

TAKE A TRIP TO THE ROLLING HILLS OF TUSCANY

Tastes *of* Italia

THE BEST IN ITALIAN COOKING

FEBRUARY 2013

The Winter Table

Pasta • Polenta • Stews • Chocolate Desserts and more



40

Recipes To Make
The Winter Warm

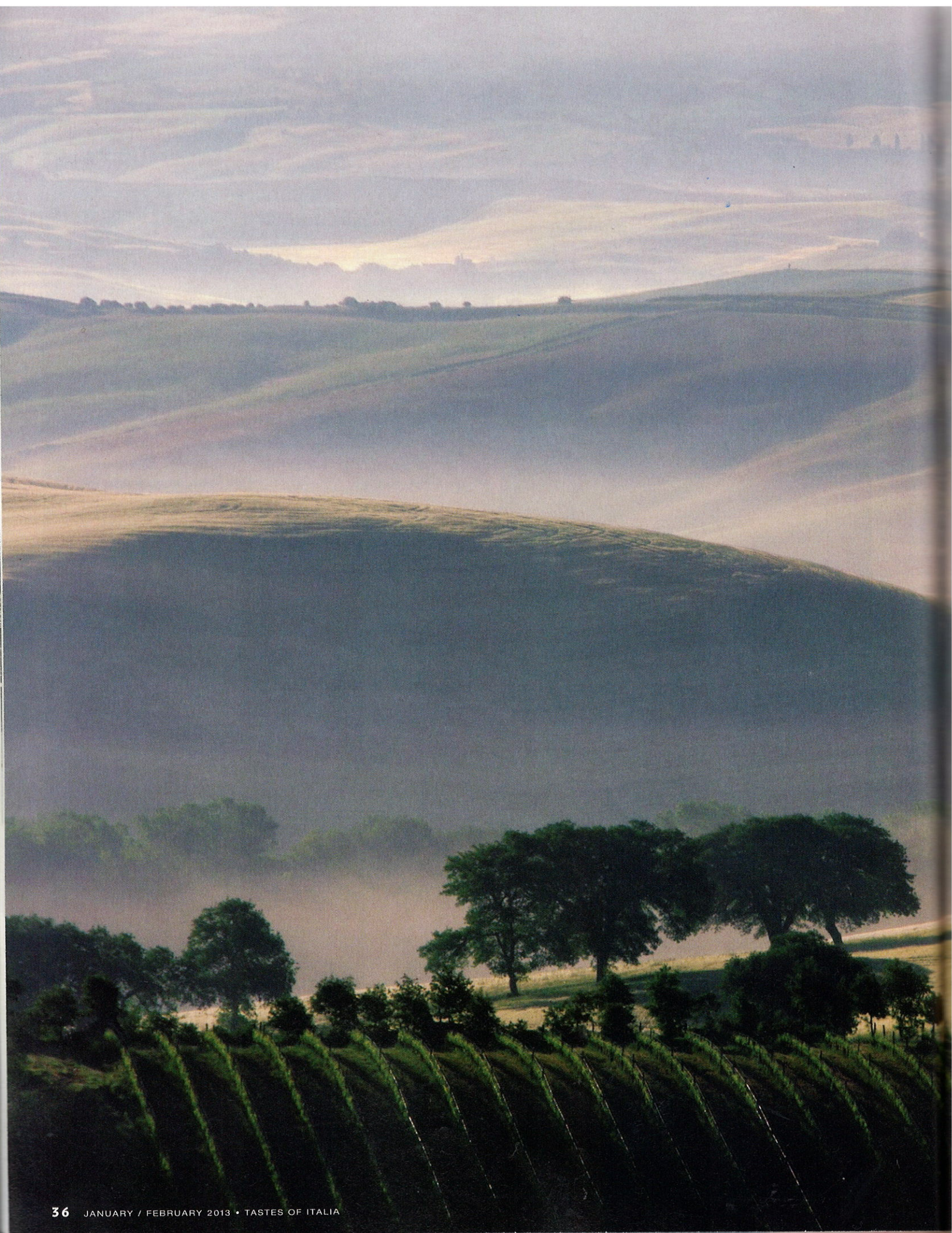
Home Grown
Recipes From
**Boston's
North End**

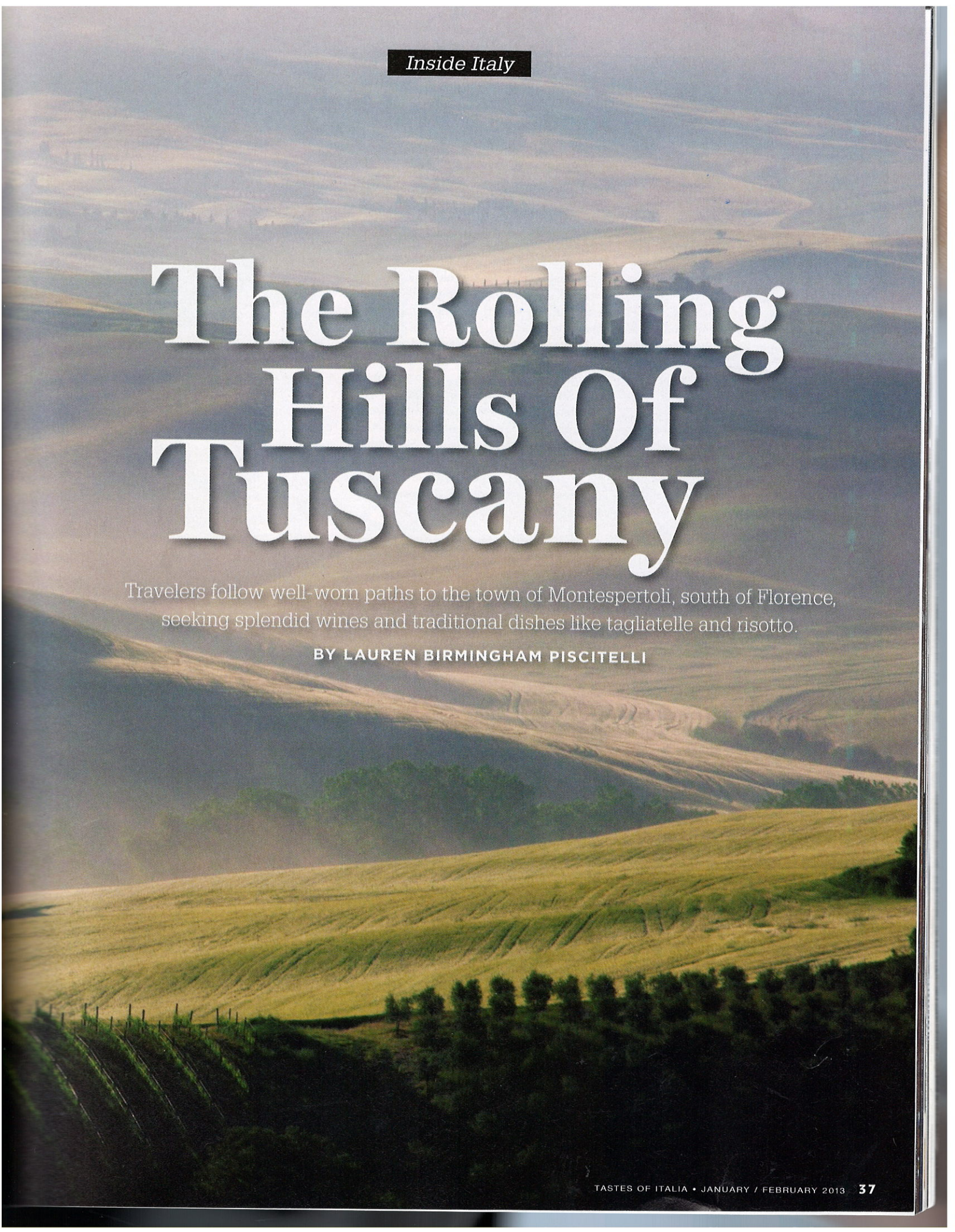
By Joe Famularo

FEBRUARY 2013



U.S. and CANADA \$5.95





Inside Italy

The Rolling Hills Of Tuscany

Travelers follow well-worn paths to the town of Montespertoli, south of Florence, seeking splendid wines and traditional dishes like tagliatelle and risotto.

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Rolling hills lined with tall slim cypress trees, yellow fields of sunflowers covering la madre terra and vineyards stretching as far as the eye can see. This is Tuscany.

Set in the heart of Montespertoli in a little town 25 minutes south of Florence, is Signore Fabrizio. Winemaker, olive oil producer, food lover and father, he is the landlord of the podere, his family villa and vineyard that dates back to 1600. Here, recipes and winemaking have passed from one generation to the next.

Inside the kitchen, Signore Fabrizio is slicing a warm loaf of crusty bread while saying *buongiorno* to his two Tuscan cooks, Melina and Simonetta. White lace kerchiefs tie back their hair and frame their tanned faces. They are carefully cleaning a pile of precious porcini, which are still covered in morning dew. A big copper pot of pappa al pomodoro, tomato soup, simmers on the back burner. They cook *casereccia*, which translates to “simple and home made,” while conversing in a Florentine dialect that Dante once spoke.

I am sipping a creamy cappuccino and nibbling on a just-baked piece of torta rustica di mele—rustic apple cake. It is 8 a.m. and the fragrant aromas in the kitchen are already stirring up my appetite.

“I grew up on this,” says Signore Fabrizio, as he ladles a big red creamy scoop of pappa al pomodoro onto his bread. His hazel eyes light up as he talks about his childhood memories at the podere. “Pappa al Pomodoro is the meal that every little boy ate every day after the milk of the mamma in Italy; it was before baby food. This was the baby food! Every mamma would say ‘eat more pappa al pomodoro, the more you eat, the more you will grow.’ But in reality, it was the only thing everyone had to eat,” Now, he says, his wife, Annette, makes it for their daughters, Gioia (five years old) and Sofia (four years old).

Pappa al pomodoro is made with fresh tomatoes, bread, garlic, olive oil and basil. It is considered a poor man’s soup.

“My great-grandfather, Florindo, would eat this soup early in the morning, like a little spuntino, around 11 a.m., and especially during the olive oil and wine harvest. It gave him energy to continue his hard work in the

vineyard and fields. He was a farmer and he worked for the famous wine producer Antinori,” he says.

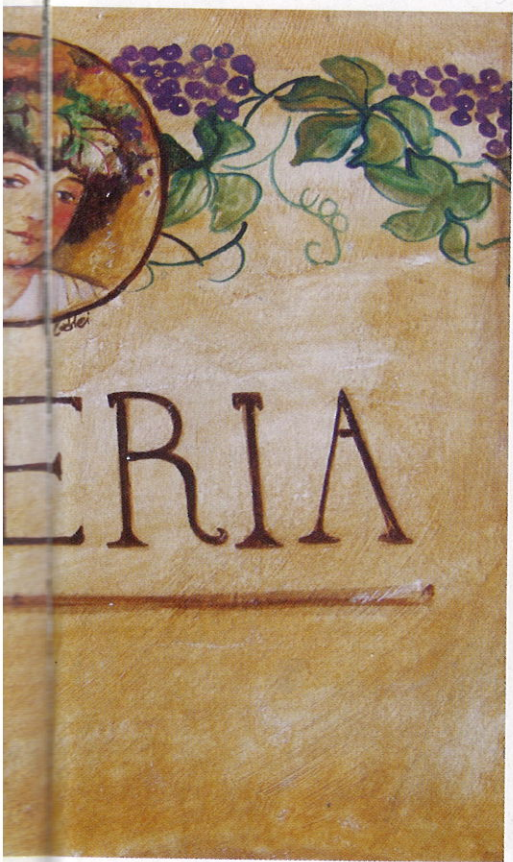
His grandfather, he recalls, was an eighth generation wine maker and the family is registered in the Museo de Vino. “Wine has always been made here in Chianti,” says Signore Fabrizio. In the old days, makers worried more about how they would transport the wine than they did about the quality of it, he adds.

“Today it has all changed and we select only quality grapes and strive to improve the method of production. At the podere, we make our Vino Chianti Montespertoli DOCG and Terre di Bracciatice, along with Riserva Ingannamatti Vino Chianti Montespertoli DOCG, aged in oak barrels. We also produce our Super Tuscan PAX Vino Rosso Toscano IGT, which is made with Sangiovese, Colorino, Cabernet and Merlot grapes. The king of grapes is the Sangiovese!

His white wine, Anselmo Vino Bianco Toscano, IGT, is made from Malvasia and Riesling grapes. He also produces rosé, grappa and Vin Santa del Chianti DOCG. “I dedicated our Vin Santo to our first daughter, Gioia. My wine making process is natural, and I do not alter nor add anything to it,” he says.

“Although things have changed since the days of my great-grandfather, some things





Chef Melina, left, with Stephanie and Lori of Cooking Vacations. This page: Sign at Signore Fabrizio's winemaking cantina; Tuscan travelers villa; the podere's wine in the cantina.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY:
Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



have remained the same, like our cuisine. We cook in harmony with the four seasons. Our formaggi, salumi, and prodotti biologici stagionali are the most important things in Tuscan cooking. And it is always a pleasure when I visit the local markets early in the morning and see our local artisans. We are like a family. The shepherds in our Tuscan hills herd the sheep and make the local cheeses, too," he says.

"These are the beautiful things visitors have the chance to see in Tuscany. Passion, along with hard working hands, goes into the making of our local food products," he adds. He is proud of his Tuscan heritage and his family traditions.

A typical Tuscan meal is, he says, "like going to church. We have rules and respect, starting with our antipasti. Our antipasti in Tuscany are like little side dishes. They include bruschette con cannellini, cipolle e olio extra vergine di olive, white beans slow cooked with onion, or crostini di fegatini di pollo, chicken liver served on toasted bread, carciofi sott'olio, marinated artichoke hearts served under extra virgin olive oil, and platters of prosciutto, salumi, melone e fichi, salted ham, salami, pecorino cheese and figs. We use farro and spelt in our cooking, and

our Chianina beef is the best in all of Italy."

As Signore Fabrizio tells his story of great winemakers past, I cannot help but keep an eye on the two cooks. Simonetta and Melina are making a creamy risotto with a hint of gorgonzola, a cheese that is made locally from sheep's milk. They use arborio rice grown in Maremma, a region in southern Tuscany. I watch as they carefully grate a little Parmigiano Reggiano and drizzle a line of extra virgin olive oil on top. Ingredients are kept simple. Their extra virgin, first cold pressed olive oil is made on the property. It's a fundamental ingredient in their kitchen.

"We never use butter. Butter is used for cakes," exclaims Signore Fabrizio.

Simonetta and Melina are also making fresh tagliatelle that will be served with a hearty duck sauce. The duck sauce slowly simmers and the kitchen aromas swirl.

"Here at my Tuscan table, you cannot go without having a second course. Today we are cooking up something very special, fried fennel and Peposa Fiorentina. Peposa is a thick beef stew—not using the most noble parts of the cow—and is cooked with garlic and pepper. The meat is cooked very slowly on a low heat for a minimum of three hours. This slow cooking process tenderizes the meat and sets the flavors. In our kitchen, we spice up this recipe with a little Sangiovese," he explains.

For dessert, the women are making tiramisu with black figs and Vin Santo. They are gently peeling the figs and layering the sweet fruit between billowy layers of sponge cake that have been dipped in the Vin Santo and Mascarpone cheese.

"Vin Santo, which translates to holy wine, is a perfect ending to every good meal, and you don't have to wait until dinner to have one," says Signore Fabrizio as he says "salute."

The aromas fill the warm kitchen while outside, the fields and rolling landscape look like a painting by Leonardo di Vinci. Simonetta and Melina are now setting the table. It is time for lunch already. This is a Tuscan traveler's dream.

Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli is founder and owner of Cooking Vacations Italy which specializes in culinary tours, hands-on cooking classes and cultural adventures in Italy. www.cooking-vacations.com; (617) 247-4112.



A Tuscan street in Certaldo. Inset: Chef Simonetta with cantucci, traditionally served with vin santo wine at the end of a Tuscan meal.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY:
Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

"THESE ARE THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS VISITORS HAVE THE CHANCE TO SEE IN TUSCANY. PASSION, ALONG WITH HARD WORKING HANDS, GOES INTO THE MAKING OF OUR LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTS."



PIAZZA DEL CAMPO: Famed medieval center of Siena, Tuscany.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY:
Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Mushroom Risotto

Here is a simple risotto that can be made year round. Dried porcini or fresh wild mushrooms add a real boost of flavor, but cultivated mushrooms are delicious, too. This dish should have a creamy, not mushy, consistency, and should be served with plenty of extra Parmesan cheese.

- 7 ounces of fresh porcini mushrooms or
½ ounce dried porcini**
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 2 large cloves of garlic, finely chopped**
- 1 medium onion, chopped**
- ½ teaspoon black pepper**
- 1¾ cups (14 oz.) Arborio rice**
- ½ cup dry white wine**
- Salt, to taste**
- 1¾ pints chicken broth or good vegetable
stock, heated**
- ½ cup freshly grated Parmesan
cheese, plus extra to serve**

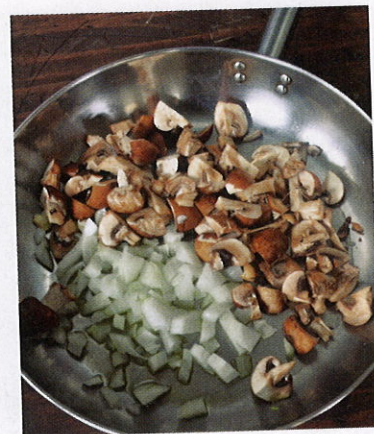
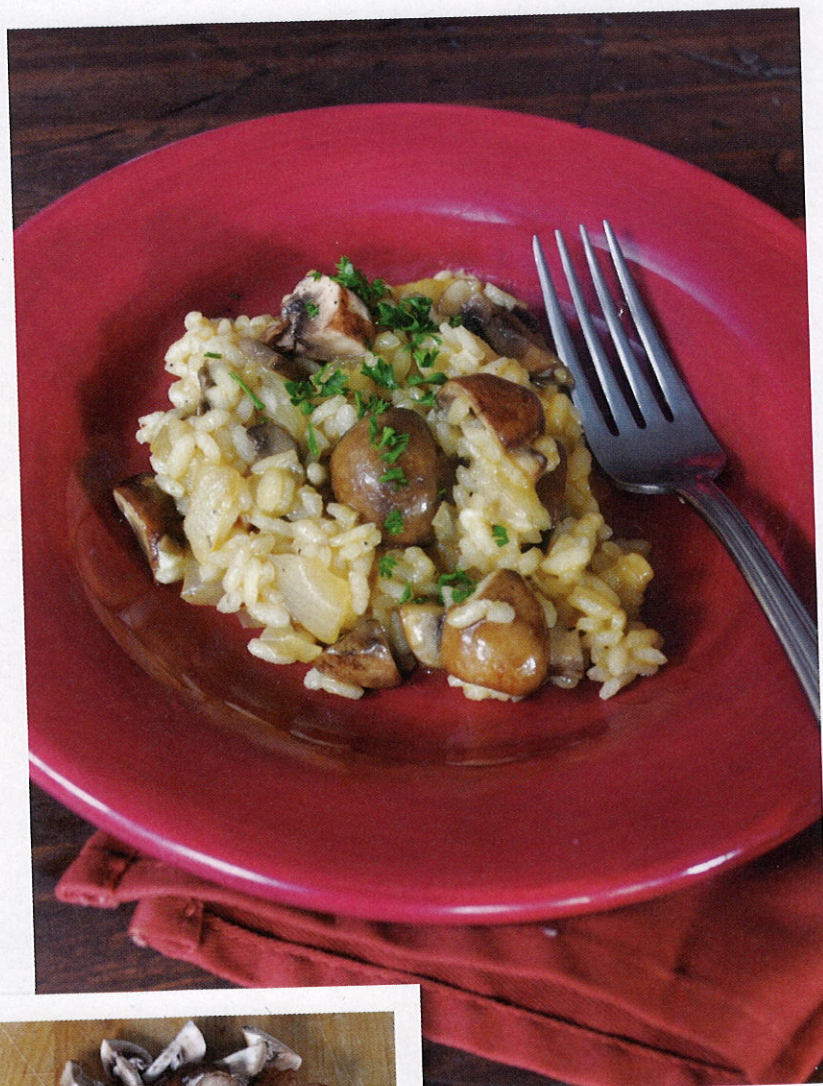
If using dried mushrooms, soak them in hot water for 30 to 40 minutes. Lift them out of the liquid (which can be used in another dish), rinse well then chop coarsely. Alternatively, clean and trim the fresh mushrooms, chop and set aside.

Meanwhile heat the butter and oil in a large frying pan. Add the garlic, onion, black pepper and chopped mushrooms. Sauté gently until softened but not browned. Transfer half the vegetable mixture to a plate and set aside.

Stir the rice into the remaining vegetable mixture in the pan. Sauté for 5 minutes, stirring constantly to make sure the grains are well coated. Pour in the wine, and when it has been absorbed, season with salt to taste.

Add the hot broth to the rice, a ladleful at a time, waiting until each addition is absorbed, and stirring constantly. After 20 to 25 minutes the broth should be absorbed and the rice should be tender. Remove the pan from the heat, check for salt then stir in the rest of the vegetables and Parmesan. Serve immediately, offering extra cheese to sprinkle on top.

Makes 6 servings.



Tuscan Apple Cake

- 1 cup almonds, peeled and ground**
- Grated rind from 1 lemon**
- ½ cup plus 6 tablespoons sugar, divided**
- 2 medium green apples, cored and peeled**
- ½ cup butter, melted**
- 4 large whole eggs**
- 1⅓ cups all-purpose flour**
- 2 teaspoons baking powder**

Preheat oven to 350°F. In a small bowl mix the ground almonds with the grated lemon rind and the ½ cup of sugar.

Peel the apples and cut them into quarters and then into thin slices. Melt the butter.

In a separate bowl, beat the eggs with the 6 tablespoons of sugar; add the melted butter, the flour and the baking powder, and beat well.

Pour the mixture into an 8-inch cake pan, lined with parchment paper.

Press the sliced apples into the mixture, pushing them right down into the pan (so they are covered). Sprinkle the mixture with the sugar, almond and lemon mix.

Bake 35 to 45 minutes or until a toothpick inserted comes out clean. Makes 8 servings.





Peposo

- 2 pounds of lean tender beef, medium diced**
- Olive oil for the skillet, about 3 tablespoons**
- 5 cloves of garlic, unpeeled**
- Sprigs of sage and rosemary**
- Salt, to taste**
- ¼ teaspoon of black pepper**
- 4 cups of Chianti wine**
- Tuscan bread, sliced**

Place the diced beef in a large skillet with olive oil. Add unpeeled garlic cloves, herbs, salt and pepper. Cover with the wine and cook on low heat until the meat is extremely soft, about 4 hours.

Toast the slices of bread in the oven or on the grill, ladle the Peposo over the bread and serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings.

Pappa al Pomodoro

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 2 or 3 garlic cloves, to taste**
- 1 pound of ripe tomatoes, peeled and chopped**
- ¼ to ½ cup fresh basil leaves; reserve a few to chop and use as garnish**
- 4½ cups of clear vegetable broth (celery, carrot, onion, parsley, pinch of salt and pepper to taste)**
- 11 ounces of dried bread, diced into cubes**
- Sea salt, to taste**
- Black pepper, to taste**

In a large pot, sauté the garlic in the extra virgin olive oil on low heat. Add the peeled and chopped tomatoes and a few basil leaves and let stew for 15 minutes. Slowly add the broth and then the diced bread to the mix. Cook another 10 minutes.

Turn off heat. Let stand for an hour. After an hour, stir the soup; the bread will have absorbed most of the liquid. Traditionally soup is served as is. For a smoother texture, puree with a hand blender.

Serve warm adding a few chopped basil leaves and a swirl of extra virgin olive oil on top. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Makes 4 servings.



MUCH OF THE CHARM OF THE TUSCAN COUNTRYSIDE COMES FROM SCENES LIKE THIS ONE, WITH TILE ROOFTOPS AND ROLLING HILLS LINED WITH CYPRESS TREES AND VINEYARDS.

