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TUSCAN STYLE BRAISED BEEF

Cooking School

Simply Tuscan

No fancy chefs at this down home Tuscan cooking school

By Susan Van Allen

On the Italian coast, the morning sun casts its glow over a round of aged provolone cheese, draped by kitchen of ruby vino. In the above, tomatoes bubble under the watchful eye of a Sicilian. The thick, garlicky hand of my cooking teacher holding a wooden spoon is an important part of this picture. As part of a cooking tour of Italy, I sat hand-in-hand in the kitchen of a Tuscan culinary institute.

"Simply Tuscan Cook" is a weeklong program of cooking lessons that includes trips to nearby towns, wineries, cheese factories, restaurants, and distilleries. The 15th century village of Montefalco (population 700), an hour south of Florence, is the center of the experience. It presents a landscape of rolling hills, olive groves and vineyards in the Chiusa Valley. Cooking tours such as this one take you inside Tuscany, sharing the tastes of the local life, rather than standing back and admiring the scenery as a distant tourist.

Helen Hill and Patry Southern left Dallas six years ago to buy a hilltop farmhouse, pursuing their dream of a Tuscan life. They opened an Italian Market and Breads Unlimited, two village pantries, to teach eager students recipes they've been making since they were kids. The hilltop's choice to have their own kitchen of star chefs makes this cooking school unique—no "Simply Tuscan" classrooms here. The classes are the family kitchen—hanging out with the cooking grandmas who each contributed us with their different, yet equally endearing styles.

Italy. It's not just a word, it's a way of life. It's a way of life that's been passed down through the generations. It's a way of life that's been passed down through the generations. It's a way of life that's been passed down through the generations.



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Cooking School

Simply Tuscan

No fancy chefs at this down home Tuscan cooking school

By Susan Van Allen

On the kitchen counter, the morning sun casts its glow over a round of aged pecorino cheese, framed by bottles of ruby Vino Nobile. On the stove, tomatoes bubble under stuffed zucchini blossoms. The thick, gnarled hand of my cooking teacher holding a wooden spoon is an important part of this picture. As part of a cooking tour of Italy, I had landed smack in the midst of a Tuscan culinary masterpiece.

"Tuscan Women Cook" is a weeklong program of cooking lessons that includes trips to nearby towns, wineries, cheese factories, restaurants, and designer outlet shops. The 13th century village of Montefollonico (population 700), an hour south of Florence, is the center of the experience. It presents a landscape of rolling hills, olive groves and vineyards in the Chiana Valley. Cooking tours such as this one take you inside Tuscany, sharing the tastes as the locals do, rather than standing back and admiring the scenery as a distant tourist.

Hosts Bill and Patty Sutherland left Dallas six years ago to buy a hilltop farmhouse, pursuing their *Under The Tuscan Sun* dream. They depend on Iolanda Marcocci and Bruna Giannini, two village *nonnas*, to teach eager students recipes they've been making since they were kids. The Sutherlands' choice to hire town women instead of star chefs makes this cooking school unique — no Emeril "BAM!" showmanship here. The classes are like family parties — hanging out with the cooking grandmas who each entertained us with their different, yet equally endearing styles.

Bruna, trim and crisp, delicately works sliced tomatoes through her hands, removing bitter seeds to prepare *bruschetta*.

Iolanda is more rough-around-the-edges. She prowls her stocky five-foot frame from table to



*** KITCHEN DIVAS:
Iolanda Marocci (top left)
and Bruna Giannini (right)
show novice cooks the ins
and outs of rustic Italian cui-
sine. Lower left: Stuffed
Zucchini blossoms are ready
for placing in tomato sauce.
Lower right, Iolanda works at
the stove.



stove, brandishing her old paring knife she calls "mi amore" — one minute scolding Bill for buying ricotta that wasn't up to her standards, the next pinching his cheeks with affection.

By watching these pros, we learn the simplicity of the region's cuisine. No fancy Williams Sonoma tools here. Iolanda and Bruna use their expert hands as food processors — breaking up tomatoes for sauce and tearing basil for panzanella salad. Olive oil and sea salt pour liberally, while vinegars, herbs, and sauces are added sparingly so the flavors of fresh tomatoes and *pasta fresca* aren't overwhelmed.

Though Iolanda makes it look simple, rolling *pici*, the thick spaghetti specialty of the region, isn't easy. Bill urges us to "Jump in and give a hand." I go for it and create a lumpy mess. As Iolanda perfectly re-rolls my attempt, I realize "jumping in and giving her a hand" with the *pici* was like grabbing Michelangelo's chisel and giving him a hand with David.

The class ends at lunch time at the dining table, beautifully set with linens from the Arezzo antique market. Our glasses are filled with local wine and we toast our teachers, then settle in for the four-course lunch we'd been salivating over all morning. Another Tuscan culinary masterpiece is served.

For further information, see www.tuscanwomenscook.com

About the author: Susan Van Allen is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles.



Panzanella (COUNTRY TOMATO AND BREAD SALAD)

1 small loaf or round of stale coarse country bread (about 4 to 5 cups)
6 scallions
12 basil leaves
2 large, firm tomatoes
3 cloves of garlic
1 large, peeled cucumber
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
2 to 3 tablespoons white wine vinegar
Salt and pepper to taste

Fill a medium size bowl with water. Slice the bread. Dunk each bread slice in the water until saturated, then squeeze out the water, break the bread into bite-size chunks and transfer to a large salad bowl.

Coarsely chop the onions, tomatoes, cucumbers and basil and add to the bread mixture. Mince the garlic and combine with the rest of the ingredients.

Add the oil, vinegar, salt and pepper and mix thoroughly. Set the salad aside for at least 30 minutes before serving. This may be made the day ahead and refrigerated, but be sure to serve it at room temperature.

Any of the above ingredients may be adjusted to individual tastes.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Fiori di Zucchini Ripieni (STUFFED ZUCCHINI BLOSSOMS COOKED IN TOMATO SAUCE)

Tomato Sauce:

5 tablespoons olive oil
1 (28-oz. can) plum tomatoes

1 tablespoon sugar
1/4 cup heavy cream
1 tablespoon water
Salt and pepper to taste
10 to 12 zucchini blossoms, slightly chilled

For the filling:

1 1/3 pounds ricotta
2 eggs
5 tablespoons Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, grated
1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped
Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
Salt and pepper to taste

In a large skillet, heat oil. Break up tomatoes through your hands over the skillet and cook on medium-low heat for 45 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add sugar and continue cooking for another 45 minutes, continuing to stir occasionally.

In a separate bowl, add the water to the cream and stir the mixture into the sauce. While the sauce is cooking, stuff the zucchini flowers.

Wash, clean and remove the centers of zucchini blossoms.

In a medium sized bowl, mix together the filling ingredients and transfer to a pastry bag. Squeeze the mixture into each of the blossoms, so each is filled almost to the top.

Place the stuffed flowers in the sauce. Lower the heat to a simmer. Cook the flowers in the sauce for 30 minutes on each side. If necessary, add water to the sauce as needed while cooking.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

THE CLASSES ARE LIKE FAMILY PARTIES -
HANGING OUT WITH THE COOKING GRANDMAS
WHO EACH ENTERTAINED US WITH THEIR DIFFERENT,
YET EQUALLY ENDEARING STYLES.



♦ ♦ ♦ Top: Iolanda rolls out dough for *picci* (thick spaghetti). Left and above: The Tuscan countryside provides a beautiful backdrop for the cooking school.