

Embrook School Culinary Tour of Tuscany

by Claire Nicol, Head of Design and Technology, Emmbrook School

In the last issue of DATA Practice we toured Rome with teachers on a CPD trip. This time it's the turn of students to visit Italy and sample the range of foods on offer in Tuscany.

Our culinary tour began on a Friday, when the coach arrived to take us on the long trip to Montecatini, a beautiful Roman Spa town an hour and a half from Florence. The ferry crossing was very busy, with hundreds of school pupils off for half-term skiing, rugby, and sight-seeing tours. After twenty four hours and many service station stops we had arrived at our hotel: our base for the next five days. We all spent the next few hours settling in and having a meal, before we took a look around the town. There was an air of expectation as the thirty five students looked around.

On Sunday morning we set off at 9am for a guided tour of an artisan cheese maker in Trequanda, with an opportunity to taste the produce and investigate traditional and local food production. The scenery on the way was most beautiful: undulating hills with Tuscan farm houses on the tops, topiary trees, and long farm drives. It was the typical calendar picture.

We made our way down a small track to the farm house where the owner was waiting. The farm house was very old and had been in the family for centuries. It consisted of a main house with traditional features including grain storage under the hall floor and a salt cupboard in the wall of the lounge. The kitchen had a huge range which was used up until the late 60s. A vast array of jelly moulds, saucepans and kettles hung from the walls, and in an adjacent room a huge log fire was burning. Outside in an out-building they stored lemon and grapefruit trees, all in fruit. The stable block had the names of the horses that once occupied them above each door, while other buildings were being turned into holiday flats. We found a derelict church, and a beautiful topiary garden which would give all the shade required in the summer.

Back in the house, we sat in the huge lounge with a painted ceiling in traditional colours and pattern, and listened to the owner's daughter explain about the organic farm they had, keeping goats which made the cheese we were later to taste. They also made wine, and had olive trees from which they bottled their own olive oil. We then watched an informative video.

Next we went through to the dining room and were allowed to taste a very young Pecorino cheese and a much more mature one. The younger cheese was served with slices of pear while the more mature one was served with delicious fig jam. We also tried an almond tart made from goat's cheese and goat's cheese and chocolate dessert. The quality of the produce was outstanding as was the hospitality and the pupils really enjoyed the experience especially looking at the regional ingredients, and tasting the foods. The views from the house were breath-taking. It was a great start to the trip.

Next onto Sant' Antimo Abbey and after a short look round as a lot of renovation work was underway we travelled on to Montalcino, a beautiful old Tuscan village with narrow streets where we found time to stop for coffee

and the thick hot chocolate that is almost a mousse, while pupils purchased pizza or pastries. Then we went to the castle to look at the 'library of wine labels' and then walked the castle walls. All too soon the coach arrived and we travelled back to the hotel for our evening meal.

Pisa

It was an early start the next day as we set out for Pisa which we found in full sunlight and nearly empty of visitors. The pupils enjoyed taking pictures of themselves pushing over the Leaning Tower, and looking round.

From the top of the tower the views were magnificent: snow on the nearby mountain range, and terracotta roofs slanting in different angles. After coffee at a local café overlooking the square we were back on the coach and taken back to our hotel for lunch. As with any meal we had in the hotel we had a pasta starter which the pupils really liked. Soup was also an option, but not as popular. The main course was usually meat and vegetables and the dessert fruit or cakes.

Maionchi

We then set off for Villa Maionchi which was perched on the Lucca Hills. This estate dated back beyond the 17th Century and was unique because of its incredible position, and especially because of the high quality of produce that was made there, such as wine, grappa and extra virgin olive oil. This has made it a destination for the famous: the Three Tenors, Nicole Kidman, Tom Cruise and now The Emmbrook School! As at Montalcino, Maionchi catered for agritourism as this, they feel, will also bring in revenue, and help people understand the importance of farming the land.

The owner spoke to us about the olive groves and vineyards in the peace and tranquillity of her Italian garden that had three water fountains, and the topiary and architectural plants we come to expect. We then went into the restaurant area where we were treated to the most fantastic tasting of local produce, meats including salami and Italian black pudding which had a very delicate flavour, meatballs, and olive oils on bread, olives and almond biscuits. The pupils learnt new cooking and food skills. The restaurant had a really homely welcoming atmosphere, decorated in old tools, and each table had a gingham cloth. Next to the dining area was a shop that sold all the produce at a reasonable price giving the pupils the opportunity to buy gifts. Olive oil was the most popular, but jams were also in demand. If you wish to visit this outstanding estate either travel by car or study a map carefully, we had three attempts at finding a suitable road to access the farm, due to the fact our guide had not been to the farm in a coach before. We had a few frazzled nerves on route.

Lucca

We next travelled to the Circolo L'Inchiostro in the centre of Lucca for a typical Tuscan meal cookery lesson. The lesson was held by two sisters in a beautiful building which made up one house in a circle of houses with a courtyard in the middle. The pupils were shown how to make Pappa al Pomodoro, (tomato soup with

garlic and bread) Pollo alle Erbe con Olive (chicken and olives with fresh rosemary and sage) and Befanini (special biscuits). The pupils really enjoyed the experience and when it came to them eating their handy work, sat almost in silence as they ate. This was a real success. At the end the pupils thanked the two sisters and we went back to the hotel.

Florence

The last full day's activities started with a guided tour of Florence and a visit to the ancient food market of St Lorenzo. The market was fantastic, with every possible Italian produce displayed to perfection. We purchased fig jam, orange relishes, salami, parmesan, spaghetti and Panforte Nero, the chocolate cake eaten for celebrations.

Then we were taken to the Uffizi Gallery, one of the most famous museums of art and sculpture in the world. The tour guide was marvellous; he was on the pupils' level and had some great anecdotes to keep them really engaged. His enthusiasm was catching and the pupils were totally captivated.

After a lunch of pizza we set off for a cookery lesson on how to make Tiramisu, the famous coffee biscuit and cream dessert. The lesson was at the top of a building in the centre of Florence which had an old cage lift through the centre. The pupils had a demonstration, and then in groups they set about making the dessert. Once they were complete the pupils ate them washed down with fruit juice. After clearing up, they had time to shop for gifts, before we visited Michelangelo Square to look down on Florence all lit up including the Ponte Vecchio Bridge. Then back to the hotel for dinner.

Back home

On Wednesday morning, pupils bought food from the supermarket for the long journey home. Many had ice cream or pastries in local cafes. For lunch we took them to Ristorante Corsaro Verde before getting onto the coach for the trip back.

Although the trip had taken lots of planning and hard work it was obvious that the pupils had really gained a lot from the experience. For some it had been their first trip abroad. Pupils had had the opportunity to try many different foods, and see and appreciate different culture and historical landmarks.

We booked the tour with Travelscope (<http://www.travelscope.co.uk>) and the coach company they used was TWH contact number 020 7062 1044. Both provided an outstanding service.