

the food of love

Savouring the view in the Italian mountains is matched only by savouring the flavours of the local produce. Sally Van Es rolls up her sleeves at a cooking course in the village of Tolfa, just north of Rome. Photography by Chris Warde-Jones

On wedding days in Tolfa, single women gather around large tables to prepare a delicious handmade pasta called *strozzapreti* for the wedding feast, while the single men look on. If their pasta-making skills are seen as suitable, the women can count on a marriage proposal.

More nerve-racking than worrying about hooking a husband – I already have one – is the prospect of being scolded by local chef Anna, our supremely talented cooking teacher. We

are staying at I Castagni ('The Chestnuts'), a villa surrounded by wild woodlands and rolling pastures populated with docile Maremma cows. Anna runs a tight ship – or, in this case, kitchen – and the prospect of disappointing her horrifies me. So often over the five wonderful, edifying, mouth-watering days I spend there, just when I think my pasta dough is magnificent, Anna raises her eyebrows at me as if to say, "keep kneading, *bella*".



Italian style: Interior of the Etruscan Tomb of the Leopards, Tarquinia; the village of Tolfa (top right); dining *al fresco* at I Castagani (right)



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Just 45 minutes' drive north of Rome's Fiumicino airport, Tolfa is still part of the capital, but couldn't be more different. The mountains are situated between the coastal plain of the Tyrrhenian Sea and Lake Bracciano. Medieval and Renaissance architecture, Etruscan ruins and monasteries nestle among wild, verdant landscapes. Wild flowers, mint, sage, mushrooms, asparagus, chicory and *misticanza* (salad leaves) grow everywhere, as do oak, ilex, cerris, flowering ash, elm, cornel, madrona and carob trees. And along with those pretty cows, donkeys, horses and wild boar roam this prime truffle-hunting territory.

But the scenery is a bonus – we are here to cook. An international group of just six, with varying levels of skill and experience – but all with a passion for food – has come together for an

intensive course in learning how to pummel, roll, stuff, chop, bake, stir and simmer, Italian-style. Happily we already know how to eat.

day one

For anxious new recruits, there can be nothing more comforting than the words "here's something we prepared earlier". Arriving at the villa in the early afternoon, lunch has already been prepared: two kinds of *bruschetta* – tomato and basil, and mushroom and parsley, dripping with locally produced olive oil; air-dried *bresaola* (aged, salted raw beef); a fennel and orange salad; creamy slabs of buffalo mozzarella; and deep-fried zucchini flowers are all laid out on a huge table outdoors, flanked by



'we knead, we sweat, we roll, we marvel at the enormous local truffles'



La dolce vita (opposite page, clockwise from top): The group attempts to make a jam tart while Anna, in pink, looks on; villa I Castagni; *strozzapreti* – the husband-catching pasta; a Maremma cow

chilled rosé. I run upstairs to my room, squeal briefly at the gorgeous view, then race back to the table, ready to eat.

Following an afternoon of rest and recovery in a deckchair, I take a walk around the village, introducing myself to those long-lashed Maremma cows along the way. I see some kids reaching in over a fence in the distance, possibly up to no good, but realise as I get closer that it's a couple of elderly women picking wild sage.

day two

I'm woken early by birds, so there's plenty of time to visit the local market. Alongside the camouflaged combat trousers and scary nylon underwear that are the preserve of markets all over the world, there are tables piled high with fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, meat, cheese, and beautiful embroidered linens. I notice that there seems to be even more discussion over each transaction than in Rome – eating is a serious business here.

Back to the villa, and it's time to cook. In preparation for lunch, Anna has us stuffing artichokes, rolling and skewering *involtini*, simmering a rich tomato ragu, kneading and rolling lasagne sheets until they are transparent. Making pasta is always an effort, but now I'm really beginning to pant.

After lunch the group takes a short drive to the town of Tarquinia to visit the Frantoio olive oil producers, crushers of tiny *canino* olives. The main crusher tells us it is possible to bring our own olives to press into service, but before I have much chance to contemplate starting my own label they inform us that these olives take ten years to mature for harvest. What would I eat while I was waiting?

A visit to the Museo di Tarquinia follows, with its beautiful friezes and giant tombs carved with brave, muscular warriors and foxy, lithe-limbed Amazons. Also on view are Etruscan burial sets containing ceramics, jewellery and vases, which were supposed to help the dead through to the afterlife. I ponder

what food I'd pack for that final journey – Champagne? Truffles? Balsamic vinegar? – then grow anxious about trying to fit a refrigerator into my tomb.

day three

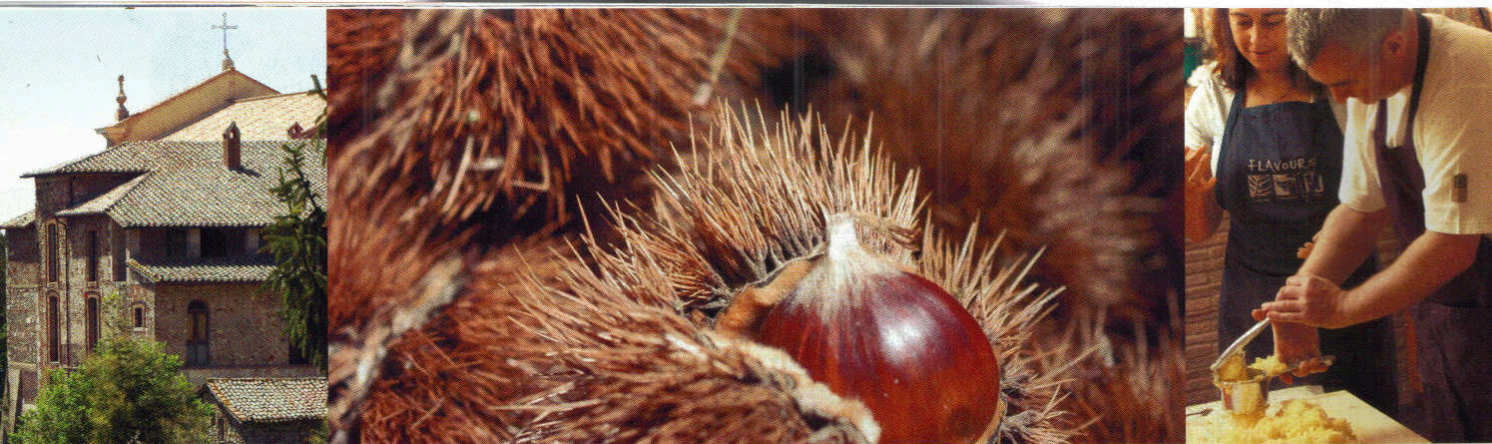
After staring at the villa's outdoor pizza oven for days, willing it to life, I notice a well-dressed gentleman feeding logs into it. Who is he? A heat consultant? Suddenly Anna appears and they embrace like shy newlyweds. Has she been secretly making *strozzapreti*? It turns out that he is her beloved, and that indeed, we will be making husband-catching pasta very soon. *Please let me be good at it*, I wish. Also on the menu is roast chicken (rubbed lovingly with salt and olive oil); plump, amazingly light little pillows of gnocchi (the trick is to allow the steamed potato to completely cool before kneading it with the flour) with fresh pesto; and finally pizza, Civitavecchia style, simply topped with tomato, chili and parsley, and just delicious. In an attempt to

bruschetta

- four thick slices of day-old sourdough bread or ciabatta
- two cloves garlic, cut in half lengthways
- extra-virgin olive oil
- sea salt

Grill the bread, and while still very hot, rub with the cut side of the garlic. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with salt. Or bring everything to the table and guests can burn their fingers themselves. (Unless you decide you don't want to share, in which case just eat quickly over the kitchen sink and pretend you've ruined it.)

- Top with chopped, ripe tomatoes and torn basil leaves for a more complete first course.



Back to the land: (left to right) A view of the local church from villa I Castagni; chestnuts give the villa its name; cookery students Michelle and Stephen prepare gnocchi for dinner

walk off the day's feasting, we stroll to the 12th-century Il Castello della Rocca nearby for spectacular views stretching as far as Rome and the Apennines.

day four

Up with the birds again, then off to Rome for the day for some sightseeing and more eating. We start at the Villa Giannicollo, with its amazing view of the city, then drive through the relaxed Roman traffic over to the wonderfully fragrant Giardino Degli Aranci, or orange garden – and lo, the view looks back across to the Villa Giannicollo. Perfect espresso at Camilloni a St Eustachio – topped with just the right amount of *crema* – hoisted standing at the bar; excellent potato and rosemary pizza at Pizzeria di Pasquale (crisp, thin crust, covered in tender slivers of potato, sold by weight); a bitter Campari from way up above the city at Caffè Capitolino, and then back to the tranquil countryside. Having always considered myself a city girl, I am a little alarmed to note how excited I am to see those cows again. For our peasant-style dinner we make a very good spaghetti carbonara using locally produced pancetta, and what a contrast it is to that creamy goo that is sometimes passed off as the real thing; followed by piles of grilled sausages (I hope there were no local cows involved), and a delicious jam tart – all old Roman favourites. Anna tries not to laugh at our lumpy attempts at pastry lattice-work.

day five

Our last day sees the group making shaved-truffle and fresh-ricotta ravioli like pros. We knead, we sweat, we roll, we marvel at the enormous local truffles. That pungent flavour, that bosky aroma, those clever pigs. And how was our *strozzapreti*? “*Bellissima!*” pronounces Anna. She is happy, and so are we, knowing that we will eat happily ever after. ■

pesto

- two large handfuls basil
- 150 grams pine nuts
- two cloves garlic
- pinch sea salt
- around 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 100 grams freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano or pecorino, plus extra to serve

Mix the basil, pine nuts, garlic and salt in a food processor until finely chopped. With the machine still switched on, pour in the olive oil in a steady stream until you have a good sludgy consistency. Add the Parmigiano Reggiano, and taste for seasoning. Add more olive oil if necessary. Serve tossed through hot pasta, and top with extra cheese. Remember that a little goes a long way: the sauce is supposed to complement the pasta, not the other way around.

- To store, place in an airtight jar, covering the surface of the pesto with a little olive oil to prevent it drying out. Keep refrigerated.
- For a peppery variation, include some rocket (*arugula*) leaves with the basil.

