



Majestic view of Chianti.



Casa Di Sopra (our villa).



View from Fattoria Campriano.

Gazing out from
La Cantinetta di Rignano.

Eating lunch "al fresco" at the Cantinetta di Rignano.



Limonaia estate in Panzano.



Dog House in Siena (even the dogs live the "dolce vita").

Traveling With Taste

A Tuscan Culinary Tour

By Maria Loggia

When choosing a holiday destination, many issues enter into the decision-making process. Typically we try to envision ourselves immersed in a diverse energetic culture, surrounded by breathtaking scenery while enjoying delectable local dishes. Simply put, we try to saturate our senses during our time away from home. This is the Italy of our dreams—the magical region we have read about, seen in paintings and fantasized about. Tuscany offers all this and more, from medieval villages, walled towns and Renaissance cities. This is the land of Florence, Siena and Lucca and more duomos than we can count. And then there are the wines. What would life be like without Chianti, Brunello, the Super Tuscans and Vin Santo.

Driving from the Florence airport to the villa with our guests, we are immediately impressed not only with the incredibly efficient use of space, but the balance between nature and man. The landscape is one of endless rolling hills, all neatly groomed with cypress trees, grapevines and ancient olive groves. What God has created, man has sculpted, maintaining a beautiful balance.

The villa is located up in the hills of Chianti on a very large, private estate, a short walk from the perched town of Radda. As the guests are assigned rooms, they all eagerly explore the luxurious villa which will be their home for the next week. Inside, huge, airy, light rooms with original beams come as a complete surprise for everyone to enjoy private moments or to gather together for a glass of Chianti Classico.

The tour officially begins on the Sunday morning with a trip to an open-air market in Panzano, followed by a visit to Tuscany's most famous butcher shop "Antica Macelleria Cecchini". Here, owner Mr. Dario Cecchini, a very serious and dramatic man (Simon Cowell look-a-like) holds court displaying his skills and products amid classical music. Although photographs are not allowed, his hospitality is genuine and displayed with the various tastings of mouthwatering porchetta, sausage, and liver pate. He even provides his own wine to complement the offerings. Truly worth a visit! (Serious gourmands should not miss this place). Later on, a stop in Greve, a friendly market town, allows us to visit the town square and low and behold, a food fair in the center of town allows us to taste more local products: (Finocchiata, pecorino Toscano, Marzolino—a soft pecorino cheese, salame di cinghiale, and lardo di Colonnata—sinfully delicious cured fatback).

For lunch we stop at La Cantinetta di Rignano. This is the ultimate in rural feasting as both the setting and the local dishes are "genuino". We head home through the winding roads of Chianti for a rest and of course let us not forget dinner at the villa. No one is hungry, after all, we ate all day, but come 8:00 pm every one gathers around the villa table and somehow our appetites return. "L'appetito viene mangiando!"

The following day, we visit an organic goat cheese producer and a "Cinta Senese" breeder - the zebras of the hog world, used to produce the highest quality cured meats in Tuscany. Along with a beautiful drive in the country, we experience first hand, the best that Tuscany has to offer. Even though our GPS (called a Tom Tom locally) is not being co-operative with us, and sends us around in circles (We arrive 30 minutes late at our first appointment).



Maria shopping at San Lorenzo's "mercato centrale"



Cinta Senese pork farm



Antica Macelleria Cecchini in the Panzano region

After a wonderful morning we head off for our first estate meal. At the "Azienda Campriano". Mr. Rarnuccio is hosting us for lunch and has prepared a wonderful feast, each course is paired with one of his estate wines. Here, one of the most repeated Italian sayings comes to mind. "Time stands still when you're at the table". This means that each course is presented in a definite order as the meal is leisurely and convivial. Tuscans have a "genius" for celebrating the moment.

Although Tuscany is more often associated with wine, its "cucina povera" is second to none in Italy. As we are in Tuscany on a culinary tour particular attention is paid to local dishes. You soon discover that their cured meats are saltier than those from other regions because until not long ago, farmhouse bread was baked only once a week, so to prevent it from going mouldy, no salt was put in the dough. As the same people who baked the bread also cured the pork, they compensated for this by making the salumi saltier than most.

With that in mind we head off on Tuesday to "Castello di Volpaia" for a cookery class followed by a tour of their winery as well as their "acetiaia" - vinegar factory.

The meal features: Schiacciata al Rosmarino, Penne con zucchini e zafferano, Involtoni alla Toscana (recipe follows), Indivia stufata, and Giovannella's gelato. Once again the meal is skillfully paired with their estate wines.

Wednesday morning, there is a buzz in the air. Today we are heading to Siena. This city once controlled much of Tuscany and fought for centuries with Florence for control of the region. I much prefer Siena over Florence as it is less frequented by tourists and

Favorite find - Galantino olio al basilico

This fragrant basil infused extra-virgin olive oil is wonderful drizzled on vine-ripened harvest tomatoes, grilled medley of vegetables and any grilled whole fish.

Retail suggested price is under \$13.00



Le Fouvrac
1451, avenue Laurier Est
Montréal, Québec
T: 514-522-9993

Les Douceurs du marché
138, rue Atwater # 150
Montréal, Québec
T: 514-939-3902

Fromagerie Cavallaro
11760, boul. de Salaberry
Dollard-des Ormeaux, Québec
T: 514-683-9662

allows for breathing room. The group is quickly split in two. The women casually walk through a large open-air market selling leather goods, clothing and shoes, while the men quickly escape to the comfort of the food stalls.

Following the free time, the group assembles for an "al-fresco" meal at Osteria Le Logge. Our menu featured: Paté di Fegatini con Mirtilli, Spaghetti di Gragnano con pecorino di Pienza, Controfiletto di Chianina con verdure, and Crostatina di Frutta con gelato della casa. Later in the day our guide Donatella escorts us through a walking tour of the city and its many historically important buildings, all the while regaling us with historical facts.

For many enophiles Montalcino is their Mecca. So, on Thursday we hit the road and travel through the Siene hills towards the medieval hill town of Montalcino. Once a city state on its own, it was taken over by the Siene centuries ago. It is the home of Brunello di Montalcino, one of Italy's most esteemed red wines. A pleasant stroll through town, a glass of Brunello on an outdoor terrace, or a full tasting of Brunello wines at the Enoteca La Fortezza within the fort walls are all viable options to visitors.

Later on, we lunch at Castello Banfi and enjoy a sumptuous 5-course meal. Each course is paired with wine from their award-winning estate.

On Friday our farewell meal is celebrated at Badia a Coltibuono a former Benedictine Abbey dating back to 770 AD. The estate includes an 11th century church, Lorenza di Medici's cookery school and a classy restaurant run by her son Paolo.

My love affair with Italy began over 12 years ago when my husband and I decided to take a 19-day journey across Italy. Although Italy's splendors are many, it was in Tuscany that I left my heart. People here obviously and thoroughly enjoy day-to-day life, especially gathering, preparing and sharing food. The guest is welcome to the table with a natural and deep sense of hospitality. At each season, different foods are welcomed, savoured, and honored. As every day is a blessing we too should try to embrace in this pleasure cycle.

Now, year after year, I faithfully return to the region with students to share new experiences and the Italian "gioia di vivere".

For more information on Tavola Mia Culinary Tours visit www.tavolamia.com and click on the tours tab. ❖



Involtini di Vitello alla Toscana

Tuscan veal roll - Yield: 6 servings

Ingredients

3 slices of top round veal, butterflied, then pounded into 1/4 inch slices
3 thin slices mortadella (preferably imported Italian)

For the frittata:

3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
6 eggs
3 tbsp fresh Italian parsley, finely chopped
sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

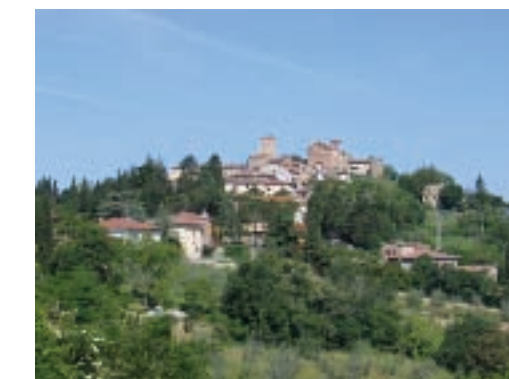
To cook the rolls:

1/4 to 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
4 rosemary sprigs, left whole
4 garlic cloves, peeled, flattened
2 bay leaves
1 cup dry white wine
1 to 1-1/2 cups chicken stock, preferably homemade, completely defatted

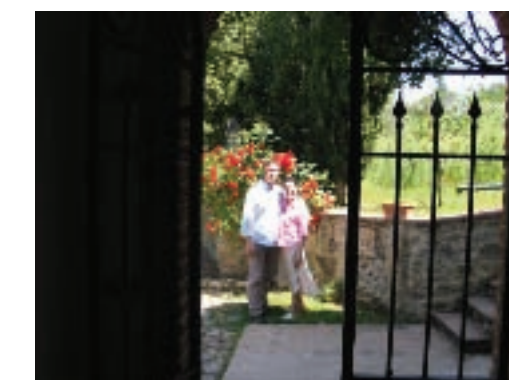
Preparation

To prepare the frittata: In a small bowl combine 2 eggs at a time with 1 tbsp of parsley and season with salt and pepper. Heat one tbsp of oil in a small skillet. Add your frittata batter and cook, flipping over once. Continue with the other eggs. Cool the frittata on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. On a work surface place your veal slices, season with salt and pepper. Place a mortadella slice over each veal slice, followed by the frittata. Roll the meat tightly jelly-roll style and tie with kitchen string. The "involtini" should look like a small salami. Continue with other two veal slices.

In a large skillet heat the oil on medium-high heat and combine the garlic and rosemary sprigs. Add the veal rolls and brown lightly, turning the meat a few times. Add the white wine and let evaporate. Add 1/2 cup of broth and cook covered on gentle simmer for about 60-70 minutes. Add more broth as needed. Ten minutes before the end of cooking time, remove cover and let meat brown. Allow to cool a little, remove string before serving, then cut into 1/2-inch slices. Serve with some pan juices.



Town of Panzano.



Maria and her husband Gino at the Azienda Baruffaldi.



Tavola Mia Tuscan tour group.



Left to right, Dora, Jeanne and our host from the Volpaia cookery school, Signorina Stianti.