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Associated Press Video

Cooking class reveals soul of Italian food

By **BRIAN BERGSTEIN**, Associated Press

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PANZANO IN CHIANTI, Italy □ Deep in the Chianti wine country, I guided a rented Volkswagen over a nearly mile-long dirt road, past vineyards and olive trees and down a steep, narrow and gouged stretch that made the car's shocks groan.

Maybe the dusty bouncing would have been less severe if I had taken the rutted path a little slower. But that would have required containing my excitement about the destination: a Tuscan inn with cooking classes.

Italy is a beautiful, friendly place, with an insane assortment of things to do and see. But when my wife and I spent three weeks there this spring, one of our most exciting activities was eating.

We were blown away by fresh pasta with one-note accompaniments, such as truffle oil or mushrooms. We marveled at the deep flavors of dried meats, pungent cheeses and rich red tomatoes. Things I would not eat at home, such as wild boar and rabbit, became new friends.

One problem, beyond pants that no longer fit, is that if you really like to cook, eating amazing food forces you to reconsider your own kitchen strategies. It's as if the people in the restaurant are throwing down a gauntlet, saying, "Oh yeah? You think you make some good beef stew? Beat this."

So the opportunity to take a cooking class □ especially in Tuscany, the hilly northern region whose landscape of medieval villages and farms has changed little in centuries □ was too good to pass up. Here we could learn from the masters □ get inside the inner sanctum and see how the magic happens.

We discovered the bed and breakfast, Fagiolari, the same way we found most every place we stayed □ on the Internet, with the help of guidebooks and message-board postings from other travelers. Information abounds because so many tourists go to Italy; the Tuscan countryside is a trendy vacation spot (think "Under the Tuscan Sun"), and lots of places offer cooking classes, including multi-day sessions.

Our class came on the final night of a three-day stay at Fagiolari, a converted stone farmhouse where rooms started at \$100, breakfast included.

Owner Giulietta Giovannoni charges \$100 per person for the class, which she has offered since 1995. That includes an apron, a cookbook with about 30 recipes, the dinner that you learn how to cook, plus generous carafes of the red Chianti wine grown on the premises. Since dinner alone at Fagiolari runs about \$28 per person, the cooking class essentially costs \$72.

Considering that she charges that much for cooking classes, Giulietta seems surprisingly humble when I asked about the origins of her culinary wisdom.

"In Italy, the women all cook," she shrugged, and smiled.

But there is a little more to it: Raised in Florence, 20 miles to the north, she worked in a restaurant and with caterers before buying the Fagiolari farmhouse, olive groves and vineyards and turning it into a five-room B&B. In Italy this kind of inn/working farm is called an "agriturismo."

Giulietta's success with Fagiolari (pronounced Fahj-ee-o-lah-ree) inspired her twin sister, Marinella, to open a lovely agriturismo of her own just outside the Tuscan hill town of Volterra. We stayed at Marinella's place, called Podere San Lorenzo, before coming to Fagiolari and ate a few dishes that blew our minds, including a light but tasty asparagus lasagna and roasted vegetables stuffed with meat. (Marinella also offers cooking classes.)

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During our class in Fagiolari, Giuletta was in the background, turning things over to her young assistant, Stefania Balducci, who also speaks very good English. She sweetly, patiently and ably guided me, my wife, a Dutch couple and two New Zealanders.

The menu consisted of pesto, the sublime mixture of basil, garlic and olive oil; zuppa di farro, a traditional Tuscan soup featuring cannellini beans and spelt, a barley-like grain; vegetables simmered in a tomato sauce; beef and pork loins simmered in Chianti wine and onions; and an apple cake for dessert.

When we arrived at 5 p.m., Stefania had carefully laid out the ingredients, purchased that morning, and done a few key things in advance, like soaking the cannellini beans and spelt for the soup.

As we sipped wine, Stefania showed us how to make the dishes, and had us six students take turns peeling vegetables, chopping onions and picking fresh basil in the garden.

Stefania had a few key tips that I made sure to absorb, such as how to season raw meat by cutting strategically placed holes and stuffing them with salt, pepper and garlic cloves. Another bit of her advice: pesto will stick to pasta better if you add small chunks of potato to the boiling water in which the noodles cook.

The Dutch couple insisted on learning how to make the pesto by hand, with a mortar and pestle, though Stefania said the results wouldn't be that different from what could be achieved with a handheld food processor. We made two versions, one each way.

By 8 p.m. □ after several glasses of wine □ we were starving to eat what we had been making and smelling. For me, the anticipation seemed more acute by having finally become an insider in an Italian kitchen.

We spooned the pesto onto chunks of bread and debated whether the hand-ground version was superior. I thought it had a more interesting texture but I couldn't decide if it tasted better. I had two bowls of the rosemary-infused soup, which I found hearty and full of flavor.

As for the main course, the vegetables were good but not amazing, and the meat was flavorful and satisfying, though I think our hosts had sliced it too thin before serving. The apple cake was sweet and very light.

When the plates were cleared and we shifted from wine to grappa, I decided to recommend the cooking class to others (though I think the cost was too high for a class with six pupils, which reduces the hands-on experience).

For one thing, it was a great icebreaker that led to a long and enlightening dinnertime conversation with our classmates.

Perhaps best of all, it demystified and democratized the Tuscan kitchen. The essential message was how to get good food to emerge from simple concepts and very fresh ingredients.

That's a strategy I feel comfortable trying to replicate at home □ even though home, sadly, is far from the nurturing green landscape of Tuscany.

AT A GLANCE

GETTING THERE: The usual starting point for Tuscan adventures is Florence, the region's urban and cultural center. The city is accessible by air, train or bus, as is Pisa, another popular Tuscan destination. Trains and buses also run into several Tuscan towns from Rome, which is about 150 miles south of Florence. Another widely available option is renting a car and driving into Tuscany. The region is not very far from anywhere; after all, Italy is roughly the size of Arizona.

FAGIOLARI: www.fagiolari.it or (39-055) 852-351. Rooms begin at \$100, but will rise to \$120 in 2005. Cooking classes are \$100.

PODERE SAN LORENZO: www.agriturismosanlorenzo.it or (39-058) 839-080. Rooms begin at \$90, with a 10 percent discount during most of the winter. Cooking classes are \$100.

COOKING CLASSES: For information on other cooking classes in Italy, visit www.slowtrav.com/italy/planning.

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