



A change of course

Writer **Christine Smallwood** joins vegetarian chef **Jane Baxter** on a culinary adventure across Umbria to discover its meats



An endless array of salumi, sausages and truffles means we eat more than is advisable – but it's all irresistible





Clockwise from top left: Jane cooking at the Arnaldo Caprai vineyard; courgette flowers at Osteria del Matto; the Duomo in Spoleto; Giorgio Shaw's capocollo; Piazza San Benedetto, Norcia; frascarelli with truffles; Salvatore Denaro grilling chickens in the sun; Osteria a Priori, Perugia

Recipe for a culinary exploration of Umbria: Take two friends – Christine Smallwood, the writer of *An Appetite for Umbria*, and Jane Baxter, an acclaimed chef who was the creative culinary force behind the Field Kitchen, the restaurant which put Riverford Organic's vegetables on the gastronomic map. Place in a beautiful Montefalco vineyard in the central Italian region of Umbria, and marinate in Sagrantino and *passito* wines. Mix in as many meetings with chefs and producers as possible and serve with pork. Lots of pork.

The two of us, with some food loving friends in tow, arrived in Spoleto in the early evening. A gentle wander around town involved a chance meeting with Filippo Proietti who runs Osteria del Matto where we'll be eating later. It takes a matter

of seconds for Jane to see why his nickname *il matto* (the madman) has stuck. Having enthusiastically embraced everyone, he runs through some of his current, and quite frankly ludicrous sounding projects. But no time to delve into the crazy details, it's Jane's first cooking session with Filippo's mother, Santina. Although her kitchen is very small, she welcomes a fellow chef and starts with her tips for *farro* and *agretti*.

As usual dinner is a somewhat random array of dishes from mamma's kitchen: salami, liver pâté, mashed potatoes (superb), grilled tomatoes, fried ricotta, rice *suppli*, chicken with peppers, *strangozzi* with tomatoes and asparagus, cheeses and apple strudel. Conspicuous by its absence was mamma's chocolate and *amaretti crescionda* dessert, but after some flattering, pleading and begging from those of us in the know, it appeared. And shortly after so did the grappa.

ALL YOU CAN EAT

It's unsurprisingly a late night, finishing with a revealing number of empty bottles, but we awake to a sunny morning after. Jane's keen to shop at the market. There are lovely broad beans, peas and *agretti* and the bonus of *porchetta* in Spoleto's Piazza del Mercato. Serafino has been selling these succulent roast pork rolls for years and is an institution. Santina pops by, keen to see what's been bought and gives some insider tips on how she'd tackle the purchases.

It's then time to hit the road and check into the Antonelli vineyard just outside Montefalco. We're staying in a country house and have a kitchen, much to Jane's delight. And everybody else's. The unpacking's barely done when a gorgeous al fresco lunch is served. Bliss.

It's back to our culinary treasure hunt on Sunday morning, as we have an early departure for Norcia and a drive over the Piano Grande, past the town of Castelluccio known worldwide for its lentils. Norcia is a byword for excellent butchery, pork products and truffles. A focused shopping spree works up an appetite which is just as well as we're off to meet the Bianconis for lunch. An endless array of salumi, sausages and

truffles means that we eat far more than is advisable on such a hot day, but it's all irresistible. Even Jane's son, nine-year-old David, declares "I'm in pig heaven". In fact we're all so full that we simply have light snacks with Antonelli's wines back at the vineyard that evening.

But even the well established Antonelli wines are changing: during an informative tasting we hear about the vineyard's formal move to organic recognition for their wines and oil. We're all fans of their produce, especially their *passito*.

THE KING OF PORK

The following day we head to visit Perugia, the region's capital. Unfortunately, it's grey and damp and the main drag, Corso Vannucci, is almost deserted. No matter. Osteria a Priori is warm and welcoming. I happen to know the owner Alessandro Casciola from his time as director of the Strada del Sagrantino, so the wines are sure to be good. He talks about his professional move from promoting a wine route to running an *osteria*, all while serving excellent fizz and some well paired nibbles of salami and cheese. By this time, Alessandro and David are getting on famously. David has quietly been drawing pictures of bottles. In fact he's been capturing their essence as well as we have been downing their contents and Alessandro offers to exchange a plate of salami for his sketch. It doesn't take David long to spot an entrepreneurial opportunity and he produces his second drawing at record speed. Alessandro is clearly relieved that David is obliged to call a halt to his salami earning endeavours when his pasta arrives.

Change on the wine and food front is even more evident the following day, which is one that we're all excited about: a visit to the Arnaldo Caprai vineyard. Cause for cheering alone but there's more: lunch with Marco Caprai, cooked by Salvatore Denaro. Salvatore's restaurant, Il Bacco Felice, in nearby Foligno was a highlight of eating in Umbria. Not only was the food great but Salvo's ability to get all tables chatting and sampling each others' wine was an endless source of



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DISCOVER ITALIA!

► gastronomic gossip. Regrettably, Il Bacco Felice is no longer, but Salvo (aka the 'king of pork and king of cork') is a natural to work closely with Arnaldo Caprai. Salvatore Denaro is Sicilian. He makes a dramatic late entrance. Link these two statements however you see fit.

ANYTHING BUT DULL

Salvatore is not only a gifted chef, but a scene-stealing showman. And put on a show he does. He takes over the wine tasting, which is admittedly less sip-and-assess than relaxed slurp-and-smile, but he comes into his own when everyone moves to the dining table in the kitchen. The dishes come thick and fast including his renowned *panzanella* and some grilled chickens, all seasoned with flamboyance and flirting. Lunch ends with a *granita* of mulberries from Salvatore's garden served with a very generous drenching of grappa. After that any sane people would head home for a swim and a light snack. Not us. Next up is a night in Terni.

There's a consensus from the guide books people have brought that Terni is best avoided: "flat and dull" seems to be the oft-repeated verdict. *An Appetite for Umbria* views it much more positively, as "the perfect antidote to hill town fatigue" and I would have it down as more of a party town. Starting at the Oste della Ma' Ora, Renzo Franceschini greets everyone like old friends, even though he only knows me, and the wine, plates of salami and cheese are served with the expected mix of decorum and irreverence. We head across town to the Met Bar and wine expert Andrea Barbaccia (formerly of the Oste). Everyone settles at a fabulous table outside among the herb pots with some local friends. Andrea was very successful at the Oste, but decided to do something different a few years back and is flourishing while introducing new wines to the locals. The evening ends in the early hours of the morning and our group's view is unanimous: Terni is indeed a party town. It may be flat but there's nothing dull about it.

How to follow a day like that? It can only be with one person.

Giorgio Shaw, who happens to be the perfect Anglo-Italian mix. Born to Italian parents, he was raised until he was 12 years old in Edgware, before moving back to Todi where he now lives and works with his English wife Linda. He does his best to be grumpy but is so charming and funny that he can't quite pull it off. Giorgio has spent the past few years running a pig farm, a vineyard and an olive grove for a well-heeled American who has established roots in Todi. And he really has done it in style. His pork is out of this world: his *salsicce sott'olio* are extraordinary and his wine, having been produced for many years for private consumption only, is now being sold and enjoyed more widely.

It's a pork and red wine extravaganza. Fried sage leaves accompany the pre-dinner white wines, but that's pretty much it for greenery. Platters of salumi are followed by grilled pork chops: it's Umbria *porcine* HQ. Constant cajolements come from Giorgio to drink up as there's another bottle to try. It's our penultimate night, so we bravely battle on.

MEN OF MANY TALENTS

The final day brings a visit to Cucinaà, a bold new venture set up by three culinary VIPs. Marco Gubbiotti gained a Michelin star at La Bastiglia in Spello, but he's now set up a relaxed, hard to define place: part wine bar, part bistro, part *caffè*, part deli cum bakery. It's modern, stylish and very popular. His partners are sommelier Ivan Pizzoni and pastry chef Andrea Santilli, so all the bases are expertly covered. Our few hours in the kitchen with Marco involve making the obligatory pork dish, but also *frascarelli* (a small sieved pasta) which had mystified Jane when we'd eaten it in Terni.

The vibe at Cucinaà is relaxed, charming and just the right side of trendy. We find it heart-warming that a technical master like Marco has left the Michelin race and chosen such a stylish but accessible outlet for his skills. Jane is impressed by its groundbreaking understatement and starts dreaming wistfully.

But at the end of the trip, has the recipe worked? I have mostly spent



Clockwise from above: the Piano Grande; Salvatore takes over the wine tasting; the Casale at the Antonelli vineyard; Giorgio Shaw's Cinta Senese pigs; Christine and Marco at Cucinaà.

the week catching up with friends from the past. It's been a heartening series of updates and it's been a blast meeting so many gifted chefs.

A TRIP TO REMEMBER

And Jane, having met the brilliant but mad people in *An Appetite for Umbria* and eaten her body weight in pork – what will she remember?

"Each Italian region has an amazing bounty to offer. Having focused on vegetables for so long it was revitalising to enjoy such superb meat. But the *agretti crostini* on the first night were unforgettable. Guess I'll always be on a veg crusade. Everyone in Christine's book was brilliant. Knowledgeable, warm, funny and inspirational. New recipes and new challenges here we come." ■

An Appetite for Umbria is available from www.appetiteforitaly.com





BRING THE FLAVOUR OF UMBRIA TO YOUR HOME

➤ FARRO

Use *farro* instead of rice to make a *farrotto*. Exactly the same method as a risotto, but with a lovely nutty taste. We like it with vegetables, small cubes of courgette, green beans, potatoes or squash and pesto. See Renato Ialenti's recipe in *An Appetite for Umbria*.

➤ LENTILS

Rather than mashed potato with your sausages, try Castelluccio lentils. Earthier than puy lentils, they're always eaten on New Year's Eve in Italy, because they represent money. This is a popular dish throughout the cooler months.

➤ TRUFFLE PASTE

For a treat, search out some summer truffle paste. This usually includes mushrooms and is a reliably simple and quick sauce for pasta or gnocchi. Serve with a side salad.

➤ PORK

Try roasting a pork shoulder or loin in the *porchetta* style. Stuff with seasoning, garlic and fennel seeds and serve generously sliced in a top quality bread roll. See Jane Baxter's Atafu Pork recipe in the *Riverford Farm Cook Book*.

➤ SAGRANTINO

Swap your usual red wine for a Sagrantino, and change your usual dessert wine to a Sagrantino *passito*. Let your glass transport you to Montefalco and a view over the Umbrian hills.



UMBRIAN CONTACTS

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- **VESPASIA RESTAURANT**
Via Cesare Battisti 10, 06046 Norcia
www.palazzoseneca.com
- **OSTERIA A PRIORI**
Via dei Priori 39, 06123 Perugia
www.osteriaapriori.it
- **ARNALDO CAPRAI**
Località Torre, 06036 Montefalco
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- **OSTE DELLA MAL'ORA**
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Each Italian region has an amazing bounty to offer – new recipes and new challenges here we come!

