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PICNIC AMONG THE VIOLETS
A COOKING SCHOOL IN CHIANTI
CANTONESE CUISINE

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Above: Badia a Coltibuono. Opposite: Lorenza de' Medici in her kitchen

A COOKING SCHOOL IN CHIANTI

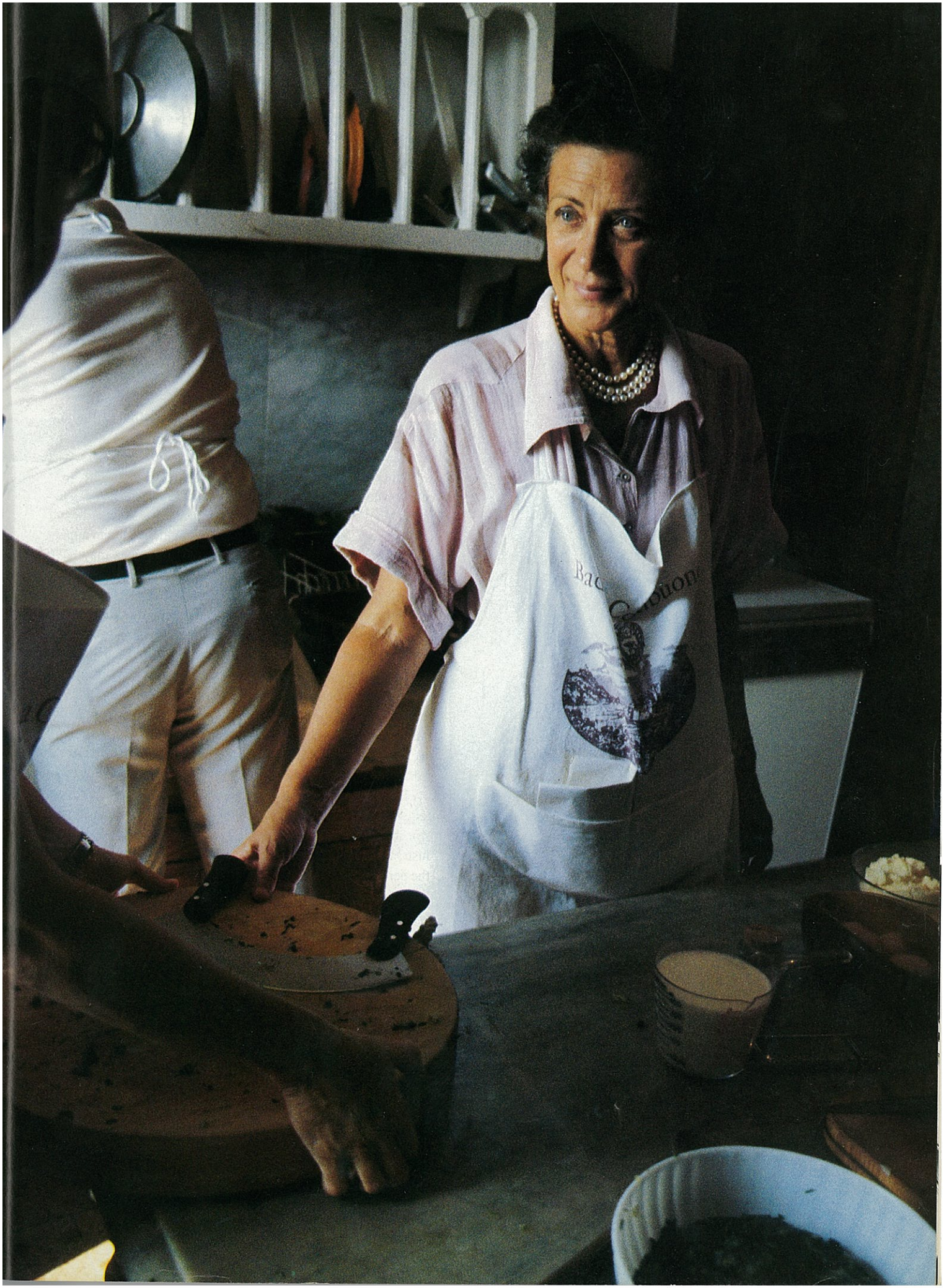
BY ZANNE EARLY ZAKROFF

Photographs by Ronny Jaques

We Americans love Italian food but tend to limit our knowledge of the subject to pasta and pizza. To contemporary cooks, pasta in the pantry has become the culinary equivalent of money in the bank. The multiplicity of its shapes and sauces makes pasta—economical, nutritious, and easy to make—a food with a staggering variety of possibilities. Pizza has long been one of our favorite fast foods, and when made well it can be sublime. What is amazing is not that pizza and pasta have prompted our devotion but that we haven't hurdled all obstacles to learn more about other Italian foods and preparations with similar appeal.

The aficionado can scarcely do better in the interest of education than travel to Italy, and specifically to Badia a Coltibuono in Tuscany, which offers a unique opportunity to understand the region's cuisine and the culture from which it originates. The most vivid impressions of a country are conveyed through its flavors and its people as well as its sights, and the cooking course offered by Lorenza de' Medici does more than merely satisfy the senses.

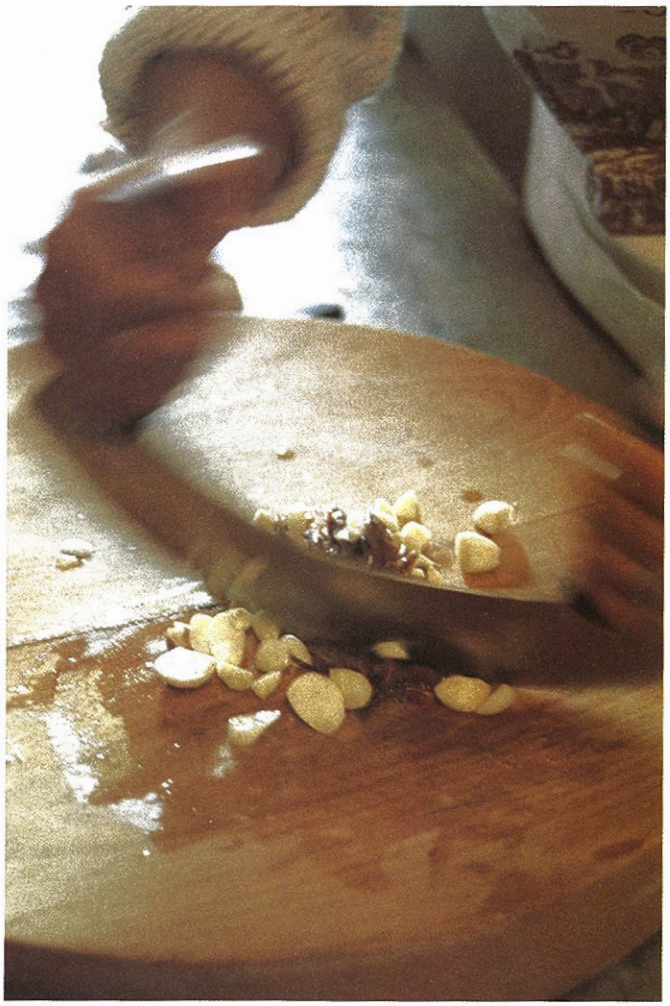
A stranger might be forgiven for not automatically casting Lorenza in the role of cooking teacher. Descended from the Neapolitan branch of the Medicis, Lorenza is possessed of so patrician an elegance that she wouldn't appear to take to a kitchen at all, but in fact her abilities and knowledge of culinary matters are impressive. The mother of four, Lorenza has always worked outside her home and was balancing the demands of family and career for nearly three decades before such a juggling act became commonplace. In her professional life she has worn many hats, as a fashion editor for the now-defunct magazine *Novita*, as food editor for *Vogue Italia*, and as an author of gardening books, children's books, and approximately twenty



cookbooks. Ten years ago Lorenza left publishing to open her own shop, in Milan, specializing in looms and fine yarn. Most recently, and at a time of life when many people begin to think of retirement, she decided to start a cooking school instead. The delight in discovering Lorenza is almost in spite of her accomplishments and overwhelmingly due to her warmth and great sense of humor. The school at Badia a Coltibuono well deserves its success.

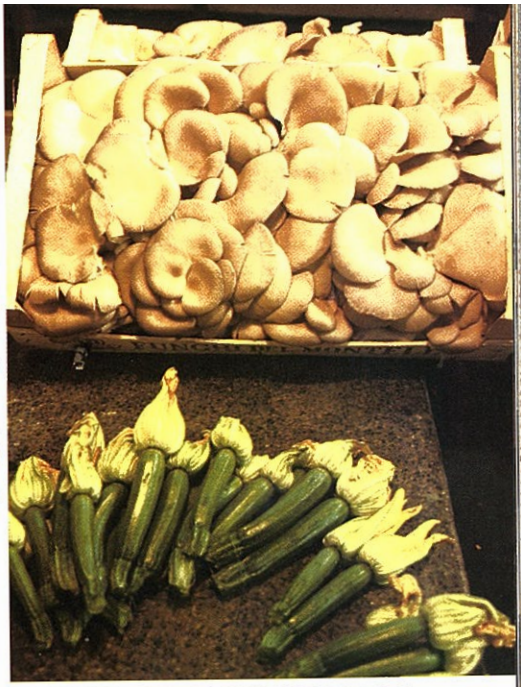
The organization of the course is fairly standard in my cooking school experience. A discussion and demonstration of the day's menu begin the morning, followed by hands-on preparation by the students, with luncheon comprised of the dishes cooked. Food-related field trips, cultural excursions, and tours of the countryside fill the afternoons, and evenings are spent over leisurely dinners hosted by friends of the family. Beyond the format, however, there is little similarity between Badia a Coltibuono and any other school I know.

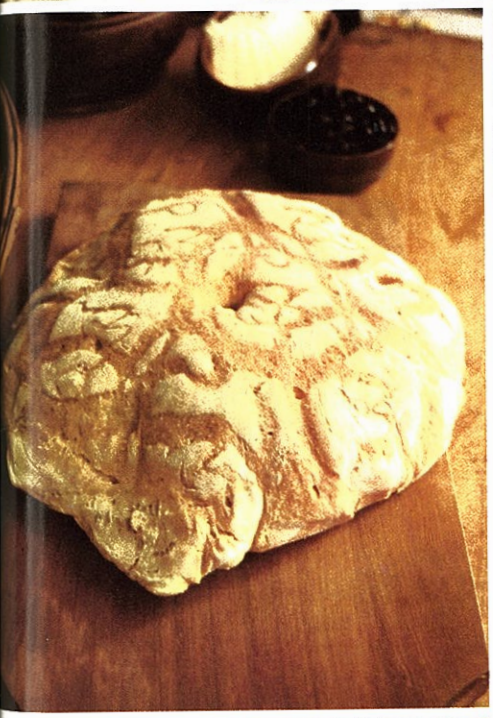
"Abbey of the Good Harvest" is the translation of Badia a Coltibuono, which was built by an order of Benedictine monks in the eleventh century. Today the abbey is owned by Lorenza's husband, Piero Stucchi-Prinetti, and it serves as their country home besides being an aggressively successful wine farm. Nine hundred years ago the monks at Coltibuono began to propagate some of the first vineyards in the area, and apparently they were successful. *La Vita* in those times may have been far less than *dolce*, but one assumes that early wine tastings softened many hardships. Students who stay at Coltibuono today are invariably delighted that the accommodations are anything but monastic, unless, of course, the monks were living far beyond the Rule of Saint Benedict. The exquisite comfort of sleeping on pure linen sheets in this contemporary incarnation of the abbey is not only sufficient to convince one to discard "easy-care" polyester-and-cotton-blend versions but more than enough to obliterate thoughts of monks in hopsacking sleeping on hard wooden pallets. And, although the frescoed walls and vaulted ceilings of Lorenza's living room evoke its former status as a refectory, a cocktail gathering there today is light years from the community of more spiritual than spirited calling that once dined in our places. Secluded in the lush hills of Chianti, the school is an ideal retreat from many of the perils of progress, and yet it offers all the necessary amenities.



Above: The mezzaluna in action
Opposite: Tuscan produce at its best, including (center right) marinating beef ready for braising and (bottom right) Pecorino with olive oil and black pepper

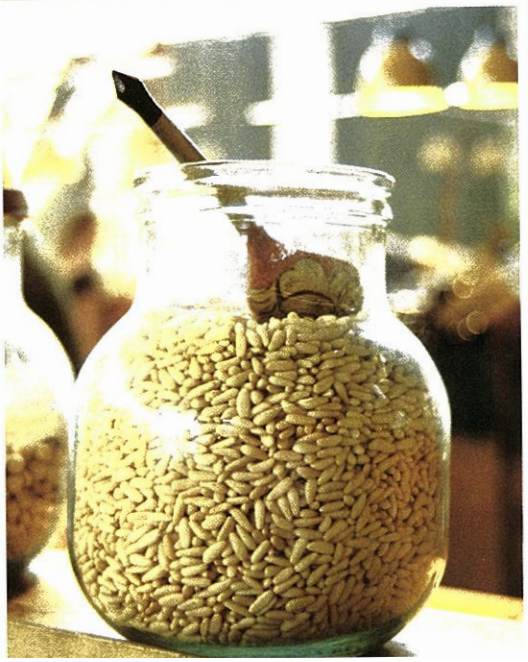
The personalized cuisine that Lorenza shares with her pupils takes the traditional fare of grand Italian families and adapts it for ease in contemporary entertaining. "No last-minute fuss" is the philosophy behind the recipes, which are calculated to keep the cook out of the kitchen once guests have arrived. This is not a school where one is likely to master amazing feats of culinary legerdemain. The food is uncontrived but always delicious, and no one will be intimidated by complicated equipment. The only possibly unfamiliar utensil in the kitchen is the *mezzaluna*, a half-moon-shaped knife with handles at either end. Form follows function here, and the *mezzaluna*'s natural rocking action makes short work of chopping onions or mincing parsley without requiring unusual technical prowess of the user.

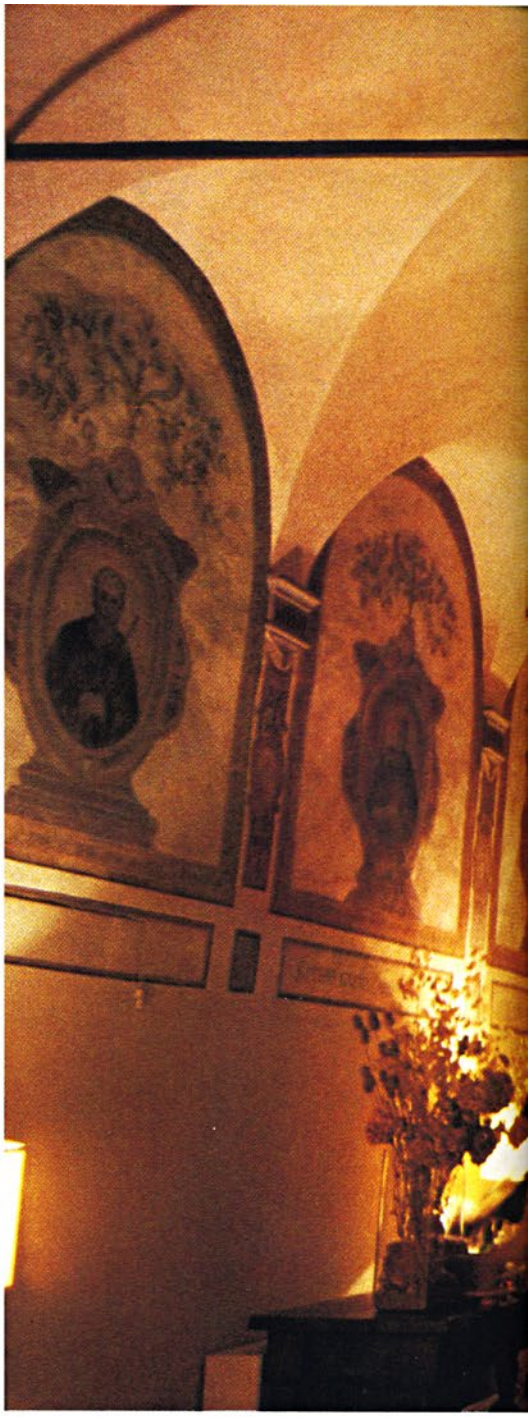





Badia a Coltibuono
Badia a Coltibuono
Olio d'Oliva
Badia a Coltibuono
Aceto di Vino


FUNGHI DEL TRASIMENO





Above: The farewell dinner in the former abbey refectory Left, top and bottom: Students gather in the kitchen and stroll through the grape arbor.

Anyone who pays attention will be rewarded with the sort of hints that make the more mundane cooking jobs easier: a solution to the problem of peeling garlic, for instance, which has never been one of my favorite tasks. Most of us know that hitting a clove of garlic with the flat side of a knife will shatter its papery wrapping, but the operation often shatters the garlic as well, sending bits of it flying across the kitchen. Lorenza's method is the best I've yet encountered: With the root and stem ends of the clove held firmly between the thumb and forefinger, she gently squeezes the garlic until the peel splits and separates from the usable portion. No special equipment is necessary, but the job is accomplished with ease.

Another of Lorenza's "tricks" is going to allow me to celebrate the height of the tomato season this year without exacerbating the heat of the dog days by canning tomatoes or cooking them into sauce. When Lorenza's plum tomatoes are at their peak she rinses them, pops them into a plastic bag, and presses out the excess air. The tomatoes are frozen whole until Lorenza is ready to use them, at which point they are dropped, still frozen, into a large bowl of cold water for about 15 seconds; this simple dunking causes the peels to slip off as though the tomatoes had been blanched. Now I can make "fresh" tomato sauce at my convenience in February and spend hot August days at the beach, where I belong.

A perfect first course for a hot summer's dinner is *sorbetto di pomodoro e rucola*, which combines arugula, the bitter green we usually encounter in salads, with tomato pulp and herbs in a purée frozen in an ice-cream maker. The *sorbetto*, lighter and more refreshing than gazpacho, is the kind of easy but elegant dish that inspires one to entertain. It is always a surprise to re-

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member that tomatoes, which we think of as being so integral to Italian cuisine, are a New World export that didn't find favor in Italy until a few hundred years ago. Beans, however, have long been a staple in Italian cooking, particularly in Tuscany, and one of my favorite dishes is a salad of white beans and tuna. Lorenza takes that classic combination and fills tomatoes with it, creating a luncheon dish that is attractive and easily made in advance. The Italian way with vegetables is definitely an aspect of the cuisine that is unknown to many of the pizza and pasta persuasion, but Lorenza's use of produce is sufficient to turn the head of the most singleminded carnivore. Her kitchen garden provides squashes, lettuces, tomatoes, and herbs that added incomparable freshness to the non-meat courses we prepared and enjoyed.

One of the many unique features of the school at Badia a Coltibuono is the availability of the country's most important crops. Coltibuono grows the grapes for its wines and the olives for its oil and processes both on the spot. Students are exposed to various aspects of winemaking and olive oil production and can therefore see from start to finish mainstays of the Italian economy and cuisine that are as old as the land itself. Lorenza and Piero's engaging son Roberto, a recent graduate of the Department of Viticulture and Enology at the University of California, Davis, now works in the family business and conducts informal tours and wine tastings with justified pride. Although the wines and olive oil of Coltibuono have been exported for relatively few years, their quality merits the generous attention they receive abroad and at home. Piero Stucchi-Prinetti's considerable skill in marketing is matched by his insistence on excellence. But more eloquent testimony to the quality of this wine and oil is Lorenza's use of them in her classes.

Not a single woman or man in my class of twelve lacked an appetite during our week together, but there were those who occasionally felt the need to engage in just enough physical activity to stave off guilt from overindulgence in the good life. One or two made use of the swimming pool in the break between luncheon and the afternoon excursions, while a small but hardy band daily returned breathless from hiking a part of the steep approach to the Badia. I chose to placate my conscience with strolls among the roses and boxwood hedges in the fifteenth-century garden, my favorite part of which was the grape arbor leading from the house to the pool. My choice was a lazy but peaceful alternative for anyone who loathes exercise, and I have traveled enough in Italy to know that I can eat whatever I want there without fear of calories, because meals are as well balanced and nutritious as they are blissfully satisfying.

Just as Lorenza and Piero take pride in all that Coltibuono has to offer, so too they share with visitors the richness of life away from the Badia. The nearby village of Gaiole was a market during medieval times for the fortified towns in the surrounding hills. Vincenzo Chini is the butcher Lorenza relies on there, and with good reason, as his family have been butchers in Gaiole for four hundred years. One afternoon Vincenzo demonstrated his mastery as a meat cutter for us and explained the process by which he cures his prosciutto. None of us had ever imagined we could be enthralled by seeing meat butchered, but, because Vincenzo is an artist, there was nothing unpleasant or macabre about the demonstration, and we left very impressed with his skill.

On another day we drove through several of the hill towns in the area, falling more deeply in love with the beauty of that region with each kilometer. Our destination was San Giusto in Salcio and the home of an elderly widow there who raises a few sheep and makes cheese from their milk. Although it was late in the season, she had managed to glean a few cups of sheep's milk, which she heated. Then she kneaded the curd and pressed it into Pecorino, reserving the whey to transform it into ricotta. The cheesemaking took no more than a half hour and was amazingly basic and straightforward. But again it was as good as magic to those of us who had never seen it before. Luigi Barzini, in his book *The Italians*, wrote that "Italian cuisine merely presents Nature at its best," and it just doesn't get much better than this.

Nature's best was manifested not only in Lorenza's food and the prosciutto and Pecorino we sampled but also with great style and care in dinners hosted for us by friends of Lorenza and Piero. If entertaining is a talent, then entertaining strangers elevates it to an art. The Ricasoli name is synonymous with Chianti in the region's history and specifically with Brolio wines. The castle at Brolio, where we were guests of Costanza and Bettino Ricasoli Firidolfi, is surely the most impressive in the area. Modern restaurant designers who say that Americans want to be crowded into noisy dining rooms, take note: One night at Brolio our group thoroughly enjoyed a splendid dinner that was no less convivial for having been served in a room the scale of which dwarfed our table of twenty. There was no deafening clatter to accompany our meal, only spirited conversation, the art of which remains alive in Europe partially because people can actually hear what is being said by their dinner companions, at least in private dining rooms of such scale.