

IN THE

Tuscan KITCHEN

Cooking class at rustic B&B reveals soul of Italian food



GRETCHEN HEEFNER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BY BRIAN BERGSTEIN
The Associated Press

PANZANO IN CHIANTI, Italy — Deep in the Chianti wine country, I guided a rented Volkswagen over a nearly mile-long dirt road, past vineyards and olive trees and down a steep, narrow and gouged stretch that made the car's shocks groan.

Maybe the dusty bouncing would have been less severe if I had taken the rutted path a little slower. But that would have required containing my excitement about the destination: a Tuscan inn with cooking classes.

Italy is a beautiful, friendly place, with an insane assortment of things to do and see. But when my wife and I spent three weeks there this spring, one of our most exciting activities was eating.

We were blown away by fresh pasta with one-note accompaniments, such as truffle oil or mushrooms. We marveled at the deep flavors of dried meats, pungent cheeses and rich red tomatoes. Things I would not eat at home, such as wild boar and rabbit, became new friends.

One problem, beyond pants that no longer fit, is that if you really like to cook, eating amazing food forces you to reconsider your own kitchen strategies. It's as if the people in the restaurant are throwing down a gauntlet, saying, "Oh yeah? You think you make some good beef stew? Beat this."

So the opportunity to take a cooking class — especially in Tuscany, the hilly northern region whose landscape of medieval villages and farms has changed little in centuries — was too good to pass up. Here we could learn from the masters — get inside the inner sanctum and see how the magic happens.

We discovered the bed and breakfast, Fagiolari, the same way we found most every place we stayed — on the



BRIAN BERGSTEIN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Stefania Balducci teaches a cooking class at Fagiolari, a bed and breakfast in the Chianti region of Tuscany.

If you go

GETTING THERE: The usual starting point for Tuscan adventures is Florence, the region's urban and cultural center. The city is accessible by air, train or bus, as is Pisa, another popular Tuscan destination. Trains and buses also run into several Tuscan towns from Rome, which is about 150 miles south of Florence. Another widely available option is renting a car and driving into Tuscany. The region is not very far from anywhere; after all, Italy is roughly the size of Arizona.

FAGIOLARI: www.fagiolari.it or (39-055) 852-351. Rooms begin at \$100, but will rise to \$120 in 2005. Cooking classes are \$100.

PODERE SAN LORENZO: www.agriturismosanlorenzo.it or (39-058) 839-080. Rooms begin at \$90, with a 10 percent discount during most of the winter. Cooking classes are \$100.

COOKING CLASSES: For information on other cooking classes in Italy, visit www.slow-trav.com/italy/planning.

Above, the countryside in the Chianti region of Tuscany, Italy, is a hilly landscape of medieval villages and farms that has changed little in centuries.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The dining room is a favorite gathering place for guests at Fagiolari in the Chianti region of Tuscany.

See **IN THE** on **PAGE E2**