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[rottenbacher](#)

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[Villa Buonasera](#)

Latest Month

[October 2017](#)

S M T W T F S

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8 9 10 11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18 19 20 21
22 23 24 25 26 27 28
29 30 31

[View All Archives](#)

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[McDonald's](#) [a&m](#) [acer](#) [adidas](#)
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[apple](#) [apple vs google](#) [apple](#)

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[art business](#) [asus](#) [auto](#) [beauty](#)

[bentley](#) [bespoke](#) [bing](#) [bitcoin](#)

[blackberry](#) [burger king](#)

[chanel](#) [coca-cola](#) [dell](#) [dolls](#)

[facebook](#) [fashion](#)

[fashion business](#)

[fast food](#) [fit for fun](#) [for home](#)

[ford](#) [fossil](#) [gambling business](#)

[garda](#) [gm](#) [google](#) [gran](#)

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[lamborghini](#) [lanvin](#) [lavazza](#)

[lenovo](#) [lenovo vs samsung](#) [lg](#)

[linkedin](#) [lj](#) [long living](#) [love it](#)

[Previous Entry](#) | [Next Entry](#)

Cookery schools in Europe

Dec. 15th, 2011 at 1:05 AM



1. Menfi

Sicily

available through Tasting Places

Tel: 020 7460 0077

Website: www.tastingplaces.com

Cookery writer Maxine Clark happily admits she loves Sicily more than any other part of Italy and it shows in the enthusiasm and wealth of local knowledge she brings to the courses she teaches in Menfi. Sicilian food is an earthy and exotic mix of European and Arab influences . Staples such as pizza and home-made pasta are also tackled, with Maxine exhorting her students to 'knead the dough from cellulite to a baby's bottom'.The week-long course takes place in the romantic setting of the eighteenth- century Villa Ravidá, the private home of a grand Sicilian family who now produce award-winning extra virgin olive oil. Early evening cocktails are served in the villa's elegant drawing room, which is decorated with faded frescoes and meals are eaten outdoors with unlimited supplies of Sicilian wine. Polly Roger Brown

2. Finca Buen Vino

Spain

through Pata Negra cooking schools

Tel: 01732 750 174

Website: www.patanegra.net

Pata Negra are the cooking schools to go to in Spain. They run a whole tranche of courses featuring Sam and Sam of Moro fame to Michelin chef Luis Irizar, who holds his school at the northern Spanish town of San Sebastian.

However, I went high up in the mountains of Andalucia to the beautiful, comforting home - Finca Buen Vino - of Sam and Jeannie Chesterton, for their week-long cookery course. It all takes place in the Chestertons' house. You sleep there, eat there and cook there, round Jeannie's kitchen table. Included in the trip is a day out to Jerez to drink sherry and eat, and many trips into the local pretty towns. We went to a jamon festival but the finca also produced its own Serrano ham, chestnuts, olives and scented honey. Lucy Cavendish

3. Le Marmiton

Avignon, France

through Gourmet on Tour

Tel: 020 7396 5550

Right next to the Pope's palace in Avignon is the hotel La Mirande, an austere building in a quiet cobbled square.

Throughout the year the hotel runs intimate cookery classes in their nineteenth-century kitchen, where noted local chefs pass on their tips to beginners and serious food appreciators. Le Marmiton (a chef's assistant) puts on morning, afternoon

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[samsung](#) [skype](#) [sony](#)
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[ВАЖНОЕ](#) [ВКонтакте](#)
[ВКонтакте vs Facebook](#) [Игорный](#)
[бизнес](#) [Крым](#) [Родина](#)
[Россияне](#) [США](#) [козлы-воночки](#)
[Формула-1](#) [а мне нравится :\)](#)
[австралийцы](#) [молодцы](#)
[альтернатива](#) [банковской системе](#)
[антиреклама](#) [бережем себя](#)

БИЗНЕС [брендинг](#)

[важное](#) [война она такая война...](#)
[ВСЯКО-РАЗНО](#) [вторая жизнь](#)

[вещей](#) **ВЫПЬЕМ** [где](#)
[выпить](#) [ГОТОВИМ ДОМА](#) [еда](#)
[живу](#) [заметки по](#)
[ПСИХОЛОГИИ](#) [здоровье](#)

[интерьерные вещи](#) [итальяшки](#)
[молодцы](#) [йога](#) [какие акции](#)
[ПОКУПАТЬ](#) [КИТАЙЦЫ](#) [МОЛОДЦЫ](#)

[КНИГИ](#) [корейцы](#) [молодцы](#)
[кофе](#) [кофейни](#) [кулинарные](#)
[школы](#) [купить или как?](#)

[ЛИРИКА](#) [люблю Австрию](#)
[люблю их](#) [МАРКЕТИНГ](#)
[мексиканцы](#) [молодцы](#)

[МЕНЕДЖМЕНТ](#) [МНЕНИЕ](#) [МОИ](#)
[любимые конфеты](#) [МОИ](#)
[любимые отели](#) [москвичи](#)

[музыка](#) [МЫСЛИ ВСЛУХ](#)
[нужное](#) [облажались...](#)
[планшеты](#) [поддержим](#)

[отечественное](#) [поедим](#)
[политика](#) [понравилось](#)
[португальцы](#) [молодцы](#) [правда](#)

[какая есть\)\)\)](#) [психология](#)
[работаем над собой](#)
[рассмешило](#)

реклама [ремонт](#)
[рестораны](#) [рідна ненька](#)
[Україна](#) [свезло так свезло](#)
[сингапурцы](#) [молодцы](#) [скоро](#)

[весна - шевелим задницею](#)
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[таки да](#) [телефоны](#) [то что мне](#)

[интересно](#) [ультрабуки](#)
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[чай](#) [что и где едим](#) [эко](#) [это](#)

[интересно](#)
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Page Summary

[роттенbacher](#) :
[дополнение \[+0\]](#)

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and evening classes for a maximum of 12 people. I was booked in to a morning class. The smell of the wood-burning stove filled the kitchen and around a table sat 12 local food fanatics salivating at the thought of being trained by Christian Etienne, a Michelin-starred Avignon chef. I was lucky to be in a class with Christian because, although he spoke no English and my French is less than perfect, his charisma communicated everything. Christian's speciality is tomatoes. He loves them, and our starter, main, and even our pudding included tomatoes (green ones, on a tart). Our task was mainly to watch and appreciate a master at work, but we all helped out (there was a lot of de-seeding to do). The meal was accompanied by fine wine and a chorus of 'Ooh la la' from all the participants. It was one of the best meals of my life. Chloe Diski

4. Vallicorte

Tuscany, Italy

Tel: 020 7680 1377

Email: tours@vallicorte.com

Website: www.vallicorte.com

This is exactly what you need from a course: a good group of people (the organisers try hard to match age groups, nationalities etc), a charismatic, enthusiastic instructor (the wonderful, dark-haired siren Ursula Ferrigno) and a pair of hosts who should be given their own television show (no one comes as amusing or as informative as John and Berenice Bonnallack). As soon as I got there it was as if I had reached paradise. The sun was shining, the garden was full and plentiful and Ursula could reach parts of you - cooking wise - that you didn't know could be reached. Most students stay in the ancient villa (fully modernised inside) and then gather at the former barn-turned- cookery school for a morning session, then lunch and a siesta, followed by an afternoon session. Ursula, being Ursula, does not stick rigidly to the recipe pack we were given. That is not how she cooks. 'Ooh,' she'll say, 'let's make rosemary and apple cake!' and off you go. I made pasta! I even learnt how to chop properly. But more than that, I learnt how easy it is to love Tuscany and wish to remain in its beautiful sun-dappled hills for the rest of your life armed with a good bottle of oil, some fresh tomatoes and a bottle of Vino Santo. Lucy Cavendish

5. Gualtiero Marchesi's Gourmet Cookery School

L'Albereta, Italy

Tel: 00 39 030 7760 550

Marchesi is a three-star chef so, if you wish to learn from a master, then this is the right course for you. There is no way that you, I, or anybody - apart from Gordon Ramsay, Raymond Blanc, Marcus Wareing, Marco et al - could ever learn to cook to the standard of Marchesi's three-day course. This man produces food I can barely pronounce, let alone emulate. But that is not the point of the course. It is a lesson in which you look and learn but do not necessarily do it yourself. In the meantime, between watching the maestro and feeling depressed at your own incompetence, you can enjoy the beautiful surroundings of the hotel (a spa is opening soon) and drink copious amounts of their Bellavista 'bubbles'. Gualtiero is the consummate chef and he immerses you in the heart and soul of Italy. Included in the course are two guided tours of local vineyards, three nights, breakfast and lunch and three dinners. Lucy Cavendish

6. L'Ecole de Cuisine

Bordeaux, France

Tel: 00 33 5 56 90 91 92

Email: contact@coledubordeaux.com

L'Ecole de Cuisine is run from the bowels of one of France's most historic and celebrated restaurants, Le Chapon Fin. Owned by the Cazes family - proprietors of the Lynch-Bages wine estate - the cookery side is designed and overseen by Michelin two-star chef, Thierry Marx. Run in English and French, it is open to amateurs and professionals alike. A sommelier is on hand to demonstrate wine and food harmony, and the course concentrates on typical south-western cooking, with a bias towards Marx's terre et estuaire (land and estuary) cuisine. It takes place at Le Chapon Fin from Tuesday to Saturday. Lunch or dinner are included. Mark Porter

7. Cooking with Stavros

Symi, Greece

available through Laskarina

Tel: 01629 822203

Website: www.laskarina.co.uk

Stavros Gogios is chef and owner of Mythos, the best restaurant on the small Greek island of Symi which specialises in traditional medézhēs (essentially a Greek version of tapas) with a modern twist. Persuaded to share his recipes by holiday company Laskarina, Stavros now runs week-long cooking demonstrations in his restaurant kitchen.

On the first morning of my week Stavros took us for a walk through the picturesque harbour town of Symi, introducing us to his father-in-law Yannis, who sells dried herbs gathered from the local hills, and then showing us the greengrocer, baker and butcher where he buys his fresh produce. He taught us how to make stifádhō (beef stew with tomatoes and onions), spanokópitta (spinach and cheese pie) and baklava (a layered filo pie with honey and nuts) as well as the other, more experimental dishes he's become known for - feta mousse, squid in basil sauce and courgette parcels stuffed with mushrooms. 'I think that cooking is a bit of fantasy - a way of expressing yourself,' said Stavros as he filled everyone's glasses up again. Polly Roger Brown

8. Casa Ombuto

Tuscany, Italy

Tel: 0039 34873 63864

www.italiancookingcourse.com

High in the hills of the Casentino valley, 50km south of Florence is Casa Ombuto - an amazing house with a swimming pool and views to die for. Michele, interpreter and frontman, and his wife Carla, one of the most respected chefs in Tuscany run the inspiring seven- day cookery course, held in the cave-like cantina of the villa.

I tried everything from basic pasta-making to a delicious wild boar in tomato and herb dish. I had a day's excursion which ended in the most stunning restaurant for dinner, and a day free to view the surrounding wildlife or visit Florence. The other five days are for cooking, which starts at 3pm. This course suits those who are keen to learn with little experience to those established cooks looking to broaden their tastes and techniques. Wendy Geoghegan

9. Promenades Gourmandes with Paule Caillet

Paris, France

available through Gourmet on Tour

Tel: 020 7396 5550

This is a non-residential cookery course designed to be slotted into a weekend, or long visit to Paris. You could just about do it on Eurostar for the day. It's a terrific way of discovering the food underbelly of the city, as the Cordon Bleu chef and guide, Paule Caillat, leads the class round markets, butchers, the kitchens at the Hotel de Crillo, truffle and herb shops. You then return to Caillat's kitchen in the Marais and cook up your shopping. Katie Lee

10. Refúgio da Vila

Portel, Alentejo, Portugal

Tel: 00351 266619010

www.refugiodavila.com

'The richness of our food comes from the poverty of our people,' says Miguel Amaral, head chef at the elegant Refúgio da Vila hotel in Portel, in southern Portugal. The Alentejo is one of the most traditional and poorest regions of Portugal, a land of wheat fields and olive groves - two of the ingredients which form the basics of the region's cuisine along with herbs, rabbit, pork and eggs. As Miguel says, local recipes, such as coelho á carvoeiro (rabbit and tomato stew) have been improvised to turn staple foodstuffs into tasty meals. Polly Roger Brown

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