

Bringing home the flavour of Lazio

I am a seasoned sampler of cookery breaks, in both France and Italy, and keep returning for more. My own culinary skills are nothing to write home about – I've progressed over the years from unimaginative and slapdash through wistfully aspirational to downright greedy. No matter, for the right person – anyone even faintly fond of the kitchen and interested in food as one of the pleasures of being abroad – the cookery break offers an almost foolproof recipe for success.

As you pack your apron, you may come over all virtuous about the benefits that will come to your nearest and dearest from your brief absence. In fact, ahead lies a creative time with a bunch of like-minded people, with sensational meals, master-minded by a pro. Best of all, you get to take home the ideal souvenir, a genuine insight into the flavour of the region, reflected in recipes that will ensure a warm welcome on your return.

This time I'm in Tuscia in northern Lazio, on the knee of the Italian boot, an hour north-west of Rome. And I'm hanging on to an imaginary hat as my hostess, Lorne Blyth, swings her minibus round the steep bends of the mountain roads with all the confidence of a native.

The focus of Flavours, founded by Blyth in 1998, differs from some of its starrer successors in that the emphasis remains firmly on the home cooking of the region, rather than on the virtuoso performance of a celebrity chef. This is *cucina povera*, using the local ingredients that have been placed before generations of Tuscan families. Anna Belloni, the week's voluble and charming presiding genius, has had some restaurant experience, but her real qualifications lie in her own country kitchen and in the inherited skills that she has been careful to pass on to

TICKET TO LEARN COOKERY

her own daughter, in defiance of the strengthening grip of the supermarket.

Most of what we use can be sourced at Tesco later, but Anna regards her personal network as crucial. One friend supplies salad vegetables, another eggs – only those yolks displaying the *pizzico del maschio*, the red spot indicating fertilised credentials, need apply. Herbs come from her own garden; Anna knows every vegetable plot for miles around and rejects anything from an unreliable source. "Always look for the little producer, the stall with just a few things on it," she tells us. "Chances are he'll have grown them himself."

We start with a quick trip to Tolfa market, to get a feel, literally, of fresh artichokes and courgettes, a taste of *caciotta* cheese from Viterbo, a sniff of the mottled pink salami that will feature in the lunchtime *involtini* – beef olives. Please tell me that *mortadella vera* isn't really made with donkey meat. But this is an unsentimental part of the world. "Si, si, Eeyore," Anna assures us.

Flavours has sole use of our base, a comfortable modern villa furnished with the impersonality of a classy guesthouse. Only the odd photograph betrays the fact that this is the holiday home of a well-to-do Roman family. But the kitchen remains at the heart of the house, a place of warm tiles and shining copper, of baskets overflowing with fresh fruit

and vegetables. Throughout the day, seductive smells – rising dough, hot coffee and sizzling garlic – beckon us downstairs.

Chi non lavora, non fa l'amore (No work, no lovemaking), sings Anna as we start chopping and kneading. Her husband-to-be, Antonio, has brought in a basket of sage and wild fungi. Later in the year, he'll take the neighbour's dog in search of truffles.

Anna's cooking is of the instinctive, improvisatory sort: a *guccio* (mouthful) of this and that; plenty of *olio di gomito* (that old standby, elbow grease). In this sort of kitchen, nothing goes to waste; there are few exact quantities laid down: "You use your hands; you touch, you feel you know." This is a woman who makes pasta almost every day of her life, scorning not only those fiddly machines but even the humble mixing bowl. Instead, we learn to think of sandcastles, breaking eggs into a heap of flour on a board and stirring the inner rim of the volcano gently into the puddled centre. There can be few more satisfying culinary ploys, except perhaps rolling the resulting dough, tissue-fine, thin enough to see through to the grain of the wood below.

Instead of hard and fast rules, we amass an arsenal of tips: old potatoes make lighter gnocchi than watery new ones, which absorb too much flour; a really fresh artichoke squeaks when pressed; the heftier the sauce, the broader the pasta should be: *pappardelle* with rabbit, fettuccine for tomato-based *ragù*, angel hair for soups.

Anna's morning sessions are timed to leave ample opportunities for sightseeing. The cookery, says Blyth, is only one aspect of an exploration of the region. About an hour away by rail, Rome awaits the stout-

hearted. I decide instead to join the carload offered a day's exploration of Tuscia, a little to the north.

The road to Viterbo winds through jungles of wild fennel, fields of asphodel and cherry pink judas trees. Why has tourism so neglected this lovely corner of Italy? The province is riddled with Etruscan remains: we stop at Tarquinia's fine museum where terracotta ranks of the dead recline on sarcophagus lids, each effigy propped on its elbow as if just roused. Emptied, their painted tomb chambers in the nearby necropolis depict lives of pleasure, filled with hunting, feasting and dancing girls. A brief look at the splendid Renaissance centre of Viterbo and we move on to the Lago di Bolsena for lunch majoring on lake fish, partnered by the famous Est! Est!! Est!!! wine of nearby Montefiascone.

While I have not yet let Anna's Amaretti and bitter chocolate *semifreddo* loose on West Perthshire, her aubergines layered with Parmesan and mozzarella cheese, her hot chilli carbonara and her mushroom sauce with gnocchi have all become standbys. Meanwhile, my ability to dish up that particularly Italian sort of roast chicken – flattened, with whole garlic cloves, rosemary and crisp roast potatoes – has gone a long way towards ensuring that my family will wave me off on my next cookery break with equanimity.

Like all the best short breaks, this one has stretched with the unhurried elasticity of Anna's pasta. There's time for mild shopping: rocket seeds and fresh mozzarella from Viterbo, olive oil from Tarquinia, kitchen equipment from Allumiere, including one of those chestnut wood rolling boards that just might turn me into a serene, singing-along, pasta-making, Italian earth-mamma. Well, I can always dream.

Juliet Clough

BOOK BEFORE 28 FEB

Europe's Atlantic edge, the long line of coast that stretches from Brittany to Spain and Portugal, has witnessed some of our greatest naval and land campaigns over the years, none more so than the Napoleonic Wars of the late 18th and early 19th century. Our voyage from southern Spain will highlight some of the finest.

A fitting start will be the great achievements of Nelson, made all the more poignant in the year we commemorate his death two hundred years ago at the Battle of Trafalgar. Moving from southern Spain to Portugal and northern Spain, we will spend time in Lisbon, Oporto and the surrounding countryside, learning more about Wellington's Peninsula War. Then on to France and the important historic naval centres of Bordeaux and La Rochelle, the site of many daring British maritime exploits. Here, the adventures of Admiral Lord Cochrane will be vividly brought to life by our guest speakers as we learn about the man Napoleon named 'Le Loup des Mers' ('the sea wolf').

MS ISLAND SKY

Formerly known as *Renaissance VIII*, this deluxe vessel recently underwent a significant refit and is one of the finest small ships in the world. Built in Italy in 1992 to a high specification, the *MS Island Sky* offers exceptionally spacious and well designed cabins. All cabins are in fact suites with a sitting room area and some have private balconies. Due to the generous size of the suites our maximum complement of passengers is 116. The spacious and finely decorated public rooms include a lounge, elegant bar, library with Internet centre and a single seating dining room. Outside there is a very nice deckhouse

