

# THE ITALIAN HOB

Atkins be damned – a holiday in the kitchen might expand your waistline, but it will nourish the senses and feed your inspiration for a long time

WORDS LEE RANDALL

**F**ROM the day I set foot on Roman soil, I was hooked, and today, some 24 years and half a dozen visits later, my love for Italy and all things Italian remains undiminished. I love the art and the fashion. I love the people and their language. And in common with every sentient being, I love Italy's cuisine, from Genoa's pesto to Napoli's pizza and everything in between.

Lorne Blyth is a Scottish lassie who also adores the boot-shaped country, and that passion inspired her to create Flavours, a travel company specialising in cooking holidays in three locations across Italy. Thus I find myself in northern Lazio, some 45 minutes north-west of Rome, a region of mellow medieval hill towns flanked by the Mediterranean, where the pace of life is slow and the earthy, unpretentious local cuisine superb. My destination is I Castagni, a private villa in Tolfa, where I will spend a week in the kitchen under the tutelage of Anna, a local woman whose genius would put many a professional to shame.

Normally on such trips my notes run to

lavish hotel trappings, distances between monuments and the number of oohs and aahs per scenic vista. Looking now at my scribbles from this memorable week, I see only lists of food, glorious food.

Lorne, who would have no trouble working as a professional organiser, has co-ordinated all her guests to turn up at roughly the same time, so we travel to Tolfa as a unit, instantly united in our amazement at the skilful way she manoeuvres the fully loaded mini-van through the winding, vertiginous roads without breaking sweat or breaking into profanities. (Did I mention she is pregnant?)

We settle into the villa and sit down to a meal that hints at the delights ahead: a welcoming lunch of light yet cheesy melezano (aubergine) parmigiano. In the evening we dine on wafer-thin fillets of pork in a light, creamy sauce, along with a simple dish of succulently ripe pears served with great chunks of richly flavoured parmesan, a combination that is new to me, and which works perfectly.

The next morning it is aprons on and into the kitchen. Anna speaks little English, but her smile needs no translation, nor does the skill in her hands. Lorne is fluent in Italian, however, and makes sure we understand every word, both in the kitchen and on our day trips out.

Early on, Anna teaches us how to craft sublime roast potatoes that would have Gary Rhodes chewing his toque, and a lemony sponge cake requiring nothing more than a dusting of sugar and a cup of strong coffee by way of accompaniment.

Another day we make semi-freddo, combining the richness of heavy cream with bitter dark chocolate and the nutty flavour of amaretti biscuits. It's easily my new favourite dessert, and it graced my Christmas table.



Nor will I forget my shock and awe at the size of a black truffle Anna hands me, ever so casually, to grate for a dish of ravioli. I feel like a diamond cutter – terrified yet excited.

I learn the secret of foolproof home-made pasta – mostly patience, strong hands and a fundamental understanding of one's ingredients – and, better still, that if you get this right, pasta tastes wonderful and doesn't require drowning in heavy sauce.

The pattern of our days is quickly established: communal breakfast followed by a quick break, then back into the kitchen for the morning lesson when we make that day's lunch. Then, of course, we tuck in, generally eating outdoors, laughing over the morning's mistakes and uncorking the first of many bottles of wine.

Some afternoons we visit local villages, ably led by Lorne, who heroically ferries us about. Others we are left to our own devices – fighting for space on the hammock, taking long, meandering walks or sleeping off yet another glorious meal.

Hats off to Lorne, for I've never been on a trip as perfectly paced. Our lessons never go on too long or feel arduous. We have just the right amount of time to bond, tempered by long stretches that allow solitude and privacy should we desire them. Even the sightseeing is perfectly pitched and includes a visit to the local olive oil factory, a trip to the market and a private tour of Bracciano's impressive castle.







Each night we settle down to a more formal dinner prepared by Anna, and we spend several hours enjoying the delicious tastes and the wine-fuelled craic. In situations such as these, so much depends on your company. Unfortunately there's no way – short of filling the house with close personal friends – to guarantee a good group. I am especially blessed to wind up with a quartet of wonderful women from around the world, all travelling

solo. They fill my week with laughter and pleasure. No one plays the diva or angles to be teacher's pet.

Such is the spirit of camaraderie established – due in no small measure to Lorne and Anna, who always set a tone of friendliness and good spirits – that, several months on, we still trade emails, tales of Italian-themed dinner parties and our plans to give Flavours repeat custom.

Good taste: Northern Lazio is a region of mellow medieval hill towns; (left) Anna passes on her culinary skills in the relaxed atmosphere at I Castagni

## FACT FILE LAZIO

### Five things you must do...

1. Abandon diets all ye who enter here. Instead, tuck in and enjoy, for this is food you won't easily forget.
2. Don't leave Italy empty-handed. I came home with exquisite chunks of parmesan and pancetta, local honey and olive oil, all at bargain prices. We also visited a ceramics factory and my fellow guests bought some beautiful tableware for not a lot of money.
3. Try limoncello, a zingy sweet-and-sour lemon-based liqueur. But beware – it *will* get you twisted.
4. Don an apron, roll up your sleeves and prepare to get messy. The real joy of these cookery lessons is in the doing.
5. Plan your next visit. Flavours also offers cooking holidays in Bologna in the north and Puglia in the south.



**How to book** A week-long break at I Castagni is £1,199 per person. This covers accommodation, cookery lessons, food and wine, day trips and transfers from the recommended flights. Air fare and travel insurance are not included. Rome's Fiumicino is the nearest airport for Lazio.

**For more information** [www.flavoursholidays.com](http://www.flavoursholidays.com), or ring 01506 854621 to order a brochure.

**Currency** The Euro. €1 = 67p