



On a roll Barbara
Mancini prepares
pasta for dinner
in the Villa Pia
courtyard (right)



THE ULTIMATE PASTA SOURCE

When a British couple looked for local ingredients for their Umbrian hotel, they were thinking oil and cheese. But, says Peter Stanford, the villagers were the real find. They know the secrets of Italian cooking – and are willing to share

When Kevin Begley and Morag Clelland left England to set up a hotel in Italy, the plan was for Begley to do the cooking. He had, after all, trained as a chef and worked in London's Dorchester Hotel. But today, Begley is rarely seen in the kitchen at Villa Pia, the couple's picture-postcard 18th-century farmhouse on the border of Umbria and Tuscany.

It's certainly not an absence of guests that's keeping Begley away – seven years after the couple arrived, Villa Pia has an enviable reputation as one of Europe's best hotels for families. But Begley has handed over his apron to four members of a family from the local hill-top village of Lippiano. And their style of cooking, passed from generation to generation, has proved so popular that many visitors are now taking cookery lessons as part of their stay.

"It happened almost by accident," says Clelland, a fair-haired 40-year-old with a gentle Scottish accent and a laid-back manner. "From the very start we didn't want this to be a British encampment, so we actively encouraged local collaboration, making a conscious effort to be part of village life and offering good wages to

Lippiano people. It took them a while to weigh us up, but once we were accepted they started asking about work. Among them were Barbara Mancini, Patrizia Mariotini and Beppa and Luca Bartolomei – two generations of cousins, aunts and in-laws from the same large family.

"At first they were just helping Kevin out in the kitchen, and Barbara was doing the cleaning. Gradually she let us know about her desire to cook. The others followed, suggesting more authentic recipes and sources for local produce. So we decided to give it a try."

Begley admits he was surprised by how good this largely untrained family team was. It took a while to get used to the idea, but soon he was delighted to pass on the reins and concentrate on other aspects of the business.

There were, however, a few obstacles. "We needed to be confident that they would do it and do it well, that they could make the transformation to cooking for larger numbers – at peak times we can have as many as 14 families staying," he explains. "Only Luca had any formal training as a chef, though Patrizia had done some waitressing." And it worked both ways, says Begley – the family quartet needed →

CRISTIANI



All the right ingredients, clockwise from left: Barbara gives a ravioli lesson; bruschetta; veal with raisins and pinenuts; Morag Clelland and guests prepare for dinner; and bread toasting by the fire



A Villa Pia dinner

Serves 4. Wine recommendation: a Chianti, such as Vini Nobile di Montepulciano

Bruschetta

1 ciabatta loaf
Extra-virgin olive oil
14 tomatoes, finely chopped
Garlic
Salt
Marinate tomatoes in salt and olive oil for half an hour. Cut the bread into medium slices and toast under a grill. While still hot, rub with peeled cloves of garlic. Drizzle with olive oil and add salt, to taste. Top toast with the tomatoes and serve immediately.

Gradually it will become thinner. When you have the required thickness, leave pasta to dry for half an hour then cut into squares with a sharp knife.

For the filling, cook the spinach in boiling water. Drain, making sure you squeeze out all water. Place in a bowl and add half the Gorgonzola, two eggs, Parmesan and a pinch of salt and pepper. Mix into a paste and add a teaspoonful to each square of pasta. Fold into parcels pressing down edges.

For the sauce, place the remaining Gorgonzola, with a tablespoon of milk, in a frying pan over low heat. Once melted, take off the heat and add the mascarpone and walnuts. Place ravioli parcels in boiling water and cook for five minutes. Do not overcook them. The thinner the pasta the less time they need to cook. Drain and toss ravioli with the Gorgonzola sauce in a frying pan over a low heat. Serve immediately.

Ravioli with walnuts and Gorgonzola

400g/14oz fine pasta flour
500g/1lb 2oz spinach
600g/1lb 5oz Gorgonzola
200g/7oz walnuts, finely chopped
250g/9oz mascarpone
6 eggs
Handful of freshly grated Parmesan
1 tablespoon of milk
Salt and pepper

Make one mound with the flour and form a hollow in the middle. Break the eggs into the hollow. Slowly work together until you have an elastic dough. It should not be at all sticky – if it is, add small amounts of flour until it is smooth and elastic.

Form the dough into a flat circle and roll with a rolling pin – the longer the rolling pin the better. Always roll from the centre, pushing the dough outwards.

Veal with raisins and pinenuts

4 thin slices of veal
100g/4oz raisins
50g/2oz pinenuts
Handful of parsley
Salt and pepper
Handful of plain flour
1 glass dry white wine
Knob of butter
Toothpicks
Cover raisins in warm water and leave to soak for 10 minutes. Remove and →

reassurance that their cooking would go down just as well with paying customers as it does in their own home.

This wasn't a part of Italy known to the couple when they decided to head out from England in search of a new life that would allow them more freedom while earning a living and raising their children. Clelland had spent some time in Naples and the south in her youth when her father was posted there with the Royal Navy. But, though they ended up here by accident, they fell in love with Villa Pia, and both have come to feel at home.

Most of the recipes and techniques that now flourish in the hotel's kitchen have been handed down from local parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. The influence of history and geography is easy to detect, says Clelland. "We are, more or less, right in the centre of Italy and, at least in Italian terms, we're a long way from the coast – there are mountains on either side. So there is no great tradition of cooking fish here because until comparatively recently it simply wasn't available. They do a good soup, but beyond that fish is not something they excel at."

Still, the region has its share of gastronomic specialities. Truffles are a local delicacy, beloved



of Italian chefs such as Antonio Carluccio, whose cooking is influenced by Umbria. Twenty-nine-year-old Barbara's husband, Ermanno, happens to be a locally renowned truffle hunter who takes his dogs into the oak forests that cover the local hillsides to sniff them out from under the ground (the use of pigs has been abandoned). What he finds, his family uses in raviolis and tagliatellis, and with roast pork dishes at Villa Pia. In the autumn, the same woods also yield porcini mushrooms.

Another staple is chianina beef, from local cows that have the equivalent premium status as Aberdeen Angus in Britain. Fiorentina steaks, cooked over a fire and served with rosemary and balsamic vinegar, are another regular. →



PICTURE CREDIT

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FOOD & DRINK SPECIAL

Most of the sourcing and purchasing of ingredients is now in the hands of the kitchen team. "I think you could make a case that every valley in Italy has its special dishes – though often they are the same dish with a different name depending on which town you are in," says Begley. "What is special about what you have here, however, is a belief in getting the basics right. It goes back to this style being based on what is done at home. So Barbara, Luca, Patrizia and Beppa have all learnt to stick to simple ingredients that are available locally, to go with the seasons, and to avoid anything overly complicated. What they worry about above all are things such as the quality of the olive oil, who supplies it, and how good their olive trees are." Luca, 27, still lives on his family's small-holding and brings the produce of its olive groves, chestnut trees and its animals for use in the Villa Pia kitchen.

"We do sit down and discuss new menus with them," says Begley. "And we try new things. Morag and I eat with the guests several evenings a week so we can judge their reactions. We don't have a menu with choices. There is a buffet lunch and a three- or four-course dinner each evening. So we have to tread a fine line between providing something that is interesting and something that is not too outrageous. We try to exceed expectations but never shock."



Cooking on gas, from left: Kevin Bagley; Patrizia Mariotini, Barbara Mancini and Luca Bartolomei; Luca's aunt Beppa; grilled aubergines; and ricotta tart



The enthusiasm generated by the food has led to a growing number of bookings outside the school-holiday season – when there are fewer children around – from groups or individuals who want a peaceful, gourmet, long weekend in a beautiful part of Italy. The fare is now mentioned in the visitors' comments book every bit as often as the facilities – two swimming-pools, a bamboo wood with adventure-playground equipment (in another incarnation Begley was a youth leader), table-football and

table-tennis, a soon-to-be-completed tennis-court, plus five acres of gardens, with a box-hedge maze, and beyond it the villa's own vineyards, growing the local Sangiovese grape.

But the best yardstick for the success of going with local wisdom is the number of guests who, each Wednesday afternoon, forgo the pleasures of trips to local towns such as Gubbio, Arezzo, Perugia and the whole Piero della Francesca trail (he was born in the next valley to Lippiano), and instead attend Barbara's

informal cooking classes in the kitchen. The most popular lesson is how to make pasta. For Barbara and her family, Begley remembers from the early days, buying in even freshly made local pasta was a sacrilege. Beppa, 49, still makes her husband fresh tagliatelli three times a week – he refuses to eat any found in shops.

Out of the kitchen windows, during Barbara's cooking classes, you can see children careering past on rope swings and bicycles, and it is this combination that makes Villa Pia an unusual foodie destination. The recent trend for holiday cookery schools has been led by often quite stuffy places where the chef presides as if over his or her own court. Clelland and Begley's hotel couldn't be more different – it's so informal that when he's finished cooking, Luca is often found playing with the children or even, while their parents slip away for a night-cap in the local bar, doing a bit of baby-sitting.

The quietly confident Barbara speaks very little English and her pupils' Italian is usually out of a phrase book, but somehow, says Clelland, it all comes together in the informal lessons. "We used to hover around outside the kitchen in case they needed us, but we soon realised we were surplus to requirements." ■

Prices start at £350 per adult per week. To book, tel: 00 39 075 850 2027, or visit www.villapia.com



dry on kitchen towel. Mix the raisins, pinenuts, parsley, salt and pepper. Lay out the veal on a chopping board and place some of the mixture in the middle of each piece, then roll them over and hold each together with a toothpick. When all rolls are ready, cover with flour and gently fry in a knob of butter for five minutes. Add the dry white wine, stir and serve in the sauce immediately.

Grilled aubergines

1 large aubergine
Extra-virgin olive oil
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
Handful of parsley, chopped

Thinly slice aubergine width-ways and place under a very hot grill. When brown, grill other side. Lay in a single layer and drizzle with oil. Sprinkle with garlic and parsley. Leave for half an hour and serve.



Ricotta tart

300g/11oz self-raising flour
50g/2oz butter
150g/6oz sugar
2 wineglasses Vin Santo
500g/1lb 2oz ricotta
100g/4oz chocolate (70 per cent cocoa), broken into small pieces

Preheat the oven to 180C/350F/Gas 4. For the base, melt butter

and allow to cool until tepid. Place flour on a board and make a hole in the middle. Add butter, 100g (4oz) of sugar and one glass of Vin Santo and knead until it is a smooth pastry. Stretch into base of a 12cm (5in) cake tin which is 2cm (1in) deep so pastry goes just 1cm (1/2in) up the sides. Mix remaining sugar and Vin Santo with ricotta and chocolate. Spread on top. Place in the oven for 40 minutes and serve.