



Savour the true tastes

Take the finest, freshest produce, grown in some of the world's most fertile soil, mix in lashings of Mediterranean sunshine with just the right amount of rainfall and garnish with cooking skills passed on through generations, and you have the essence of Italian cuisine. Flavours – a specialist travel organiser – offers the chance to learn first-hand from those who know Italian food best...



Italian food has captured the imagination of British gastronomes. The magical epicurean mix of the freshest natural ingredients combined with simple creativity in time-honoured recipes has seen Lazio come to Liverpool, Puglia to Peterborough and Bologna to Barnstaple.

But although Italian food has grown in popularity to become a national favourite and countless cookbooks and television programmes have honed our knowledge of, and affection for, Italian cooking, can anything really match the real thing?

Can even the most authentic recipe conjured up at home ever come close to the vital pleasure of autumn truffles taken in the sage-scented mountains of the north of the country or freshly-caught sea bass enjoyed in the shadow of an elegant Baroque castle at sunset?

of Italy

Perhaps not, but the people behind Flavours Italian Cookery Holidays believe they offer the very best of both worlds – exclusive, tailored holidays to some of the country's epicurean hotspots with local food enthusiasts on hand to pass on time-honoured recipes and tips on how to prepare favourite dishes once back at home.

Lorne Blyth set up the company five years ago and now divides her time between Italy and her base near Edinburgh in West Lothian. Fascinated by the customs

and cuisine of Italy, she spends most summers sourcing regional specialities and artisan foods – be it freshly pressed olive oil or lemon liqueur.

She believes Flavours offers a true taste of Italy. "These days," she says, "with the growth in the internet and tour operators, people can book all sorts of holidays. I wanted to offer something people would really find quite difficult to organise themselves because so much of it is down to local knowledge. It's something really authentic.

"I see myself simply as a middle person offering something very different, a very different perspective. I didn't want it to be about some ex-pat, gin-drinking colony. Instead, our guests stay on private estates owned usually by friends or friends of friends. They get to see the real Italy. What we put together is unique and authentic."

Holidays with Flavours – from a long weekend to a full week – centre on one of three areas of Italy: Northern Lazio, Bologna and Puglia, the heel of the 'boot' of Italy, with each one chosen to reflect the diversity of the country's cuisine.

Northern Lazio

Northern Lazio, south of Tuscany and close to Rome, is known for the quality of its produce, including its



cheeses, truffles and herbs. Here, in the region known as Etruria, Flavours offers accommodation in I Castagni, a villa in the secluded Tolfa mountains with panoramic views as far as Rome and the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Cooking in Lazio is, according to Flavours, essentially simple. Dishes are based on locally-grown, mainly organic ingredients with the emphasis on tradition. A sample week in Lazio might include welcome drinks, visits to an olive oil producer, local market, a guided tour of the nearby Bracciano castle, time spent relaxing at the local *bagnarello* (thermal baths) and lunch at Lake Bolsena.

Cookery lessons take place in a large farmhouse kitchen with an open fire and traditional wood-fired oven. The fruits of your cooking labours can then be eaten at the villa's huge dining table or on the terrace.

Puglia

Puglia is an unspoilt, largely undiscovered region with coastlines on both the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and sun-drenched, white-stone villages replete with bobbing fishing boats and simply oozing history from every pore.

A typical stay here might include a private wine tasting at the Duke of Salve's castle, dinner at a local fish restaurant and visits to Santa Maria di Leuca, Gallipoli and Lecce, the finest Baroque city in the Mediterranean.

Accommodation here is at the neo-classical Casino Pianelli, built by Count Orlandi in 1790. The house boasts formal gardens planted in the traditional white and blue and an *orto*, or kitchen garden, which provides much of the produce used for cookery lessons, which – perhaps unsurprisingly – major on locally caught fish.

Bologna

Though not the home of Bolognese sauce (and don't suggest so locally!), Bologna, in the north of Italy, can lay claim to being the birthplace of three other staples of Italian cuisine, Parmesan cheese, balsamic vinegar and, of course, Parma ham, while the local speciality is fresh tortellini piled in mounds with a variety of fillings.

The Flavours base in this region is Villa Masini, a converted granary in the grounds of a beautiful country villa 40 minutes from Bologna itself. Open fires, exposed beams and the aromas wafting in from the herb gardens lend the villa an air of rustic relaxation. Trips to Bologna and Ravenna, to a tutored wine tasting, a tour of a local cheese producer and plenty of time for sightseeing all feature on a typical itinerary.

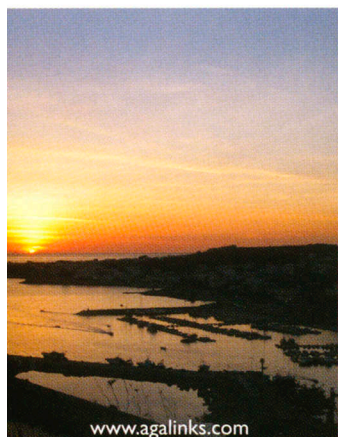
The farmhouse kitchen at Villa Masini has a traditional stove and meals are enjoyed *al fresco* or in the high-ceilinged dining room.

How to Book

Flights and travel insurance are not included in the cost of holidays booked with Flavours, but a great deal else is. Usually, this would comprise any cookery lessons, accommodation in a twin or double room, all meals, selected wines, pre- and after-dinner drinks, the expertise of a Flavours guide, transportation to the recommended airport and all organised excursions.

Prices start at £599 per person, with no single supplement. For further information, log on to www.flavoursholidays.com or phone 01506 854621 ■

Summer 03 Aga Magazine



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AGA magazine 77