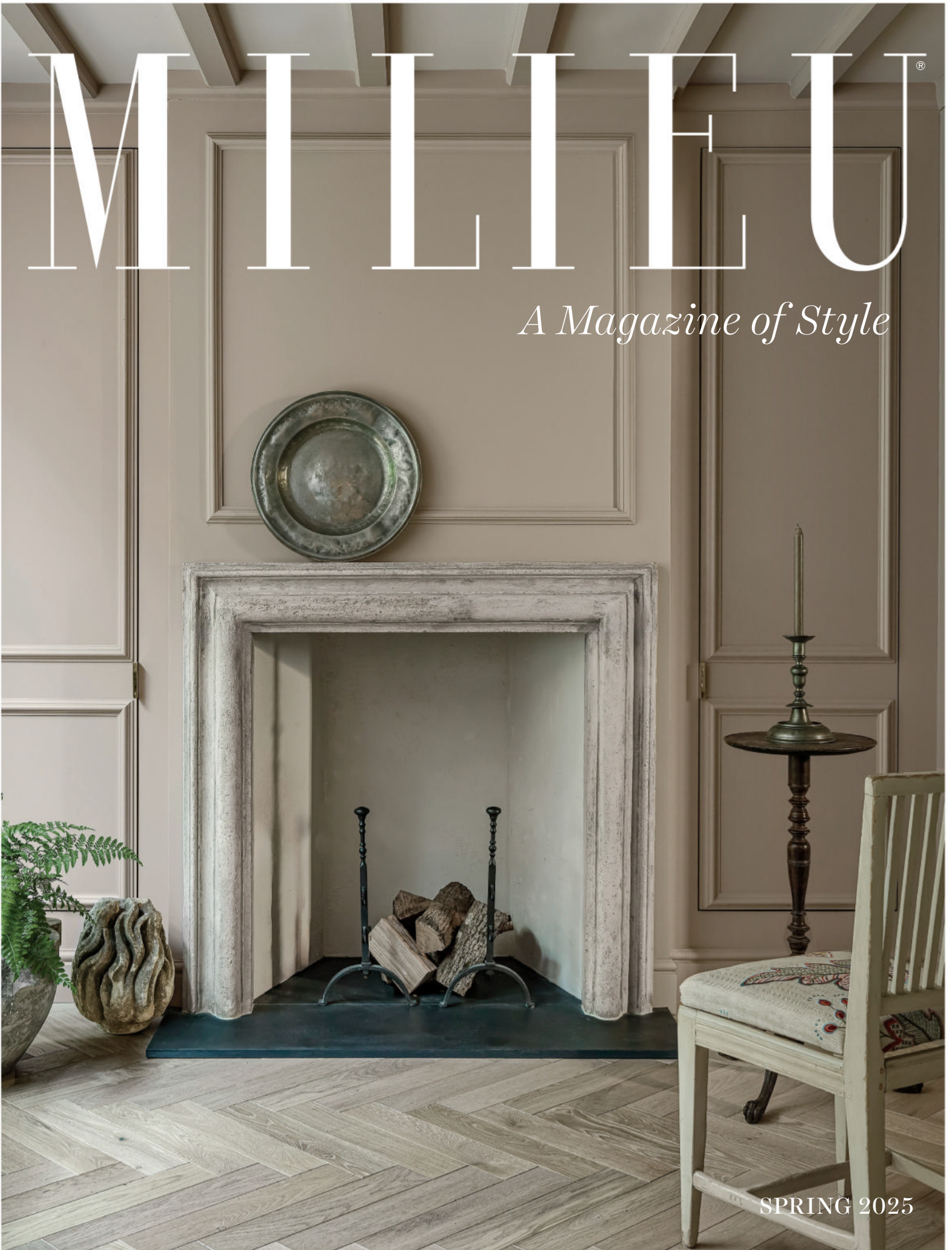


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# *JOURNEY*



# A Taste of Tuscany

While learning to cook classic Tuscan cuisine is the main course of a week-long stay at Tuscookany, there is also a rich meal to have every evening with new friends who are there to share the kitchen with you

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Behind the wheel of a tiny Fiat, climbing a steep, curvy hill, I'm certain I'm lost. But as I round one final curve, my destination comes into view—a sprawling villa called Torre del Tartufo (Tower of Truffles).

This is one of four villas offered by Tuscookany Cooking Vacations, and I'm already in awe. But nothing can prepare me for the delicious magic that lies ahead—a week of cooking lessons, exceptional wine, impeccable service, one-of-a-kind experiences, and the birth of a love for all things Tuscan.

The Tuscany Cooking Schools of Tuscookany are located in villas on large, secluded estates at Bellorcia, Casa Ombuto, Torre del Tartufo, and Bellancino—all four featuring lovely views of the Tuscan countryside.

When I reached my room, fresh flowers and a cookbook dense with recipes awaits. The wooden beams above me scream *Tuscany* and custom-made furniture fills the room with rustic charm. I unpack, take a quick peek at my cookbook to whet my appetite, and head out to explore the grounds. As I wander, I'm enveloped by a peaceful calm. I can feel this place is special.

That evening our group sits down to dinner—the only one we do not take part in creating. While watching the brilliant sunset, plate after plate of exceptional Italian food is placed in front of me, paired

Opening page: One of the four Tuscookany villas at which guests stay, Torre del Tartufo (Tower of the Truffles), is situated near the town of Arezzo and dates from about 1700; true to its name, the villa is surrounded by a truffle estate. Right: When the weather is right, meals are served al fresco on the kitchen terrace. Opposite: The kitchen at Casa Ombuto, another of the Tuscookany villas, with Chef Alice and students inspecting dishes in progress for dinner.











Opposite, top to bottom: Many of the master bedroom suites at Torre del Tartufo feature a large fireplace. There are numerous nooks, perches, and terraces situated throughout the villa, including these discreetly curtained areas near the swimming pool.

with an exquisite wine. At the end of the feast comes a parade of digestifs, an Italian tradition I'm happy to embrace. As some guests retire, many of us stay up telling stories, laughing and sampling the seemingly bottomless bottles of *limoncello*, *amaro*, and *grappa*.

The following morning, I shuffle into breakfast and find a gorgeous spread of Tuscan delights. Other guests have just returned from an early morning hike, and those of us who stayed up late are impressed. Eventually, everyone scatters to relax in a hammock by the pool, get a massage, or visit a nearby town. I decide to curl up with a book on a lounge chair by the pool, though I find myself gazing at the Tuscan hillsides more than I'm reading the printed pages before me.

That afternoon, we put on our aprons for what we're really here for: cooking. The kitchen is abundant with all the right ingredients. On the counter are locally sourced vegetables, fresh eggs, and olive oil, while the fridges are stuffed with cheeses and meats from a nearby farm. Teams of guests are assigned dishes, and we get to work.

It's chaos, it's mistakes, it's endless questions to the chef, it's wonderful. Mid-lesson, we are shooed outside for a glass of wine and a snack. Chef claims it's so we can enjoy the view, but I'm pretty sure they want us out of the kitchen so they can clean up our messes. There are no dishes to do here; just bring something to the sink and it's washed and put away—I've had dreams about this. The hours pass quickly and soon we sit down to our first student-made dinner, all of us playing parts in the culinary production. Praise is lavished on the dishes and we are filled with pride, amazed that we created a meal this delectable. The next day everyone is more comfortable and confident in the kitchen, and our aprons are no longer pristine white. Today we get to make pasta and hand-roll it. It's surprisingly simple and I'll definitely be showing off this skill when I get home.

After two successful days in the kitchen, it's time for a break. Our hosts take us first to a winery that dates back to the year 1000, then to an agricultural cooperative for a demonstration about making Tuscan cheeses, and, finally, a linen factory where we get a glimpse into the making of their intricate fabrics. On the ride home we all sleep, exhausted from our day of peeking into authentic Italian culture.

The rest of the week is filled with more cooking, wine, and laughter (the latter, one of my favorite ingredients of the trip). We make homemade pizzas in a wood-fired oven, hunt for truffles, learn about beekeeping and producing olive oil. On our free day, guests jaunt off to Sienna or Florence, but I choose to enjoy the quiet at the villa—it won't be long until I'm back in Los Angeles, sitting in traffic.

Much too soon, it's time to depart paradise. While I'm sad to go, I'm certain I'll be back; there are three more Tuscan villas and three more resident chefs to experience. Driving away from Torre del Tartufo, I am grateful for such an exceptional opportunity to quench my Tuscan thirst—and for the cooking skills I've learned, the people I've met, and the peace I've found. ■





Top: Trees and their reflections appear to frame the sunset. The low-chlorine pool is solar heated and remains warm throughout the day and evening. Left: The hot tub at Bellancino, another of the Tuscookany inns, is heated with logs obtained from the cleaning and maintenance of the surrounding forests. In addition to the eco-friendly firewood, water is provided from boreholes, and solar power is harnessed for multiple applications.