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### Tuscany to Lazio: 5 Top Cooking Courses in Italy

When it comes to cuisine in Italy, education and adventure are one and the same



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Posted by Marie Elena Martinez

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Italy is a land rich in history and lush in landscape. It's a place of varied topography – mountains, valleys, coastal towns, and islands – that produces some of the most beloved cuisine on the planet. Whether it's Neapolitan pizza, a hearty fettucine Bolognese from Emilia-Romagna, Venetian risotto, truffles from Umbria, or a seafood stew from Marche that sends your palate soaring, everyone has a favorite region and a favorite dish.

Though I watched my grandmother and my mother make Sunday "gravy" more times than I can count, I've always wanted to learn about the ways in which the Italian people cultivate their land, source their ingredients, choose their menus, prepare their meals, pair their wines, and celebrate with a sit-down meal on their home soil. With so many companies offering food-based excursions through both the cities and countryside of Italy, I decided to head to Tuscany and Lazio – two vastly different culinary regions – to sample a few epicurean adventures along the way in the hopes of finding the best of the best. (Photo courtesy of Flickr/Giampaolo Macorig)

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Beans are a staple, as is high quality beef from cattle breeds like Chianina and Maremmana. Wine-braised game such as boar, deer, and rabbit, and hearty soups thickened with day-old bread like *ribollita* cover the Tuscan table. Then, throw in some Chianti. There are countless villas throughout Tuscany that look to broaden your appreciation of Tuscan food. From my experiences, two stood out.

### Villa Le Maschere

Once a crumbling Medici palace headed for demolition, now a five-star **Small Luxury Hotel of the World** property, **Villa Le Maschere** sits pretty in the town of Barberino di Mugello. Overlooking Bilancino Lake, a design palette of purples and blues, greens and yellows are bathed in gorgeous Tuscan light throughout the day.

In this fairy tale setting, cooking classes with Chef Fabio Danzo enhance any visit to the region. Danzo stresses the authenticity of local ingredients as he infuses his own herb flavorings in his oils and uses the same technique to create original salts. Then he shows attendees how to use the ingredients to make a chunky soup, a smooth flan, or a silky mousse. *(Photo courtesy of Flickr/ulterior epicure)*



The menu changes seasonally and highlights traditional Tuscan and Mugello dishes. My class included *pappa al pomodoro con gamberi*, a bread and tomato soup with shrimp, Florentine-style “*tagliata*” of beef, and a walnut and cocoa parfait for dessert. Through demonstration, the easy-going Danzo illustrates how to execute a Tuscan meal, in the end presenting each course in the hotel’s elegant restaurant, *Il Pionponero*. (€135 or \$190, minimum of 2).

### Ciao Laura’s Farm to Fork

Veronica Clemente, the lifelong Tuscan who leads Ciao Laura’s Farm to Fork cooking class from her father’s countryside villa in the Chianti region, lives and breathes food. When you meet her, she’ll tell you how she used to sneak into her family’s kitchen after she finished her homework as a young girl to watch the magic whirl around her. You can see her passion to share what she’s learned with others. Her cooking classes teach “the key” to the Italian way of life: food.



Veronica’s hands-on approach begins the moment students arrive at her home. After reading through Italian recipes, deciphering culinary words and phrases, and visiting farms and markets for ingredients, a menu begins to take shape. Everything is made from scratch in

Veronica’s kitchen – from bread to pasta to sauces – and the process is inclusive. The Farm to Fork experience recently expanded to include a children’s program. (€130 or \$186 per person, minimum of 2; discounts available for groups of 4+) *(Photo courtesy of Ciao Laura’s Farm to Fork)*

## Tuscany

Derived from peasant origins, Tuscan cuisine is simple food focusing on local produce, mellow cheeses, hearty breads, and grilled meats.

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## Gourmand Tour of Florence

Spaced out over a day in Florence, the Gourmand Tour is a comprehensive way to experience the city's culinary highlights. In the morning, guests meet at **Gelateria Perchè No!** for a crash course in making gelato. Good gelatos taste like their flavor (not milk or sugar), and leave a clean palate after each spoonful. A tasting of two gelatos, two sorbets, and a bonus scoop follow a trip into the laboratory to watch as one of the day's flavors is whipped into creation. (*Tip: Skip breakfast!*)

A typical Tuscan lunch is served across the Arno River at **Hostaria del Bricco**, a family owned spot with brick archways and wine bottles lining the walls. Here, everyone speaks Italian, unlike the mix of languages you hear on the other, more touristy side of the river. Start with an assortment of crostini with a selection of spreads, then move onto crêpes with spinach and ricotta or pasta with wild boar. If you're feeling adventurous, finish with tripe Florentine. Or cap off your meal with oven-baked rabbit, pork, or beef in pepper and wine sauce. Lastly, you'll head out for a pre-dinner aperitif and meat and cheese plate at **Enoteca Fuori Porta**, a buzzing local wine bar full of friendly Florentines. One white and two red wine pairings will be explained as they arrive at the table for tasting.

## Lazio

Lazio, the region in which the capital of Rome resides, is known for richer cuisine than Tuscany. Pasta dishes like spaghetti *alla carbonara* and spicier *all'amatriciana* make heavy use of



*guanciale* (or unsmoked bacon), and *raviolo d'uovo* — stuffed with soft egg yolk — abound on the tables of Lazio. Meat dishes like *coda alla vaccinara*, oxtail stewed with tomatoes and wine, vegetables like artichokes and peas, and strong cheeses like Pecorino Romano round out the list. (*Photo courtesy of Flickr/StefZ*)

## The Lazio Countryside Tour

My introduction to the Lazio countryside began at **Sant'Isidoro**, the oldest and largest winery in the region. Started in 1939 by the Palombi family, Sant'Isidoro produces three red wines and one white. In a dusty truck, Giovanni, one of three Palombi sons, shuttled me between the farm — growing artichokes, asparagus, tomatoes, and an assortment of herbs — the vineyard, the wine cellar, and fruit trees where we enjoyed bright orange apricots straight from the branch.

In **Tarquinia**, a medieval UNESCO World Heritage city, a "light" Italian lunch unfolded. Four courses of freshly prepared plates from crudos to pasta to pigeon and steak were paired with Sant'Isidoro's wines. The



powerhouse Soremidio (Montepulciano), named after Giovanni's father, was the centerpiece.

That evening, I found myself at **Valle del Marta**, a farm, vineyard, and country resort. At the quiet restaurant within,

ceramic crocks full of prosciutto, baked ricotta, and raviolis with mushroom-truffle cream sauce were presented one after the other to highlight the region's fare. (*Photo courtesy of Marie Elena Martinez*)

The Gourmand Tour of Florence and the Tour of the Lazio Countryside are part of a partnership between **Slow Food Italia** and **Perillo Tours**. For a full list of Independent Slow Food activities, dick [here](#). Prices vary.



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## The 3-Star Michelin Experience

### La Pergola

When the opportunity to dine at La Pergola, one of a handful of three-star Michelin restaurants in Italy, and the only one in Rome, presented itself, I knew where my educational culinary journey would end. Housed in the luxurious [Rome Cavalieri](#) hotel, and overlooking a glittering Roman cityscape, world-renowned [Chef Heinz Beck](#) wields control over a small army of white-gloved attendants catering to every whim.

Deriving inspiration from all regions of Italy, and applying healthy, modern techniques to classic recipes, Chef Beck delivers tenfold. Refreshingly approachable, Beck tells me he “doesn’t cook to the critics,” as he samples the evening’s *amuse bouche* – a deconstructed bruschetta with clams and a foam of carrots, dried celery, and plums – and tests his dishes on none other than his wife.

The meal begins with water, bread, oil, and salt selections (*tip*: the Japanese cherry salt was sublime). Subsequent dishes are served on silver trays and presented first in Italian, then in English. Tuna carpaccio on *pappa al pomodoro* was followed by fagottelli pasta, Beck’s delicate and delectable version of raviolo d’uovo. A black cod with chili pepper and anchovies preceded lamb with spring vegetables, a cheese selection, and finally a silver box containing *twelve* different pairs of petit fours.

(€175 or \$250, 6-course tasting; €198 or \$283, 9-course tasting; ala carte €46 - €98 or \$65 - \$140)

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