



# Cooking in the country

**Gisela Williams** picks up tips in the culinary arts in some of the most beautiful locations in Europe. Dinner for ten, anyone?

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**W**HILE I SPEND MUCH OF MY TIME being wined and dined at Michelin-starred restaurants and writing about food, ironically, my repertoire in the kitchen doesn't go far beyond a handful of efficient and dependable dinner party pleasers. (Soy and ginger pork roast and garlic potato pancakes anyone?) I may rave about the slow food movement in my articles, but in reality, when I'm cooking, the faster it's all over with the better. Recently, I felt an urge to be more hands on, to understand what goes on behind the scenes, what it takes to create the perfect paella, develop a great bottle of wine or bake buns from scratch. The last thing I wanted, however, was to experience mundane cookery school classes that were just a three-dimensional version of a television show.

Fortunately, as our global palettes have become more refined, food and wine tourism around the world has become equally more sophisticated and exciting. A case in point: the latest batches of luxury culinary schools and programmes to sprout up in Europe are offering more than just days in a test kitchen sharpening knives and learning how to debone fish perfectly. Instead, just as at the new gourmet programmes I experienced recently, one rolls up one's sleeves and jumps right in and cooks a feast alongside a charismatic chef, or travels the countryside meeting winemakers and truffle hunters. The bonus is that they all boast wildly beautiful locations and in some cases even glamorous pools. After all, the truth is, even after all I've learned, I'm not spending any more time in the kitchen. Rather, I'm just able to appreciate all the more the meals that someone else cooks for me.

## CATACURIAN, SPAIN

I arrived at this new cooking school in Spain's Prioat wine region after leaving the highway south of Barcelona and snaking up narrow roads that wound dramatically



Catacurian is in the heart of the Prioat wine region (top); cooking Catalan style (centre); a typical Catalan dish (right); superb Spanish countryside is part of the package (below)



through smoky grey slate hills. In the last ten years, the big flavourful red wines from Priorat have attracted a strong international following, and no important wine list is complete without one.

I was met on arrival at Catacurian, a stone house in the middle of the charming small village of El Masroig, by co-owner Alicia Juanpere. Once a dance teacher in Barcelona, she and her partner, American Jonathan Peret, invested everything in turning Juanpere's century-old family home into a stylish, three-bedroom cooking school. Polished wood beams support the white ceilings; a wine cellar stocks local wine; a fragrant herb garden grows in the back terrace and the kitchen is stocked with only the best knives, paella pans and a work counter at which there's enough room for four people to station themselves comfortably.

With no time to waste, we hopped in Catacurian's four-wheel drive vehicle to visit Costers del Siurana, owned by the Pastrana Jarque family, one of the region's most powerful and successful winemakers. It is close to impossible to visit many of Priorat's best vineyards on one's own; with Alicia, doors are flung open.

The owner's oenologist brother, Joan Jarque, was on hand to take us around the property, followed by a tasting of four of their top wines. Afterwards we enjoyed a meal of white asparagus and Moroccan-style chicken with almonds at the restaurant the Pastrana family own nearby. To work off lunch, I meandered through the surrounding vineyards under a bright sun before returning to Catacurian to shower and prepare for the evening class.

Cooking with Alicia is like learning to cook with a traditional Catalan mother; she directed us all to clean and cut cuttlefish, saving its black ink, and whip up traditional *alioli* – a strong garlic paste which is a staple in Catalan cooking – by hand, in between issuing pointers and recounting personal stories. While sipping glasses of *cava* – Spanish sparkling wine – we worked on making three rice dishes: a shellfish paella, a paella with black ink and a rice-based dish with rabbit. After each was finished, we sat down at the simply but well-set wooden country-style dining room table and, along with different Priorat wines, savoured our accomplishments. It was a lovely evening, all the more satisfying because we had helped with the feast! After tasting a sweet dessert wine, we drifted outside to watch the stars and then retired to our individual rooms. I hadn't slept so well in days; I wasn't sure if it was the fresh mountain air or the bed with its comfy mattress, firm pillow and smooth bedlinen.

Next morning, after breakfast, we set off reluctantly on the return journey to Barcelona. I would have preferred to stay for one of Catacurian's week-long programmes, which include six cooking classes, more vineyard visits, olive oil tastings and day trips to the region's monasteries and castles, as well as 14 unforgettable meals. But even after only a day and night at this beautiful place, I felt as if I had a home in Priorat to return to one day.



The Belle Isle Cookery school is housed in a 17th-century castle

## BELLE ISLE COOKERY SCHOOL, NORTHERN IRELAND

Over a sit-down dinner at stately Baronscourt near Omagh in Northern Ireland, the family seat since 1612 and one of the few remaining family-owned manors in the British Isles, the Duke of Abercorn humorously confessed to not being much of a cook. But there is no question that this charming *bon vivant* appreciates fine food and wine, a fact illustrated by his newly opened Belle Isle Cookery School.

Located an hour from Baronscourt, Belle Isle is a charming little island surrounded by the expansive waters of Upper Lough Erne and dotted with scenes from a Beatrix Potter storybook: sheep grazing in thick green fields, friendly local farmers clad in caps and wellies and rabbits hiding in the grass. It is the setting for the Duke's pet project, now managed by his eldest son, Jamie Hamilton.

The Duke purchased the 450 acres and the estate that makes up Belle Isle in 1991 and gradually refurbished the grounds, which includes an elegant, vine-covered, 17th-century castle and self-catering apartment complex, once the

property's stables. Groups can rent out the entire castle, whose eight bedrooms were decorated by the famous designer, the late David Hicks. One room even boasts a bed that Coco Chanel slept in while being romantically pursued by the then Duke of Westminster.

Young Irish chef Liz Moore heads up the Cookery School, which is located next door to the stable apartments. Moore teaches organisation and confidence in the school's cosy but state-of-the-art kitchen. There are evening demonstration classes focused on Dinner Party Specials and Outdoor Entertaining, day-long classes and five-day courses.

We started our first day class with a cup of coffee, some biscuits warm from the oven and bread making. 'It allows nervous students to relax,' explained Moore. 'There is nothing more calming than pounding and kneading a ball of dough.' Like a young Mary Poppins, Moore is efficient, no nonsense, but lots of fun. Her motto with food is to be surprising but keep it simple, and her background as a private chef and caterer to Ireland's top aristocratic families – she has cooked lunch for the Queen – supplies students with priceless advice for one's own future entertaining enterprises.

After we put our dough aside to rise, we all participated in creating a salmon dish with watermelon and mozzarella, an unusual but fresh combination. Moore taught us how to make homemade herb mayonnaise, an Italian gremolata (like pesto but with parsley) to be used on fish or meat, a well-dressed salmon carpaccio, a colourful and easy to make summer pudding and a strawberry ice cream made from blending frozen strawberries with cream and icing sugar. In the late afternoon we sat down hungrily to consume our labours, everyone very pleased with the tricks we had learned. And later, at home, even I managed to pull out the strawberry ice cream recipe to wow some very impressed guests.



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### TRY A LITTLE URBAN COOKING

**Gourmet on Tour** offers an exciting variety of cooking vacations throughout the world. One of their newest and most exclusive programmes started this autumn and takes place in Paris, at Alain Ducasse's professional culinary school. Spend a day at the famous



chef's foundation learning entirely about chocolate or southern French cuisine. Rates start at €790 per person including two nights in one of two stylish hotels. For more details contact [www.gourmetontour.com](http://www.gourmetontour.com).

**Saboroso**, Barcelona's top tapas and wine touring company, has just started a cooking experience which involves a shopping tour of local markets with Sarah Stothart, an Australian who used to be Rupert Murdoch's private chef, and several hours in a private kitchen helping her to cook a two-course Catalan meal. Sit down afterwards and feast on the end results, along with a generous tasting of Spanish wine. Starts at €150 a head. Contact [www.saboroso.com](http://www.saboroso.com).

The dining room at Belle Isle (top); chef Liz Moore (right), whose motto for food preparation is to keep it simple but surprising (below)



## CHATEAU DE TOURREAU, FRANCE

My taxi driver let out an audible gasp as we turned into the long regal drive that leads to Château de Tourreau. 'Is this where you are staying?' he asked incredulously in Provençal-accented French.

I answered in the affirmative with a modest smile, feeling quite smug, although truthfully, I was also amazed at what stood before me: a beautifully restored, pale yellow, 18th-century château with blue windows, framed by a line of clipped shrubs and ancient plane trees on either side of the long entrance road. As we drew closer, the next door 'farmhouse' came into view, a Mediterranean-style guest building with seven double bedrooms, terracotta tiled roof, garden courtyard and large gates guarded by three friendly Rhodesian Ridgebacks.

I was immediately put at ease by the family of the house, the petite, welcoming Frenchwoman Marie-Thérèse and witty Zimbabwean-born Englishman Michael Dobbs-Higginson, who live full time in Singapore but are here for several weeks of the year when the chateau is not rented out. It was only recently that they decided to open up their second home to paying guests.

Even more recently, in autumn this year, the Dobbs-Higginsons, both enthusiastic connoisseurs of gastronomy, decided to initiate a bespoke cooking programme, overseen by one of the area's most interesting and innovative young talents, Johannes Sailer, owner and chef of Les Abeilles in nearby Sablet. Depending on the season and the interests of the guests, Sailer takes the chateau's visitors to local markets, such as the ones in Carpentras and Iles sur la Sorgue, showing them how to choose the best ingredients. He also makes introductions to cheese makers or

truffle hunters and hosts a lunch or dinner at his restaurant, which features such seasonal delights as an all-tomato menu: a genius gazpacho, a refreshing terrine of grilled tomatoes and fresh goat's cheese, a quick-cooked shoulder of lamb with a flavourful tomato sauce and for dessert, tomato crème brûlée.

Sailer teaches his methods in the spacious and airy chateau kitchen, and the lesson is followed by a sit-down meal in one of many dining areas. These include an informal table in the kitchen, the chateau dining room and, in summer, the fairytale stone courtyard with jasmine-covered walls and carp fountain, or beside the enormous seamless pool surrounded by oleander and fig trees and blooming flowers.

Days here blend lazily from one to the next. In my case I barely left the property; only once to explore Avignon, a 30-minute drive away. I enjoyed fresh pressed juices in the morning, sitting on the steps that overlook the chateau's formal sculptured gardens and fountains ruled over by four proud pet peacocks; sit-down lunches by the pool with rich local wines (the most famous vineyard of the southern Rhone valley is Château-neuf-du-Pape, only 15 minutes away; guests can arrange tastings and visits there) and cheese courses served with sweet dessert wines. There were also catnaps by the pool; walks through sunflower-filled fields; reading sessions in the chateau's living room which, like the rest of the interior, is decorated with beautiful French and Asian antiques; lively three-course dinners served by the chateau's personal chef; and the occasional film watched in the Peacock Salon's home cinema. I managed to completely avoid the state-of-the-art gym, squash and basketball courts. Although I returned home a few kilos heavier, it was worth it.



A little culinary wizardry is followed by a sit-down meal in the chateau's spacious kitchen

## COOKING ADDRESS BOOK

### CATACURIAN

A week-long programme at Catacurian, including accommodation, all meals, day trips and transportation to and from Barcelona airport, starts at €2,000 euros per person. +34 934 312 404; [www.catacurian.com](http://www.catacurian.com).

### BELLE ISLE SCHOOL OF COOKERY

The 'Castle Days' 5-day course with accommodation in the castle

starts at €1,400 per person. +44 286 638 7231; [www.irish-cookery-school.com](http://www.irish-cookery-school.com).

### CHATEAU DE TOURREAU

A three-day gourmet course at the chateau, including lessons and guided day trips with chef Johannes Sailer, starts at €1,500 (not including accommodation). Staying at the chateau (which can sleep up to 18 people) costs between €4,000 and

€8,000 a night (off-season). [www.chateaudetourreau.com](http://www.chateaudetourreau.com).

### VOLPAIA

A half-day gourmet class starts at €130 per person. Accommodation is available in apartments, starting at €570 (for four persons per week) or €1,100 (for six per week). There are also two villas at the property available to rent. +39 0577 738 066; [www.volpaia.it](http://www.volpaia.it).



The beautiful 12th-century Castello di Volpaia (top) now plays host to gourmet cookery classes (right)

## VOLPAIA, ITALY

Some people inherit a house. Giovannella Stianti inherited an entire 12th-century Tuscan village. 'My father bought Volpaia in 1966,' she explained. 'He left his book printing business to my brother and Volpaia to me.' Over the last three decades this stylish, intelligent Florentine with silver hair and strong ambitions has, along with her businessman husband Carlo, transformed Volpaia into an authentic gourmet tourist venture complete with award-winning vineyard, enoteca, an olive oil-and-vinegar-producing business, gardens, five self-catering apartments, two charming villas, reconstructed stone farmhouses and a popular restaurant.

The cooking school was a recent venture and started as a bit of a family joke, according to Giovannella. 'I have loved cooking for years and my home has always been the setting for many dinner parties,' she explained. We were chatting on the restaurant's terrace, over a meal of ricotta and spinach dumplings served with a butter and thyme sauce, and sesame-grilled chicken marinated in rosemary and lemon. 'My husband thought it would be a smart thing to invest in me and so we built the cooking school.'

The school is located in the oldest part of the village – still protected by the original castle walls – and features a stone terrace with views of the surrounding Tuscan hills. Inside, there's an intimate, contemporary and well-equipped teaching kitchen with terracotta tile floors, stainless steel work tables and an island with a gas stove. Giovannella is a lively and efficient teacher who instructs in the art of simple, seasonal Italian entertaining. 'Cooking should be easy,' she explains, 'and organised so you can enjoy your own parties.'

Three stylish Italian women in their early 40s and I took

part in her class, which covered a variety of things from learning how to make the best pizza and schiacciata dough from scratch, to creating a fried sage and courgette flower dish and learning the secret behind perfect panna cotta. One imagines that if there were to be an Italian Delia Smith, Giovannella would be the perfect choice.

Over lively conversation about food and family, after three hours we sat down and tried everything, served to us on the terrace by a waiter. 'The worst part about cooking is cleaning up afterwards and serving,' believes Giovannella. 'That's why I have someone else take care of those chores.'

A typical gourmet week at Volpaia would include a day of cooking; a half-day tasting and learning about wine at the Stiantis' wine cellar; an invitation to dinner cooked by the hostess at her home; a day in Siena with an art historian; and a day trip with Giovannella to Florence (a 45-minute car journey away) to explore the city's fantastic food market. In between, one can hike through the surrounding hills, fragrant with ripening grapes; relax in one's villa (beautifully decorated with antiques); play tennis at the village's courts; and soak up Volpaia's historic landmarks, such as the Renaissance Church of Sant' Eufrosino.