

97 WAYS TO BECOME A BETTER COOK

TIPS + RECIPES FROM
THE WORLD'S BEST
COOKING TEACHERS

Gourmet

THE MAGAZINE OF GOOD LIVING

45 MEMORABLE COOKING VACATIONS

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GOURMET - MAY 2008



Kitchen aid: Julien De Mori shucks *borlotti* beans and demonstrates to friend Sam Birnbaum the fine art of spreading sauce over a pizza crust.

THIS VILLA COMES WITH STAFF—YOU'RE IT

SAN CASCIANO DEI BAGNI, ITALY We turned onto an unpaved road a few miles from San Casciano, a medieval Tuscan hill town south of Florence famous for its hot springs, and wound through a thick oak-and-chestnut forest, following the signs for our villa, La Vetrichina. Once we found it, Milvina and Marina Riccardi rushed out to the car to greet us: “*Come state, belli?*” Marina declared, clasping her hands together in a mixture of childlike and grandmotherly glee, pronouncing us “lovely” at the same time she was asking how we (total strangers) were doing. Then she shooed us into the kitchen.

A pair of heavy soup pots bubbled away on the stove. The tantalizing scent of sautéing onions filled the air, and, on the counter, a dozen tiny lamb chops sat marinating in a bowl of olive oil, rosemary, and sage. Marina lifted the lid of one of the pots. “*Una bella zuppa,*” she said, dipping a spoon into the porridgy liquid before handing it to my 15-year-old daughter, Michela. “*Farro e ceci.* Do you know chickpea-and-*farro* soup?” It might need salt, Marina warned. Of course it would get a drizzle of oil at the table, she assured us. A wicker basket on the marble counter bore jars of homemade apricot-and-plum jam, a loaf-shaped cake dusted with sugar, and a note wishing us a wonderful stay. We trundled off to find our rooms and to have a swim before returning to the kitchen to help Marina finish making dinner, a three-hour feast that tapered off into laughter and Vin Santo until almost midnight. Had we really just arrived?

There are people who seem blessed with an intuitive understanding of how the kitchen works, possessing a kind of gastronomic green thumb. I am not one of them. I was the six-year-old who, when baking her first cake, understood “grease the bottom of the pan” to mean the outside bottom. When asked to “watch the pot” while my mom ran out on some last-minute errand, I assumed my sole responsibility was to keep the thing from catching fire and burning down the house. I learned to cook the way an uncoordinated child learns to ride a bike: By falling, then getting up and trying again. This may explain why I would rather spend a day in the kitchen of a wonderful home cook than in that

of a *Michelin*-starred chef. And why I am partial to Italy, where cooking is more a birthright than some onerously acquired skill. It certainly explains why my idea of a splendid holiday was a week in Tuscany with my husband, Jason, and our two kids in a villa owned by a *simpatica* host who had agreed to not only cook for us but with us.

We found our house through **Homebase Abroad**, a U.S. company that specializes in what it calls “the art of experiencing Italy.” Homebase can rent you a villa, as >

GARLIC TOMATO SAUCE

Adapted from Marina Riccardi, La Vetrichina, San Casciano dei Bagni, Italy
MAKES ABOUT 3 CUPS (ENOUGH FOR 1 POUND OF SPAGHETTI)
ACTIVE TIME: 45 MIN START TO FINISH: 1 1/4 HR

You'll be amazed that anything this simple could taste so good, not to mention that all this garlic—yes, two heads, not two cloves—can produce such a seasoned, mellow taste.

- 2 lb ripe plum tomatoes (see cooks' note, below)
- 2 heads garlic, cloves peeled and halved lengthwise and any green sprouts from center discarded
- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/8 teaspoon hot red-pepper flakes

- ▶ Cut an X in bottom of each tomato and blanch in a large pot of boiling water 10 seconds. Immediately transfer tomatoes with a slotted spoon to an ice bath to cool, then peel, seed, and chop.
- ▶ Cook garlic in oil in a small heavy pot over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until golden, 3 to 5 minutes. Add tomatoes, red-pepper flakes, and 1/2 teaspoon salt and simmer, covered, stirring occasionally, 1 hour. Season with salt.

COOKS' NOTES: If ripe tomatoes are not available, substitute 1 (28-ounce) can whole tomatoes in juice (not in purée; preferably San Marzano), chopped, including juice; season sauce with sugar if desired.

- Sauce keeps, chilled, 4 days.

COOKING VACATIONS RELAXED

well as organize a fireworks display on the lawn or a few hours of hot-air ballooning. All we wanted to do was cook. As I perused its website, pulling up villa after villa on the screen, I kept returning to one particular selection: "Restored Tuscan farmhouse. Organic vegetable garden. Private cooking classes by charming English-speaking owners." I imagined myself wandering through the garden, picking lettuce for lunch and, later, stopping by a farmers market with the owners. The charming owners. A straw basket would swing from my arm as I made joyfully spontaneous decisions about what we would cook for dinner. Before my fantasies could go any further, I had booked La Vetrichina.

Our house was a typical two-story Tuscan affair with thick whitewashed walls, high-beamed ceilings, terra-cotta floors, and a fireplace big enough to sit in. There was a rose-covered pergola and a terrace overlooking the valley, which was surrounded by a ragged string of mountains. There were more bedrooms than we had people to sleep in them, and a lot more space than we were used to inhabiting, but *la cucina* was no bigger than our kitchen at home. And yet, two things tipped me off that we were in the home of a serious Italian cook: The healthy assortment of sturdy metal espresso makers, the kind used for brewing on the stove, and the conspicuous lack of gadgetry—no food processor, no gleaming enamel mixer, no electric can opener.

We awoke the first morning to the crowing of a rooster and the faint sound of church bells from San Casciano. Michela went out to the henhouse with Marina and returned with four pale white eggs in her cupped hands. We soft-boiled them, and I commented on the rich orange color of the yolks. Jason cut a tomato in half, rubbed it over a slice of toast, then doused the stained bread with olive oil. I raised an eyebrow. (This is not a man to forsake butter and homemade jam.) Milvio had obviously been up and busy in the garden for hours, harvesting bushels of ripe plum tomatoes (which, he explained, Marina would boil down into *conserva*, tomato preserves) and meticulously extracting tiny round seeds from the brittle dried pods of last season's *cavolo nero*, Tuscan "black cabbage" (actually a dark green and crinkly kale).

Marina outlined a rough daily plan that ended up becoming our pattern for the week: We would go to market with her in the morning, loll about during the wide swath of midday, cook in the late afternoon, and sample the fruit of our labors in the evening, around eight. We remained faithful to this program, avoiding the *supermercati* in favor of local open-air markets and the little shops tucked into the tangle of San Casciano's cobbled streets, one of which housed a butcher, a greengrocer, a baker who also made pizza, and an *alimentari* whose sparkling glass display case was filled with cheeses, cured meats, and olives.

Marina's approach to shopping required neither a list nor grim-faced determination. "Do let's make *pici*," she cooed from the backseat as Milvio sped north toward the weekly market in the town of Chiusi. The handmade spaghetti-like pasta made with only flour and water is a specialty of this part of Tuscany. "But let's decide everything else once we're there." Something about her warbling voice—high- and low-pitched at once, and punctuated by frequent bursts of laughter—made me think of Julia Child.

With Marina at our side, we allowed ourselves to be carried along on the twin tides of curiosity and adventure. We pointed to a heap of shelling beans, their pale pods flecked

with purple. "Ah, *si, borlotti*. We can make a soup tomorrow with black cabbage, tomatoes, and beans." We bought a strand of braided garlic for *aglione* (garlic-and-tomato *sugo*, a classic sauce with *pici*), red peppers to braise with onions, new potatoes with bits of dark earth still clinging to their papery skins, and yellow-fleshed peaches to cut into a carafe of chilled *vino bianco*.

On our way back to La Vetrichina, we stopped at a butcher shop in the one-horse town of Piazze and bought a chicken to pan-roast with olive oil, rosemary, sage, and chile peppers, and some ground beef and pork for a meaty red sauce, also for the *pici* since Marina thought we should try both of its traditional toppings. The marbled meat for this *sugo* (two parts beef, one part pork for a "sweeter" sauce) was ground to order. Our yellow-skinned chicken not only had its head and feet on, it looked like it had enjoyed plenty of exercise before its demise; no one had to tell me "free-range." Marina and Jason discovered their shared love of *frattaglie* (offal) and bought a pound of veal kidneys. Milvio and I bonded over our mutual aversion to the same.

Every evening, when it came time to cook, Marina would call us into the kitchen and assign each of us a task. "Julien," she said brightly to my 18-year-old son, "help roll out the dough for the pasta. Michela, you and I are going to make a chocolate cake." She simply assumed that the kids would want to cook. In fact, it wasn't that difficult to keep their attention—especially when making pizza in the wood-fired oven and when using the curious little wooden box known as a *chitarra* (guitar), a device originally from Abruzzo, whose tightly strung metal strings, with the help of a rolling pin, would instantly turn a rectangle of dough into pasta.

Marina rarely used recipes (and couldn't help diverging from them when she did), never thought her cooking was anything special, and was imperturbable in the kitchen, no matter how many potatoes were in the air at once.

What did we do all week besides go to the market, cook, and eat? Milvio says La Vetrichina attracts two types of people: those who are up at dawn, intent upon visiting every noteworthy attraction (they're countless) within a two-hour radius, and those who spend their days lazing around La Vetrichina, rarely venturing farther than lovely San Casciano. We were decidedly of the second variety. We dropped by San Casciano's hilarious *pallio*—a madcap frog race replete with Renaissance pageantry, friendly rivalry, and dishes like *salsicce e fagioli* (sausages and *borlotti* beans) and *ribollita* ("twice-boiled" vegetable, bean, and bread soup). We even spent half a day—and far too much money—being rubbed, scrubbed, and steamed at the swanky Fonteverde Spa. It was nice enough, in a faux-luxurious sort of way. But we couldn't wait to get back home and into the kitchen. In the end, all we really did want to do was cook. (781-639-4040; homebaseabroad.com; \$11,600 for one week, including meals and wine) —Lori De Mori

WHAT I LEARNED Fresh-shelled beans cook in half the time of their dried counterparts and are twice as delicious. **BIGGEST SURPRISE** How happy my kids were to help in the kitchen (as long as it wasn't me who had asked them). **BEFORE YOU GO** You don't really have to think about a thing: Homebase Abroad sends out an extensive questionnaire at the time of booking, asking about everything from what you'd like to find in the fridge upon arrival to whether you'd be interested in attending a wine tasting or renting a Harley Davidson.