

# My Big Italian Dream Party

Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

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EVER since my first dinner party, when I lived in a tiny flat in London and struggled over a menu of shrimp Creole while making sure I had eight forks for the eight people squeezing around my budget Ikea dining slab, few things have made me happier than sitting around a table with a hand-selected group of friends.

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Jackie Calmes

With everything in place, only more guests are missing from the table.

But my dream dinner — blame Peter Mayle — has always revolved around hosting one of those grand country feasts filled with flavors that erupt in your mouth and characters like those in [“A Year in Provence.”](#) That fantasy, combined with the white wine I was sipping during a cooking class taught by Salvatore Denaro, one of Umbria’s best chefs, is the only thing that can account for the words that tumbled out of my mouth one Tuesday last July.

“Hey, Salvatore,” I said, “you want to come to our festa on Friday?”

And with that, the annual outdoor dinner party that my friends and I have at [Agriturismo La Montagnola](#), the olive oil estate in the Umbrian hills that we rent every July, escalated from a relaxed pastoral gathering into nerve-racking lunacy. With the addition of Mr. Denaro, we would be staging a seated outdoor dinner party for 24, including a hot-shot Italian wine maker and a former mayor and part-time truffle hunter from the country’s mushroom heartland.

And let's not forget the Medici-Borgia heiress, whose family owns the 1,500-acre spread that we rent: Vittoria Iraci Borgia, who would be coming along with her factotum and chef, Carmela; Carmela's husband, Romolo; and their son, Francesco.

And Francesco's girlfriend, Aurora.

The fear factor squared off against my culinary ambitions. Others may want fame and fortune; give me the perfect dinner party.

When I was growing up in Liberia, our house was so far out of town that the only time people came to visit was when my parents arranged fabulous gatherings that took days of preparation. My dad buried a pig in our yard for slow-cooking while my mom, clad in huge Jackie Kennedy glasses, floated around directing the household staff.

Living in the United States, I tried to replicate my parents' affairs, minus the staff. But my tiny backyard in Alexandria, Va., doesn't really have anywhere to bury a pig, let alone stretch out a dining table for 30.

Enter La Montagnola. Nine years ago, during a cooking class that Vittoria and Carmela hold in the family's 17th-century palazzo outside Torgiano, I discovered the perfect holiday escape on a budget: Vittoria had three farmhouses there available for weekly rental, including a six-bedroom mountaintop house, Caprareccia, which costs (and still does) 2,400 euros — about \$3,180 today — for the whole week, or about \$500 for each large room with a queen bed.

The villa has two kitchens, two dining rooms and enough wineglasses even for us. It sits atop its own mountain, with emerald olive trees cascading down from the swimming pool to nearby hillside ruins. Sunsets are an every-evening explosion of color.

I sympathize with readers who recall with envy [the article I wrote](#) about the villa for this newspaper's Travel section three years ago. Before that jealousy bubbles over again, let me repeat that the vacation is not expensive. Nobody in our group of 9 to 14 people is a hedge-fund manager. We come from all walks: some single, some married, some with children, who have come to cherish our week in July in our magical place.

At week's end, we've always held a festa to celebrate the good fortune that sent us to that first cooking class. And as our dinners have expanded every year to include just about every Tomaso, Riccardo and Aroldo we meet, Vittoria has gamely obliged us. When she heard me invite Salvatore, she started laughing. "I'll send Romolo with a truck to bring you tables," she said. "You want me to make something?"

Well, I'm not my mother's daughter for nothing; I know how to delegate. And I dealt with my rising panic by planning every possible detail.

We already had a general idea of what we planned to serve, and we divided the cooking. Anticipating that this dinner was going to jump the shark, I had assigned myself the porchetta — roast pig — which I craftily planned to buy at one of those mobile butcher vans that are scattered at daily markets across Umbria. That would free me to organize, order everyone around and generally make a nuisance of myself.

We strongly believe in “when in Rome,” so our menu would be mostly Italian. An antipasti table near the pool, for cocktail hour, would include sopressata, grilled ciabatta rubbed with garlic and drizzled with some of La Montagnola’s fresh green olive oil and my friend Roe D’Angelo’s oozing [risotto](#) balls stuffed with mozzarella and pecorino.

Cocktails — Campari orange and prosecco — would be set up on a table on the east side of our villa, overlooking rosemary bushes as fat as hedges.

And the rest of our feast would be simple, rustic and so local that the branches providing the lemons would still be rustling when we sat for our insalata. Roe would do the primi: spaghetti with pancetta (Umbria is the land of the pig), mint from our mountain and shallots and [tomatoes](#) from the flea market. My porchetta, stuffed with pine nuts, raisins, fennel and garlic, would hopefully be the star of the secondi.

There are different ways to make porchetta, and the Italians roast the whole pig. To make porchetta at home, you wrap a pork belly around a pork loin, stuff it with whatever you like — sautéed onions and apples, rosemary and sage, black pepper. Then you tie it up, rub it with olive oil and slow-roast it over root vegetables in a bath of red wine.

Our porchetta would be beautifully amplified by Beth’s cannellini beans; Vittoria’s lenticchia, a savory and surprisingly simple dish of lentils, onions and olive oil; and a [salad](#) of lemon and wild arugula (that mountain sure is generous) prepared by Roe. Before any grousing starts about division of labor, Roe can really cook, and we are not ones to look gift cavallos in the mouth.

Dessert would be Marlene’s Key lime [pie](#) with freshly whipped crema. She had brought Florida Key lime juice and graham cracker crusts from the United States. We were too scared to try an Italian dessert because Carmela makes the best tiramisu that exists and we could never compete. Better to distract everyone with a surprise American treat.

The boys would handle the booze. That meant going to the village and stocking up on the robust local wines our region of Umbria has to offer. Our favorite is Sagrantino di Montefalco, one of Italy’s sleeper delights. The guys won’t go anywhere near the Uffizi in Florence or the archeological museum in Perugia, but somehow manage to find their way every year to the [wine museum in Torgiano](#), where they while away entire afternoons before stumbling back to the house. Luckily for them, Marco Caprai, the scion of the Arnaldo Caprai Sagrantino wine

family, was also coming to our party, and he had a habit of showing up with a double magnum or two.

The morning of our party broke as all midsummer mornings in Umbria do — bright sunlight piercing through the bedroom window that I leave open. I bounded into a day filled with pre-party activity: driving with Vittoria to the flea market in Foligno to watch the butcher's mouth drop open when I told him how much porchetta I needed (six kilos), scouring the hypermarket for condensed milk for Marlene's pie, then turning around and driving back there when Vittoria demanded "that avocado thing you made three years ago."

I glared at her. "I'm planning a Fellini-esque bacchanal, and you want guacamole?" I shouted. But back we went to the hypermarket, which, I must report, does not carry jalapeños.

The guests began arriving around 7:30 in a stately procession, all with gifts. Our table stretched more than half the length of the pool, the iron chairs digging into the grass carpet underfoot. The ice cubes I had spent all week hoarding (my Serbian brother-in-law had taught me to put a plastic bowl in the freezer and keep emptying the ice trays into the bowl and refilling them) clinked in Campari glasses. Andrea Bocelli crooned "Con Te Partirò" from the CD player.

But people weren't talking to one another; they were standing around anxiously, in clumps. Nerves screaming, I dragged Bruno, the part-time truffle hunter, over to Marco, the vintner. "Don't you two know each other?" I asked loudly. Beth caught on quickly and glided to where Carmela and her husband stood alone. "Carmela, tell Salvatore about your sausage lasagna," she said, turning to the ebullient chef. Slowly, the setting, food and prosecco began to do their work.

At midnight, we were still lounging around the table, stomachs full and hearts content. Salvatore was in conversation with Beth, his hands gesticulating as he weaved between Italian and English. He had made Marlene's night by pronouncing her pie "delizioso," kissing his fingers. Vittoria was flirting with two ridiculously good-looking twins over glasses of the sweet after-dinner favorite Sagrantino Passito, and Bruno, who had brought me 16 black truffles from Acqualagna as a hostess gift, was patiently explaining to me how easy spaghetti al tartufo was to make.

My dinner party had exceeded all of my fantasies. The guests had devoured Roe's spaghetti, plowed through the porchetta and contorni, and gleefully consumed two cases of wine. When the last one finally left around 1:30 a.m., I went over to the antipasti table to clear it. Some salami was still there, but the ciabatta with olive oil was gone.

And you know what else was gone? The guacamole.