



COOKING UNDER A TUSCAN SUN

Andrew Marshall joins a cooking school in the Tuscan countryside before travelling to the city of Florence to take a foodie tour...

Every day is a picture postcard here," says George Myers, as we take in the magnificent panorama of countryside which stretches as far as the eye can see. We are on the terrace of Hotel La Costa in the 13th-century hilltop village of Montefollonico, situated about 200km north of Rome and 110km south of Florence. George, along with his wife Linda and their daughter Whitney are our wonderful hosts of 'Cook in Tuscany' – a week-long, gourmet experience of cooking classes run by local women, fine dining and local excursions.

We step inside the sun-lit breakfast room which offers a tempting selection of dishes, including hard-boiled eggs served with olive oil and chilli flakes, Italian fruit pie, fresh juices and fine coffee. After breakfast, my partner, Amanda and I stroll over to nearby *ristorante* La Botte Piena to join an eager group of Americans, Canadians and Australians already wearing aprons and rolling their sleeves up, in readiness to cook and indulge in some of Tuscany's best dishes.

"This morning we will be making *pici*, a hand-rolled pasta which originated in

the area," says Linda. Then after a few instructions, we are off on our 'Great Italian Bake-Off' adventure, busily mixing flour, warm water, olive oil and a pinch of salt into a well-kneaded dough. When the balls of dough have rested for about 20 minutes, it is then rolled out and cut into strips. Then the real fun begins – as we roll, pull and wrestle the strips of dough with our palms in a collective floury frenzy of *pici* comparisons, photo-taking and shrieks of laughter. "Remember to pull with one hand while rolling with the other," shouts Linda, trying to be heard among the noise. The desired result is a fresh pasta, thinner than a pencil, but unlike spaghetti, it will have variations in its thickness.

When the fun *pici*-making session is over, George takes on the role of DJ as we all conga around the table then funnel into the kitchen for a cooking class with chef Elena, who runs the *ristorante*, along with her husband Simone. Elena demonstrates how to make *papa al pomodoro* (a popular soup of bread, tomatoes, olive oil and basil) followed by a savoury cheesecake (a base of crushed breadsticks, a filling of



PHOTO: COOK IN TUSCANY



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fresh ricotta and a topping of tomatoes drizzled with balsamic vinegar) and *torta della nonna* (a creamy custard tart).

After creating all this delicious food, it's time for everyone to enjoy eating it. The 'Cook in Tuscany' team of George, Linda and Whitney, along with Elena, Simone, chef Julio and wine expert Serena, join the guests at the long communal table in the centre of the *ristorante*. A typical Italian lunch or *pranzo*, is a leisurely affair and usually consists of four courses: an appetiser *antipasti*, a first course *il primo* (usually pasta or soup), a second course *il secondo* (meat or fish with a side dish *il contorno*), and dessert *dolci*.

Each of our courses is paired with an Italian wine chosen from Simone's extensive collection of over 10,000 bottles. Prosecco from the Veneto region accompanies the *papa al pomodoro* and savoury cheesecake appetisers, a glass of Bolgheri Vermentino white wine goes with the *pici* and truffle first course, Chianti Classico complements the second course of thick T-bone steaks (from the gigantic Chianina cattle breed), grilled over charcoal with oven-roasted vegetables, and a sweet Moscato d'Asti dessert wine is paired with a *torta della nonna* dessert. Buon Appetito!

Lush landscape

After lunch, there's time for a quick siesta at La Costa, before we head off in the minibus with the rest of the gang for the afternoon excursion. Soon after leaving Montefollonico, we are immersed in the classic, painterly landscape of Tuscany – olive groves, vineyards and wheat fields carpet



1 'Cook in Tuscany' hosts – husband-and-wife team George and Linda Myers 2 Aerial view of Montefollonico and the surrounding Tuscan countryside 3 'Cook in Tuscany' guests take part in a cooking lesson (making *pici*) inside La Botte Piena restaurant, Montefollonico 4 A lovely panorama of the Tuscan countryside from the walls of Pienza 5 A bottle of wine from Fiaschetteria Fantappiè – a gorgeous wine shop and stop on Eating Europe's 'Other Side of Florence' Food Tour 6 A bowl of *papa al pomodoro* a popular Tuscan broth consisting of bread, tomatoes and basil 7 'Cook in Tuscany' guests take part in a cooking lesson with Elena inside the kitchen of La Botte Piena, Montefollonico

the rolling hills, interspersed with rows of tall cypress trees that follow twisting tracks towards honey-stoned farmhouses on the slopes.

We visit the interesting village of Bagno Vignoni, famous for its Roman thermal baths, before journeying to historic Pienza, the earliest example of a Renaissance ‘ideal town’ which was granted World Heritage status in 1996. “You must try the gelato here,” says George as he leads us through a series of narrow lanes to the gelateria Buon Gusto (*Via Delle Case Nuove, 26*) which means “good taste”. Nicola and chef Giuseppe, who run it, focus on quality ingredients and natural flavours making small batches of fresh gelato each day.

This is the real deal, and very different to the mountains of brightly-coloured ice cream with preservatives and artificial colouring you see in many tourist-trap gelaterias. Several delicious and original flavours are available including rosemary-strawberry, carrot-ginger and salted caramel. Just a few minutes’ stroll away, next to the Duomo, is a panoramic promenade, situated high above the town walls and the ideal spot to eat your ices, while taking in the sweeping hillside views. Later in the evening at La Bandita Townhouse (*Corso il Rossellino, 111*), the group enjoys a four-course meal of *zucchini carpaccio* with Parmesan shavings, *tagliatelle al pesto*, chicken breast with asparagus and bacon, and a chocolate, pistachio and salted caramel dessert.



8 View of the city walls of Pienza. SoprArno Suites detail 9 SoprArno Suites detail, Florence. Florence 10 Ice cream close-up from Buon Gusto gelateria (ice cream shop) in Pienze 11 One of the rooms at the SoprArno Suites, Florence 12 Inside Buon Gusto gelateria (ice cream shop) in Pienze



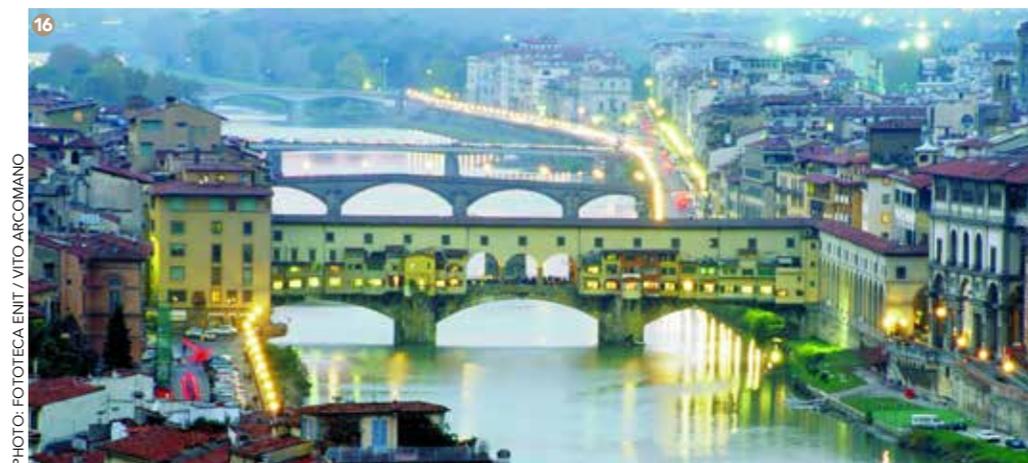
The rest of the week follows a similar schedule with variations: morning cooking classes with different chefs, cheese and bread-making, wine tastings, a truffle hunt, a pizza dinner, more afternoon excursions and a farewell dinner at La Costa. One Cook in Tuscany guest sums it all up. Rita from Salt Lake City says: “George and Linda immerse you in the local culture, the food, the way of life and the history. They make it fun.”

THE OTHER SIDE OF FLORENCE

After arriving in Florence and dropping off our hire car, we walk in the afternoon sunshine to the Oltrarno district, literally translating as “the other side of the River Arno”. The Oltrarno was and still is a fiercely-proud working-class neighbourhood, with a strong sense of community, and in recent years it has become home to a myriad of artisanal shops, craftsman workshops, independent boutiques and a new generation of bohemian settlers. The Oltrarno is the Florentine equivalent of Paris’s Left Bank, Rome’s Trastevere or London’s Shoreditch.

Situated in the heart of the Oltrarno is the Soprarno Suites (*Via Maggio, 35*), the splendid accommodation for our first night in Florence. The Soprarno Suites is the collective creativity of internationally-acclaimed calligrapher and graphic designer Betty Soldi and her lawyer husband Matteo Perduca, who have lovingly converted a 16th-century palace into an elegant retreat for the discerning traveller.

The 11 individually-designed rooms/suites on the second and third floors boast original frescoed ceilings,



tall windows, hardwood floors and freestanding clawfoot baths. From the ‘Traveller’s room’ with its four-poster bed, vintage explorer’s trunk and library of *National Geographic* magazines, to the ‘Typographer’s room’ adorned with pieces salvaged from a former printshop in Viareggio, Betty and Matteo’s passion for collecting furniture and objects to reclaim and up-cycle is reflected in the personality of each room.

The eclectic décor continues in the ground-floor breakfast room/café, where guests sit on chairs rescued from a school classroom and ‘50s/‘60s movie posters share wall space with framed menus and other retro memorabilia. The buffet-style breakfast of fresh fruit, warm wholewheat croissants, homemade *crostata* (fruit tart), yoghurt in glass pots and coffee made to order at the centrepiece bar, ensures a deliciously-memorable start to the day.

“Welcome to the Other Side Of Florence Food Tour,” says Eating Europe guide Gaia Ancilotti, from our 10am

meeting point at Piazza Nazario Sauro just over the Ponte Alla Carraia bridge. After group introductions, Gaia explains how we wouldn’t be crossing the River Arno to where the tourist-packed Duomo, Uffizi Gallery and Piazza Della Signoria are, but instead we would be focussing on the Oltrarno district. The four-hour food tour provides an excellent initiation into Florence’s culinary traditions and offers uniquely-Tuscan tastings from several foodie vendors and shops, interspersed with entertaining facts and tales en route.

“After eating your way through this alternative district, you will feel like a true local,” says Gaia as we walk to Le Nuvole (*Borgo San Frediano, 31r*) to start the tour with a coffee and a pastry. Managed by a father-and-daughter team, this bar/tabacchi/café is a favourite meeting point for the local community. “People in the area, myself included, will typically visit this type of place a few times a day, starting with a five-minute breakfast of espresso and a

sweet pastry before going to work,” Gaia tells the group. “We may also return at lunchtime and later in the evening for an aperitivo or after-dinner digestif.”

Sitting outside Le Nuvole in the early May sunshine, with music from the Doors and Pink Floyd enhancing the bar’s avant-garde vibe, half-filled cups of macchiatone coffee are set down on the table in front of us. The macchiatone is a double shot, frothy-topped coffee, somewhere between an espresso and a cappuccino. Served alongside our coffee is a popular Tuscan sweet treat – *budino di riso*, a tartlet of rice pudding, baked in shortcrust pastry and dusted with icing sugar. A *delizioso* combination.

A hop, skip and a jump away is Pasticceria Buonamici (*Via dell’Orto, 12r*), a family-run patisserie established in 1949. When we arrive, the proprietor, Mr Roberto and his daughter Rossella are behind the counter busily serving pastries, macarons and their famous *cantuccini* biscuits to customers –



PHOTO: ILARIA COSTANZO

all hand-crafted on the premises. Cantuccini, also known as *biscotti*, are almond biscuits that originated in the city of Prato during the 18th century. We all follow Mr Roberto into the bakery section to watch him make these Tuscan biscuits. Historic black-and-white photos adorn the walls, and at head height is the mark where the devastating floods of the River Arno reached in 1966. On the counter top sits the original family recipe book, alongside all the ingredients needed for *cantuccini*. With deft fingers Mr Roberto blends flour, butter, eggs, almonds, sugar and orange zest before the mixture is shaped and twice-baked, resulting in wonderfully-crunchy, biscuits that are traditionally served with Vin Santo or holy wine (a sweet Tuscan dessert wine). Before leaving the shop there's a taste test and an opportunity to buy some.

Tuscan treats

Next on the agenda is the food stand Da Simone (*Piazza de'Nerli*) where Florentines have been coming for decades to enjoy the local speciality – *lampredotto panino*. These sandwiches filled with tripe (the edible lining of a cow's stomach) originated centuries ago as an affordable source of protein for the working-classes. In recent years there's been a resurgence in its popularity with an increase in food stands or *trippai* around the city's squares and markets. The recipe uses the fourth stomach of a cow, which is slow-cooked, usually with tomato, celery, onion and parsley



PHOTO: ILARIA COSTANZO

until tender. It is traditionally served on a crunchy bun and topped with *salsa piccante* (spicy red sauce) and/or *salsa verde* (tangy parsley sauce).

Other places we visit include L'Angolo Saporito (*Via Sant'Onofrio, 7r*), a bakery known for its *coccoli* (a typical Florentine snack) and *cecina* (a flatbread made of chickpea flour), and Sandro & Ivana (*Via de'Serragli, 39r*), a family-run *alimentari* (grocery store) specialising in cheese, particularly Maremma Tuscan cheese made from ewe's milk. The historic trattoria L'Raddi (*Via Ardiglione, 47r*), named after its first owner, a Florentine boxer, serves rustic Tuscan dishes such as *peposo* (peppery beef stew). Situated in an attractive little piazza in the heart of the Oltrarno is Gelateria Della Passera (*Via Toscanella, 15r*), often described as serving Florence's best gelato.

Later in the afternoon we explore more of the Oltrarno district. After visiting some of the noteworthy historical sites such as Palazzo Pitti, Santo Spirito di Firenze and Piazzale Michelangelo, we check in at the Ad

WHERE TO STAY

Soprano Suites: www.sopranosuites.com
Ad Astra: www.adastraflorence.com

COOK IN TUSCANY

The seven-day, all-inclusive programme includes six-nights' stay at Hotel La Costa in Montefollonico, all hands-on cooking classes, tours, three meals a day, wine, excursions, receptions, bus tours and all gratuities. If you don't have the time for a full week, then day cooking classes are also available. George and Linda Myers also run cooking schools in Cuba 'Cook in Cuba' and Mexico 'Cook in Mexico'. For more information visit the website: www.cookintuscany.com

EATING FLORENCE TOURS

In addition to the 'The Other Side of Florence' food tour, there is also an evening tour 'The Florence Sunset Food Tour' which takes visitors through the area of Santo Spirito. During the 3.5hr tour, guests will experience Florence's nightlife and walk the cobblestoned streets of hip Santo Spirito while enjoying plenty of drinks and artisan foods at seven different stops. Highlights include watching how Italian cocktails are made (Americano, Negroni, Negroni Spagliato), and discovering the secret behind the famous *Bistecca alla Fiorentina* during a live cooking demonstration (plus sampling the steak afterwards). To book either tour, visit www.eatingeuropetours.com

Astra (*Via del Campuccio, 53*), the sister hotel of the Soprano Suites. The Ad Astra comprises nine unique rooms and is located on the first floor of the ancestral mansion of the Torrigiani family. It overlooks the largest privately-owned garden in Europe, dominated by the neo-gothic Tower of Baccani, built as an astronomical observatory in the early 1800s. Just like the Soprano Suites, the owners, Betty Soldi and Matteo Perduca have taken the original period features like frescoed ceilings, parquet floors and ornate chandeliers and blended them with reclaimed furnishings and vintage pieces to create a masterpiece of interior design.

The Ad Astra provides a haven of quiet away from the bustling city. While other guests are out seeking the night life of Florence, we spend our final evening listening to jazz and leafing through books and magazines in the elegant, communal lounge. Later on, we sip Torrigiani wine on the spacious terrace, while enjoying the splendour of the palatial garden – it's the perfect finale to our gourmet trip to Tuscany. ➤

18 The breakfast terrace, Ad Astra, Florence 19 The lounge/common room for guests, Ad Astra, Florence

FLY

CityJet offers daily flights to Florence from London City