

Cooking— Italian Style



Ray Knapp of Germantown, Penn. and Diane De Filippi of Napa sample their morning's work in a cooking class at Villa Campestri in Tuscany. De Filippi, the former owner of the Ink House bed and breakfast in St. Helena, began leading cooking tours to Italy after she retired from innkeeping in 2004. *Submitted photo*

Taking a hospitality show on the road

By **SASHA PAULSEN**

Register Features Editor

When Diane De Filippi sold the Ink House Bed and Breakfast in St. Helena in 2004, she faced the question of what to do with all the hours she had typically spent looking after guests.

"There is life after innkeeping," De Filippi said. "I just decided to take the show — my brand of hospitality — on the road."

To Italy to be exact.

During her 16 years running a bed and breakfast, De Filippi had amassed a wealth of contacts and hospitality expertise. "Like many of the 'old guard' innkeepers in the Valley, after struggling through the drop in tourism, it made the best sense to sell and do other things," De Filippi said. "I began a hospitality consulting business in the valley called 'Ask Diane.' There are many innkeepers still trying to dig out from under and preparing for sales from what I understand."

In 2006, as part of "Ask Diane," she organized her first European adventure.

"I called up some of the guests who'd stayed at the Ink House, and said, would you like to do a cooking trip to Italy?"

She'd learned over the years the kind of guests she liked best were not the high end, expensive ones. Her goal was to keep her trip affordable and unpretentious, the same principles she'd applied to innkeeping. Deciding to forego a commission allowed her to keep the price lower. "I tried to make it affordable so that the average guy could come."

The cost was \$1,895 per person. "My comparison research shows prices for like experiences averaging at \$3,500," she said.

Her group of eight, which included a retired couple from Tennessee and a retired nurse as well as a couple of Napa friends, departed for

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Italy and "it went off without a hitch," De Filippi reported.

"I tried to remember what was scary about traveling," she said, "and take care of those things."

For this trip, however, De Filippi chose the four-star Villa Campestri about 45 kilometers from Florence, an "oasis of rolling meadows, forests, vineyards and olive trees." The villa includes an "oleoteca," located in the old cellars, where guests can learn about and taste the olive oil produced on the estate from the owner, Paolo Pasquale, who oversees the olive oil production and the oleoteca. "His daughter Viola manages the villa and his son-in-law, Daniele, is the restaurant manager," De Filippi said. "Truly a family business. An interesting point is that the villa stayed in the ownership of the original family for 700 years until the Pasquale family bought it."

Every morning the group joined Giuseppe Zanier, "Chef Jerry," the executive chef for Villa Campestri, in the kitchens. "The classes started at 10; at 11 it was appropriate to start drinking wine," De Filippi said. After a morning of cooking, the group would sit down to lunch and for afternoons they were free "to enjoy relaxing sipping wine by the pool, sightseeing in surrounding villages, going into Florence to explore — whatever they chose." De Filippi and the "superb staff of the Villa Campestri" made the arrangements as needed. "It wasn't regimented, however."

REGISTER RECIPES

Pesto

Chef Giuseppe Zanier
Villa Campestri

Ingredients:

3 small bunches fresh basil

1 clove minced garlic

Pinch of salt

1 heaping Tbsp. fresh grated Parmesan cheese

1 heaping Tbsp. fresh grated Pecorino cheese

1 heaping Tbsp. pine nuts

6 oz. olive oil

Directions:

Wash and dry basil; remove and discard stems. Combine all ingredients in food processor and whip until creamy. If mixture is too thick, add a small amount of hot water and whip until creamy.

Pesto may be stored and frozen. It is a good idea to make a large batch, freeze the pesto in ice cube trays and remove cubes when frozen. Keep cubes in small zip lock bags and use individual cubes as desired.

Traditional Tiramisu

Chef Giuseppe Zanier
Villa Campestri

Ingredients:

2 cups mascarpone cheese

5 eggs

5 heaping Tbsp. sugar

Ladyfingers

1 cup espresso or coffee

2 oz. bittersweet chocolate shavings or unsweetened cocoa powder

Directions:

Combine egg yolks and sugar in bowl and beat well. In separate bowl, beat egg with mixer until you have stiff peaks. Combine egg yolk mixture with mascarpone. Gently fold in egg whites until creamy. Dip ladyfingers in espresso or strong coffee for a few seconds (too much liquid makes your final dish soggy). Arrange a tight layer of ladyfingers in a 9 by 12 serving dish. Cover ladyfingers with the mascarpone mixture. Sprinkle with grated chocolate or cocoa powder. If using cocoa powder, do not dust the tiramisu until you are ready to serve. Cover and refrigerate several hours before serving. Tiramisu can be prepared up to 24 hours in advance.

Over the course of a week they cooked main course entrees, side dishes and desserts: Fresh Artichoke Frittata, Gnocchi with Campestri Garden Fresh Ragu, Crepes Béchamel, Rustic Tuscan Pate, Spaghetti with Olive Oil and Sautéed Herbed Breadcrumbs, Herb Infused Ravioli with Fresh Pesto, Tuscan Crusted Bread Salad, Pumpkin and Spinach Soufflé, Faggioli Con Pesto, Torte Di Nona, Pan de Espana, Tiramisu and Almond Biscotti were some of the dishes they tackled.

"It was peasant cuisine," De Filippi said. "I thought I had Italian cooking down, but the cuisine changes from region to region. Italian cooking is really very simple," she said. "It's fewer ingredients, but ones that make a statement. For example, pizza. You won't see a pizza of the 'everything on it' variety. It's simpler, but the flavors come through."

Was it a success?

"The group bonded so much, we've decided to go again," De Filippi said. The original group will depart for Rome in September for another week of cooking. Meanwhile, De Filippi said she enjoyed the excursion so much, she's planning to continue leading them. For one of her upcoming trips she said, "I'd like to put together a 'Napa goes to Tuscany' group of locals."

She intends to keep the cost down as much as possible, she said. "It's all about the passion and looking forward to doing your thing. Everyone should be able to do that."

Everyone also brought home a folder full of Chef Giuseppe Zanier's recipes and De Filippi shared two — for basic pesto and a tiramisu, the traditional Italian dessert — with readers.

More information about the Italian cooking tours is available at De Filippi's Web site askdianed@sbcglobal.net