



## Following dream to Italian cooking school

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By Jim Cash

Guest Food Columnist

Nothing gets a person's attention like hearing the word "cancer." It is a huge wake up call for anyone. I know this very well since I have spent my professional career as a pathologist, reading slides at a microscope at Wilson Medical Center.

In 2015, when another pathologist gave me a diagnosis of cancer, I had a wake-up call of my own. I knew I needed to get moving and do some of the things I had always wanted to do. I had always wanted to go to Italy and study cooking, particularly Mediterranean cuisine.

Last month, my wife and I flew to Florence, Italy, rented a car, and took a drive into Tuscany. Our destination was Poppi, Italy, and Casa Ombuto's Tuscookany, a cooking vacation. It was the vacation I had always dreamed of.

I have always been an enthusiastic home cook and someone who wanted to know more and explore culinary adventures. This was my big chance.

We arrived at a beautiful villa in a remote area, about two hours south and east of Florence, and we were surrounded by vineyards and olive groves. The villa, and the school kitchen, offered lush gardens full of ripe tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, celery, leeks and every herb imaginable. Our teacher guided us around as we arrived and urged us to get to know what was growing. The fig trees, as back home in Wilson, were bursting with fresh figs. The only thing missing was Wilson County's ferocious mosquitoes.

Throughout the week we learned to cook many fabulous dishes. Our side trips took us to an olive press, wineries and a fromagerie. On the way back to the school one night, we even encountered a wild boar. I loved it all.

From French, Moroccan, Italian and Spanish classics, as we cooked away each day at Casa Ombuto, sometimes as many as seven wonderful hours each day, my favorites began to emerge. I have always enjoyed preparing desserts, but this week I prepared many interesting dishes. Here are three of my favorite recipes from the week.

### Gazpacho

I have had lots of gazpacho over the years, but this was my favorite.

3 pounds juicy tomatoes

1 cucumber

1 medium onion

1 medium red bell pepper

1 medium green bell pepper

1/2 cup olive oil

4 tablespoons wine vinegar

1/2 pound of stale bread

1 1/2 cups chicken stock

4 cloves garlic

Rustic bread for croutons (2 to 3 slices)

Roughly chop all the cleaned vegetables, garlic and onion, place in bowl, add olive oil, and leave to macerate for two hours. Reserve some cucumber and tomato for garnish.

Soak the break (discard crust) with chicken stock and vinegar in another bowl.

Process vegetables and bread in a blender. Season to taste with salt and hint of cayenne pepper. Leave in refrigerator until serving.

Serve in four bowls. For garnish, slice two to three slices of country bread into 1/2-inch cubes, and fry in olive oil to make croutons.

Using some of the saved cucumbers and tomatoes for garnish, add the croutons and serve.

Recipe tip: Gazpacho may improve in taste if made the day before.

Serves four.

## Almond Macaroons

These have a wonderful texture.

2 eggs

16 ounces slivered almonds (ground finely in food processor)

1 teaspoon baking powder

2 tablespoons orange flower water\*

1 cup confectioners' sugar

Grated zest of 1 lemon

Almonds for garnish

Break eggs into bowl. Beat lightly with fork. Incorporate sugar and baking powder.

Add ground almonds, lemon zest and orange flower water. Mix to a smooth paste.

Grease hands with olive oil, and roll dough into small balls 1-inch in diameter.

Flatten onto a plate filled with confectioner's sugar. Push an almond for garnish into the middle.

Place onto a parchment-lined baking tray, leaving space between each.

Bake at 300 degrees for 15 minutes. Cool on a wire rack.

\* A substitute for orange flower water is one part orange extract to two parts lemon juice.

Makes two dozen.

## Pork Tenderloin with Pancetta, Grapes and Walnuts

1 whole, trimmed pork tenderloin

16 ounces thinly sliced pancetta\*

1 clove garlic, finely chopped

2 to 3 teaspoons fresh thyme, finely chopped

Salt and pepper

8 ounces red, seedless grapes, halved

8 ounces white, seedless grapes, halved

1/2 cups coarsely chopped walnuts

Olive oil for frying

1/2 cup Marsala or red wine

Mix the finely chopped thyme and garlic together and add 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper. Add a few drops of olive oil to make a paste.

Rub sides of tenderloin with the above mixture.

Wrap the pancetta slices around tenderloin and secure with string.

In olive oil, brown tenderloin in Dutch oven — high heat, all sides.

Add Marsala wine and allow liquid to reduce.

Cover pan with lid, reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes.

Add grapes and continue to simmer for 8 to 10 minutes, covered.

Add chopped walnuts and let simmer for 5 minutes, covered.

Let rest, remove string, slice pork and garnish with sauce, grapes and walnuts on serving platter.

\* Pancetta and bacon are both prepared from the same cut of meat. However, bacon is cured, and pancetta is not. If substituting bacon, use a thinly sliced, mildly cured version.

For more information about this cooking school, and to follow our chef and teacher, Laura Giusti, visit [www.Tuscookany.com](http://www.Tuscookany.com) Laura is also on Instagram with many great recipes and food photos at [@lauragiustichef](https://www.instagram.com/lauragiustichef).

Buon appetito!

Thanks to Jim Cash for his guest food column.



Jim Cash participates in a the Tuscookany cooking class while on vacation in Italy last month.

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