



The Godfather

FRANCO TARUSCHIO RAN THE CELEBRATED WALNUT TREE INN FOR 37 YEARS AND NOW ENJOYS PASSING ON HIS SKILLS TO YOUNG PEOPLE, BOTH AT HOME IN WALES AND IN ITALY. WE JOINED HIM FOR A WEEK-LONG COOKING COURSE IN THE MARCHE

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KAREN YATES



Day one, Saturday. As welcome lunches go, it spoke volumes about the joyous food filled week ahead.

Franco Taruschio, OBE, was keen for me to understand the essence of his native Marche – a largely undiscovered and unspoilt region of central Italy – and from the start it was clear that every mouthful comes with provenance, tradition and probably a story. The antipasti included bruschetta topped with a mix of wild dandelion, radicchio, thistle, chicory and cardoon, plus homemade bresaola, followed by tagliatelli with walnut and pumpkin sauce and passion fruit ice cream. One of the breads was made with musto, served only at this time of year, and formaggio di fossa, cheese aged in caves, which came about when people hid cheeses from the Germans in WWII only to find this intensified the flavour.

New friends

Others on the course were Fiona, Tim and daughter, Sophie; Fiona's late father was the butcher who supplied The Walnut Tree Inn. Fiona fondly remembered staying with her family in Franco and Ann's flat in nearby Porto Recanati. Also keen to cook were Ukrainians Vadym and his wife Viktoria. Back in 1989, Vadym and two friends knocked on Franco and Ann's door in Abergavenny looking for work – Franco gave them odd jobs and Vadym ended up in the restaurant.

All this against the impressive backdrop of the Marche – the medieval town of Recanati, where the course is held on a hill, so the views from the dining room are of the vast and undulating landscape.

Our four-course supper, which began not long after lunch ended, included chicken with Agresto, known locally as Jewish vinegar, made from immature grapes gathered during vendemmia, the grape harvest. Clearly the Marche's once-thriving Jewish community still has strong culinary influences.

Day two, Sunday. Franco was keen that the course should be flexible to everyone's needs, which was just as well as it was the morning of the Rugby World Cup final and Tim wasn't going anywhere. Around 11.30am, we set off to Ostaria La Pergola for a truffle-themed



lunch. Antipasti of frittata, bruschetta and polenta all came with shaved truffles. Next was passatelli, made with breadcrumbs and lemon with, you guessed it, truffles.

Later, we walked to Pergola's truffle festival. The Marche has festivals for everything from the cave cheese we ate yesterday and the Vincisgrassi we made on the fifth day, to snails and rabbits. A distinctive scent filled the air as hundreds of stalls displayed black and white truffles, chopped truffles in jars, pecorino with truffles, fresh and dried porcini mushrooms and ceps, all harvested on the nearby shrubby hills. We bought a smallish white truffle that sat neatly in the palm

one of the most fabulous dishes I've ever tasted. Then we prepared a simple Jewish Italian plum and almond tart and fave dei morti. Roughly translated as beans of the dead, these sweet biscuits are the shape of broad beans and made only at this time of year to remember the deceased.

The afternoon included a visit to the nearby award-winning Gabrielloni olive oil producers. Sisters Elisabette and Gabriella showed me how to taste the oil: sip, inhale through closed teeth, tip the head back so the oil reaches the back of the tongue and pow! – the vivid green taste of olives slips down the throat and a strong, peppery aftertaste tickles the ears.

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for 60 euros; Franco explained this was a bargain – the same truffles are sold to traders in Alba for double this price.

That night we learned to make crostini al tartufo (scrambled eggs on toast with anchovies and shaved truffle) and risotto with truffle – the precious white stuff grated generously over both. Those taking the course in May will be taken to a truffle farm and won't miss out.

Day three, Monday. We were joined for a pasta masterclass by TV chef Miranda Galassi and 33 Austrians. During the class we sampled the cappelletti we'd just made, transformed by Franco using chicken stock, walnuts and olive oil into

Then to the winery in Montefano, selling fine, kosher and good quality but ridiculously cheap wines – people filled their own bottles for around 1.3 euros a litre. Also in Montefano is Ann and Franco's farmhouse, which has mulberry, pomegranate and olive trees with great views but enormous cracks in the walls from the earthquake a few years ago.

Supper was roast quail stuffed with figs and polenta chips, followed by the plum tart and biscuits prepared earlier. All washed down, as every night, with a good many glasses of local wine.

Day four, Tuesday. First stop is Franco's favourite caffè, the charming Il Gatto e

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Le Volpe (fox and cat) in Porto Recanati, before visiting the fish and vegetable markets to buy ingredients for tonight. After tasting sweet Sughitti made with polenta, nuts and musto in Franco's flat, we headed to Picchio in Loreto for pasta, salad, wine and chocolates. Some of the hundreds of homemade chocolates on sale are imprinted with the crest of the Pope, who visits Loreto every year.

Next to the reason for his visits: the awe-inspiring basilica, containing a house believed to have been home to Mary, Joseph and Jesus, transported brick by brick from Nazareth. Inside this is the famous black Madonna.

Sharing skills and passion

Afterwards, we caught up with a group of 15 and 16 year olds selected from three schools by Franco and staff of the Royal Forest of Dean College to learn Italian language and cooking. The 16 students had won a European Commission Award and a Mary Glasgow Award for the project and produced a little cook book with the recipes they'd learned. With the money from the awards and book sales, they financed this trip to Italy.

It's what he's about, Franco told me. At 73, he's not interested in celebrity but is keen to pass on his passion for the Marche and cooking to younger people. That evening, we made brodetto and superb seafood in potacchio.

Day five, Wednesday. A class I've been especially looking forward to: Vincisgrassi,

Franco's signature dish, a layered, baked pasta, at The Walnut Tree Inn. It's made exactly to the original 18th-century recipe, and while we rolled pasta and chopped porcini mushrooms Ann told me she once argued with a well-known cook that it is essential when cooking dishes from another country to have breathed its air.

After lunch, we vote to visit to the elegant seafront at Portonovo, where the locals will tell you Prince Charles used to dine. I looked out to sea and felt completely relaxed.

That evening I ask Ann what she considers the essence of the Marche. "Tranquillity", she replies.

Day six, Thursday. Back by popular demand are torte della Nonna (Grandma's tart), requested by Sophie, and torta con tre liquouri (tart with three liqueurs), which contained brandy, rum and Tia Maria, and brought back happy memories of his time in The Walnut Tree Inn kitchen for Vadym. The tarts were in turn the lemoniest and booziest imaginable.

Workers food

For 'elevenses', as Franco calls them, served every day with prosecco, we tucked into crescente, which ballooned like poppadums in the hot frying pan, delicious with tomatoes and prosciutto. Next we made gnocchi with duck ragù. Traditionally duck is served on Thursday, when farmers came to the markets. It is also always served to workers when they finish the harvest, roasted or cooked

umido, with wine and tomatoes.

It's a free afternoon so I explored Recanati, visiting the cathedral opposite with its newly restored frescos and taking in the fabulous views from this high point in the Marche, before enjoying a supper of Franco's superb monkfish in potacchio.

Day seven, Friday. The last day, so we bake breads and cakes to take home: *crescia di formaggio* (bread made with pecorino and Parmesan, served at Easter), rosemary biscotti, *pane del pescatore* and a ricotta tart. Then a lunch of chicken in potacchio to bolster us for the retail outlets a short drive away, selling designer brands including Tod's and Prada with huge discounts. Ann made a beeline for Tod's and bought two pairs of shoes in as many minutes!

Our last supper was at Il Giardino Dei Saporì, an agriturismo Franco and Ann have visited for 20 years. The seemingly endless stream of homegrown and homemade foods cemented what we'd learned this week, all the dishes now comfortingly familiar. As we ate, Franco told me again how much he loves his native Marche and helping young people to learn about the infinite beauty of the area and its distinctive and traditional cuisine. The essence of the Marche? Surely this is what it's all about. 🍷

➔ For details on Franco's cookery courses, see www.gustoinfinito.it. The courses take place in May and October at Gallery Hotel Recanati, www.ghr.it

Seafood in potacchio

Serves four

'In potacchio' is a style of cooking particular to the Marche. The word comes from the French 'potage'. Vary the seafood according to what's in season and available; we used mussels and vongole.

Ingredients

- ★ 800g mussels
- ★ 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- ★ 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ★ 1 pinch chilli flakes, or to taste

- ★ 1 tbsp finely chopped flat parsley
- ★ 1 tbsp finely chopped fennel fronds
- ★ ½ tbsp finely chopped rosemary needles
- ★ 8 uncooked langoustines
- ★ 200g cherry tomatoes, halved, skin on
- ★ 800g clams
- ★ 1 glass dry white wine
- ★ Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ★ Roughly chopped flatleaf parsley, to garnish

Method

Clean the mussels, remove the beards and scrub well. Discard any that are damaged. In a large frying pan, briefly fry the garlic, chilli and herbs. Add the langoustines and cook until they have turned pink. Add the tomatoes, mussels and clams; when the mussels and clams have opened add the white wine and reduce a little over a brisk flame. Season with salt and pepper. Ladle into shallow soup bowls, sprinkle with the chopped parsley and serve immediately.