

Created by: Debra C. Argen

Cooking School in Tuscany



Cooking lesson at [Toscana Saporita Cooking School](http://www.toscanasaporita.com) in Tuscany!

For those of you that read **Chefs' Recipes** each month, you may have noticed that I am definitely an avowed foodie, so when Edward F. Nesta and I traveled to Tuscany, we had to attend a Tuscan cooking school. As an ex-chair of a gourmet club, as well as a published cookbook author, "**Cooking with the Family**", I love to cook and recreate the flavors from my travels for my family and friends. For this month's **Chefs' Recipes**, I share the results of our cooking lesson at **ToscanaSaporita Cooking School** (www.toscanasaporita.com) at the Camporomano estate owned by Baron Gianfranco Pecchioli.

Sandra Lotti is the Owner/Director of **Toscana Saporita Cooking School**, as well as a respected chef, cooking magazine contributor, and published cookbook author with a new book which was just released entitled, "**Il Forno Racconta La Cucina della Lucchesia**" ("**Stories from the Burner**") which is in Italian, but will be printed in English shortly. She started the school 10 years ago, and sessions run 6 months of the year.



Sandra, Chef **Christopher Covelli**, who joined Sandra five years ago at the school and is also the owner of **L'Uva Restaurant** in Provincetown, Massachusetts (www.luvarestaurant.com), together with chefs, **Joseph Hahn** and **Marco Barcaroli**, taught Edward and I, plus 11 students of mixed ages and cooking ability, Tuscan cooking in 5 days. Due to prior commitments, Edward and I were only able to attend Day 1 of the cooking class, but we were inspired by what we learned. The class began with important knife skills where we learned to dice, chop and slice, celery, carrots, onions and fennel, of which the first 3 ingredients are the ingredients for soffritto, the basis for Tuscan cooking. From there, the energetic and charming Sandra beguiled the class with humorous stories and wisdom. She shared some great secrets with the students of adding a pinch of baking soda to boiling water, which will speed up the cooking process of vegetables, and will also keep the vegetables white, (example: fennel). To remove pesticides and other bacteria and dirt from the skin of fruits and vegetables, add 2 tablespoons of baking soda to 1 quart of water and soak the fruits or vegetables for 20 minutes. After 20 minutes, you may use the fruits or vegetables as you desire.

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After we prepared our soffrito ingredients, and sliced fennel for our Gratinated Fennel (Finocchi gratinati), Marco taught the class about when to marinate and when to use an infusion with meats. He demonstrated “how-to” with a beautiful pork loin, which the class would be eating for dinner. Christopher explained the difference between gelato and ice cream, and had us sample a pistachio gelato that we would be having for lunch. Joseph and Christopher taught us how to make homemade pasta, stressing the importance of ingredients and then set the class to work with forks, hands and then later cranking the dough through a pasta machine to achieve perfect, long sheets of pasta, from which we made tagliatelle, while Sandra made a porcini mushroom sauce for the tagliatelle using a 1 kilo (2.2 pound) porcini, the largest mushroom that the class had ever seen. Our soffrito ingredients were used for the Zuppa alla Frantoiana o Ribollita (Olive Pressers Style Soup & Ribollita).



Between assignments, the class had short breaks where the students had the opportunity to mingle. The class consisted of **Jack** and **Martha Pesa**, from Massachusetts, who were on their honeymoon, **Carol** and **Roger Tanner**, **Mark** and **Linda Gresenz**, **Goodie** and **Nancy Burquist**, **Shirley Ransom**, and **Dick** and **Pam Carlisle**, who were all from Arizona.

The lunch menu consisted of Finocchi Gratinati, (Gratinated Fennel), Sugo ai Porcini (Pasta with Porcini Mushroom Sauce) and Pistachio Gelato with a Morello cherry. Sandra has graciously agreed to share a few of her many recipes with Luxury Experience readers.

We enjoyed the efforts of our lesson over lunch, and as the rest of the class went on an excursion, we drove back to our hotel, **Il Borgo**, for another “Lesson from Tuscany.” (Read our articles on **Tuscany** in **Hotels and Resorts**, **Firenze and Tuscany** in **Destinations**, **Restaurants**, and **Wine Cellar** sections.)

Sandra Lotti's Toscana Saporita Cooking School Recipes

Finocchi Gratinati (Gratinated Fennel)

Serves 4

8 bulbs fennel (Preferably female fennel, trimmed with tough outer leaves removed.)

4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

Salt

½ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

Fresh Thyme

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Salt and freshly-ground black pepper

1. Cut each fennel bulb into thin slices lengthwise. Parboil in salted water until softened (about 10 minutes). Drain.
2. Toss with oil, thyme and cheese and arrange in a baking pan. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Bake in a 350 degree oven for 20 minutes or until the top is gratinated.

Pasta Fatta in Casa (Homemade Basic Pasta)

1 cup unbleached, all purpose flour (King Arthur flour will give right consistency.)
¾ cup semolina flour
2 eggs
Pinch of Salt
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons water

1. Heap the flour onto a flat work surface and create a well in the center. Add the eggs, salt, oil and water to the well.
2. Using a fork beat the egg mixture, incorporating increasing amounts of the flour wall until a smooth dough has been created. Knead with floured hands for 5 minutes.
3. Pinch off a lemon-sized piece and pass through the widest setting on a pasta machine. Dust lightly with flour, fold into thirds, and pass through the machine three more times. Narrow the setting on the machine, dust the sheet lightly with flour and pass through the machine.
4. Continue to pass through even more narrow settings until you have reached the desired thickness (generally 4 or 5 on the machine will do it.)

Variations: Different types of flour such as chestnut, chickpea, whole wheat, oat, soy, or rye can be added. Adjust the measurements according to the hardness of the flour. For example, when using whole wheat, chickpea, faro or chestnut flour (all fairly hard), use 1 cup all purpose flour, 3/8 cup semolina and 3/8 cup whole wheat flour.

Tuscan Porcini Mushroom Sauce (Sugo ai Porcini)

3 cloves garlic
6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
1 teaspoon fresh catnip (or 2 leaves of fresh mint)
1 pound fresh porcini mushrooms, brushed, cleaned and cut into chunks
2 tablespoons white wine
3 ripe tomatoes, diced
salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Make a soffrito with garlic and extra virgin olive oil. Make sure that the garlic stays white. Add the catnip and then add the mushrooms. Cook over medium heat for 8 minutes and then add the wine and the tomatoes. Cook for 5 minutes.

Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

2. Cook the pasta halfway, drain it and reserve the cooking water. Add the drained pasta to the pot along with the sauce, and add a ladle of cooking water. Finish the cooking in the pot with the sauce. Serve the pasta dusted with Parmigiano Reggiano.

Note: Soffrito is a Traditional Italian base for sauces, soups and other good things. Translated it means "softly fried", and can be made with just extra virgin olive oil and onions, or with leeks, onions, shallots or garlic or a variety of those with the extra virgin olive oil.

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As they say in Italian “mangia”!

For more information on cooking classes, please contact **Sandra Lotti** at:

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