



A day at the Divina Cucina cooking school, run by Judy Francini, far left, begins at the market, left. Above: A plate of fresh spaghetti with zucchini and tomato.

# Michelangelo & Minestrone

A cooking school in Florence proves that there's no better way to explore Italian culture than to prepare a meal. by Aaron Latham

**O**n a recent trip to Florence, my family and I decided to divide our time between museums and cooking lessons. We thought the two would complement each other since Italy embraces both the eternal and the ephemeral. It's a country that's about art for the ages and art for lunch, about the Leaning Tower of Pisa and pizza, Botticelli and balsamic, Leonardo and lasagna, Michelangelo and minestrone. A thing of beauty is a joy forever—or maybe just for dinner.

The cooking lessons were actually the idea of our 27-year-old daughter, Taylor, who is a whiz in the kitchen. Early in our marriage, my wife, Lesley, and I had agreed that neither of us would cook or do repairs (a recipe for a happy marriage that I recommend). So we were originally unenthusiastic about taking classes that we'd never

put to use. But Taylor pointed out that we had spent time studying Italian art even though we never intended to paint *Mona Lisa* or chisel *David*. She argued that cooking lessons would be something new, a different vein into the beating heart of Italian culture. Finally, Lesley and I agreed—not because we bought Taylor's arguments but because we wanted to spend time with our only child; she lives on the West Coast, and we're on the West Side of Manhattan.

## Great Tastes

This is hard for a parent to admit, but our daughter was smarter on this point than we were. Taking cooking lessons in Tuscany turned out to be one of the best things we have ever done, in one of the best places on earth: the Divina Cucina school, which is run by the charming Judy Francini. A native Californian married to an Italian, Judy has been teaching cooking in Florence for more than fifteen years, and she's a great authority when it comes to exploring the culinary side of Tuscany.

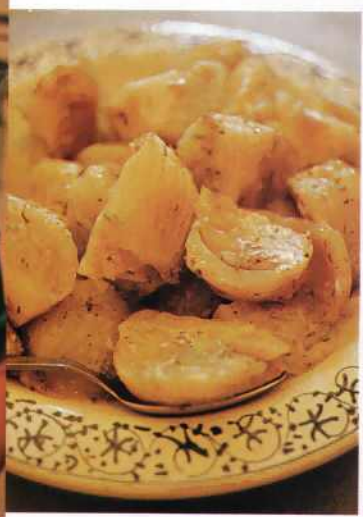
Our day at the Divina school began, appropriately enough, at Florence's Mercato Centrale, a sprawling market housed in a huge stone-and-steel construction that covers a full city block. With its two dozen arches, the Mercato—built in the 1860s, when the city was Italy's capital—looks like a massive French train station. After the floods of 1966, it was extensively renovated and a second floor was added.

Before we entered this Cathedral of St. Food, located a short walk from the Divina kitchen, Judy gave us a briefing. She is plump and likable, as cooking teachers should be. Take her course, gain a friend. We were a party of four: my wife and I, our daughter and her boyfriend, Andrew Major.

**Clockwise from right: The Duomo; the owners of Casa del Vino; twice-cooked fennel; learning how to make panna cotta.**

"In Italy, you look first," Judy told us. "When you see what's good and fresh at the market, you then create your menu. Tuscan cooking is about sourcing ingredients. So let's go shopping."

Our first stop was a meat stand, Simone Manetti's, where Judy introduced us to a very stylish butcher: her hair was coiffed, her lipstick fresh, her pearl necklace real. There was hugging and kissing.



"You're the prettiest butcher I've ever seen," my wife told her, getting into the spirit.

At the next stand, Baroni Alimentari, Judy declared, "You can't shop on an empty stomach." And so we tasted four-year-old Parmigiano-Reggiano and twelve-year-old balsamic vinegar. We also sampled prosciutto from Parma (sweet), prosciutto from Umbria (salty) and *culatello* ham from Zibello (really expensive). The stand itself, like almost all the others, was as beautifully designed as a still life in the Uffizi. And the characters behind the counters were definitely as memorable as museum portraits.

## Great Tastes

We met, for example, Riccardo Guerrini, owner of the cow-face stand, who was happy to pose for a picture holding a sample of his merchandise next to his own face. (Stripped of all hair, cow faces look like Halloween masks, but they are actually edible.)

Then there were Daria and Ida, the so-called Chicken Sisters, who told us how to stuff a chicken neck before baking it. The dish sounded delicious even if it didn't look particularly appetizing. The chickens on sale at this stand—which was named Polleria Daria & Ida—had their feet attached, because buyers want to see how yellow they are. The yellower the better.

Because Judy escorted us, everywhere we went we were embraced as friends. The Mercato reminded me of a medieval village in the center of a modern city: everybody knew everybody, but newcomers were also welcomed and adopted into the big market family. The wide-open friendliness made me think of the American West, not just as it is now but even more as it was in the old days. I had begun this market odyssey reluctantly, but I was beginning to have a very good time.

"Whoops!" yelled Judy. "Low-flying pigeons."

We ducked, and the birds skimmed over our heads. Leaving the market briefly, we visited the Casa del Vino, a nearby wineshop that also served snacks. We ordered zucchini-eggplant-mozzarella-cream-cheese sandwiches and washed them down with several glasses of red wine. Judy repeated her mantra: "You can't shop on an empty stomach."

We returned to the market to make our purchases for lunch. We had seen what was available; it was time to pick. The zucchini looked good and fresh. The chicken



Carefully prepared roast beef, top, and focaccia, above, are part of a delicious dinner, right.



feet were especially yellow. That pricey ham was really delicious. And we decided on ricotta cheesecake for dessert. When we revisited the booths—this time to buy—it was almost like a reunion with old friends.

"No one uses recipes," Judy told us back at her school, "but there are guidelines. We're going to work with sun-dried tomatoes. You rehydrate dried tomatoes with warm red-wine vinegar."

We had decided to cook a chicken roll, so we purchased a double chicken breast that had been butterflied and pounded thin. Laid out on the kitchen table, it

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## Great Tastes

resembled an artist's blank canvas. Taylor went to work "painting" it with the tomatoes, sheets of Pecorino (a sheep's-milk cheese) and slices of the ham. She finished by adding sage, rosemary and garlic.

"That's our trinity," Judy said of the herbs. "Now roll up the chicken."

Taylor rolled the chicken breasts up like a carpet.

"Do you know how to tie things?" Judy asked.

"No," Taylor said.

"Do you knit?"

"No."

"Macramé?"

"No."

"Do you sail?"

"Yes."

"Can you make sailors' knots?"

"Yes."

Taylor tied up the rolled chicken like a furling sail.

"Beautiful."

We cooked our chicken on top of the stove in a pan with a triple-clad bottom.

### Judy's Tips

**SOAK DRIED PORCINI MUSHROOMS** in warm, not hot, filtered water. After removing them, freeze the mushroom water in an ice-cube tray and reserve for later use; it will impart a rich flavor to sauces.

**MAKE GARLIC BREAD** with an extra-virgin olive oil, preferably one with a deep green color, which indicates that the flavor is intense and peppery.

**PREPARE FRIED SAGE** by placing an anchovy between two sage leaves; secure with a toothpick and fry.

**COOK ONIONS** until they are almost burned; doing this makes them sweeter.

**USE SEA SALT** to bring out the flavor of fresh sage.

**TRY MIXING BALSAMIC VINEGAR AND HONEY** for a really special marinade for just about anything.

*More culinary tricks, tips and recipes can be found on the Divina's informative Web site, which also contains Judy's seasonal newsletter, "Over the Tuscan Stove."*

Boyfriend Andrew was put in charge of turning it—around and around, browner and browner. Judy instructed him to hit it a couple of times, and Andrew spanked the chicken with a wooden spoon. He also poured some red wine over it. Meanwhile Lesley peeled and sliced garlic while I cut up zucchini and cleaned artichoke hearts. When the chokes were as clean as I could get them, Judy put them in a pan with olive oil, garlic and salt.

"At this point the French add cream," she explained. "They work on a dish all day, and then everything tastes like cream. The Tuscans add water."

Judy brought out a huge pasta pot and filled it with water. When it began to boil, she tossed in a handful of sea salt. Lots of water and lots of salt seemed to be the secret. Then in went pasta that looked like white licorice sticks. When it was al dente, we added the pasta to the zucchini and poured red wine over the dish (another Judy strategy, we discovered).

"The whole thing here is making a big deal about what you eat," Judy said, lecturing as she stirred. "Italians go '*buonissimo*.' Americans go '*Mmmm*,' which in Italy is a sound reserved for the bedroom. When Italians hear Americans going '*Mmmm*' in a restaurant, they say, 'I'll have what she's having.'"

We all sat down at Judy's table and passed the pasta.

"Eat up," Judy said. "You never wait to eat your pasta or drink your coffee."

Lesley tasted the pasta dish and said, "*Mmmmmmmmm*."

Taylor said, "There you go again with those sex noises, Mother."

The whole meal was *mmmm*, and we had cooked it. We felt *buonissimo*. ❖  
*Private one-day classes are offered year-round on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. The price is \$300 a person (\$250 a person for each additional class) and includes all food and wine, a copy of Judy's cookbook, From the Market to the Table: Recipes From the Central Market, and an apron. The classes run from 11 to 4, and Judy will teach at a level that is comfortable for you. 011-39-055-292-578; divinacucina.com.*

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