

FORK IN THE ROAD

Whisked away to another world

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY LINDA BERGSTROM**
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It is Day 4 of cooking class at La Bastide des Saveurs, and many of the 14 students are looking for chairs to catch a few minutes of rest before the whisking begins. But it is also dessert day, so a delicious reward is guaranteed.

Such are the joys, and challenges, of a gourmet cooking class at the estate of the Hostellerie Berard in La Cadiere d'Azur, France.

There is work to be done, and instructions to follow, during a day that can stretch to seven hours. The key also is to have fun. Who wants to work on vacation?

The setting is movie-set perfect: the rustic kitchen of a 19th century country house in the Provencal countryside. Pass by the herb and vegetable garden on the way to the kitchen with chef Rene Berard.

A cutting board and knife await each student around the wooden block table. Bowls of cubed butter, sugar, yellow apples and pine nuts give clues to the day's tasks. Berard walks in, and it's time to grab your knife, or your pen to take notes, and get cooking.

This class has its share of English speakers — from Australia, Canada, South Carolina and Chicago — so the translator takes her spot across from Berard. The veal stock is already boiling on the stove, and the smell is heavenly. Every so often during the day, an assistant stops by to pour in another bottle of red wine or drop in herbs, vegetables — even hooves.

The cooking lineup includes two kinds of tarts, lemon and apple, along with chocolate fondant (think: the original molten chocolate cake), a wafer and fruit creation, and a French classic in sauce vanille bourbon.

The students take turns cracking eggs, whisking, rolling out pastry, stirring sauces, even tossing cooked apples in the pan before the concoction is set aflame. Do something wrong, and you get a gentle suggestion from Berard. Do it correctly, and you get a smile and "Ah, perfect."

There is time to soak in the atmosphere. The window is cracked open and reveals a proto-



Chef Rene Berard joins students for lunch after a gourmet cooking class in La Cadiere d'Azur, France.



Veal stock, left, cooks all day. Students created two types of tarts, right, and more.



typical Provence countryside. Copper pans crowd the space above the stove, and dried herbs in glass jars line the countertops. The tile walls of red and yellow shout Provence.

Desserts do not make a meal, so the lesson includes an artichoke salad featuring artichokes from the garden. The students have had a hand in the entire

lunch menu, so the lamb that was boned and put in a marinade days ago is brought out. Berard arranges the meat before he hands it over to assistants to cook. That pot of veal stock is strained; not much is left from a day of work, but what a taste it has.

Then it is outside to the terrace to enjoy the fruits of the students' labor. A table under canopy is

already set with glasses, cutlery and bottles of wine.

And the food parade begins: bread and olive tapenade and anchovy paste; ratatouille; lamb with pistachio butter; vegetable terrine; mashed potatoes; artichokes with shallots, celery and mushrooms. And those desserts. Conversation ranges from the nightly parties (the seaport of

If you go

La Cadiere d'Azur is one of those picturesque French towns. It is big enough to have several decent restaurants and small enough that you feel you are experiencing life as a resident.

The charming Hostellerie Berard (hotel-berard.com) occupies several buildings in town. It may seem as if you are on a treasure hunt as you travel down corridors, up and down steps and across alleys to find your room. Ours had no embellishments but was functional and clean. The extras came in the fabulous view of the refreshing pool and enchanting valley below. Rooms range from \$145 out of season to \$420 for a suite in peak summer season.

The family of chef Rene Berard runs the hotel, the top-notch restaurant and the cooking school. Most cooking students opt for the longer four-day class; costs, including room for five nights, breakfasts and other events, start at \$2,450. You can also do what I did and hook up with a group for a one-day class; my rate was \$215. The schedule changes, so check for availability.

The location gives you day-trip options in Provence and the Cote d'Azur. Cassis has the beach and the seaside restaurants. Le Castellet has steep streets and touristy shops but a great regional wine shop at its base. Bormes-les-Mimosas has wonderful flowers and towering seascape views.

Cassis is on the night's agenda) to the bouillabaisse to the honey farm visited earlier in the week.

One of the younger students, recent college grad Arielle Saporita, of Chicago, marveled at the garden tour earlier in the week. "There were four different types of basil," she said.

The 1 p.m. stated ending time stretches to 3:30 p.m., but no one wants to leave.

There is talk that Berard will not be doing this much longer. Someone asks him directly. His words are translated: "The day I don't have a passion, I'll stop."

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Food, family focus of Sorrento class

**STORY AND PHOTOS
BY IRENE S. LEVINE**
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We arrive for our cooking class in Sorrento, Italy, on Pasquetta, the Monday after Easter — a national holiday celebrated by families throughout Italy. It seems appropriate that today everyone is focused on food and camaraderie.

When we reach the driveway of Villa Ida, we are greeted by Roberta Cuomo, the first member of the Cuomo clan we meet. We follow her along a short path lined with grape vines and fragrant oranges and lemons. She invites us to drink Neapolitan coffee and plum cake around one of the large, round, painted ceramic tables in a manicured backyard that feels like a family room.

My husband, Jerry, lived and worked in Italy for a year before we met, and now, many years later, we are here to feed my interest in Italian cookery and expand his role in the kitchen beyond frothy cappuccino and carciofi alla giudia (Roman-style fried artichokes).

The Cuomos, once a family of nobles, live in a private villa that houses 20 family members in an ochre-colored stucco enclave subdivided into eight apartments. Angela (Roberta's aunt), the capocuoco (executive chef) of the operation, soon joins us. In her late 50s, she speaks only limited English (Roberta is a proficient speaker), but Angela is adept at communicating with a warm smile and seems to understand every comment we make or question we ask. We roll up our sleeves and take our places at individual cooking stations set up on both sides of a long table next to the outdoor kitchen.

The menu includes a traditional four-course Neapolitan-style lunch using recipes that Angela and her mother, Ida, inherited. First, we make tomato sauce for a pasta dish that layers ziti from nearby Gragnano with baby eggplants and mozzarella cheese. The approach is hands-on, watching and doing.

Following Angela's lead, we marinate capretto (goat) in garlic, oil, vinegar, rosemary, sage, salt and pepper in preparation for roasting. Next she shows us how to flour and fry veal scaloppine. With our appetites growing, we assemble tiramisu for the dessert. Sophisticated looking but surprisingly simple to make, the desserts are placed in the fridge.

After we've finished preparations, Angela's brother-in-law "Charlie" invites us to his man cave, a cantina where he stores the wines he makes from seven grapes, including the distinctively sweet



A path lined with grape vines, oranges and lemons leads to Villa Ida in Sorrento, Italy.



Layered Gragnano pasta.

strawberry grapes of the area. "I come here with my problems to solve them," he says philosophically. "But when I enter the cantina, I forget them." It's easy to see why. We taste his white wine, red wine, merlot and a combination of red wine and gassosa soda that Charlie calls "babooza."

Charlie soon coaxes us out of our cushioned seats in the cave to get back to cooking. Two men in our group help him carry jugs of wine to another long dinner table, which is set under a pergola (pergola). A cantankerous rooster next door is the only distraction, momentarily interrupting the crooning of Stevie Wonder and Frank Sinatra over outdoor speakers.



Mozzarella with lemon leaves.

We finally sit down to lunch surrounded by our cooking school adoptive family. The menu, the flavors, the setting and the warmth of our instructors combine for an unforgettable Easter Monday. Angela brings out two additional holiday desserts: a colomba di Pasqua (a Panettone-like bread shaped like a dove) and a sweeter cake called pastira.

I'm not sure my husband will expand his menu at home, but I know that, like me, he has learned two of the most important cooking lessons: Stick to simple recipes with fresh, high-quality, local ingredients, and share meals with friends and family.

Whip up a trip

BY JUDY HEVRDEJS
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You've done the museums of Paris (twice), zip-lined in Colorado and stayed at pubs in Ireland. So you already know your travel style.

Now you have a taste for a culinary vacation. But how do you find one to match your kitchen skills and interests among the thousands, from celeb chef cruises to single classes?

You start, says Olivia Townsend, by asking a few more questions beyond "How much does it cost?"

Townsend is the owner of Epiculinary (epiculinary.com), a provider of cooking vacations around the world, so she regularly asks customers what they're looking for and gets a few questions in return. Such as?

Do I have to be a really good cook?

"As long as you can boil water and follow instructions, you should be fine," she says. "We do ask about the level of cooking experience. So if you've never cooked before and just want to have fun, we're not going to put you with a high-end chef who expects you to follow precisely."

Do I get to slice, dice, saute and puree — or just watch?

"Most of our tours are hands-on, but there are people who just don't want to get into the nitty-gritty of it. They'd rather watch somebody else do it, take it in, then just sit down and eat it." In that case, a demonstration lesson is the way to go.

Small group or big crowd?

"If you do a hands-on cooking lesson, you don't want to be in the kitchen with 20 people. You want a more personalized group, two to eight people. If it gets too big, you lose sight of the hands-on type of thing and it becomes demonstration."

How long are most classes?

"Most classes are two to three hours; then you sit down and have lunch."

So I'll have to stand the whole time?

"If you do a hands-on, are you willing to be at a station and follow the chef? Some chefs will move a little bit faster. So when the chef says, 'We need to chop these onions. So chop them like this,' you look at the chef and do it yourself. The chefs are not going to be so particular. They know people are coming to learn."

Do I need to know (pick one: French/Italian/Spanish)?

Make sure the chef speaks English or there is a translator, says Townsend.

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