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Cooking in Florence
Why good food takes time



Cooking in Florence

Cooking with Chef Elena Mattei in Florence *By Susan Van Allen*

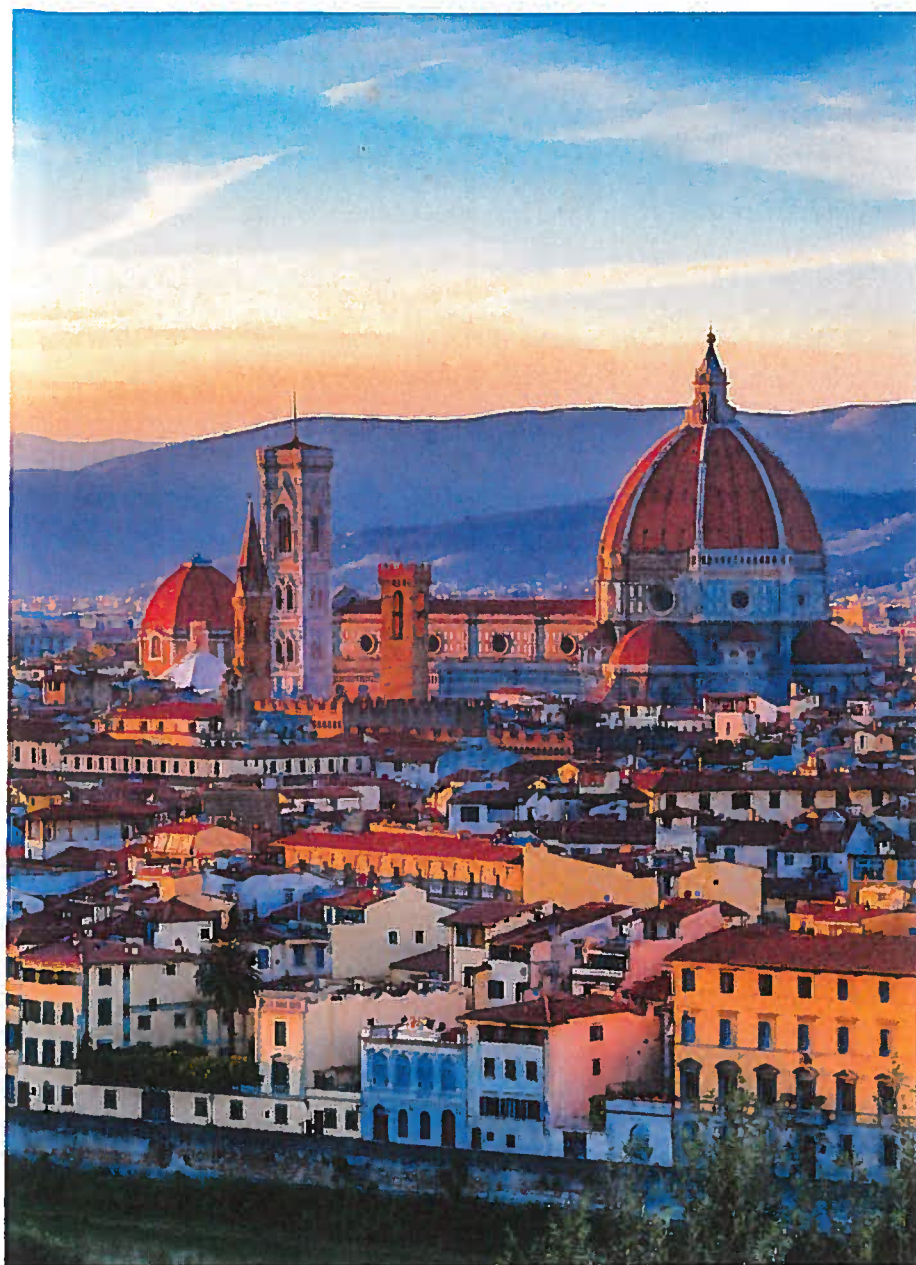
"It takes time to cook something good," says Chef Elena Mattei. I've come to her home, near the Piazza Santa Croce, for a class in traditional Florentine cooking. For a very long time I, along with another American couple, have been mincing vegetables for white ragu. "More, more," Chef Elena says, hovering over our shoulders. My eyes water from the onion I've been laboring over, until finally it's practically turned into a paste, and I look up to see a kind nod of approval from my teacher. This is certainly what's called a "hands-on experience."

Chef Elena is a chic signora, whose many years of success as a cook and teacher are rooted in two inspirations. The first is her childhood—learning by the side of the Florentine women in her family who taught her classic recipes as they prepared Sunday dinners in the 1950s. The second is the masterpiece *Science in the Kitchen and The Art of Eating Well* by Pellegrino Artusi. This cookbook from 1891 was the genius creation of Artusi, a businessman from Emilia-Romagna, who moved to Florence and pursued his culinary passion with a scientific approach. At the age of 71, he self-published his carefully tested collection of

recipes, bringing together for the first time dishes from different regions of the recently united Italy. It was written specifically so that home cooks would have, in his words, "a practical family manual." The book, having gone through many editions, is still in print, has been translated into many languages, and to this day is praised as a defining work of Italian cuisine.

I enjoy Chef Elena's warm and serious approach. One moment she's just like my Nana, reaching over to stir sugar into my espresso cup during a break in the lesson. The next, she's standing in her crisp white jacket at the head of the counter, ringing a bell to get our attention and direct us to our next task. As we chop, stir, and knead pasta dough under her guidance, the kitchen fills with the heavenly aroma of simmering ragu. True to Florentine tradition, every recipe ingredient is of the highest quality—from the best extra virgin olive oil to fine wine, all produced in the nearby Tuscan hills.

When lunchtime comes, we settle in at the elegantly set dining table. It's a scene that recalls Chef Elena's childhood family dinners in this gem of a city—where harmonious flavors are artfully blended, course



after course. Every bite is proof: "It takes time to cook something good."

In the spirit of Pellegrino Artusi, Chef Elena generously shares her recipes with us so we can enjoy Florentine traditions at home, bringing deliciousness to our winter tables.

For more info: www.cucinaconvista.it

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Green Beans in Red Wine Vinegar

- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 pound green beans
- 3 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- ½ beef bouillon cube, dissolved in ½ cup water
- ½ cup red wine vinegar

Generously coat a sauté pan with extra virgin olive oil, then add the green beans, garlic, and bouillon that has been dissolved in water. Stir the mixture together and then cover the pan, cooking for about 10 minutes. Uncover and add the red wine vinegar, cooking until half of the vinegar has evaporated.

Excellent served hot or cold.

Makes 4 servings.

Custard Cream with Almonds and Hazelnuts

- 2½ cups milk
- 4 tablespoons sugar
- 1 to 1½ tablespoons flour
- 2 large eggs
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- ½ cup coarsely chopped almonds
- ½ cup coarsely chopped hazelnuts

Heat milk until it is hot, not boiling. As milk is heating, mix sugar, flour and eggs together in a heavy saucepan. Slowly pour hot milk into the saucepan, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, cooking over low heat until the mixture thickens. Remove from the heat immediately, as it must not boil. Set aside to cool.

Whip the cream until it forms stiff peaks and then gently fold it into the custard. Divide the mixture evenly into individual dessert bowls. Sprinkle almonds and hazelnuts over each bowl. Refrigerate if not serving immediately.

Makes 6 servings.

White Meat Sauce

- 1 medium carrot, peeled
- 1 rib of celery
- 1 peeled white onion
- 1 clove of garlic
- 3 freshly ground pork sausages, skinned
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2½ pound boneless chicken breast, ground
- 2½ pound veal cutlet, ground
- 6 ounces white wine
- 2 ounces dried porcini mushrooms soaked in 2 cups of water
- 1 beef bouillon cube
- 1 cup chicken or beef broth, if necessary
- 1 tablespoon of butter, softened
- 1 teaspoon flour
- 1 pound pasta

Finely mince the carrot, celery, onion, garlic and skinned sausages, then pour the olive oil in a heavy-bottomed sauce pot and sauté those ingredients until the sausage is cooked.

Add the ground chicken and veal, turning the heat to high and cook, stirring occasionally, until all the moisture from the mixture evaporates. Add the wine and cook until it evaporates.

Strain the porcini mushrooms from the soaking liquid (save the liquid), then finely mince and stir them into the pot. Dissolve the bouillon cube in the porcini soaking water and stir into the pot. Cook about 30 minutes, adding broth if necessary.

In a small bowl, combine the butter and flour to make a paste, then stir into the pot and cook for 10 more minutes. Serve over tagliatelle or other long, flat egg pasta.

Makes 4 servings.