

Trip of a Lifetime to Tuscany

COURTESY PHOTOGRAPHY



View through the oldest doorway of the Radicondoli, the Porta Olla, into the verdant green May valley beyond

It's easy to get lost on the back roads of rural Italy. Just ask Marlane Miriello. In 2000, the former San Diegan was enjoying a vacation in Tuscany when maps failed and she ended up in a tiny Tuscan hill town called Radicondoli.

"I fell in love with it," Miriello explained to me, "and went back once or twice a year until I finally moved there in 2009." It was the sense of community and sustainable lifestyle that first attracted her. "I was so impressed by the unbelievably delicious meals made in

local kitchens that I started to research a cookbook — but then realized that no one in the village used recipes."

In 2010, Miriello found another way to share Radicondoli's food traditions: she launched Il Campo Cucina, a cooking school where guests learn first-hand about farm-to-table cuisine and the preparation of traditional Italian dishes. Groups of up to 12 people stay at Il Bel Canto, an 18th-century stone farmhouse and spend a week cooking with villagers, enjoying local wines, and soaking up the countryside. While the emphasis is on food, wine, and local culture, Miriello also includes a daytrip to Siena, dinner with a Count, and free time for biking, hiking, photography, and relaxing by the farmhouse pool.

A few special offerings throughout the year include yoga weeks with classes taught by La Jollan Anne Marie Welsh, former dance and theatre critic at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. The next Il Campo Yoga Cucina Retreat is planned for September 21-28. Miriello has also organized a Palio Adventure (August 10-17) that includes watching Siena's famed horse race from the balcony of a private palazzo.

Terry and Stath Karras of Solana Beach went to Il Campo Cucina in 2011 (and are returning for the Palio Adventure). Their favorite experience was visiting Podere Pagnano, a local sheep farm owned by Miriello's friends, Giovanni and Giovanna Porcu. The group watched sheep dogs working and enjoyed a scenic view of Radicondoli on its hilltop perch. They were then treated to a pecorino cheese tasting, followed by a delicious lunch shared with the hosts and farm workers.

Terry's best memories are of Welsh's sunset yoga class by the pool at Il Bel

Canto and the fox who watched from a cautious distance.

Del Mar residents Debbie and Tom Tucker were also at Il Campo Cucina in 2011 (and are returning for the Palio). They both were moved by the “total immersion” into the local lifestyle and the villagers’ warm reception. Debbie loved “being Italian for the week,” and Tom described having fun with Radicondolese at a village festival where Chianti was served from recycled water bottles. Like Stath, Tom makes pasta from scratch with flour he buys in Little Italy. The Tuckers are taking Italian language classes and hope to spend 6-12 months in Italy in the near future.

Jeanie Benet from Jamul went to Il Campo in 2010 and describes the week as “one fabulous experience after another.” Her favorite memories are of cooking in a local home and then sitting down with a glass of wine and being served the meal her group (seven women and a retired priest) had just prepared. “I’d see white sauce lasagna, gnocchi, and tiramisu that looked like pictures in a food magazine and say ‘I can’t believe we just did this.’”

Nancy and Mike Harrelson, also from Jamul, were just at Il Campo last September. Nancy’s “absolute favorite moment” was their cooking lesson at the farm Podere la Fonte. “Emanuela Giua and her husband Marco Garossi produce almost every ingredient used in their kitchen. They grow and grind their own wheat for flour and make both wine and olive oil. The cooking lesson was three hours long and culminated in a sumptuous multi-course lunch. “From the bruschetta to focaccia with grapes and the culinary last gasp — cantuccini with vin santo — we had a hand in it all. At the end of the meal our stomachs and our hearts were bursting.”

Mike added, “Marlane is both all-Italian and all-American and through her we

felt less like visitors and more like friends. It was the best vacation we’ve ever had.”

Or to quote Jeanie Benet, “I’d go to Il Campo again in a heartbeat. It’s the trip of a lifetime.”

(www.ilcampoitalia.com) ELIZABETH HANSEN



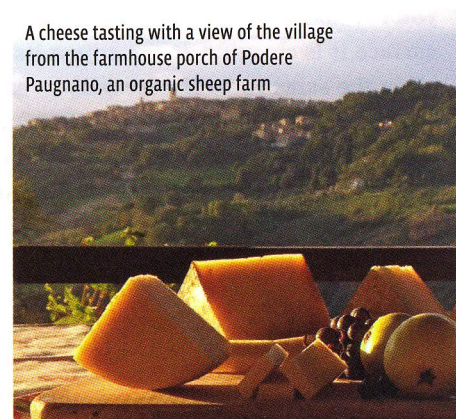
View from Marlane Miriello’s terrace of the vast Val di Cecina to the north with San Gimignano in the distance



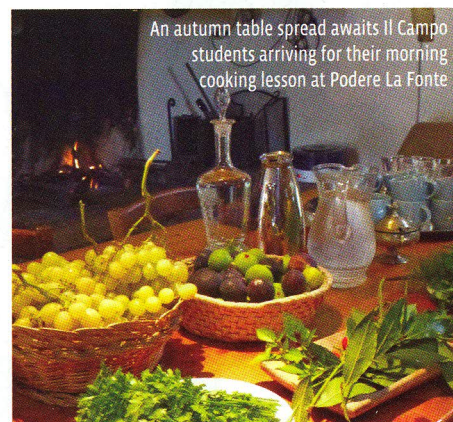
From left to right San Diegans Terry and Stath Karras, Jim and Jennifer Despenza, Marlane Miriello, Debbie and Tom Tucker, Jeri Philbin, and two Rhode Island guests at Il Bel Canto



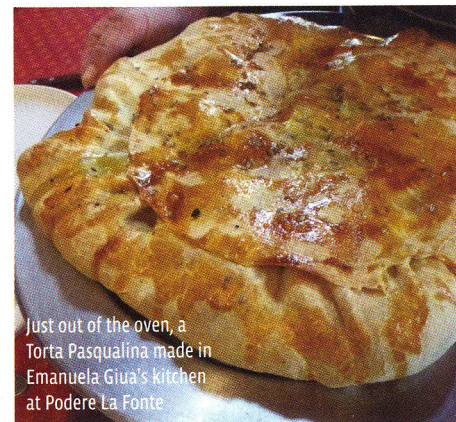
La Jollan Anne Marie Welsh leading sunset yoga session in Radicondoli



A cheese tasting with a view of the village from the farmhouse porch of Podere Paugnano, an organic sheep farm



An autumn table spread awaits Il Campo students arriving for their morning cooking lesson at Podere La Fonte



Just out of the oven, a Torta Pasqualina made in Emanuela Giua’s kitchen at Podere La Fonte