



If you enjoy food, cooking and sunshine, Lorne Blyth has the recipe for your perfect holiday. Kirsten Gray meets the woman who wasn't afraid to spend her wedding money on the ingredients for a great business.

Just like mamma

LORNE BLYTH founded Flavours Italian Cookery Holidays in 1998 to provide food lovers with a taste of Italy, taking clients to Puglia, Emilia-Romagna and northern Lazio — regions which have remained largely undiscovered by tourists. Residing in private villas, in groups of up to eight, they're taught how to rustle up local dishes by authentic Italian cooks.

"It's as close to mamma's cucina (kitchen) as you could get without marrying into the family!" Lorne jokes.

Though she is a keen cook, 31-year-old Lorne has no professional culinary experience, nor is she Italian.

Lorne, from Broxburn near Edinburgh, set up the business just a couple of years after leaving London's Kingston University with a degree in politics and German. She had some experience of the holiday trade, having worked as a tour guide while studying, escorting groups of Americans across Europe. Lorne also spent a while working as an au pair in Italy before taking a job organising tours of the UK for visiting Germans. It was then that she decided to take the plunge.

"My uncles had given me money to put aside for my wedding, but at that stage I had no intention of getting married," admits Lorne who's now engaged to airline pilot Guy Anderson with whom she has a nine-month-old son, Calum.

"My job wasn't going anywhere, so I decided to use the money to set up my own business. I began to look at alternative types of travel and came up with cookery holidays."

Contacts from her time working in the small village of Tolfa in Lazio, to the north of Rome, helped her find an Italian couple willing to let holidaymakers have the run of their villa, as well as a cleaner, a driver and the all-important cook to do the tuition. So in October 1998 Lorne took her first eight customers to Italy.

"When I started I couldn't speak a word of Italian and, while it made life difficult, in some ways it came in handy. I'd be trying to work out in my head how many pounds

sterling several trillion lira was and locals would take my hesitation as a prompt to lower the price!"

Though Lorne has since taken Italian lessons, her cooks still don't speak much English.

"Teaching cooking is very visual so language isn't all that important," she explains. "Guests love the fact that they pick up Italian words as well as cooking terms."

But it does help to know some basics. Lorne recalls one guest who was busy kneading pasta when the cook began to say "basta", which in Italian means enough — the guest thought she was saying "faster", and continued to knead as quickly and ferociously as she could. Lorne had to explain that the cook wanted her to stop, at which point everyone dissolved into laughter.

Using her first venture to northern Lazio as a model, Lorne organised other destinations, first a lodge in Puglia, then a palazzo in Bologna.

"We always take over the entire place and one of the biggest problems I faced was finding villas which not only had lots of bedrooms but an equal number of bathrooms — and a kitchen large enough to accommodate eight people getting hands-on with food."

Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the Italians she approached were slightly bemused by the prospect of a young Scottish girl teaching foreigners how to cook Italian food in their country.

"I had a quite elderly, very traditional cook who would say, 'you wouldn't know, dear, but this is how you do a bolognese sauce'. I always found that quite funny, as I'm actually fairly competent in the kitchen."

"I had the classic Scottish upbringing where I'd be in the kitchen with my mum making soup, scones and pancakes," she explains. "The similarity with what I'm doing now is that in both countries we like to use good quality ingredients."

Because the holidays only use local cooks who have their own regional

makes



Cooking up happy holiday memories.

specialities, the dishes Flavours Holidays' clients end up cooking depend entirely on where they're staying.

Favourite in Puglia are dishes containing little ears of pasta called orecchiette. Made from just durum wheat flour and water, Lorne reveals they come from a time when eggs were rare in the area. Other local dishes include zuppa di pesce (fish soup) and braciolo al sugo (veal parcels stuffed with cheese and parsley in a sauce).

In northern Lazio truffles and courgette

flowers feature in many dishes, while the cooking highlight for many is making tomato and chilli pizzas in a wood-fired oven.

In Bologna, home of Parmesan cheese, Parma ham and balsamic vinegar, pesce con melanzane e basilico (seared sea bass with aubergine and basil) and zuppette di fragole con gelato di crema e aceto balsamico (strawberry ice cream with balsamic vinegar drizzle) are just a couple of the mouth-watering recipes on the menu.



"In the north of Italy everything is made with cream and butter but in the regions we go to it's more rustic — beans, soup and vegetables," explains Lorne. "The good thing is, when you come home you don't have to look in a specialist delicatessen to find the ingredients so it's easy to recreate the dishes. Lots of people who come along have little cooking experience but are inspired to go home and have dinner parties to show off what they've learned.

"Now, because of what I do, people come to my house for dinner and say, 'I wonder what she'll make'. I do Italian cuisine and people think I've made a huge effort but really it's nothing to me. I have a huge bank of recipes. It's just my waistline I have to watch!"

Flavours now run over 25 holidays a year but with all the administration involved, Lorne finds she's lucky if she has time to go along on four. But she still has ambitious plans to add more breaks to their range, including cookery holidays for eight to 14-year-olds.

Lorne feels her holidays are unique.

"Clients know they're getting something they couldn't organise themselves — a real slice of Italy. You can book a flight and a hotel very easily but it's near impossible to find someone who will teach you how to cook local cuisine in their own home."

Lorne is hoping the current success of the business is only a flavour of things to come. After all, having spent her wedding money, she'll need to start saving herself for the big day her uncles wanted her to have.



Zucchini al forno (baked courgettes)

Serve as a traditional Italian antipasti starter, as an accompaniment or as a tasty main course with a green salad and crusty bread.

**6 courgettes, each approx.
16 cm (6 in) long**
1/2 onion, chopped finely
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
**40 g (1 1/2 oz) fresh white
breadcrumbs**
**25 g (1 oz) Parmesan cheese,
freshly grated**
**10 g (1/2 oz) fresh basil, finely
shredded**
**Salt and freshly ground black
pepper**

Preheat oven to 180C, 350F or gas mark 6.

Cut the courgettes in half lengthwise. Carefully scoop out the flesh (a melon ball scoop is good for this), chop it finely then mix with the onion, garlic, breadcrumbs, half the Parmesan and basil. Season with salt and pepper.

Gently press the filling mix into the courgette shells and sprinkle with the remaining Parmesan. Place on a baking tray and bake for 15-20 minutes until golden brown.

Serves 6



Ciambellone (lemon sponge)

Italians often eat what we see as teatime cake as a dessert. This cake is light, fluffy and fabulous served alongside strawberries in the summer or maybe some warm plums in the autumn.



3 large free range eggs
300 g (11 oz) caster sugar
250 ml (9 fl oz) sunflower oil
250 ml (9 fl oz) semi-skimmed or full-fat milk
Finely grated zest of 1 large lemon
1 tsp vanilla extract
300 g (11 oz) plain flour (Italian 00 flour can be used)
3 level tsp baking powder
Icing sugar for dusting

Preheat oven to 160C, 325F or gas mark 4.

Lightly brush the inside of a 23 cm (9 in) springform cake tin with some of the sunflower oil and line with baking parchment.

Break the eggs into a large mixing bowl or food mixer. Whisk briefly then add sugar and whisk quickly until the mixture turns pale and creamy.

Combine the sunflower oil, milk, lemon zest and vanilla extract in a jug then pour into the egg mixture. Mix this thoroughly to form a runny batter.

Sieve the flour and baking powder into the batter. Gently fold in, making sure no lumps of flour remain. Pour the mixture into the tin — it will look very thin but don't worry! Quickly place in the centre of the oven and bake for 40-50 minutes. (Do not open the oven door for 30 minutes as the cake may sink.) Press gently on the top and if the cake springs back it will be ready.

Cool in the tin for 10 minutes and place on a cooling rack until ready to eat then dust lightly with icing sugar.