

# Italian cooks take visitors into their homes to show them the pasta ropes

**By Irene S. Levine**  
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**L**uisa Mambelli, an empty-nester with two adult children, greets us at her mother's apartment in the Murri section of Bologna. The quiet, middle-class residential area is a short taxi ride from the historic center of the city.

A large piece of plywood has been placed atop the mahogany dining table that is centered beneath an elegant chandelier of Murano glass. Because kitchen space is tight, this will be our work station. Two colorful aprons and booklets of printed recipes are set on one side of the oblong table.

My husband and I are here for a cooking lesson followed by lunch, one of many authentic food experiences taking place throughout the year in private homes across Italy, from Milan in the north to Catania in the south. Mambelli is one of some 400 home cooks who participate in a nonprofit network called Home Food.

Women (and some men) selected for the program are called Le Cesarine, the name derived from that of the Roman emperor Julius Caesar because they are the "empresses" who preside over their kitchens. Being a Cesarine isn't a regular job. Instead, these are unpaid volunteers who open their homes to guests. They are carefully screened and selected for their knowledge of local foods and cooking techniques, commitment to tradition, and ability to communicate this passion to visitors from other parts of Italy and around the globe.

It was founded in 2004 by professor Egeria Di Nallo, a sociologist at the University of Bologna, in collaboration with the Association for the Guardianship and Protection of the Traditional Culinary-Gastronomic Heritage of Italy. The organization has hosted more than 300,000 visitors since its inception.

"Almost every dish in Italy has local roots and is best eaten in its place of origin," Fred Plotkin writes in his book "Italy for the Gourmet Traveller." Consistent with that premise, the mission of Home Food is to preserve the local character of Italian food and to honor the traditions of generations of mothers, grandmothers and aunts represented by the Cesarine.

Since 1861, Italy has been unified as one nation, but its cuisine and culture still remain regional and local at their core. Although "Italian food" is one of the most popular cuisines throughout the world, the generic term obscures the diversity of its products and preparations. Travelers to Italy soon discover that the 20 administrative regions vary widely in terms of their history, geography, customs and terroir (characteristics of the soil and air). Depending on the city or town someone visits, even the very same pasta dish, for example, may be prepared in different ways and have different names.

Home Food hopes to forestall the looming threat of Italy succumbing to one homogenized national cuisine, a trend propelled over decades by a confluence of economic and social forces. With more women in the workforce, many no longer have time or interest to prepare dishes from scratch, relying instead on prepared or preserved products like dried pasta and bottled sauces. Improved transportation and refrigeration systems and the growth of the global economy also have posed challenges to the time-honored customs of

pasta and bottled sauces. Improved transportation and refrigeration systems and the growth of the global economy also have posed challenges to the time-honored customs of cooking seasonal foods grown or produced close to home.

Like most of the Cesarine, Mambelli speaks minimal English, but her welcome is so warm it feels as if we are visiting an old friend. Our lunch menu includes two pasta dishes that most typify the Emilia Romagna region: tagliatelle with a classic ragu sauce (made with braised meat, celery, carrots, onions, fresh tomatoes and white wine) and tortelloni stuffed with ricotta and Parmesan cheeses, and spinach.

Tagliatelle are long, ribbon-shaped pieces of pasta about a quarter of an inch wide. According to legend, the width corresponds to  $1/12,270$  the height of the Torre degli Asinelli, the taller of two medieval towers in Bologna, and is modeled after the hair of an Italian noblewoman. The pasta with these precise measurements is reproduced in solid gold at the city's Chamber of Commerce, along with its recipe. The texture of tagliatelle is considered a perfect conveyance for heavy Ragu Bolognese (Bolognese sauce).

Tortelloni probably are the most emblematic pasta of Bologna, having been eaten there since the first half of the 19th century. Considered a main course, the doughnut shape of the stuffed pasta is said to have been inspired by Venus' navel. Their more diminutive cousins of the same shape, tortellini, are commonly served in broth (tortellini en brodo) with heartier meat fillings.

Our dessert will be a moist tenerina cake, whose recipe hails from the nearby city of Ferrara. The soft cake, with a fudge-like consistency, is made with dark chocolate, butter, sugar, flour, eggs, vanilla and milk.

After we wash our hands and don aprons, Mambelli transitions into full teaching mode at her side of the table. She gives us our tools and all the ingredients she's carefully measured beforehand.

We make the relatively simple cake first because it needs to bake in the oven. Then she shows us each painstaking step in making sfoglia, the characteristic egg pasta dough. When her 84-year-old mother, Maria Teresa, joins us, Mambelli explains that she learned how to cook by watching her.

Many fine restaurants in Bologna hire sfogline (pasta ladies) who arrive every morning to make hand-rolled pasta using the same techniques. Specialty shops in the city, such as Paolo Atti & Figli, produce fresh pasta daily, some selling for more than \$20 a pound because of the quality ingredients and skill required to make it. (By comparison, I pay about \$1.99 for a pound package of Barilla dried pasta at home.)

As we begin working, the need for a common language dissipates. We pay close attention to Mambelli as she shows us how to knead, stretch and cut the dough so it has the right amount of air and proper thickness. It isn't as easy as she makes it seem. Our dough alternately gets too thin or too lumpy.

"No, Jerry!" she shrieks, pulling my husband's sheet of dough to her side of the table for an emergency repair.

Our shoulder muscles ache from using the rolling pins; it feels as if we have spent the last two hours mixing heavy cement. We muddle along and finally achieve a rhythm. Our efforts are rewarded with beautiful strands of tagliatelle, all the same width, and tortelloni pressed so tightly that their filling couldn't possibly ooze out while cooking.

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"Bravo! Bravo!" Mambelli says. Maria Theresa smiles simultaneously.

By the time we have washed up again for lunch, Mambelli has assembled the dishes in the kitchen and set the dining room table with fine china and glasses of a bubbly Lambrusco wine. Because it takes many hours to make ragu, she has prepared the sauce before our arrival.

She proudly serves us each course. Without question, this is the most exceptional of many wonderful meals we've enjoyed in Bologna. Not only is the meal perfetto, but our experience in the home of a local is a reminder of the integral link between food and culture.

### **If you go**

You can register to become a member and make reservations for Home Food lunches, dinners, cooking lessons, wine tours and other events online at [homefood.it/en](http://homefood.it/en). The website includes a calendar of available dates, locations and menus as well as free recipes. Dinner or lunch is 50 euros per person, including a first, second and dessert course with wine and coffee. Children are welcome.

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