

TUSCANY

– FLAVOURS COOKERY HOLIDAY

“Tuscany and its exquisite towns never cease to enchant me.”

ALL PHOTOS: LYNNE COATES

LYNNE COATES SAMPLES A FLAVOURS COOKERY HOLIDAY IN THE IDYLIC TUSCAN COUNTRYSIDE.

For those who love cooking, Mediterranean food and sunshine, a cookery holiday in Italy could provide the perfect recipe. Flavours is a specialist travel company offering cookery, painting and Pilates holidays in Tuscany, Umbria, Sicily, Puglia and Bologna. Inclusive packages of four to seven days are available for small groups of up to 10 people. I adore Tuscany and enjoy cooking, so the idea of combining the two really appealed. I booked a one week holiday and it did not disappoint.

I arrived at Pisa Airport where a driver was waiting to take me to Il Monsonaccio, one of three villas set in the lush countryside and vineyards of the Varramista Estate. The journey took about 30 minutes and our hostess for the week, Elizabetta, was there to greet me when I arrived.

My fellow guests had already retired for the night, having arrived on an earlier flight, so I met them at breakfast the next morning. We were a small group of just six guests and, while we were all interested in cooking, none claimed to be an accomplished chef – we were eager to learn about Italian cooking Tuscan-style. Elizabetta prepared breakfast for us, while our chef Sunshine (yes, that was his real name!) was busily prepping the ingredients for our morning's lesson.

After breakfast we donned our Flavours aprons and were ready to cook. We began by learning how to chop correctly which may sound relatively simple, but I was surprised how fine chopping can truly release the flavours of the food – I was already acquiring

new skills! We cooked all morning, learning how to make fresh pasta and complementary sauces. Sunshine then showed us how to make tiramisu; a traditional Italian dessert, which was to be served later at dinner. I was particularly excited about this as I love tiramisu!

Cooking done, we went outside to enjoy some welcome Tuscan sunshine, surrounded



by stunningly beautiful landscapes. With a glass of pre-lunch Prosecco in hand, (this was to become a daily ritual!) we chatted fairly predictably about food and wine – what else! Mouth-watering aromas of the cooking lunch began wafting through the shutters and it wasn't long before we sat down to enjoy the results of our morning's efforts – pasta never tasted so good!

Sunshine would be preparing our evening

meals so the afternoons were free to relax. While some guests chose to chill with their Kindles, I decided on a walk to try and work off some calories in anticipation of those I would inevitably gain during this holiday! The Varramista Estate has around 400 hectares with paths that wind between the vineyards, olive groves and woodlands, providing a tranquil and idyllic setting. With the afternoon sun casting shadows through the tall cypress trees that lined the pathways, I was in Tuscan heaven.

As expected, dinner was a feast! We began with a starter of spaghetti simply served with a tomato, garlic and chilli sauce which was delicious. My vegetarian meal was an unbelievably light soufflé served with cannellini beans cooked with garlic – a typical Tuscan dish, with a side salad of greens, washed down with a very acceptable local red wine. To finish we had our tiramisu, which did not disappoint and was definitely a recipe to try at home. By now our group was beginning to get to know one another and conversation flowed along with the wine.

Each day we learned new skills and recipes and Elizabetta and Sunshine kept us amused with their colourful Italian banter. Generally speaking, meat is a big part of the Tuscan diet but Sunshine was enthusiastic about vegetarian food. He was happy to create exciting dishes for me and will accommodate most dietary needs. He told me that he once had a Jewish group and he adapted the menus especially for them. In return, they gave him

VARRAMISTA ESTATE



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a few Jewish recipes! The villa was typically rustic in style. The rooms, all en-suite, were simple but comfortable with traditional furnishings. However, eye-watering views over the vineyards more than compensated for the lack of contemporary gizmos.

Included in the week-long holidays are visits to some of the nearby cities. Our holiday included a day trip to Florence with lunch and an afternoon in San Gimignano with dinner. Both cities were just a short journey from the estate. Florence dazzles – it is undoubtedly one of the most captivating cities in the world and definitely one of my favourites. San Gimignano is a small, walled medieval town perched on a hilltop in the Tuscan province of Siena. Famous for its many towers and unique architecture it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its spectacular beauty attracts tourists from all over the world. In my job I get to travel to many wonderful destinations but Tuscany and its exquisite towns never cease to enchant me.

The Varramista Estate is owned by the Agnelli family who inherited it from Enrico Piaggio, the man who famously designed the Vespa scooter. Wine has been produced on the estate for over 600 years and during our visit we were invited for a tour of the Varramista Villa and wine cellars, followed by a wine tasting. Our guide gave us an informative tour, after which we tasted a variety of the wines produced by the estate.

The week passed very quickly. The cookery classes had been great fun and we all came away inspired with new cookery skills and recipes we vowed to try at home. With a combination of good food, wine and stunning surroundings, together with convivial companions, the holiday had been a great success. Flavours have created a winning formula for a different kind of holiday experience – suitable for both couples and singles, I highly recommend it.

VILLA MONSONACCIO



DETAILS:

I flew Ryanair LBA to Pisa: Ryanair.com.

For Flavours holidays visit: Flavoursholidays.co.uk. For information and reservations email: info@flavoursholidays.com or phone: 0131 343 2500. Prices for short break holidays (four days/ three nights) start from £899 pp.

Special dietary needs can be accommodated.

