



From far left: Rufus tries his hand at tortellini as Pietro looks on; a Piedmontese hilltop village; homemade ravioli and tortellini; a bottle of local Barbera d'Asti on the Cascina Papaveri terrace



Food for thought

When Rufus Purdy and his wife separated, his appetite vanished. It took a visit to Piedmont and a week of indulging in fresh Italian cuisine to reignite his desire for eating

My first attempt at cooking came on the night I left home. In a tiny kitchen in a university hall of residence, I took a can of baked beans that my mother had bought for me and tipped the contents into a saucepan. Then, with wooden spoon in hand, I spent the next few minutes stirring them over a flame, the empty can placed alongside me so I could keep an eye on the instructions. It was a breakthrough. By the end of my first year at college, I was making stir-fries, curries and several other dishes with more than one ingredient. Compared

to my flatmates, who seemed to exist solely on tinned food, I was pretty proud of my culinary skills. So, a few years later, when I met the girl I was later to marry, I was able to surprise her with the fact that I knew an avocado from a lime. I wasn't one of those men with a vitamin-deficient pallor who couldn't be trusted not to burn her best pans. I even had my own. Through nearly a decade of being together, we cooked side by side – radio turned up in the kitchen, jostling each other out of the way as we went for

the same utensils – and expanded our repertoire, via a small library of recipe books, to take in dishes that were always fresh and seasonal. But then came the break-up. All of a sudden I found myself wifeless in a new flat, without all the kitchen implements I'd become attached to over the past eight years. It's amazing how much the absence of a favourite serrated knife can affect you when you're feeling low. Not that it mattered for the first month or so. I simply side-stepped the whole painful issue by not bothering to eat at all. For two weeks, I subsisted purely on alcohol, before dipping my toes gingerly back into nutritional waters via whatever fast-food place was still open when I stumbled back from a night's drinking. Without my wife to hand me the herbs and tell me my soup could do with more pepper, it felt as though I had been exiled to frozen-food wastelands. But with two well-stocked delis, an organic butcher and one of London's

best cheese shops just two minutes' walk from my front door, there seemed no reason why I shouldn't be preparing meals for friends at least once a week – the ingredients were there and I had the know-how, it was just the inclination that had gone. My attitude to food was in danger of becoming entirely functional. **Stirring stuff** So, this is why, a few weeks later, I find myself at the Cascina Papaveri ('Poppy Farmhouse') in Piedmont, northern Italy. I'm here to learn how to make simple, delicious dishes using the fresh ingredients widely available in the local area – and hopefully reawaken my love of food. Depending on the season, I could be layering my chopping board with anything from fat green stalks of asparagus to nutty, soil-specked truffles, but today, under the expert eye of chef Pietro Baldi, I'm helping to make four different kinds of risotto.

'Get that dog out of the kitchen,' yells Pietro, gesturing angrily at Henry, the puppy tentatively stepping through the door in search of the source of the intriguing smells. 'Oh, is he not allowed in?' asks Jenny, one of the five other guests in the kitchen with me, turning round to usher the bewildered dog out. 'It's fine,' says Pietro quietly. 'As long as he goes in the pot.' I look up from the risotto I'm stirring to watch the commotion, and Pietro is onto me as quickly as Paolo Maldini to the heels of a hapless centre-forward. 'Stir,' he says firmly, mimicking the action of a spoon with his right hand. He looks disdainfully at the fast-congealing rice in the saucepan in front of me. 'Needs more stock,' he says, turning round to inspect another guest's efforts at Italian cookery. I've already spooned a goeey mixture of eggs, cream, cocoa and amaretti into pots for a highly calorific dessert, while the others in the

class busy themselves with grating cheese, chopping vegetables and preparing salad. It's a busy but rewarding scene. Everyone has a role to play in preparing the lunch we are to eat al fresco on the terrace in a few minutes time, and there's definitely no room for dogs.

Over a long lunch, taken at a long table overlooking vineyards and hilltop villages, John Sims, the owner of Cascina Papaveri, explains why Pietro won't have Henry in the kitchen. 'It's the Piedmontese attitude,' he tells us. 'Here, animals are purely functional. Rabbits are for eating, chickens for eggs, dogs to guard the house. Pietro can't understand why we treat Henry as a pet.'

Risotto and relaxation

John and his wife Robyn have lived in this area, around half an hour from Asti (of 'Spumante' fame), for several years, and only opened their home to guests earlier this year. Both devotees of Italian cooking, and zealous about their love of Pilates, they decided to open an informal guesthouse in which visitors could experience all the things they've come to love. Once you've paid your money, you are treated like an old friend who just happened to be passing through the area, and are plied with a constant supply of excellent local food and wine. 'Farmhouse' is a bit of a misleading term – I can't imagine there are many farms in Italy with full-sized swimming pools and saunas in the basement – but the Sims' grow plenty of organic produce on their land. Indeed, it is quite usual for guests to be sent into

Travel notes

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies daily to Turin, from £36.99 return. Guests then need to take the train to Asti. **Cascina Papaveri** (www.cascinapapaveri.com) offers four-night breaks from £543pp, and seven-night breaks from £1,086pp (all-inclusive). For information on Piedmont, visit www.piemontefeel.it



the garden to fetch lettuces for a salad or courgettes for a frittata.

The Pilates bit might sound odd, but the sessions offered with qualified tutors really do fit effortlessly into the Cascina Papaveri routine. Even I, a Pilates virgin, find the combination of food and light exercise works perfectly for me. Each morning, I head down to the hi-tech poolside studio for an hour-long workout with the instructor then relax with a swim afterwards. It is when I sit out on the terrace one day after one of these sessions, drying myself in the wind like a side of Appenine ham, I experience the most stressful moment this tranquil corner of rural Italy can throw at me. With the midday sun beating down on my pale English skin – and, yes, a fairly mad dog for company – I hear church bells in one of the hilltop villages on the other side of the valley start to peal. Then, from the other side, but closer, another church

begins to announce 12 o'clock. For the next quarter of an hour, the sound of bells circling me masks the noise of bees and cicadas, and fills the balmy summer air with melody.

This lack of regard for synchronicity strikes me as being as quintessentially Italian as hand gestures in a traffic jam. You don't come to Italy to look for national stereotypes, but they do have a habit of finding you. Pietro, a man who glowers beneath his chef's hat but who has a sense of humour drier than a bottle of Friuli, could have been dreamt up by a focus group at the Italian tourist board. And, on my first night at Cascina Papaveri, the opening scene from *La Dolce Vita* is played out just a few feet above my head. Sitting with Sophie, the pretty Pilates instructor, on the edge of a fountain, we see a helicopter looming above us. The two pilots immediately spot Sophie and bring the craft down as close as they can to wave.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY; CHRISTINE HANSCOMB; ANDREW INGLIS; SOPHIE USKE; JOHN SIMS



The sound of bells masks the noise of bees and cicadas, and fills the summer air with melody



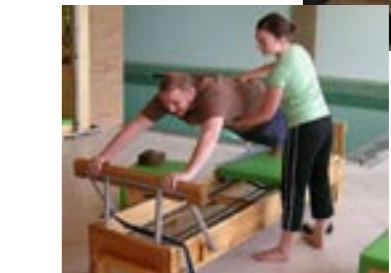
This is all good. I've come away to immerse myself in Italian life and hopefully leave with a reignited passion for fresh, lovingly prepared food. And from the moment I'm served my first meal of an olive oil-drenched tomato, mozzarella and sage leaf salad to my last supper of homemade ravioli and rabbit roulade, I find myself falling in love with what's on my plate again.

Market forces

The weekly visit to market in Asti is an important part of the routine at Cascina Papaveri, and guests are sent into the throng of Piedmontese housewives armed only with a few words of Italian and a €5 note to buy something to share with the other guests at lunch. It may have been the warm sun on my face, but I've never felt more alive than when ambling through stalls selling everything from T-shirts emblazoned with badly translated English slogans – 'I

am always for the wild and fashion' – to hair slides and sandals. But it is the food that really brightens my day. Vegetable stalls bearing more primary colours than a children's TV presenter groan under the weight of plump scarlet tomatoes and dayglo-orange pumpkins, while tableloads of fresh yellow and green pasta vie for attention with barrels of glistening green and black olives, and bloody cuts of meat and offal.

One day, waking up in one of those grey post-break-up moods, I decide to go for a walk, and I head off into the woods just down the hill from the farmhouse. Walking along, thinking sad thoughts, I am interrupted by a loud crashing and banging from the trees ahead. I begin to feel wary, wondering who's going to call my ex-wife to explain how I got gored to death by a wild boar, and start to tread carefully. The noise, thankfully, comes not from psychopathic swine, but from ripe-to-bursting



cherries the size of ball bearings becoming too heavy for the tree and plummeting to the sun-baked earth like hailstones. I recount this story to the other guests at lunch, and, in the afternoon, we are despatched to go and collect the cherries so that they can be served, simmered in vanilla, cinnamon and lemon juice, at dinner that night. As we devour them, soft flesh dissolving in our mouths, I realise just how simple the relationship between food and happiness can be. And I vow never to let myself forget that again.

Clockwise from far left: the group receive instructions in the farmhouse's kitchens; Piedmontese vineyards; Cascina Papaveri at night; Pietro tosses pasta made by the group; Rufus attempts Pilates