

Mama's recipe for health

BY ANNA SELBY

A family cooking school in Lazio's wild mountains proves a tasty antidote to fast food – and an ideal introduction to culinary skills

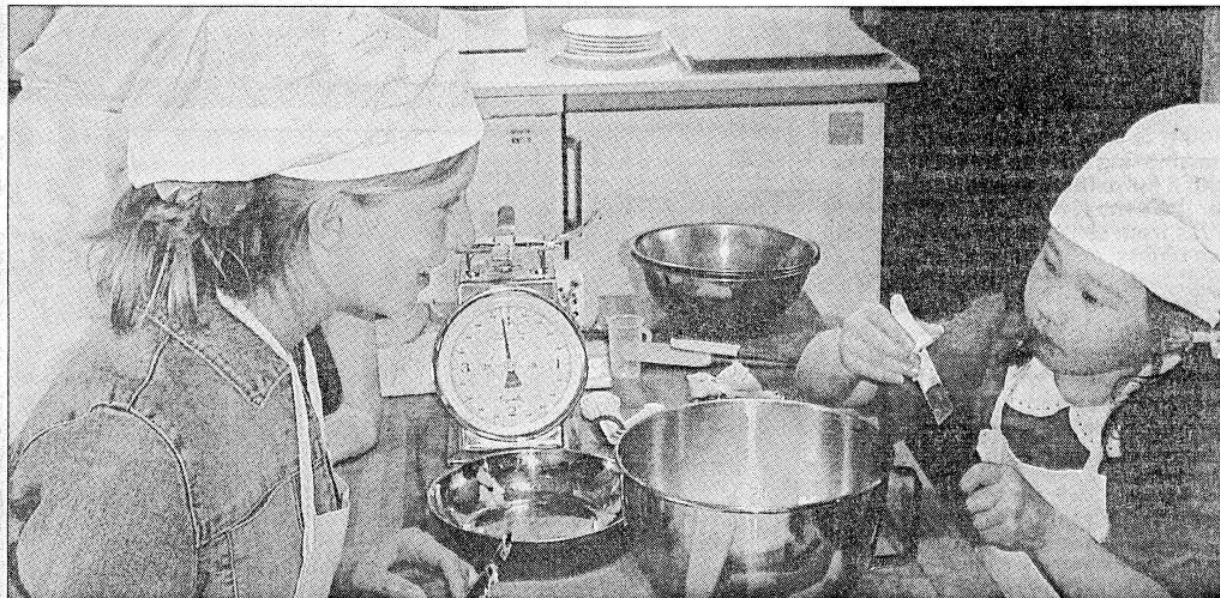
HARDLY a news bulletin goes by these days when we don't hear yet another statistic related to the ever-increasing waistbands of our children.

Reared on fast food, fizzy drinks and snacks with soaring levels of salt, fat and calories, they look forward to a future characterised by rising rates of heart disease, diabetes and cancer. The only statistic that seems to be on the way down is their life expectancy.

Surely, though, the problem is ignorance. Most children don't know where real food comes from, let alone how to cook it. So, before it was too late and he reached the stage of teenage neanderthalism — "Cooking? That's the microwave, innit?" — I decided my 11-year-old son, Christian, should be initiated into the mysteries of slow food.

We plumped for Lazio, home of flavours cookery school, and stayed at I Castagni, an elegant private villa in the wild Tofia mountains, still home to wolves and bears. Inside the villa the locals were friendlier — Anna, our teacher, and Lorne, from Flavours, organiser and translator for Anna, who speaks only Italian. "Our courses aren't about celebrity chefs," said Lorne, "but local cooks who introduce you to regional, rustic cooking." We had arrived in mamma's cucina.

Unlike some cookery courses, where you watch in awe as the chef demonstrates skills you could never hope to emulate, under Anna's tutelage we were



A passion for pasta: children love a creative, instinctive, messy approach to cooking — and can pick up skills now that will last a lifetime

as hands-on as you can get. She scorns all forms of kitchen machinery. "Pasta makers? If you cook with machines, your food is robotic, soulless." There are no formal measurements here either — she prefers a splash, a handful, even a mouthful (figuratively speaking).

You taste constantly and are always up to your elbows in flour, pummelling dough or squidding potato into gnocchi. Creative, instinctive and messy, this is the perfect approach for children and adults who like a bit of passion with their cooking.

ON our first morning, we don our aprons and are given giant wooden boards to work on — pizza dough is thin enough when you can see the grain. Pasta starts life as a sandcastle of flour — "Don't break the walls" — massaged with egg into a dough.

Anna issues orders to treat it roughly — "Don't be gentle, it's not pastry". Christian flings his dough across his board and savages it with an oversized rolling pin. "Bravo," cries Anna,

praising his "olio di gomito" — elbow grease.

She deftly cuts the finished dough into a variety of shapes — wide ribbons are good with rabbit and hare; narrower ones with tomato sauce; smaller shapes go with peas; scraps go in soup. Lasagne is not cut symmetrically, but randomly, then refitted like a jigsaw.

We didn't just make pasta. We cooked globe artichokes, a vegetable that, Anna is amazed to hear, has always bewildered me. They are so easy, so versatile, she says. You can fry them with onions, make them into a sauce, serve them with carpaccio or anchovies, even wrap them in foil

and barbecue them. Today, we soak them in lemon-juice water (squeezed by hand, of course) and stuff them with a heady mix of wild mint and garlic.

We make involtini with veal and mortadella vera which, Anna explains, is donkey meat. We all glance at Christian, who is unmoved by this information. He demurs a few days later, however, when it comes to breaking open a chicken with his hands — although he devours the result, cooked in rosemary, garlic and olive oil.

Apart from a little finishing off in the evenings, all the cooking is done in the mornings and the rest of the day is free. We go foodie shopping with Lorne in the local market, buying big chunks of Parmesan and mozzarella. We see the local sites, including a mediaeval bread oven. And we go walking in the hills to collect handfuls of wild mint. We take the train to Rome for a day of sightseeing.

If Lorne was worried about having a child on a cookery course for the first time — would he get bored, cut his fingers off? — she didn't show it. Christian loved it and was downstairs early in the

morning with Anna making biscotti while I was still in the bath.

Flavours is launching a family cookery course next Easter, during the school break, with extras such as pony trekking, fungi hunting and visits to the annual olive-oil harvest and pressing. Watch out, Jamie and Ainsley, the next generation is coming up fast.

'Christian savages his dough with an oversized rolling pin'

WAY TO GO

Flavours (01506 85462).

www.flavoursholidays.co.uk offers cookery courses for adults from April to October in Lazio, Puglia and Emilia-Romagna, from £849pp full-board. Flights excluded.

Exclusive family cooking courses run in Lazio on the following dates next year: 31 March-3 April, 29 May-1 June, 28 August-1 September, 24-27 October.

Half-term food and fun for little'uns ...

THE KIDS' COOKERY SCHOOL, LONDON

FIONA Hamilton-Fairley's cookery school is all about getting children involved in preparing tasty food. They work in small groups and the kitchen has been specially designed for little people as well as children in wheelchairs. £15-£30 per session. 020 8992 8882, www.thekidscookeryschool.co.uk

STIRRIN' STUFF, ANGUS

STIRRIN' Stuff runs family workshops for kids and parents — it can also arrange activities for children's parties and toddlers. £10 per session.

01575 530353, www.stirrinstuff.co.uk

LEEDS CASTLE, KENT

CHILDREN can discover the delights of nature as experts lead them along the castle's nature trail. They will be armed with magnifying glasses and collecting bags to examine plants and animal species en route. Tours run daily 12-2pm (adults £12.50, kids £9). 23-29 October, www.leeds-castle.com

NOTTINGHAM CASTLE

STEP back in time at the 14th annual Robin Hood Pageant.

Wander around the mediaeval village with its craft stalls, juggling jesters and activities, or watch as Robin Hood and his merry men come face to face with the Sheriff in a jousting finale (adults £6, kids £4). 23-24 October, 0115 915 5330.

HOP FARM COUNTRY PARK, KENT

HOP Farm's Witches and Wizards Week will feature a daily spook theatre show, storytelling, a ghost-hunt treasure trail and time to make halloween masks, witch's and wizard's hats (adults £8.50, kids £7.50). 23-31 October, www.thehopfarm.co.uk

HMS BELFAST, LONDON

Drop in on the The Big Draw, aimed at families with young children. Free of charge and no booking required (sessions run 11am-1pm and 2-4pm). 23-30 October, 0207 940 6300.

TOWER OF LONDON

The whole family can help Lord William Seymour, imprisoned for love, escape from one of the most secure locations in the land. Search for vital equipment including knotted bedsheets and disguises (adults £13.50, kids £9). 23-31 October, 0870 756 7070.

Justine Speller

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