

Cooking class demystifies Tuscan kitchen

DEEP in the Chianti wine country, I guided a rented Volkswagen over a 2km 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, 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 marvelled at the deep flavours 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.

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.

Our class came on the final night of a three-day stay at Fagiolari, in a converted stone farmhouse where rooms started at about \$A140, breakfast included.

Owner Giulietta Giovannoni charges

about \$A140 for the class, which includes an apron, a cookbook, the dinner that you learn how to cook plus carafes of the red Chianti wine grown on the premises.

Raised in Florence, 32km north, Giulietta worked in a restaurant and with caterers before buying the Fagiolari farmhouse, olive groves and vineyards and turning it into a five-room B&B.

Giulietta's success inspired her twin sister, Marinella, to open a lovely agriturismo of her own just outside the Tuscan hill town of Volterra.

We stayed at Marinella's place, called Podere San Lorenzo, before coming to Fagiolari and ate a few dishes that blew our minds, including a light but tasty asparagus lasagna and roasted vegetables stuffed with meat. (Marinella also offers cooking classes.)

During our class in Fagiolari, Giulietta was in the background, turning things over to her young assistant Stefania Balducci, who sweetly, patiently and ably guided me, my wife, a Dutch couple and two New Zealanders.

The menu consisted of pesto, the sublime mixture of basil, garlic and olive oil; zuppa di farro, a traditional Tuscan soup featuring cannellini beans; vegetables simmered in a tomato sauce; beef and pork loins simmered in Chianti wine and onions; and an apple cake.

As we sipped wine, Stefania showed us how to make the dishes and had us take turns peeling vegetables, chopping onions and picking fresh basil.

Stefania had a few key tips such as how to season raw meat by cutting strategically-placed holes and stuffing them with salt, pepper and garlic cloves.

By 8pm - after several glasses of wine - we were starving. The anticipation seemed more acute by having finally become an insider in an Italian kitchen.

We spooned the pesto onto chunks of bread and debated whether the hand-ground version was superior. I thought it had a more interesting texture but I couldn't decide if it tasted better. I had two bowls of the rosemary-infused soup, full of flavour.

As for the main course, the vegetables were pretty good, not amazing, and the meat was flavoursome and satisfying. The apple cake was sweet and light.

When the plates were cleared and we shifted from wine to grappa, I decided to recommend the cooking class to others.

For one thing, it was a great icebreaker that led to a long and enlightening conversation with our classmates. Perhaps best of all, it demystified the Tuscan kitchen.

The essential message was how to get good food to emerge from simple concepts and fresh ingredients.

That's a strategy I feel comfortable trying to replicate at home - even though home, sadly, is far from the nurturing green landscape of Tuscany.

- BRIAN BERGSTEIN



Tuscany's Chianti region offers more than beautiful scenery. Picture: GRETCHEN HEEFNER, AP

Way to go

Florence is accessible by air, train or bus; trains and buses also run into several Tuscan towns from Rome, which is about 240km south of Florence. Another widely-available option is renting a car and driving into Tuscany.

Websites: www.fagiolari.it, www.agriturismosanlorenzo.it and www.slowtrav.com/italy/planning.