

WINE: A DAY WITH THE AMBASSADOR OF RUFFINO

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Almond Cake with  
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### Tastes of Umbria

Learn To Cook The Native  
Dishes Of This Special Land

APRIL 2013



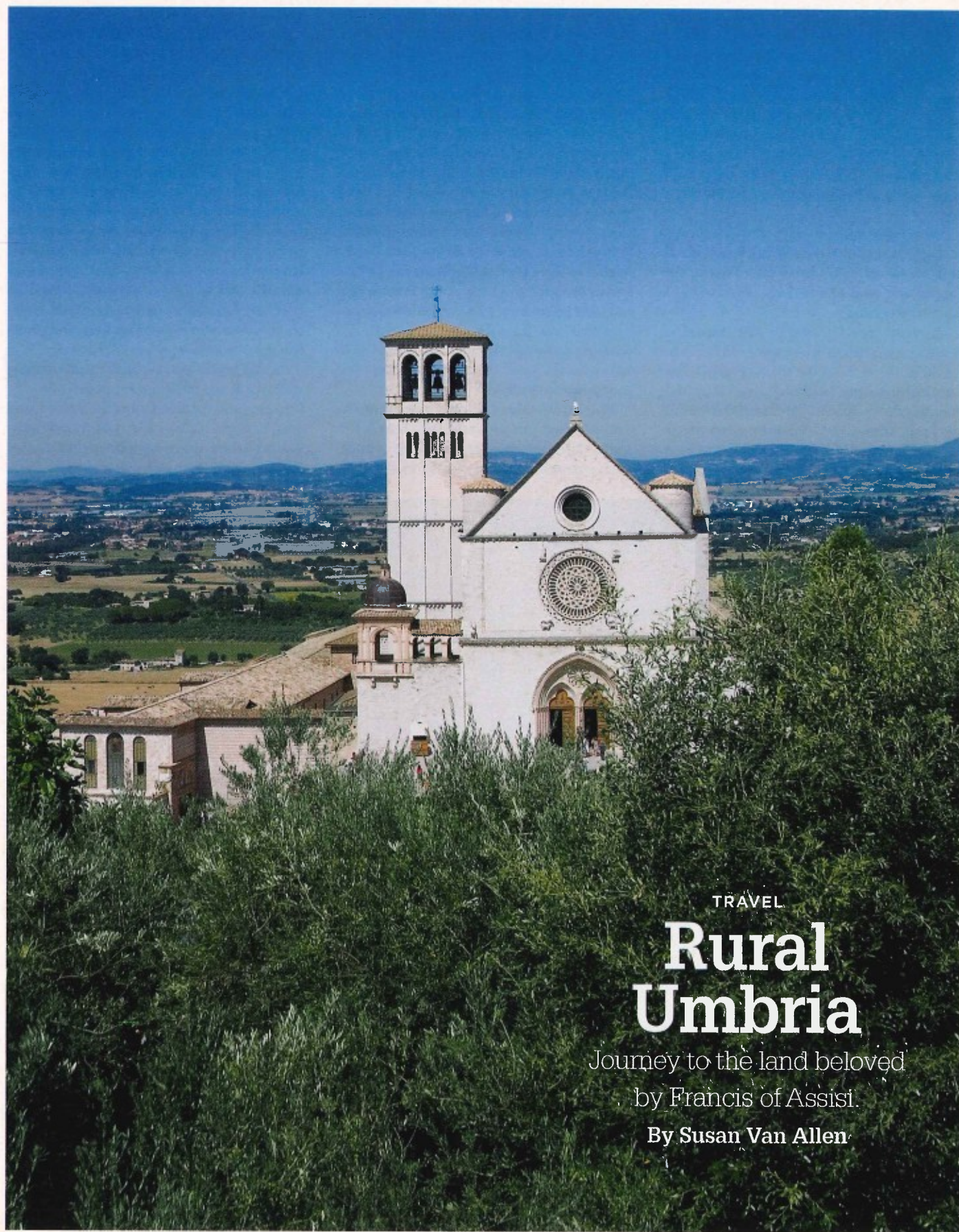
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Tastes of Italia

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SPRING'S BEST BETS/TASTES OF UMBRIA/WHOLE HOG

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TRAVEL

# Rural Umbria

Journey to the land beloved  
by Francis of Assisi.

By Susan Van Allen

## INSIDE ITALY

**S**pring is a most magnificent time to visit Umbria. This is when the natural beauty of the central region, nicknamed Italy's Green Heart, bursts into colorful bloom with wildflowers — vibrant red poppies and golden lentil blossoms. If you're up for foraging, wild asparagus and berries are there for the picking.

Farm lands are abundant with fava beans and artichokes. And the region's famed black truffles, found in Umbria's lush forests, are dug up and used to add deep, rich flavors to sauces and pastas.

A great base to explore the region is Madonna del Piatto, a charming B&B, set in the hills overlooking the town of Assisi. According to Letizia Mattiacci, who owns and runs the place with her Dutch husband Ruurd de Jong, Madonna del Piatto came about through a few miracles, risks, and lots of hard work. Amore played a major role in the story.

Letizia was born and grew up in Perugia. She studied entomology (the science of insects), became a researcher, and by coincidence met another entomologist, the Dutchman, Ruurd, at a conference. "And then there Ruurd was, coincidentally, again at another conference," she tells me. They fell in love, married, and worked in France, Texas, and Holland. Wanting to settle down, they decided to switch careers. Since they had loved staying at intimate, family-run places during their world travels, they chose Letizia's beloved home region to create their dream B&B. On the day after Christmas in 1997, a friend dropped them off at the bottom of a hill, and pointed up to an abandoned property that was for sale. Letizia and Ruurd walked up the hill through the snow, fell in love with the view, and three days later the property was theirs.

Five hard-working years of renovating the 500-year old former shepherd's refuge followed. Their daughter Tea was born in 2001, and in 2003 they triumphantly opened their

rooms to guests. While they were renovating, they found a plate in the rubble, on which was painted an image of a medieval woman with flowers in her hands. This became the inspiration for the name of the farmhouse: La Madonna del Piatto or The Lady of the Plate.

"Our cooking school started as an experiment," Letizia says. "B&B guests always enjoy the wonderful Umbrian restaurants. They love the olive oil here that's praised for its high quality, there are delicious pecorino cheeses from the sheep that graze in the mountain pastures, the cured meats are world famous—from salumi to prosciutto that's aged for 18 months. But to have a homemade meal, to cook together like the natives do, this is the essential experience of our lives here, and something very special to share with travelers."

Letizia begins her class in the nearby village of Santa Maria degli Angeli, where whatever is in season is gathered up at the market, and then brought back to the modernized farmhouse kitchen. Everyone rolls up their sleeves for the hands-on pasta making class. Fresh



herbs are added from the garden. Her recipes are simple and there's a fun, informal atmosphere. "I love cooking with people," Letizia says, "even children really enjoy it, just as my ten-year old daughter Tea does."

Besides teaching her region's traditions, Letizia brings her scientific background to the class. "There is chemistry that must be understood, to bring out the best flavors," she says. She teaches her students that when something tastes good fresh, it should be cooked for a very short time. "For example, fresh herbs should be added at the very end of the cooking process and then the dish should be served immediately, to get the maximum flavor. And for sauces, I teach them to use a shallow covered pan, on low heat, cooked very slowly, so the flavors can be maintained."

Class ends with a wonderful meal on the Madonna del Piatto terrace, overlooking the view of the hills and Assisi that Letizia and Ruurd fell in love with years ago. Thoughts of Saint Francis, the Assisi native/mystic/nature lover come to mind. He certainly would smile over this tranquil scene, where the beauty and deliciousness of Umbria is so fully appreciated.

Letizia has kindly given us a few of her simple, perfect for springtime recipes, so we can enjoy the spirit and flavors of Umbria in our own kitchens.

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

## Artichoke Timbale

- 1 lemon
- 8 artichokes, rinsed
- 6 eggs
- 3 ounces of grated Parmesan cheese, plus 2 tablespoons for topping  
Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 2 tablespoon bread crumbs
- 7 ounces mozzarella, thinly sliced or shredded
- 1 10-inch Bundt pan

Preheat oven to 400°F.

Fill a large pot with water, squeeze the juice of one lemon into it, and add the squeezed lemon to the pot, too. (This prevents the artichokes from turning a scary turquoise color while cooking.)

Bring the water to a boil, then drop in the artichokes. Cook for 20 minutes or until one of the central leaves comes away with a little give.

Drain and cool the artichokes. Pull away

and discard the outer tough leaves, peel and trim the stems, and cut away the choke if there is any. Quarter artichokes and then cut quarters in half again.

Beat the eggs with the Parmesan and season with salt and pepper.

Butter the Bundt pan generously, then dust with the bread crumbs, knocking out the excess. Now build up the timbale in the pan by layering artichokes, then sprinkle evenly with mozzarella, then artichokes, continuing to alternate, and ending with artichokes. Pour the egg and cheese mixture into the pan, sprinkle with an extra tablespoon or two of Parmesan and bake 25 to 30 minutes, until set and golden.

Serve at room temperature.

Makes 6 servings.

## Honeyed Ricotta Mousse

For the mousse:

- 1 pound ricotta cheese
- 3 tablespoons confectioner's sugar
- ½ cup heavy cream, whipped until firm, or 2 tablespoons mascarpone

For the marinated fruit:

- 1 basket strawberries, cleaned and thinly sliced. You may also use two peaches or fresh berries (don't cut the berries)
- ½ cup white vermouth, Amaretto, or other sweet liqueur
- 1 tablespoon sugar  
Juice of ½ lemon

To finish:

- 4 to 6 teaspoons honey (best to use artisanal raw honey with a flowery aroma, such as orange)

For the mousse:

Whisk the sugar into the ricotta. Carefully fold in the whipped cream or mascarpone. Cover and keep in the refrigerator for at least 1 hour.

For the marinated fruit:

Toss fruit, liqueur, sugar, and lemon juice in large bowl to combine. Cover and place in the refrigerator for at least 1 hour. For children, use only lemon juice and sugar.

To finish:

To serve, spoon the ricotta mousse into individual plates or bowls. Add the marinated fruit, distributing evenly. Drizzle

each portion with honey. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

## Fettuccine with Pesto and Fava Beans

About 1 cup fava beans, or enough to make 6 tablespoons shelled beans

For the pesto:

- 4 tablespoons fresh basil leaves
- 2 tablespoons pine nuts
- 1 small garlic clove
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

To finish:

- ½ pound narrow fettuccine
- Salt for pasta cooking water
- 1 small garlic clove, very finely minced
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Grated Parmesan or Pecorino cheese

Blanch fava beans in boiling water for 5 minutes, or until some of the skins start to split. Drain and refresh under cold water. Remove shells. This will take some time, but brings the dish from ordinary to quite amazing.

To make the pesto, combine all ingredients in a food processor and blend until it forms a thick sauce. It's important to make the pesto at the last possible moment before using it on the pasta, so the pesto doesn't oxidize and the flavor is retained.

While making the pesto, cook the fettuccine in salted boiling water, according to package instructions.

In a pan large enough to hold all the pasta, saute garlic in olive oil until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the shelled beans and cook briefly to infuse them in the garlic oil. Remove from the heat and stir in 2 tablespoons of the pesto.

Drain the pasta, reserving 1/3 cup of the pasta water. Transfer the pasta to the pan. Turn on the heat to medium low and quickly stir so that the sauce is partly absorbed by the pasta.

Add the reserved pasta water to dilute the remaining pesto. Stir the diluted pesto into the pan, evenly coating the pasta.

Serve immediately with Parmesan or Pecorino cheese on the side.

Makes 2 servings.