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## TRAVELING GOURMET



STUDENTS MAKE chocolate confections at Perugia's Scuola di Cioccolata.

# EATING WELL IN ITALY

BY SHARRI WHITING DE MASI

Our gourmand globetrotter has scoured the five-star kitchens of Italy to unearth the best hands-on programs.

At **Villa Pambuffetti** ([www.villa-pambuffetti.com](http://www.villa-pambuffetti.com)) in Montefalco, Umbria, Alessandra Pambuffetti has perfected the art of participatory cooking classes. After three hours sequestered with Alessandra and her assistants in the kitchen of this grand villa, we students

emerged with flour in our hair, tomato sauce on our aprons and huge appetites. Fortunately, the lesson included eating the results of our efforts—pasta and grissini from scratch, potato crepes with cream, mascarpone and sausage sauce and more.

Villa Pambuffetti offers 15 rooms looking out across the valley to Assisi and Spello, with the ancient walled town of Montefalco steps away. Tip: In addition to the Sangrantino wine (DOCG rated) and fine olive oils, Montefalco is full of shops that sell gorgeous,

locally made table and bed linens.

Rosi and Filippo Iannarone have restored the elegant 17th-century villa and surrounding farmhouses at **Villa at Monte Solare** ([www.villamontesolare.com](http://www.villamontesolare.com)), and added Le Muse, a Maria Galland Paris spa. They then installed a teaching kitchen on this vast estate near Panicale, close to the Umbrian/Tuscan border. Chef Andrea Sposini shows students how to de-bone an entire chicken without stabbing themselves, sharing cooking tips as he works (the salt should go in *after* the pasta water is boiling). We suffered through the incredible five-course meal that followed the lesson, all in the name of research. Travelers who would like to devote more time to learning Umbrian and Tuscan cuisine can sign up for

five days of cooking classes. Tip: Five days of spa visits may be necessary to balance the food intake.

Villa Monte Solare offers rooms in the elegant main villa, as well as in the Limonaia, which has four superior bedrooms, each with a double bed or two single beds and a comfortable reading area with armchairs. The Casa dei Gelsi, built in 1639, has five suites on two floors, each with a separate sitting room. (Rosi has decorated



**PARTICIPANTS AT VILLA PAMBUFFETTI** (left) get one-on-one instruction from expert chefs.

with those wonderful fabrics from Tessuti di Montefalco and hand-painted majolica ceramics from MOD in Deruta.)

Continuing in our quest for culinary experiences, we followed the intoxicating smell of chocolate to Perugia's Scuola di Cioccolata ([www.perugina.it](http://www.perugina.it)) near Perugia.

## ACCESS:

### Where to Dine

#### Ravenna

**Ca' de' Vén**, Via Vorrado Ricci 24; 39-544-301-63. A comprehensive wine bar in a grand 16th-century building with nooks and crannies perfect for private tastings and an unusual communal table where locals come for a quick lunch.

**Cinema Alexander Ristorante**, Via Bassa del Pignataro 8; 39-544-212-967; mobile 39-335-587-9560. A restored movie theater with the ambience of a 1950s Italian cinema. Ask for squaquerone cheese and their excellent seafood.

#### Brisighella

**Trattoria di Strada Casale**, Via Statale 22; 39-546-880-54. Traditional country ristorante between Brisighella and Faenza with a flair for the sophisticated. Good seasonal menu.

**Osteria del Guercinoro**, Piazza Marconi 7/8; 39-546-80-464. In the historic center of Brisighella, this tiny little place serves food that explodes in the mouth. A different menu every day, from polenta to the freshest veggies. Book in advance for Sunday lunch.

#### Faenza

**La Baita**, Via Naviglio 25/C; 39-546-21-584. A charming enoteca with hundreds of bottles of wines lining the walls; delicious lunches. Try Italy's first white DOCG wine: Albana di Romagna.

**Cinque Cucchai**, on the grounds of Relais Villa Abbondanzi, Via Emilia Ponente 23; 39-546-621-527. Owned by two brothers, Marco and Romano, who were taught to cook by their grandmother. Primarily fresh Adriatic fish.

#### Montefalco

**Coccorone**, Largo Tempestivi; 39-742-379-535. A secluded restaurant down a cobbled street from the main piazza. Excellent local specialties, including faraona (guinea hen) and pappardelle (wide, flat pasta) with sagrantino, the famous Montefalco red wine.

**Le Noci**, Via Torino 6; 39-74-298-371. The village of Grutti, between Montefalco and Todi in Umbria. Daniela and her mother cook traditional country Italian. Truffles, porcini mushrooms and wild game are favorite ingredients.

#### Modena

**Caffé Concerto** in the Piazza Grande (no. 26); 39-59-222-232. Across from the duomo, Caffé Concerto has a wonderful lunch buffet, sleek décor and is great for people watching.

### Where to Shop

#### Faenza

**Bottega d'Arte Ceramica Gatti**, Via Pompignoli 4; 39-54-663-4301. One of 60 ceramics workshops in Faenza, this studio, founded in 1928, offers contemporary pieces.

**Bottega Vignoli**, Via Fermi 30; 39-54-662-1076. An arresting take on majolica ceramics can be found at this workshop and studio. [www.ceramichevignoli.com](http://www.ceramichevignoli.com).

#### Ravenna

**Marco De Luca** mosaic studio, Via Battuzzi 27; 39-54-446-0321. De Luca brings to the 21st century Ravenna's fifth-century-AD techniques.

#### Montefalco

**Tessuto Artistico Umbro Montefalco**, 39-74-237-8977. In a courtyard on the main piazza, the shop touts a wealth of hand-loomed fabrics, made-to-order tablecloths, curtains and bedspreads.

**Tessitura Pardi**, 39-74-299-754. Across from the San Francesco museum, beautifully merchandised; fabrics and items for dining room, bedroom or kitchen.

### Wine Routes

**Strada del Sangiovese** ([www.stradadelsangiovese.it](http://www.stradadelsangiovese.it)), running between Faenza, Brisighella and other small towns in Emilia Romagna.

**Strada del Sagrantino** (<http://english.stradadelsagrantino.it>), the area surrounding Montefalco, Umbria, produces the DOCG red Sagrantino di Montefalco.

**Strada dei Vini dei Castelli Romani** ([www.stradadeivinideicastelliromani.com/stradavini/eng/index.htm](http://www.stradadeivinideicastelliromani.com/stradavini/eng/index.htm)), which includes the area outside Rome, the only European capital in a grand cru wine area.

We joined the group of 14 students, who stood before their own cooking spaces, surreptitiously licking fingers dipped in pans of melting chocolate. The four-hour classes are taught in Italian, but after the first three minutes, the common language is chocolate and everybody understands it. Aprons are provided to catch any spills, and students take home their own confections. To reserve, telephone either the Perugia Chocolate Museum (39-75-527-6796; ask for an English-speaking person) or the Scuola (39-75-527-61). Tip: Arrangements can be made for English-speaking groups; request that interpreter Rosanna Giambardi in Perugia ([roziegiam@virgilio.it](mailto:roziegiam@virgilio.it); 39-328-665-6096) accompany your VIPs.

The people of the Emilia Romana region say theirs is the best olive oil in Italy. The first DOP-designated (denomination of protected origin) olive oil came from Brisighella, a little town nestled in the hills of this otherwise flat region. **Terra di Brisighella** ([www.brisighello.net](http://www.brisighello.net)) offers oil tastings, which include four or five varieties and qualities, including "ice oil," which is made from olives picked after the first frost. Terra di Brisighella also offers a wide variety of local wines, which go down very well with the oil and freshly baked bread.

Get back to nature with all the mod cons at **Relais Campiome** ([www.campiome.it](http://www.campiome.it)), just outside Brisighella. Both a winery and a hotel, Relais Campiome is run by young winemaker Filippo Manetti (39-54-680-112; mobile, 39-339-113-7070). The five rooms are modest in size, but every detail has been considered, from the 14th-century doors to the Philippe Starck bathrooms. A group of friends or a wedding party could book the whole borgo, forage for some of the great wines and oils Filippo

produces and take day trips to Faenza and Ravenna, where food for the soul is the focus.

In Faenza, one of Italy's oldest ceramics centers, those who prefer staying in town will enjoy **Relais Villa Abbondanzi** ([www.villa-abbondanzi.com](http://www.villa-abbondanzi.com)), a 19th-century neo-classical villa enclosed in a tree-filled garden. There are 15 rooms, each of which is uniquely decorated. Opt for Executive Suite 22 in the main building—it has a fireplace and a sunroom. There's a small wellness center with sauna, gym and massage by appointment. For special requests, ask for Elena or Valentina (39-54-662-2672).

Ravenna is a UNESCO World Heritage site, which is a "must visit" to see the Christian and Byzantine mosaics. The most charming place to stay is the 15th-century **Albergo Cappello** ([\*\*VILLA ABBONDANZI\*\* \(top\) features 15 guest rooms, each with unique style \(top, right\).](http://www.</a></p>
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**RELAIS CAMPIUME** (right, below) doubles as a winery and an intimate hotel.





albergocappello.it), located in a Venetian-style Renaissance building. There are seven rooms, including two Deluxe Suites. Tip: Ask for a room with frescoes to get

the full effect of the architecture. For special requests, contact Stefania Vicari (info@albergocappello.it).

What is olive oil without its partner, balsamic vinegar? On the

west side of Emilia Romana is Modena, the capital of *aceto balsamico*. A tasting with Lara Bompana at Acetaia Bompana (www.bompana.com) exposes one of the dirty little secrets of the balsamic barrel—often, what is sold as balsamic vinegar is really just plain old wine vinegar colored brown (just read the label). But, tragedy can be averted by buying the real traditional balsamic, aged 12 years and made according to the rules of the Modena consortium. Sampling balsamic vinegars under Lara's guidance is an education in flavor. Starting with the least expensive, which is better than supermarket balsamic, she moves up to the amazingly good: 25-year-old vintage balsamic vinegar that is measured out in drops. Tip: There is also some 75-year-old balsamic available, which costs the earth and tastes of heaven. Pack-

aged like fine perfume and just as expensive, Bompana's tiny bottles fit perfectly in our suitcase.

Entire vacations have been built around drinking Italy's more than 2,000 varieties of wine. For the perfect appetizer to the banquet that is Italian vino, book a tasting and wine dinner at the Rome Wine Academy (www.wineacademyroma.com). Director Ian d'Agata has a passion for the grape and brings in winemakers from all over Italy for tastings and lessons.

Our great night at the Academy started with a vertical tasting, half a dozen vintages from the same winemaker, followed by a sumptuous four-course winemaker's dinner in a private dining room. Tip: Instead of stumbling down the Spanish Steps after all that wine, settle into one of Il Palazzetto's four luxury rooms (Il Palazzetto is located in the Wine Academy building on the Spanish Steps) or try out the new boutique St. George hotel (www.stgeorgeho.tel.it) on elegant Via Giulia, a short taxi ride away. ■



VILLA MONTESOLARE guests get schooled in the kitchen (above).

VILLA PAMBUFETTI's poolside is perfect for an alfresco break (left).