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DECEMBER 2012



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HOLIDAY CLASSICS/CHRISTMAS IN PALERMO/ITALIAN WINES

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# Holiday Feasts in Le Marche

A young American couple embraces tradition in a 13th-century Italian village.

BY SUSAN VAN ALLEN

**N**on-stop eating for a month—from the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8) to the Epiphany (Jan. 6)! That's how Chef Jason Bartner and his wife Ashley describe holiday times around their agriturismo in Le Marche, a central region of Italy located at the calf of the boot. The Bartners are a passionate, young American couple who bought a 300-year-old farmhouse

in northern Le Marche, beautifully renovated it, planted a garden, and created lovely guest accommodations and a cooking school where travelers can immerse themselves in the authentic Italian farm to table experience.

"We wanted to live a life of quality, and Italians more than anyone truly seize the day," says Ashley. The Bartners fell in love with the Bel Paese on their honeymoon, then lived in New York where Jason studied at the French Culinary Academy and became an executive chef in the city's top restaurants. Meanwhile, Ashley was carving out a successful career for herself in the hospitality industry. "But the more successful you become as a chef, the less actual cooking you do. The work becomes all about the restaurant business," says Jason.

Wanting to live their passions, they returned to Italy to hunt for property. With so many foreigners buying in Tuscany and Umbria, they chose Le Marche instead. "We wanted to live among Italians," says Ashley.

This under-the-tourist-radar region is bordered on the east by the Adriatic sea and the Apennine mountains on the west, with a center of rolling hills and verdant valleys covered with vineyards, olive groves, pastures, lush forests, and fertile fields. Medieval castles, Renaissance churches, and baroque theatres add drama to the landscape.

Le Marche's culinary treasures vary with the terrain. A specialty of the coast is brodetto, an elaborate seafood stew. Inland, where the Bartners live, roasted meats, wild boar and game are served with an abundant variety of vegetables and pasta. Le Marche boasts a distinctive pecorino cheese, Formaggio di Fossa, that is aged in autumn in underground straw





## INSIDE ITALY



Traditional dishes flavored with herbs and spices crowd the Italian holiday table during the month-long holiday feast.

Jason makes sausages in their casetta kitchen and pizza in their wood burning oven. "And when our neighbors taste his homemade pasta, they say it tastes just like



their nonnas," says Ashley. She has learned to make Marchigiani liqueurs, of which visciolino, created from the leaves of wild cherry trees, is outstanding.

Fate seemed to guide Jason and Ashley to their dreamy location. They were driving around and stumbled upon the northern 13th century village of Urbania. It happened to be the Feast of the Epiphany, and they looked around and saw all these old men dressed up as La Befana—the legendary crone who rides around on her broom the night before January 6, delivering goodies

to children. There was music, fireworks, and stands selling delicious pork panini, sweets, and warm spiced wine.

Coincidentally, the Bartners found their farmhouse (named Ca'Camone) right near Urbania, in Sant' Angelo in Vado. The property is rich with natural treasures.

There's sulphurous mineral water and a rustic backyard overflowing with wild berries, asparagus, fennel and funghi, and fruit trees that bear apples, peaches and pears. Under their old oak trees, precious black and white truffles grow, hunted by dogs during the fall and winter seasons.

Though Jason is an expert chef/cooking teacher and Ashley has the flair and know-how to create charming guest accommodations, they knew nothing about farming. They dove into the project anyway.

Their elderly neighbors, whose children had no interest in carrying on family traditions, were impressed by the Bartners' project. "They adopted us," says Ashley. "We didn't even know which direction to plant an onion, until a doctor who lives down the road showed us how. Now we're part of the farming community here and we all help each other out. For example, we'll trade our homemade sausages for the use of our neighbor's tractor."

The Bartners have become such a part of the local scene that they were invited to take part in the live traditional nativity in the neighboring village of Piobiceco, where the time of the birth of Jesus is re-enacted.

Villagers dress in costumes and play out scenes in cantinas and vacant homes, and spectators stroll through torch-lit vias to enjoy the show. "Last year we were papermakers, and this year we're going to get moved up to the livelier action and be with the sausage makers. It's a wonderful celebration of everyone coming together to experience the true joy and meaning of Christmas, away from crowded shops," says Ashley.

As for the month-long feasting, Jason revels in the simplicity of full-flavored Marchigiani cooking, turning out delicious feasts. There is always traditional Christmas Day *cappelletti in brodo*, lasagna bianca, pork roasts, cakes, and warm spicy wine to take away the winter chill. "Our neighbors are so generous. They share all their recipes," says Ashley.

That's lucky for us. From this delicious valley in Italy, through the Bartners, now we can enjoy the tastes of Sant' Angelo in Vado and toast to a Buon Natale e Felice Anno Nuovo!

For more info: [www.latavolamarche.com](http://www.latavolamarche.com)



## The Recipes

### Roast Pork Loin

- 2 to 3 sprigs rosemary
- 2 to 3 sprigs thyme
- 1 teaspoon fennel seed
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh sage
- Red pepper flakes, to taste
- Rind of half a lemon, chopped
- 3 cloves minced garlic
- 3 tablespoons olive oil, or enough to create a paste
- 2 to 2½ pound pork loin roast, bone-in and tied
- ¾ cup white wine

Combine chopped herbs, pepper, lemon and garlic with olive oil to form a paste. This can be done by hand, in a food processor, or with a mortar and pestle. Transfer the mixture into a bowl and add about 3 tablespoons of olive oil so the paste is spreadable. Work the paste into the meat evenly and refrigerate overnight, or at least 6 hours. When ready to cook, preheat the oven to 425°F. Generously salt the meat and place in a roasting pan. Roast for the first 15 minutes at 425°F, then remove from the oven. Add white wine to the pan, then return the pan to the oven and lower the temperature to 350°F. Cook about 15 minutes per pound, or until the juices run clear. Baste the meat once or twice during cooking. If the top starts to get too brown, cover for the last few minutes. If liquid at the bottom of the pan cooks out, add a little water.

Once cooked, allow roast to sit for a few minutes. Remove string and slice thinly. Use the pan juices as a sauce.

Makes 6 servings.

### Spiced Wine

- 1 bottle of red wine, your choice
- 3 whole cloves
- 1 stick cinnamon
- A generous pinch of nutmeg
- 1 grated lemon peel (or grated peel from half a lemon and half an orange)
- ¼ cup granulated sugar

Combine the first five ingredients in



a pan and bring to a low boil. Add the sugar. Stir occasionally. Once the sugar is dissolved, pour the wine through a strainer into a pot and discard the spices. Return the pot to a low flame to keep the wine warm. Serve warm and enjoy!

Makes 8 servings.

### Nutella and Hazelnut Cake

- 4 large eggs
- 1 cup flour
- ⅔ cup granulated sugar
- ½ cup butter
- 1 cup Nutella
- ½ cup chopped, roasted hazelnuts
- 1 teaspoon baking powder

#### Pinch of salt

- ⅓ cup confectioner's sugar to sift over the top

Preheat the oven to 375°F.

Beat the eggs with the sugar and flour. Using a double boiler, melt the butter and Nutella together. Combine the melted butter/Nutella mixture with the eggs and sugar. Mix in the chopped nuts, baking powder, and salt. Butter and flour an 8-inch springform pan. Pour the mixture into the pan. Cook for 30 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Remove from oven. When the cake is cool, sift confectioner's sugar over the top to form a thin layer.

Makes 8 servings.