



HIGHLIGHTS

from the APRIL TOUR



Reflecting back on Mangiare Bene's April '07 tour, many highlights spring to mind, foremost among them the wonderful people who shared a week together in the Sabina hills outside Rome. Friendly and full of humor, these veteran travelers took keen interest in everything they encountered, from daily cooking classes to hilltown exploration. The days flew by in a flurry of cooking, dining, walks, and sightseeing. Our innkeeper and cooking-class organizer par excellence, Luigi Scarpati, patiently and expertly made our schedule run on time. He created a homey environment for the participants and saw to their every need.





Luigi's chef, Lucia, won our hearts. With short, salt-and-pepper hair under a chef's white hat, big brown eyes, and a Madonna's smile, Lucia choreographed her cooking lessons in the galley-style kitchen. With her body, arms, and hands constantly in motion, her lesson on how to bring those five courses into being—*antipasto, primo, secondo, contorni, dolce*—was literally a dance. Olive oil, salt, garlic, and a few herbs, but always, oil—golden Sabina oil swirling over every dish, pouring into saucepans, or tossing with salad. Lucia made it all look so easy, but few of us could return home and execute her menus with the same panache.



Inside the Tevere-Farfa Inn, we enjoyed morning cooking classes, meals in the woodman's-style dining room, and repose on the third floor. The place is rustic, with a hunters' lodge feel to it—the indoors leads to the outdoors, the natural riverside landscape and *selvaggio* (wilderness)—the two ambiances connecting, harmonizing.

The cheerful, yellow building is a centuries' old mill warehouse remodeled in the early 2000s to become an inn and restaurant. Bikes are available for lazy rides along the winding Tevere (Tiber) River with views of the Sabina Mountains to the east and the medieval hilltown Nazzano perched above, its castle fortress lord of a fiefdom.



Only forty kilometers from Rome, this pastoral and wetland location—now a regional nature preserve—offers abundant plant, bird, and wildlife sightings, in addition to being a nucleus for regional organic farmers. Watching the sunrise one morning, we spotted a gray *cinghiale* (wild boar) rooting the soil at the edge of the woods. On her early morning walks, chef Lucia collected herbs for our cooking lessons—bay, borage, rosemary—and next to her stovetop stood large jars containing past harvests: plump dried chili peppers, thyme, oregano, and juniper berries.

Top, Luigi's salsa verde class, Lucia making *fritti misti* (herb fritters)



Nazzano's castle

The April tour coincided with peak spring weather, including delightful fresh-grass and floral-scented breezes. As we toured hilltowns, we witnessed a profusion of spring blossoms—apple, cherry, acacia, chestnut, and red bud. Along walls, roadsides, and mountain paths more color dazzled the eye—roses, irises, cyclamen, poppies, hydrangea, geraniums, wisteria, and lilacs. Erect, regal cypresses lined the avenues to important buildings—convents, cemeteries, palaces.



Tevere-Farfa Inn



Wetland boardwalks for bird watching



View from the inn



Left to right, Making biscotti, cutting fettuccini, preparing for gnocchi

Our four morning menus were as challenging in their abundance (both for executing and consuming) as our afternoon tours. The 500 kilometers of towns, churches, palaces, museums, restaurants, and landscapes traveled, in addition to the hundreds of kilos of food prepared and consumed, all fell within the realm of the sublime—something Italy achieves nonchalantly, as a way of life.

Biscotti were a special highlight of this tour. A certain palpable ecstasy was in the air, with participants' voices zinging while the lemony, hazelnut dough was rolled, cut, and baked. As dozens of cookie trays entered and left the oven, the kitchen remained abuzz with the biscotti assembly line, which included taste tests with every aromatic tray that emerged piping hot from the oven. "Basta! Or you'll spoil your lunch!" Lucia finally admonished us.

Another highlight was "Stefano" gliding up on his motorcycle at S. Cataldo Church, ten minutes late for our rendezvous. He had the key to open the medieval, frescoed church that was carved into sheer rock face. He grabbed his loaf of fresh bread from his motorcycle seat and gave us a sheepish smile: "I have to bring it in, in case someone steals it." He told us he was a fireman who gave tours of the hollowed-out church when needed by the local tourist office.





None of us will forget the many drives over steep, winding roads through rustic stone villages, past ruins along the way, including abandoned churches we might find a key to some day. At times our road was a mere ridge with sheer drops on either side, but offering the dependable, lush-green hillsides cultivated in shimmering, silver olive trees. One late afternoon on our drive to Casperia, a tempest struck, though the sun never disappeared entirely—it broke through as a wide shaft over a distant town, while the black cloud and downpour struck a different area—our car to be sure! But soon enough, standing on Casperia’s parapet, we witnessed a stunning sky—soft yellow rays filtering through gray clouds and blacker sheets of rain—literally curtains of rain—while a golden glow lit the horizon and drenched, rolling farmland.



S. Cataldo church and fresco (opposite page)



Every day offered a different sunrise and sunset.

Unexpected characters populated our “giros” (tours)—our neighbor Angelo, who spent a day obsessed with finding small cans to fill with his olive oil for our group to take home. Harvest season was long over, but Angelo’s determination led him through our constellation of medieval villages until he found the only shop with eight cans left—he bought them all. When we arrived for the oil, he treated us to a short tour of his typical working farm with its handmade outbuildings and animal and dog cages (different dogs for hunting tartuffi, birds, or wild boar); bee houses for honey; hens for eggs and poultry; and a cantina for vats of olive oil and wine. Babbling all the way about his various enterprises, Angelo filled the eight cans and waved goodbye to our departing van.

Ice cream in the skins of its flavor; wild asparagus; and zucca (pumpkin)



Then there was the stooped, kerchiefed shopkeeper in S. Oreste, like so many in our rural area, missing a few teeth as she smiled with a sparkle in her brown eyes. How eager she was to please us, to understand our gestures and rough Italian to describe kitchen implements we had been using in class—“the metal disk for pounding meat that we want to use to crush garlic”; or, “the tool that painters use that we can use to cut gnocchi” (a paint scraper!). Her brow furrowed with worry over each item—“I think I’m out of that”—but then five minutes of rummaging through crammed shelves would produce the last one.

Welshman Philip Biss, now of Roccantica, shared his eighteenth-century *piano nobile* palace with us on Evening Four. The palace windows were eight-feet high and the polished brick floors rose and sank from the centuries of resettling foundation. Sipping *prosecco* we wandered the long corridor of adjoining rooms, each one offering changing views of a glorious sunset over the ancient stone town and softly fading olive hills beyond—hills and farms whose day’s work was done, with household lights coming on in preparation for the eight-thirty dinner, or *cena*. A scintillating world, remote from strife and turmoil, encompassed us in its beauty and serenity.

On our last day we enjoyed a special outdoor lunch under a soaring *tettoia* (open-air rooftop), at La Fontanella restaurant, located in Contigliano’s rolling countryside at the foot of Greccio, one of Saint Francis’s sanctuaries. After that last delectable meal, I never wanted to eat again, but back at the inn a few hours later, Luigi and Lucia



Philip's drawing room, Roccantica



Greccio, St. Francis's sanctuary



Clockwise, Dining al fresco in Contigliano, lasagna alla Americana (more sauce), your tour organizers, gnocchi with ragu

couldn't help serving us an impromptu last supper—grilled pumpkin and zucchini, carrots, potatoes, salami and prosciutto, pecorino cheese, desserts, liqueurs....

To sum up, it was a joy to tour the Sabina with kindred, enthusiastic companions and to share multiple food experiences. And how hard it was to say goodbye at the end of the week!—but we've all been in touch since by email; and the good news is, we've all been trying to replicate Lucia's recipes in our own kitchens.

Mangiare Bene looks forward to sharing more memorable adventures with new groups of food, culture, and travel aficionados. Email or call for more information: www.mangiarebenesabina.com.

*From your tour organizers,
Gail Spilsbury and Riyaz Fazal*