

# From a noble kitchen

Italian peasant food gets the aristocratic treatment on a culinary course in Puglia

by Anita Draycott



Who hasn't been seduced by Italy's easy-going lifestyle, where friends and family linger over sun-drenched meals, where the wine and conversation flow effortlessly? Haven't we all harboured a fantasy to take off and live in an Italian villa?

Last year my fantasy came true. I was in Puglia (pronounced POO-li-a), the heel of Italy's boot, at Casino Pisanelli, an 18th-century villa that had belonged to a local count. This would be my home during a week-long stint at a Flavours Italian Cookery Holiday.

After being picked up at Brindisi airport by Lorne Blyth, Flavours' founder and director, I sat under a lemon tree in the villa's formal gardens by a swimming pool lined with lavender bushes. Before Lorne ran off to pick up the rest of the group, I was introduced to Sandro, the ever-smiling gardener, and Ida, the feisty head cook.

Savoury aromas tempted me inside to the kitchen where all was not so peaceful or pristine. Last week's group, who had departed that morning, obviously had quite the farewell bash. Empty Prosecco bottles lay by the fireplace. The kitchen counter was piled high with dirty dishes. Ida raced from room to room trying to make the place spick and span before the rest of my group arrived. I offered to help but with my pitiful Italian, Ida thought that I was asking for help. We tried sign language but finally, I had to point to the "Can I help you?" phrase in my Berlitz guide. Ida seemed surprised that a guest

Local chefs share their family recipes with the students.



## It was like being part of an Italian house party where you're welcome to raid the fridge anytime

spring and autumn, the Fornis give Flavours exclusive use of their estate. "We want to give our guests a taste of something special that they can't put together themselves," Lorne explains.

### HOME SPICY HOME

This was no sterile cooking-school experience; it was more like being part of an Italian house party where you're welcome to raid the fridge for leftovers or brew a pot of tea.

By 7PM we had gathered around the fireplace in the library. Lorne popped open a bottle of Prosecco and passed around platters of *bruschetta*. Dinner in the huge farmhouse kitchen started with Ida's chickpea and pasta soup, followed by grilled sausage and veal, a tomato and fennel salad and baked apples. All of this was washed down with copious amounts of wine and Ida's homemade Limoncello. If our small convivial group had one thing in common, it was a passion for food.

Next morning we lolled around the pool waiting for Antonio. At Casino Pisanelli we benefitted from two local chefs. Ida was in charge of dinners and Antonio, who runs a restaurant in nearby Santa Maria di Leuca, arrived each morn-

ing to lead us through typical southern recipes collected from his *mamma*.

Our working *cucina*, across a courtyard from the main house, was a sun-splashed country kitchen with baskets of fresh produce and a rustic table where we peeled, chopped and kneaded under Antonio's direction. His English was about as extensive as my Italian but, between sign language, Lorne's translation and printed recipes, we got the drift.

The traditional cuisine of Puglia is centred around durum wheat, tomatoes, olive oil and wine. With the Adriatic Sea to the east and the Ionian Sea to the south, fish is also a major staple. Throughout the week, we learned to cook a number of specialties from the Salentine Peninsula (the southernmost end of the heel) including *orecchiette* pasta, chicory and fava bean mash, stuffed squid, baked mussels and eggplant Parmigiana. After a morning of cooking, we enjoyed the fruits of our labour at lunch, *al fresco* in another courtyard.

On our first afternoon, Vanna suggested that we take a bike ride. We cycled

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## Flavours of Puglia

### BROAD BEAN MASH WITH CHICORY

- 3 lb. (1.5 kg) chicory
- 1 lb. (500 g) white dried broad beans, soaked overnight
- olive oil, to drizzle
- salt and pepper
- dried chili flakes

Clean the chicory and retain only the tender stems and heads. Boil in salted water for 10 minutes. Drain but leave a little water to keep warm and put aside.

Place broad beans in a pot, cover with water and a pinch of salt and bring to a boil. Cook until fork-tender, drain, retaining a bit of water, and mash. Serve in a bowl with the chicory, drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with salt, pepper and chili flakes. Serves 6.

### EGGPLANT PARMIGIANA

- 1 lb. 10 oz. (800 g) eggplants
- 3 eggs
- salt and pepper
- 5 oz. (150 g) flour
- vegetable oil, for frying
- 10 oz. (300 g) mozzarella, diced
- 4 c. (1 L) strained tomatoes (*passata*), canned or bottled
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- bunch of fresh basil, chopped
- 2 tbsp. (30 ml) olive oil
- 5 oz. (150 g) pecorino and Parmesan cheeses, grated

Cut the eggplants into half-centimetre slices, salt on both sides, leave for about 30 minutes on paper towels then rinse.

Beat the eggs with salt and pepper. Sprinkle the flour in a large plate. Coat the eggplant slices with egg, then dip into flour. Cover the bottom of a pan with vegetable oil and fry eggplants until tender and golden. Place on paper towels to soak off excess oil.

Put the strained tomatoes in a bowl and add garlic, basil and olive oil. Coat a casserole dish with a thin layer of tomato sauce, then alternate layers of eggplant, diced mozzarella, tomato sauce, pecorino and Parmesan. Bake for 30 minutes at 400°F (200°C). Serves 6.



FLAVOURS OF PUGLIA: GARDEN HOLIDAYS



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past immense, gnarled olive trees and foraged the countryside for flowers, berries and wild thyme. In nearby Specchia, we paused for an espresso and basked in the afternoon sun.

Back at the Casino, Ida's roast chicken and rosemary potatoes lured us into the kitchen and Vanna spontaneously decided to teach us her version of risotto with radicchio. Cacophony reigned, especially when Marina entered a room, usually with two or three cell phones ringing in her huge handbag.

Our most memorable night started out quite simply while we were sampling local cheeses. There was a knock at the door, and a troupe of troubadours marched into the front hall, just as they might have centuries ago. They entertained us for an hour with lively tarantella folk songs and dances.

### A TURN ON THE HEEL

When we weren't cooking or eating, we explored. In Santa Maria di Leuca we enjoyed an *aperitivo* at Antonio's restaurant. We visited the cathedral of the Byzantine port of Otranto and its castle, famed as the setting for the first Gothic novel which is named after it. We lunched at one of Marina's friends' swanky horse farm, before another of Marina's pals invited us to a wine tasting in his castle.

We toured Lecce, the capital of Puglia, known as the Baroque Florence, and wandered streets lined with exuberantly decorated buildings. In Gallipoli we feasted on marinated anchovies, seafood risotto, grilled prawns and linguine with clams.

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On our last afternoon, Sandro took us on a shopping spree to buy local pottery, olive-wood carvings and textiles. We returned to our home away from home to find that our hosts had pulled out all the stops. The table was illuminated with a massive candelabra. Marina uncorked fine wines belonging to her buddy, the count. We feasted on Ida's lasagna, baked cod, buffalo mozzarella and tomatoes drizzled with olive oil, fennel salad glistening with pomegranate seeds, caramelized figs, peaches poached in red wine, Amaretto biscotti, more wine and, of course, more of Ida's Limoncello. I understood why Casino Pisanelli had had that morning-after appearance when I arrived a week ago.

On our last morning, we exchanged addresses over breakfast. Sandro insisted on giving us all a litre of olive oil from his hometown. Ida tucked two bottles of her famous liqueur into my bag. Vanna had made everyone a sachet of wild herbs. We took a farewell stroll through the gardens. Alas, the fantasy had come to an end. When the shuttle arrived to take us to the airport, it was a real shame to have to take a minibus out of paradise. **PR**

### Feel the pull

From April to October, **Alitalia** (tel: 800-361-8336; [www.alitalia.ca](http://www.alitalia.ca)) flies daily from Toronto to Milan and Rome with connections to Brindisi.

**Flavours Italian Cookery Holidays** (tel: 011-44-1506-854-621; fax: 011-44-1506-854-102; [www.flavoursholidays.com](http://www.flavoursholidays.com)) at Casino Pisanelli cost \$2575 per person per week and includes daily three-hour cooking classes (maximum of eight people per group), all meals, wine and pre- and after-dinner drinks, accommodation with en-suite bathroom, local tours, transportation and transfers to the airport. Sessions run from May 31 to October 25. Flavours also offers cookery holidays in Bologna and Lazio.