



[ FIRST-CLASS TICKET ]

## A TASTE OF ITALY

Good wine, fresh ingredients, and a class that brings it all together

COOKING CLASSES AT CASA DI GUILIANA AND A VISIT TO THE NEARBY TERME DI SIRMIONE SPA OFFER AN IDYLIC ITALIAN EXPERIENCE.

Foreign visitors to Italy, including expatriate Italians, often make pilgrimages there for three experiences: the country's antiquities, its wine, and the pleasures of the Italian kitchen. Recently, in between visits to wineries and thermal spas, I attended a cooking school in the elegant kitchen of Casa di Guiliana in the village of Bure, San Pietro in Cariano, nestled in the foothills of the Dolomite Alps. The villa is northwest of historic Verona; and beyond its gates are the Valpolicella Classico district vineyards. Italy's western Veneto region, from Lake Garda to Cortina d'Ampezzo, offers mushrooms, game, radicchio, olive oil, and wines along with the perfect climate for aging prosciutto and artisan cheeses, such as Grana Padano.

Formerly a barn used for drying tobacco, Casa di Guiliana is now a luxury villa rental. The 19th-century stone dwelling has been meticulously restored with the aesthetic tension that embodies Italian style: an easy meld of classic design and modern conveniences.

From this serene location, day-trippers have several scenic options: less than two hours to the east is Venice; 15 minutes east is Verona, home to the famous Roman amphitheater, Arena di Verona; Drive 30 minutes west to see Lake Garda, Italy's largest, considered the Riviera of northern Italy.

Casa di Guiliana's consulting chef Antonia Montrucoli, assisted by her friend, Maria Rosa Gaspari, regularly conducts cooking classes in the villa. Both members of Associazione Insegnanti di Cucina Italiana, an organization founded to promote and maintain Italy's 20-plus regional cuisines, they teach villa guests and locals who want to learn traditional cooking.

Montrucoli is famous for her Veronese style of cooking and her recipes such as Pasta e fagioli, Boccon del gelosone, and Zeleti. "One must use the freshest local ingredients," she insists. "It is the philosophy which distinguishes all regional cuisines." Complexities of Veronese cuisine can also be found in *Veneto: Authentic Recipes from Venice and the Italian Northeast* (Chronicle Books; \$19.95) by Italian American Cookbook author Julia Della Croce.

Burn off extra calories at two nearby thermal spas, both of which are naturally heated by the inactive volcano Monte Baldo.

In Sirmione, the century-old spa lies at the end of a peninsula in Lake Garda, where palm trees and the Alps provide a dramatic backdrop to the soothing waters of the Aquaria Wellness Center. An array of pampering, holistic, and even medical treatments is available. By contrast, the spa at Lasize on Lake Garda's southeast shore is an outdoor, meticulously landscaped thermal park popular with singles, couples, and families.

Italy exports more wine than any other country, and the Veneto region is the largest wine producer within Italy. Sample southwest Veneto's three best-known wines, Soave, Bardolino, and Valpolicella.

On my final day at Casa di Guiliana, a friend and I drove high up into the Dolomite Alps above Verona. We took in the expansive views of Lake Garda and enjoyed a picnic lunch of San Daniele prosciutto, Grana Padano cheese, and good bread, and washed it all down with an Amarone della valpolicella Classico (2002). Ahhh! La dolce vita! (the sweet life!)

—Joseph Dumas