



A Taste of the Infinite...

Nadia Arumugam packs her apron and heads to Le Marche...

WHEN YOU are preparing your dinner with a view over the infinite, you know you are on to something special. It's little wonder that the great Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi immortalised this vision amongst the most enraptured verses of the Romantic era, in his poem *L'infinito*. As your gaze wanders from the medieval edifices of the ancient town of Recanati to the rolling hills of Le Marche's gently undulating landscape and finally rests on the dusty peaks of the Apennines, it's easy to lose track of the task at hand. In this case, attending to the freshest vegetables from the local market, destined for a feast of the region's culinary specialities. But with the energetic and ever-compelling chef Franco Taruschio at the helm, our unlikely kitchen brigade, comprised of a motley crew of journalists and food writers, are certainly kept in check.

We have all travelled to this still relatively undiscovered part of Central Italy, not far from the shores of the Adriatic, to put to the test the first of the culinary experiences offered by the Gallery Hotel Recanati. The relaxed indulgence that encapsulates the hotel's ethos is mirrored in their latest experiment. More a gastronomic journey than a traditional cooking holiday, students luxuriate in the restored sixteenth-century *palazzo's* cutting-edge home comforts, offset by stunning contemporary decorative touches, and are treated to a whistlestop tour of Le Marche's epicurean offerings in between cooking classes in the hotel's own kitchen and, if they are lucky and the weather kind, in the outdoor kitchen on the spacious *terrazzo*.

Local Flavours

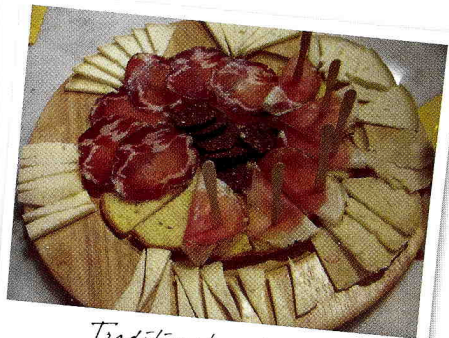
On our first evening we were whisked into the kitchen energised by a sumptuous assortment of cured meats, crostini and

traditional antipasti following our arrival. Brandishing chic black aprons emblazoned with the name of our course, "Cooking with Franco", we were fired up and ready to hit the stoves. But while the compact kitchen meant a lesson in restraint, especially for the over-enthusiastic cook like me who likes to have her fingers in all the pies, our tutor and host – the renowned Italian chef Franco Taruschio, a native of Le Marche with an invaluable knowledge of the local cuisine and genuine love of the region – more than compensated with his larger than life personality and colourful anecdotes. While Franco provided both entertainment and instruction, his wife, Anna, who had clearly caught her husband's passion for the area, enlightened us with a wonderful show-and-tell of the day's bargains from the vegetable market. Verdant *Barba di Frate*, which resemble chives, were fragrant with a heady aroma reminiscent of freshly cut grass and the crisp *puntarelle*, a type of chicory, with tender, green prongs much like young, slender asparagus tips, made up just a part of the fantastic spread of local pickings to which we were introduced. To start we began with the trimmed (by yours truly, of course) *puntarelle* – succulent, crisp and with a lemony tang thanks to an immersion in water flavoured with lemon halves to keep their colour and endow their tips with tight curls – tossed with a richly flavoured anchovy dressing. We followed this valiant first effort with a typical homemade pasta called *passatelli*, short, tender strands made from flour, Parmesan and breadcrumbs simmered in a clear fish broth – tasty and warming, it reminded me of the nourishing benefits of my mother's chicken soup. However, the highlight of the evening was the magnificent *porchetta*, a whole suckling pig, deboned, stuffed with melt-in-the-mouth pork fillet, rolled and tied – the craft of an artist. Franco already had this roasting to crisp perfection, a veritable Marchigian feasting dish in honour of our arrival.

Out on the town

The following days comprised a happy combination of foodie outings from which we would return both wiser and with delicious finds to fill up our suitcases; relaxed afternoons exploring local sights, enjoying the best Italian coffee and a pastry in a hidden *pastacceria*, and of course, in the kitchen with Franco, all organized with great precision and care by Stefania Ghergo, the hotel's general manager. On one such adventure we visited a local olive grove and olive oil





Traditional antipasti



Sport for choice in the deli

“ I do like to get up close and personal with my food ”

producer whose top notch oils have picked up countless awards across the globe. Gabriella and Elisabetta Gabrielloni, the two sisters who now run this historic family-owned business, treated us to a tour of the factory where the picked olive fruit is sorted, pressed and the luscious extra virgin olive oil bottled according to grade and composition. We then sat down to a formal olive oil tasting where we sipped and gargled their various oils and were taught to evaluate their flavour and viscosity, and how to discern the sought-after virtues of a good oil. Next up was a fuel stop at a traditional delicatessen and *enoteca* on a neighbouring hill top town of Osimo. There we browsed amongst the shelves heaving with local artisan foods, from preserves to cookies, sauces to handmade pasta made from traditional ancient grains and virtually salivated at the counters bearing whole joints of locally cured hams. With our appetites whetted we were treated to a sampling platter of the various goodies. Of my favourites, and there were many contenders, was a local uncured salami with a soft spreading consistency called *ciavoscolo nostrano*, a salty cured ham with a robust flavour and lastly a deliciously sticky “fig” sausage with a beautiful story to tell. *Lonzo de Fichi* which is made from a rich combination of figs, nuts,

walnuts, almonds and bound with a little pecorino cheese, has its origins in a period when wartime rations meant mothers had to be particularly imaginative to be able to keep their little ones well fed and satisfied. To bring this to life, Ann told us of how Franco’s mother would make this sweet sausage from ingredients that bloomed in their garden as a snack for her starving brood.

Something’s fishy ...

Now don’t take this the wrong way, but I do like to get up close and personal with my food. And this is exactly what we did on our excursion to the bustling fish, fruit and vegetable markets in the nearby coastal town of Ancona. Sadly we were too late to see the fishermen bring in their catch (Stefania assures me that on future courses they will be sure to set out in time) nonetheless the freshness of the day’s catch was clear to see in the market stalls. All manner of fish and shellfish, plump, bright-eyed and smelling of the sea they had just been pulled from, nestled in display counters, and each stall holder was kept busy trying to charm the *signoras* into buying their stock. Like most markets in the Mediterranean, these aren’t just places to buy your daily bread, no, it’s where you come to exchange your news with fellow shoppers. Walking around the market, you are immediately struck by the strong vegetal aroma and the gloriously imperfect shapes on offer – a world away from the sterile supermarket aisles back home, lined with row upon row of identical looking specimens which taste almost as plastic as they look. After Franco filled up his shopping basket, and the rest of us walked around rubbing our bellies, we moved on to our next adventure: a visit to a local wine producer. The Moroder family have been producing wine in this fertile corner of Ancona since 1837 from their 32 hectares of vines. A tour of the cellars and ancient caves which had previous been packed with snow and straw and used as a fridge, preceeded a most generous tasting of the estate’s quality wines. The star was undoubtedly the riserva *Dorico* which was given DOCG status in 2004. Made from carefully selected montepulicano grapes and aged in oak barrels, this was certainly a wine to be reckoned with; as we discovered after a glass or two!

Pasta Masterclass

For me, the highlight of the trip came quite unexpectedly in the form of a rather

■ The Gallery Hotel Recanati are running two *Gusto Infinito* courses in May, from the 17th–21st and 21st–25th in conjunction with chef Franco Taruschio. Courses cost £650 for four nights including bed and breakfast. For more information on the *Gusto Infinito* courses visit www.ghr.com or call 0039 071 981914.

diminutive Italian *signora*. Stefania’s grandmother, Signora Agatha, arrived on our final morning, wielding her pasta-making accoutrements and a lifetime of experience, to impart her wisdom. With everyone, including Franco, standing to attention, she weighed out her ingredients with an expertly trained eye and deftly transformed egg, flour and olive oil to a pillow-soft, silken dough. Then with a rolling pin nearly as tall as she was, she effortlessly rolled out the dough into an even, paper- thin disc the size of the table top. Needless to say, when her attentive, but nonetheless far less able, students hazarded a go, it quickly transpired that the apparent ease with which she worked was indeed all an illusion! Still, I must have impressed with my *capelletti* making skills and imaginative attempt to converse in Italian, as I left Recanati with fresh pasta for my dinner back in London and a ringing endorsement from Signora Agatha.



Nadia's pasta perfect!