



The secrets of COOKING

Today's cooking classes teach so much more than the technical skills required to prepare a meal. They can revive lost skills, restore old traditions, reconnect us with the seasons and reveal the secrets of cooking from the heart. By Laura Venuto.



Cucina Italiana

Learn: To cook from the heart.
Where: Cucina Italiana, Sydney, NSW.

There are no measuring cups or exact cooking times given at Cucina Italiana. And for those of us who rely on the step-by-step precision of cookbook recipes, it takes a little getting used to. Luciana Sampogna, our teacher and founder of Cucina Italiana, tells us the little pile of flour that lies before us, waiting to be transformed into fresh pasta, weighs 220 grams. She then instructs us to push aside "about 20 grams". This secondary pile, Luciana explains, is "for God".

What she means by this eyebrow-raising statement is that there is one ingredient people often fail to take into consideration when cooking and that is the elements, such as humidity or wind, which can have a considerable impact on the end result, especially when dough is concerned. Hence the reason she shuts all the windows before we begin. "Although there are two ingredients in pasta – the flour and the eggs – there is the third ingredient, which is God, and it's up to him to give the water. If God gives me too much water in the air, you will need more flour, but if the westerly wind is blowing, and there is no water in the air, you need much less flour," Luciana explains. Tonight is humid, so as we knead the dough, and feel its changing consistency in our palms,



Luciana observes each member of the class carefully, instructing us to add a little more "God" to the mix where necessary.

It may be a quirky way of putting it, but it's a sentiment that is the cornerstone of what Luciana hopes to teach – how to cook food from feel, from taste, from the heart – a skill she believes has been lost through the generations. For this reason, Luciana returns to Italy every year and seeks out the older women in the villages to learn their secrets. "Old people have the secrets because they lived through tough times. They were poor, they didn't have anything – no Kitchen Aid, no scales – and they learned balance out of necessity. That's what I want to teach people – to really feel what they are doing, and feel without the technology around them. At our school we don't teach how to chop parsley or beat cream – I want people to knead the dough and make gnocchi and understand what's happening to the potato or the flour. To really feel and

Opposite: Luciana's *linguine con scampi e limoni* (for recipe, see page 162). This page (from above): Luciana shows how to season; a demonstration in her dining room; students take a hands-on approach to making pasta.

see what's happening. That's the hard part, and that's the skill people have lost."

Luciana, who grew up in Padova, in the Veneto region of Italy, says her love of food has always been with her, and despite initially studying law, she found herself being drawn back to food. Initially waitressing in restaurants, then working at Le Cordon Bleu culinary school in London, Luciana finally stumbled on the Simili Sisters (two sisters from Bologna, Italy, famous for their baking skills and who taught the likes of Clark Gable in their heyday) before she and her husband relocated to New Zealand, and later, Sydney. Luciana trained intensively with the Simili Sisters and, seeing her passion, they encouraged her to open her own cooking school to pass on their values and recipes.

Luciana's classes take place in her family home where she lives with her husband and two young children. It is a magnificent heritage-listed Tuscan-style villa in Sydney's inner west. Built by

food for thought.

the Melocco brothers in 1920 to try to convince their mother to move to Australia from Italy, the setting is ideal for Luciana's purpose of teaching 'la cucina della mamma' (mum's cooking), which she says is the heart and soul of Italian cuisine.

During the class we knead the dough at flour-strewn wooden benches in Luciana's kitchen and we share the meal in her magnificent dining room, replete with baskets of crusty Italian bread, wine and soft Italian music. It not only serves to imbue her classes with Mediterranean atmosphere, but the importance of the home, family, and sharing in Italian cuisine.

"I created my classes as a long Italian lunch because I loved my mother's lunches and I wanted people to understand what it is to really have lunch," says Luciana. "Not to have one hour and get up and go, but to be part of the whole experience – preparing the food with the family and sitting down to eat the food together."

In true Italian style, flavour is unapologetically paramount. Many in the class are visibly shocked by Luciana's generous splashes of olive oil in the Tuscan bean antipasti and water for the pasta that she instructs should be "as salty as the Mediterranean". But Luciana is quick to cheekily quip: "People are so worried about dying from too much salt, but what they don't know is, too little salt causes mental illness!" And when we taste the result, we all agree she's right. Luciana's amusing anecdotes and atmospheric vignettes of Italian life are a great part of the appeal of the class. She explains we are making semifreddo for dessert and not gelato, because Italians never make gelato at home. "Gelato is our excuse to get out of the house and go for a *passeggiata* (stroll) with our family to the *gelateria* (ice cream shop) after dinner. It is a tradition we don't want to let go of, so we never make the

gelato at home for this reason."

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After the class you'd be forgiven for expecting to walk out of Luciana's front door and into the cobblestone streets of Tuscany where you'd double-kiss your dining companions goodbye, rather than farewelling them with a wave on a busy main road in Sydney. For Luciana, that means her work here is done. "I hope to let people experience Italy without needing their passport," she says. "And give people the experience of true home cooking. I want to show people that Italian food is not restaurant food. It is not about fussy presentation. It is about generosity. It is the real food of real people."

To find out more about Cucina Italiana or to book a class, call (02) 8021 2699 or visit www.cucinaitaliana.com.au. Classes from \$115.

are seasonal and designed to show people what has been taken out of their diet, for the sake of convenience, as well as teaching the benefits of organic food. "The aim of the cooking school is to educate people about what's happening to food and take them back to the nurturing aspect and to give them a reference point of what they are missing," Carolyn explains.

While the cooking school offers a range of classes, two of the most popular are the 'Pick and Jam' jam-making class and 'Preserving a Way of Life' class, where teacher Tina Collins shows how to preserve a range of foods from tomatoes to stone fruit using the Fowlers Vacola method – a traditional technique that has been used by generations of Australian women.

Both classes see participants explore the bountiful Peaceful Gardens Organic Farm and help pick the produce before returning to the classroom. "There are 400-500 fruit trees and when all the berries and fruit start coming out we're just flat out. That's why we have to bottle because we have to try and capture all that goodness that's being produced and maximise that," says Carolyn. "By continuing this skill it preserves the connection between us and nature – because that's what nature is giving us. In the 1930s, cooks at home were absolute masters of management, preserving and utilising every last piece. They had to be after the Depression, and I think that's really excellent for us all to think about right now."

Carolyn says renewing this connection to nature and what it gives us seasonally often has a powerful effect on people in the class. "They see a whole cycle. It's a connection that's very relaxing and it takes you to another time. We're all very stressed about so much, and in the end this is an incredibly relaxing, very old-fashioned kind of gathering and coming together. People leave happy and fulfilled. It's very energising."

To find out more about the Peaceful Gardens Organic Cooking School or to book a class, call (03) 5664 2480 or visit www.peacefulgardens.com.au. Classes from \$75.



Reconnect with the seasons and rediscover a lost skill by learning to preserve.

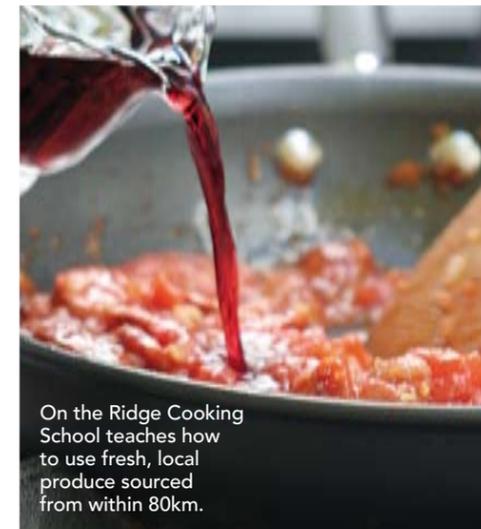
Preserving a way of life

Learn: The art of preserving.

Where: Peaceful Gardens Organic Cooking School, Gippsland, VIC.

Entering the Peaceful Gardens Organic Cooking School is like taking a step back in time to the 1930s, and that was very much the intention, says Carolyn Johns, a principal of the school. "We've set it up as a model of the 1930s – as food was in the 1930s. We believe it's the last time people really connected with food in its simplest, in its purest and in its correct way. They understood food as the basis for their nutrition, and knew how to use it. No chemicals had entered the food chain and people were careful with how they managed each piece of food," she says.

The cooking school was opened three years ago as an extension of the 60-acre Peaceful Gardens Organic Farm, which uses sustainable and chemical-free growing practices. The classes



On the Ridge Cooking School teaches how to use fresh, local produce sourced from within 80km.



A slice of the hinterland

Learn: How to use local produce.

Where: On the Ridge Cooking School, Sunshine Coast, QLD.

"It's like a little slice of France where nearly everyone has a farmer's market within 10 minutes of their home every weekend," says Tonya Jennings, referring to the Sunshine Coast region of Queensland where her cooking school, On the Ridge, is based. She says the growth of the local food movement in this region has been phenomenal and it's no wonder. "We have so many incredible producers and providores, all within such a small area," says Tonya. "I wanted to make the most of that, so my signature class is 'A Slice of the Hinterland – Cuisine of the Sun', which teaches how to source and cook with local produce. I wanted it to be a celebration of our local patch."

And what a patch it is. A meandering drive up to the school, which sits high on a ridge in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, takes in olive groves, avocado and citrus orchards and abundant vegetable patches in the gardens of local residents. Once

inside the school, the views from the balcony are like a visual preview of the feast to follow. Whether it's the avocados, macadamias, zucchini flowers, pineapples, duck, spanner crab, lemon myrtle or finger limes, all the produce is sourced within 80 kilometres, and, says Tonya, "it comes from as close as my next door neighbour's grapefruit groves and the macadamia and olive plantations that grow in my street".

Originally from Melbourne, where she spent 30 years working as a librarian, Tonya has long held a passion for the Slow Food Movement and a belief in the importance of shopping locally in order to maintain a strong connection with food. Her visits to France and Italy, where she was inspired by the way locals celebrated their regional cuisine, also prompted her to retrain as a chef five years ago and open her own cooking school to pass on these values.

With the guiding principle of simplicity, Tonya teaches her classes that when working with the freshest produce, there is no need to camouflage the flavours. "By spending a bit more time sourcing ingredients and looking for good-quality fresh produce over something that is

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more of a convenience, when it comes to preparing the dish, you need to do very little to it because of the beauty of the natural flavours," she explains.

Tonya says the local approach is also creating a sense of community in her classes. "The locals swap stories of great producers they've found, and people from out of town leave inspired to explore their own patch. There's a wonderful feeling of friendship that develops over people's love of food and pride for where they live."

To find out more about On the Ridge Cooking School, or to book a class, call (07) 5441 3715 or visit www.ontheridge.com.au. Classes are \$145 per person.

food for thought.

At Nonna's table

Learn: Time-honoured traditions.

Where: Rosa Matto Cooking School, Adelaide, SA.

Nonnas, yayas, babaannes, obaasans, nannas and even pops – these are the stars of Rosa Matto's latest series of cooking classes called At Nonna's Table. From Japan to Vietnam, Turkey to Greece, Afghanistan to Italy, each class sees a grandmother, grandfather or older cook pass on the time-honoured skills for creating the homely food of their culture – the food they share at the family table. "It's about celebrating the traditions of the older generations and acknowledging they have wonderful skills," says Rosa. "I think more and more older people are recognising that if they don't hand on these skills, they will be lost forever. So

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teaching people how to make these skills survive is really important." Rosa leaves it up to each individual to decide which dishes from their family cookbook they will pass on, and occasionally has special one-off classes such as her Great Gnocchi Cook-off between two *nonnas*, which was a particular highlight of last year's series.

Rosa, whose Adelaide-based cooking school has been running for 20 years, says the At Nonna's Table classes are her most lively – filled with laughter, story-telling and the odd risqué joke from the cheekier

nannas! "They will also bring photos of their village or their family or they might even bring a special tablecloth," she adds. "And people start to understand how the recipes they read don't tell the whole story. Food is wrapped up with memory and culture. If you don't have an understanding of that, I don't think you can fully appreciate another culture's cuisine."

Rosa says two main principles unite traditional home cooking: where it starts and where it ends up. "It starts with seasonal produce, which is generally grown in their own gardens. And not a single one of them has ever turned up to a class without extra bits," says Rosa. "Like our Greek *yaya* who comes with her own oregano because she says the one you buy at the shops is not very good! Where it ends up is not on a restaurant table but on a family's table. So the motivation is not to feed 250 people in the shortest amount of time – it's to feed a small handful of very special people."

While the ingredients and methods of the cuisines may differ, Rosa says the older generation all share one belief that is perhaps the most important lesson they offer: "They all believe food isn't just a parcel of kilojoules you need to keep yourself going. It represents something so much more valuable. You are feeding your family and you are sharing a gift with them and that gift is you can nourish them, not just in the physical sense, but in the emotional sense, too." ■

To find out more about Rosa Matto's cooking school, call (08) 8373 6106 or visit www.rosamatto.com.au. Classes from \$77.



Cucina Italiana's Linguine con scampi e limoni (Linguine with prawns and lemon)

Serves 4

Cooking time: 15 minutes

400g linguine

1½ lemons

2½ tbs extra virgin olive oil (50ml)

4 garlic cloves, crushed

1 peperoncino or 1-2 fresh chillies (depending on how hot they are)

15 green prawns, peeled, deveined, halved lengthways, leaving several intact for presentation

1 bunch flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped

1 Place a large saucepan of water over high heat and bring to the boil. Add salt, then the pasta.

2 Meanwhile, use a zester to remove the rind from the lemons. (Alternatively, use a vegetable peeler to peel rind from lemon. Use a small, sharp knife to remove white pith from rind. Cut rind into very thin strips.) Juice the lemons.

3 Place a large frying pan over medium-high heat. Add the oil, crushed garlic and chilli. Once the garlic is translucent add the prawns. Cook for 3 minutes or until cooked to your liking. Remove from heat and immediately transfer prawns to a bowl. Pour over the lemon juice and zest and set prawns aside to rest.

4 Remove garlic from the frying pan and discard. Add half the parsley to the pan and stir.

5 Drain the pasta just before it is al dente, but do not remove all the excess water as it should be a little moist.

6 Add pasta to the frying pan and place over medium heat so the pasta will absorb the flavours. Add the prawns, toss well and serve with fresh parsley.



Learn the culinary secrets of older generations at Rosa Matto's cooking classes.