sauce (salsa con melanzane)

**Prima Piatti** – Pumpkin and Parmesan custards (Copette di zucca e parmigiano)

**Secondo Piatti** – “Jump in the Mouth” Veal with Sage and Ham (saltimbocca alla romana)

**Dolce** – **Tiramasu** (this literally means “pick you up”)



The **Pumpkin and Parmesan Custards** were real winners as they were a new taste sensation and a different approach to serving pumpkin. The result is a lovely creamy custard that is slightly sweet from the pumpkin and the complex hint of the smoked cheese. I think the smokier the cheese the better.

So here is the recipe for you to try....

#### Ingredients

- 350 gms of cooked and pureed pumpkin
- 320 ml pouring cream
- 2 eggs
- 1 tablespoon grated smoked cheese (I used smoked cheddar)
- 50 gms grated parmesan cheese
- Salt and pepper to taste

#### Method

1. Preheat oven to 150 degrees
2. Pass cooked and pureed pumpkin through a sieve
3. Mix pumpkin, cream and smoked cheese and salt and pepper until smooth
4. Add the eggs and mix well
5. Pour into individual heat proof ramekins
6. Bake in a “bagno maria” (a water bath) for about 45 minutes or until the cream has thickened when you give it a gentle shake
7. Take out of oven and sprinkle about a teaspoon of grated parmesan cheese on top of each custard
8. Place under a hot grill until the cheese is golden brown
9. Serve warm with some crusty bread and a full-bodied white wine – maybe a pinot grigio from Friuli.

Happy cooking and eating... do you have any other favourite Italian dishes that you would like the recipe for? Just drop me a line in the comment box below.

**For information, prices and dates for cooking schools in Tuscany please contact me at [varley.e@gmail.com](mailto:varley.e@gmail.com)**

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## Italy On A Plate – Il Ragu, The Best Bolognese Sauce Recipe Ever!

Posted on [April 23, 2013](#) by [looksee99](#)



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In Australia, like the rest of the world we eat **Bolognese** sauce by the litres. Commonly known as “Spag Bol” – this dish is to be found on menus everywhere, and in every instance, there is a variation made by the chef. Sometimes this is successful, but in most instances, these Bolognese sauces bear little resemblance to anything that you will find in Italy.

However, recently I attended an Italian cooking school in **Tuscany**, and Paola our chef says this is the “real McCoy”. Bolognese sauce is an Italian meat-based sauce for pasta which originated in Bologna, a city in Northern Italy. There it is often referred to as Il Ragu. It is a rich, thick and hearty sauce that unctuously clings to the pasta. Italians do not eat pasta swimming in sauce but prefer a “drier” sauce that has bold and clear flavours and is equal partner to the pasta.



Bolognese is a complex sauce which involves long slow cooking to let the flavours develop and intensify. This is not a dish for people in a hurry or the impatient. It is based on a soffritto which uses finely diced onion, carrot, and celery which are sautéed in olive oil until the mixture reaches a state of browning appropriate to its intended use. A soffritto is a building block to many Italian sauces and dishes.

### Ingredients

- 1 Medium Red (Spanish) onion
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 small carrot
- 1 stalk celery
- 100gms minced pork
- 200gms minced beef
- 400gms peeled canned tomatoes (crushed or chopped)
- 2 tablespoons of torn basil leaves
- Olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 2 glasses red wine
- 1 glass of red wine extra

### Procedure

1. Mince the onion, carrot and celery in a food processor or chop very finely by hand
2. Brown these with the olive oil in a large pan over medium heat and season with salt and pepper
3. Add the combined meat and brown well
4. When the meat starts to stick to the pan add half a glass of red wine and leave on low / medium heat to reduce again
5. Repeat this 3 times, each time adding wine, stirring and leaving it to reduce
6. Mash tomatoes (if whole) and pour over to meat mixture and leave to slowly infuse with the meat for 10 minutes and then mix
7. Stir in basil leaves
8. Cover and simmer for 2 hours
9. Stir occasionally and add extra hot water if necessary
10. While il ragu is cooking drink the extra glass of wine!

**To serve** – use any type of pasta that you prefer, but tagliatelle is the Italian choice. In the absence of tagliatelle, you can also use other broad, flat pasta shapes, such as pappardelle or fettuccine, or with short tube shapes, such as rigatoni or penne.

Offer freshly grated parmesan cheese and a hearty red wine such as Shiraz or a Sangiovese.

**Do you have any favourite Italian dishes that you would like the recipe for? Yes? Please just leave a comment below and I will blog that recipe for you....**

Recipe with thanks from <http://www.tuscookany.com> (<http://www.tuscookany.com>)

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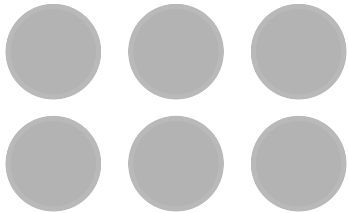
## Rome – A Night at the Opera

Posted on [April 3, 2013](#) by [looksee99](#)





Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi on Piazza Navona





Next stop is Rome.

While I was away in the countryside of Tuscany and Umbria I had forgotten how hot and steamy Rome can be. The black basalt cobble stones radiate the heat up through the soles of your feet and make your feet ache and the perspiration drip off you. I ventured out most mornings for a walk but soon after lunch, retreated to the sanity of the air-conditioned hotel room – defeated by the heat. However, as the sun sets the Romans come out to dine and enjoy the descending cool of the evening.

My hotel is located near the Piazza Novona, which is a mecca for tourists and sellers of art (good, bad and indifferent). They set up their easels to display their work and sketch artists try to lure passing tourists to pose for them.

I am amazed by the number of street vendors who mingle amongst the crowd selling a variety of practical and unusual wares, such as: packs of tissues, socks, paper parasols, hats, fans and the most amazing and optimistic seller of all, was a chap clutching an armful of colourful brooms and dustpans. I thought to myself – who would come all the way to Rome and to the Piazza Novona and think that they need to buy a dustpan and broom?

Eating out in big cities and tourist hot spots can be a really disappointing event. My first night, I ventured out of the cool of the hotel and sat in a busy bar overlooking the chaos of the Piazza Novona and while sipping my prosecco I knew that the food at any of the restaurants surrounding the piazza would live up to my worst fears – the food would be terrible and overpriced. However, on this occasion I struck it lucky. I ventured away from the Piazza into the back streets and happened on a small restaurant with out-door dining in a quiet street – I was not disappointed.

The menu read well and seemed to show off seasonal fresh food which was well cooked and reasonably priced. Over two nights I enjoyed: an appetiser of mixed crostini – tomato, artichoke puree, and olive paste, and an entre of a light tomato broth with cherry tomatoes and clams and mussels, mains were a whole sea bass grilled over charcoal and a plate of grilled seafood (calamari, salmon, sea bass, prawns and octopus). All delicious! And to cap it off, there is a fantastic gelato bar just around the corner so I could walk home while enjoying a cooling gelato.

I decided to treat myself to a slap up gourmet dinner at the Imago restaurant in the Hassler Hotel. The dining room is an elegant space with interesting and very chic Italian furniture Located on the 6th floor it commands outstanding views over the roof tops of Rome. From here, you can spot all the famous landmarks illuminated after dark. The room is beautifully furnished with tables dressed in crisp white clothes and some tables are fully mirrored and reflect the candle light and the colours of the sunset as the sun drops below the horizon and bathes the room in glorious golden colours. The staff is professional, extremely attentive and every detail is considered such as, when you are seated, a small foot stool appears at your side on which your handbag can rest.

I had a wonderful evening dining on:

- Mezzi paccheri pasta (large tube pasta) with octopus sauce, smoked scamorza cream (an Italian cow's milk cheese, similar to mozzarella)
- A tartare of three shellfish, oil-flavoured bread and sprouts
- Duck breast tandoori-style served with moscato flavoured peaches
- A wonderful cheese plate with aged parmesan and gorgonzola and pecorino
- Petti fours with coffee

Starting with a glass of prosecco, each course was matched with a wine and vin santo was served with the cheese.

The restaurant has a very special guest that visits every night. He is a very large and impressive looking seagull who comes and sits on the window sill looking in at the diners. Finally, the waiter opens the window and hands him a large piece of bread which he gratefully takes in his beak and flies off to enjoy his dinner too.

The highlight of my days in Rome was a night at the opera at the Baths of Caracalla (Terme di Caracalla), to see the opera Norma. The Caracalla bath complex was more a leisure centre for the ancient Romans than just a series of baths. The baths consisted of a central 55 by 24 meter (183×79 ft) frigidarium (cold room) under three 32 meter (108 ft) high groin vaults, a double pool tepidarium (medium), and a 35 meter (115 ft) diameter caldarium (hot room), as well as two palaestras (gyms where wrestling and boxing was practiced). The north end of the bath building contained a natatio or swimming pool. The natatio was roofless with bronze mirrors mounted overhead to direct sunlight into the pool area. The entire bath building was on a 6 metre (20 ft) high raised platform to allow for storage and furnaces under the building.

The complex is now all but a shell of the original complex and during the summer season a portable stage and seating is erected in the middle of the skeletons of the original buildings. The open air stage is huge and capable of holding a chorus of 100 singers with room to manoeuvre and an orchestra pit able to accommodate a full orchestra. The singers were wonderful and their voices floated on the warm night air.

The heat of the day dissipates and as the sky darkens and the stars and moon rise, you gather together to be entertained and transfixed by wonderful music in a fantastic setting.



Rome is home to some wonderful museums and galleries. I went to see the museum at the National Roman Museum of Diocletian Bath, near Piazza dei Cinquecento, this museum occupies part of the 3rd-century-A.D. Baths of Diocletian and part of a convent and cloister was built in 1565 and is ascribed to Michelangelo. The Diocletian Baths were the biggest thermal baths in the world. Nowadays they host a marvellous collection of funereal artworks, such as sarcophagi, and decorations dating back to the Aurelian period.

This museum’s collection could be considered as one of the most important collections of ancient sculpture in the world. The museum contains the works of art found during the excavations executed after 1870.

National Roman Museum of Diocletian Bath (Museo Nazionale Romano delle Terme di Diocleziano)  
Viale Enrico De Nicola, 79  
00185, Rome, Lazio, Italy  
Zone: Rione Castro Pretorio (Porta Pia) (Roma centro)

Next stop – cooling off in Stockholm....

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## Italian Cooking – Pasta, Pizza and Pleasure

Posted on [March 26, 2013](#) by [looksee99](#)



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I arrive at the hire car office in Firenze and it is pandemonium – bags, kids, customers and frazzled Italian attendants all sweltering in the stuffy confines of an overcrowded office. After much hand waving and raised eyebrows (on my part) I had the keys to the chariot – a Fiat Panda. Have you ever driven a Fiat Panda? Well, it is just like a ride-on lawn mower but with windows and a glove box. I opened the hatch at the back of the car to put my suit case in, only to find that it is too small to accommodate the coffin on wheels that I am carting about. So after much puffing and panting I finally get my suitcase onto the back seat with the assistance of a gent who was standing on the pavement. After graciously helping me he hobbled away holding his stomach where I am sure a hernia was evidence of his chivalrous action.

Luckily, I had arranged to hire a Sat Nav system to assist with the journey into the wilds of the Tuscan mountainside to the east of Firenze. So off I go driving on the wrong side of the road into the twisting crowded streets of Firenze in my Fiat Panda. For the first five hundred meters the sat nav was deadly silent as there was no coverage between the tall buildings and narrow streets of this part of Firenze. Finally, a voice from the wilderness sprang into life and started to give directions. Placing my trust in Susie (I named the Sat Nav – Susie) I made my way cautiously through the crazy Saturday traffic and head towards Poppi and the Tuscan hills.

After 2 hours of climbing and winding through beautiful forests (mostly in second gear and at best in third) I arrive in a small agricultural town of Poppi. This is situated on the Arno river in the very fertile Casentino valley, servicing the farming community around it. Apart from the river, its distinguishing feature is the medieval Poppi Castle imposing itself over the town from the highest point as castles usually do.

I head out of town looking for my home for the next week – Casa Ombuto. There is a rickety wooden sign pointing off-road so I follow it. The road gets rougher and rougher – holes that are big enough to swallow the wheel of the Panda, ridges, ruts and boulders make this a real off-road experience. My goodness – I should have paid more attention to the fine print on the contract – I am sure there is a clause in there about no off roading!

Finally, I glimpse my destination ahead – a couple of imposing stone pillars and iron gates. I follow the gravel drive and arrive in front of some very attractive stone buildings. These are surrounded by lovely gardens and orchards. Further afield from this elevated plateau is a valley spreading out before me and then surrounding the villa on the other three sides are heavily wooded hillsides covered with oak trees and conifers. It is very peaceful with a vivid blue sky above and the sound of birds coming from the forest and the faint hum of bees that are hovering over massive pots of lavender, roses, and oleander that surround a glistening swimming pool and terrace.

The accommodation is a large stone building covered in vines, wisteria and roses. My room is one of five bedrooms (all en suite) in a self-contained apartment. There is a kitchen with a large wooden table, a large sitting room with squishy sofas and wing chairs and the room is dominated by a huge stone fire-place in which you could literally roast a wild boar. The shuttered windows overlook the gardens and the valley in the distance. There is a shaded veranda overlooking the gardens and the swimming pool where comfortable sun lounges beckon and a vine-covered pergola where a couple of hammocks are slung between posts that look very inviting. My home for the next week is going to be comfortable indeed.

The main building is set apart from the accommodation and is the control centre of the cooking school. This is where all the action happens. It houses an enormous kitchen (where we will have our lessons) and very large dining area that can easily seat up to 30 people. Here we can help ourselves to the fridge, cocktail cabinet, refreshments, wine fridge etc at any time of day or night – as long as the last person to leave turns the lights out and closes the door.

My companions are good fun and during the week we get to know each other better and share many a laugh along the way. However, the star of the show, is our chef and teacher – Paola. She is a larger than life character with wild red hair, a big smile and a vibrant personality to match. Throughout the week, she regales us with wonderful stories about life in Italy, local identities and oddities of Italians and their unique way of life. Her passion for food and cooking is evident and it infects us all as we discover new skills and a love for creating artistry on a plate.

On our first night, Paola cooked a welcome dinner starting with an aperitivo of peach Bellinis and nibbles of tiny peppers stuffed with a cheese and caper mouse. Then dinner was served outside in the cool of the night around a huge table, under a vine-covered pergola lit by lamps and candles and surrounded by wonderful hydrangea and roses. An idyllic setting which will add to the ambiance of all our meals over the next seven days.

Dinner started with a mixed antipasto of mouse made with Bresolsa (air dried beef) on crostini, a caprese salad of buffalo mozzarella and a pastry pinwheel stuffed with an olive tapenade; prima piatti – fresh fettuccine with a rocket pesto and grated zucchini and shaved Parmesan; secondo piatti – bistecca fiorentino (T bones – 700 gms to a kilo each) flash grilled then sliced and served drenched with warm olive oil that had been steeped with rosemary, pink and green peppercorns. This was served with roasted local potatoes and a fried zucchini flower; dolce – a wonderful light apple cake spiked with pine nuts and served with a homemade cinnamon ice cream. Each course was accompanied with a matched Tuscan wine. In case the matched wine ran short there was lots of bottles of house wine on the table.

To top off the evening when the desert plates were cleared about a dozen bottles of different liqueurs, digestives, vin santo, and grappas were put on the table. Luckily my room was only a short stagger away and up only one flight of stairs. This after dinner ritual was repeated every night of our stay so there was much story telling over a glass or two of something.



Our daily routine began after an Italian breakfast of fruit and cereals, cheeses and cold meats. We spent mornings at leisure: lying by the pool, swimming, reading, sleeping, walking, biking or taking a drive to explore the local area and other towns nearby.

Lunch is served at 1.00pm by our lunch chef Rita. This was a delicious selection of dishes including pasta, a vegetable dish, salad, a meat dish and cheese and then followed by a home-made cake or tart. There is wine on the table but most of us chose to take it easy as cooking class commenced at 3.00pm.

After lunch, we had a brief hour to rest and prepare for the foray into the kitchen. The bell rings at three and we congregated in the kitchen where we were presented with our aprons and cookbooks. For the first hour we sat around the table as Paola outlined the recipes for the day. Our class was not confined to just preparing three courses but consisted of an appetizer, pasta, main, and then a dessert course – also there were other dishes cooked during the session that will make their way to the lunch table the following day.

At around 5.30 – 6.00pm we took a break from the hive of activity in the kitchen and sat around a table outside to grab any passing breeze. To restore our energy levels, wine was available, fruit juice and for repast there was a tasty cake, tart or gelato that had been cooked by the class that day. Following the break, we reconvened in the kitchen to complete the list of tasks and recipes for the day. At 7.30 it was time for a quick dip in the pool and a shower before we enjoyed for a well-earned dinner under the stars where we tried the fruits of our labours.

This is a summary of what we cooked in the week:

#### **Pasta e Pizza e Pane**

- Pizza – mine was decidedly the oddest pizza on the table – a weird abstract square shape with a toppings that looked like a Picasso canvas
- Pane alle Patate e Rosmarino – potato and rosemary bread
- Rotolo con Broccoli e Ricotta – fresh pasta roll with broccoli and ricotta
- Fagottini di Branzino all Zafferano – pasta filled with sea bass and saffron sauce
- Ravioli da Asparagi con Pesto di Asparagi – pasta filled with asparagus and ricotta
- Ravioli di Barbabietola – beetroot ravioli with lemon and prawn sauce
- Ravioli di Funghi – ravioli with wild mushrooms
- Tortelli di Patate – ravioli filled with potato

#### **Salsa e Sugo**

- Salsa Verde – green parsley sauce. A great topping for bread and meats
- La Salsa – tomato sauce.
- Salsa alla Puttanesca. A great topping for crostini and pasta.
- Maionese – Mayonnaise. To vary the flavour add orange juice, Dijon mustard, or white wine vinegar
- La Mediterranea – fresh tomato sauce. This is an ideal topping for bruschetta
- Aromatic Salt – this can be flavoured with a variety of herbs such as rosemary, zests of citrus, or rose petals
- Il Ragù – meat sauce
- Pesto di Zucchini – excellent in a vegetarian lasagne
- La Salsa di Senape – vinaigrette sauce

#### **Contorni**

- Melanzane con Tagliolini e Prosciutto – stuffed eggplant rolls with tomato sauce
- Muffin di Verdure – vegetable muffins

#### **Primi Piatti**

- Cheesecake al Pesto di Basilico – basil pesto cheesecake
- Soufflé di Baccalà – cod fish soufflé
- Zuppa di Cipolle – onion soup with Tuscan bread
- Sformato di Ricotta Tarufata – ricotta and truffle pie
- Millefoglie di Baccalà e Porri su Crema di Rucola – cod fish and leeks with puff pastry on rocket cream

#### **Secondi Piatti**

- Faraona al vin Santo e Funghi Porcini – guinea fowl with vin santo and porcini mushrooms
- Petto di Pollo Farcito alle Olive – involtini of chicken breast filled with olives
- Filetti di Pollo in Crosta di Pistacchio – chicken breasts with a pistachio nut crust
- Filetto di Maiale Croccante con Pistacchi – crunchy pork fillets with pistachios
- Coniglio alla Cacciatora – rabbit in a tomato sauce
- Vitello Arrosto con Porcini – roasted veal with porcini mushrooms
- Vitello Tonnato – veal with tuna sauce
- Fagottini di Ceci con Porri – chickpea “bags” with leeks

#### **Dolce**

- Cream di Zabione con Lingue di Gatto – zabione cream with cat’s tongue biscuits
- Cantuccini alla Mandorle – almond biscuits
- Panna Cotta
- Torta di Pesche ed Amaretti – peach and amaretti tart
- Rotolo di Cioccolato con panna – chocolate roll with cream
- Semifreddo alle noci e cioccolato bianco – walnut and white chocolate semifreddo
- Tiramisu

Delicious and loads of fun – I am happy to provide recipes on request – just drop me a line.

In the next Blog I am visiting a very special winery and chatting to the wine maker, a passionate goat cheese maker and more...

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