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# Cortona's SUNFLOWER

Distinctive terra cotta ware from Tuscany is decorated with a girasole, or sunflower, as a reminder of its sunny heritage. Traditional shapes include wine pitchers, bean pots, and vases.

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

**O**ne single sunflower adorns each piece of handmade terrabruga. On a soft yellow background, resembling the color of fresh whipped butter, shades of emerald, fava, forest and olive green are transformed into the symbol of Tuscany, the sunflower. Terrabruga e terrecotte Cortonesi is a cookware that originated in Cortona in medieval times, explains Antonella Azzini. She and husband Giulio Lucarini are experts in terracotte. Their shop, Terrabruga, is located on Via Nazione 54, in Cortona, just steps from the Piazza della Repubblica in the centro storico.

"Originally the cookware did not have a design painted on it. Then in the late 1800s, a girasole, meaning sunflower, was used and it became instantly famous. Giulio and I have continued the handmade production," says Antonella.

Terrabruga is an inviting store. A wooden shelf outside the entrance displays wine pitchers, vases, and olive oil bottles with shiny silver sprouts, each one painted with a signature sunflower. Step inside to find what looks more like a rustic kitchen than a pottery shop. Tuscan bean pots, clocks, cappuccino cups, pasta bowls, fondue sets, cheese graters and funnels are endless. Dishware features words like bruschetta, aglio, olio and formaggio. Handmade and painted, no two pieces are exactly the same.

"In our production we recreate the old world shapes, and they haven't changed over time. Our terrabruga is safe to eat and bake in," says Antonella. A renaissance vase catches my eye, and like all the others on the shelf, it is slightly different from the others, varying in color, shape and size. No machines; it's an art, and that's the beauty of it.

I met Antonella and Giulio on my first visit to Cortona, and I return each year to visit my favorite Tuscan town and shop for my own kitchen. They were not born into this business; they learned it. In 1980, Giulio was introduced to Giuseppe Marconi, the master maker of







Antonella Azzini and her husband, Giulio Lucarini, at their Terrabrugia cookware studio and shop in Cortona. The traditional terra cotta ware originated in medieval times.

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Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



cocci, a word that means “pieces of cookware for the people,” and he taught him the craft. Giuseppe, who was born in 1896, had been making terrabruga all his life.

“The master taught my husband the process of mixing, kneading, molding, painting and firing. Giulio creates each piece in the studio, while I am here in the store. During the winter I paint,” says Antonella. She holds up a round terracotta with the word Fagioli written on it, and tells me how to cook Tuscan white beans.

“In the old days, my grandmother would fill a large fiasco with beans, one by one. She’d add water, garlic, sea salt and olive oil and put the bottle in the fireplace under the cinders overnight to cook.”

She takes off the cover of the pot and explains, “This terrecotta must be placed in ice cold water the night before it is first used and only thereafter can you cook in it,” she says. Tuscan beans are the perfect first dish. Fill the pot half full with presoaked beans, cover them with water, add one or two cloves of garlic, some sage, olive oil and sea salt to taste, and cook on a low heat. Stir occasionally and use a *proteggi fiamma* (a disc of steel that goes between the flame and the pottery. It disperses the heat).

“When the beans are cooked, drizzle them with olive oil, sea salt and serve. You can add them to *menestre di fagioli*, a hearty bean soup; *Ribolita*, a recooked bean and bread soup; or puree them with garlic, olive oil and salt for *fettunta*,” she says. *Fettunta*—simple toasted bread garnished with garlic and olive oil—is her favorite.

To make *fettunta*, take day old bread and slice it thin, toast it golden, rub it with garlic, drizzle with olive oil, and sprinkle with sea salt and oregano. Garnishes can vary based on the seasons. You can use sweet little cherry tomatoes with black olives, grilled vegetables, or *fegatto*—cooked chicken liver with garlic, oil, sea salt and pepper.

As Antonella explains her recipes, we are interrupted by church bells. They ring out in the Piazza, reminding us it’s *mezzogiorno*. All this food talk has worked up an appetite. Though she never closes her shop for lunch, on this day we head to a nearby dining spot, La Loggetta, a ristorante serving classic Tuscan cuisine. Set in a 12th century palazzo at Piazza di Pescheria, it is the brainchild of chef/owner Marco Frivoli and his wife, Lara Sonnati. The menu tempts with dishes like pasta con il ragu di carne o d’anatra, porcini di montagne, gnocchi fatto in casa con zucca e Balsamico and cinta.

As Lara greets us at the door and tells us





The bell tower in the historic center of Cortona. Originally a walled Etruscan city, it was conquered by the Romans, then the Goths, and gained its freedom in the 12th century.

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IL 15 MARZO 1860  
LA CITTA' DI CORTONA FU ANNESSATA AL REGNO D'ITALIA.  
PER IL TRATTATO DI VARESE DEL 1860.  
E PER LA LEGGE N. 1793 DEL 1861.  
DEL RE VITTORIO EMANUELE II.  
TUTTO IL TERRITORIO DELLA CITTA' DI CORTONA  
FECCE PARTE DEL REGNO D'ITALIA.  
NEL GIORNO DEL 15 MARZO 1860.

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The bell tower in the historic center of Cortona. Originally a walled Etruscan city, it was conquered by the Romans, then the Goths, and gained its freedom in the 12th century.

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IL 15 MARZO 1860  
LA CITTA' DI CORTONA FU ANNESSATA AL REGNO D'ITALIA.  
PER IL SUO PATRIMONIO STORICO E MONUMENTALE  
E PER LA SUA BELLEZZA PASTORALE  
DELLA SUE VINEGGIE ARABICHE  
FUTURO DEL SUO TERRITORIO  
TUTTO IL SUO PATRIMONIO  
FUTURO DEL SUO TERRITORIO  
DELLA CITTA' DI CORTONA  
SERA FINITA - 1900 - 1900 - 1900

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about the daily specials, Chef Marco works the kitchen turning natural products into masterpieces using the celebrated Chianina steak, porcini and red chicory. Today's menu features thick strands of Tuscan pasta in a slow cooked duck sauce, farro whisked with red chicory and grana padano, red turnip gnocchetti in a yellow pumpkin sauce with a warm veil of goat cheese, ravioli in slow stewed pigeon sauce, and other tempting dishes.

Marco started out as a pastry chef, worked in Arezzo for 10 years and then took over this restaurant, which at the time was not doing well. "It was my dream to come back to Cortona and take on this projecto di passione," Lara adds, "I just followed. Marco and I were engaged at 15 years old. We were young and I always followed him in the kitchen. We met in Cortona, I followed him to Arezzo and I followed him back for love," she says.

The couple is passionate about their craft. "The gnocchi are made with potatoes that were grown on our mountains, just like our Cinta," says Lara. Cinta is baby veal that is only raised in Cortona. It's DOP, because like the Chianina, it is protected. The cinta is prepared in a simple way—roasted. It is lean, so when it hits the heat, the fat melts away.

In the restaurant, "We use only natural products and change the menu following the seasons. Daily specials change too based on what is fresh. Bread is baked each day on site using a cold stone ground wheat, which gives it a coarse texture that is good for cooking with," explains Chef Marco.

A long lunch always ends with dolce. As our café arrives, Lara also brings a just-baked crostata. As she cuts into the golden crispy crust, a single sunflower appears at the bottom of the platter.

### Notes On Cortona

Cortona, a charming Tuscan hilltop town, is in the province of Arezzo and overlooks Lake Trasimeno. It was once a powerful walled Etruscan city that was conquered by the Romans, then the Goths and became free in the 12th century. It's home to the Basilica of Santa Margherita, Le Celle, a 1211 convent where St. Francis lived and Cortona Sangiovese DOC.

Narrow cobblestoned streets reserved only for pedestrians spill with cafes along the Via Nazionale. The locals eat late and Tuesday is outdoor market in the Piazza Signorelli. The Teatro Signorelli (named after native painter Luca Signorelli), Palazzo del Comune and Palazzo Casali, along with wine bars, art galleries and hand-crafted leather shops, keep the village alive. From the small Piazza delle Repubblica to the Piazza Signorelli, children play soccer, men walk arm-in-arm, women wear hats, and linens left outside at night remain untouched. It is a safe and dreamy place.

From the first Etruscans to Saint Francis, Signore Signorelli and Francis Mayes, Cortona continues to flirt with souls who come here and never want to leave.

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# Ristorante Loggetta

anda nel Loggiato



Cortona's Ristorante La Loggetta, with husband and wife Marco Frivoli, executive chef, and Lara Sonnati. The restaurant is located in a 12th-century palazzo, and the menu changes with the seasons.

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY:**  
Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli





## Tuscan-Style Braised Beef with Tomatoes

- 3** pound beef roast (rump or sirloin)
- 3** cloves garlic, minced
- 1** tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary
- Pinch of salt and freshly ground black pepper
- ¼** cup extra virgin olive oil
- ¼** cup diced prosciutto
- 1** onion, chopped
- 2** carrots, peeled and sliced 1/8-inch thick
- 2** celery stalks, chopped
- 3** chopped sage leaves
- 3** bay leaves
- 1** cup dry red wine
- 1** (14.5-oz.) can crushed tomatoes
- 2** cups beef broth, divided
- 6** medium white or red potatoes, diced

**½** cup chopped Italian parsley

Tie the roast with kitchen string if necessary. Combine the garlic, rosemary, salt and pepper. Cut small slits into the roast and rub garlic mixture into surface; set aside.

In a large pot, heat the olive oil and prosciutto on high heat. Add the roast and brown on all sides. Add onion, carrots, celery, sage and bay leaves and cook on medium for 8 minutes. Add the wine, tomatoes and 1/2 cup beef broth. Partially cover and simmer for about 3 hours (about 1 hour cooking time per pound.) Check every hour and add remaining beef broth as necessary. After 2 hours add the potatoes.

When the meat is done, add salt and pepper to taste. Skim fat off the top and remove bay leaves. Transfer roast to serving platter and carve into slices. Serve with juices, carrots and potatoes. Garnish with chopped parsley.

Makes 12 servings.





## White Bean Soup with Spinach and Prosciutto

- 3 teaspoons olive oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- 4 cups cooked or canned white beans (like cannellini, Great Northern or Navy)
- 6 cups vegetable or beef broth
- 1 cup diced prosciutto
- 1 cup diced red potatoes
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary
- 3 cups chopped fresh spinach
- Salt and pepper to taste

Heat the oil on medium in a large pot. Add the onion, garlic and celery and cook for 5 minutes. Add the beans, broth, prosciutto, potatoes and rosemary. Bring to a boil, then simmer for 30 minutes. Puree half the mixture and add back to soup. Add spinach and cook for an additional 10 minutes. Remove, let sit 15 minutes to cool slightly. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

## Tuscan Style Cannellini Beans

- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup olive oil
- 4 cloves garlic, sliced
- 1 (14-oz.) can whole tomatoes, drained and chopped
- 8 leaves fresh sage
- 1 (15-oz.) can white cannellini beans, drained
- Salt and pepper to taste

In a large skillet, combine olive oil and garlic and cook on medium for 3 minutes. Add tomatoes, sage, beans, salt and pepper. Stir to mix well. Reduce heat and cook on low for 15 minutes. Remove and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

