

A Taste of Italy

Sarina Lewis discovers the innate simplicity and seasonality of Italian cuisine, as she signs up to learn about the time-honoured culinary traditions at four Italian family cooking schools in Victoria's King Valley and Alpine regions.

Photography Sean Fennessy



Clockwise from left: King Valley is home to some of the highest altitude vineyards in the country; Rinaldo's Casa Cucina panettone; the Myrtleford Butter Factory; persimmons ready to be picked.



NONNA'S APPLE STRUDEL**Serves 8 • Prep 45 mins • Cooking 25 mins**

“This is my mother-in-law Rosetta’s recipe,” says Katrina Pizzini. She worked with an Austrian pastry chef when she was young, and that’s where she learnt it.”

160g (½ cup) apricot jam

3 Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored, thinly sliced

55g (¼ cup) caster sugar

25g unsalted butter, finely chopped, plus extra, to grease

1 tbs currants

1 tbs sultanas

½ tsp ground cinnamon

½ tsp ground cloves

Double cream or vanilla ice-cream, to serve

Pastry

125ml (½ cup) milk

30g unsalted butter, roughly chopped

1 tbs caster sugar

150g (1 cup) self-raising flour, sifted

1 egg, beaten

1 To make pastry, place milk, butter and sugar in a saucepan over medium–low heat and bring to a simmer, stirring to dissolve sugar. Place flour in a bowl and make a well in centre. Add egg and 60ml milk mixture, stirring to form a dough.

2 On a lightly floured work surface, knead dough gently for 5 minutes. If mixture is sticky, sprinkle with a little extra flour (it should be a little softer than pasta dough consistency). Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 1 hour.

3 Preheat oven to 180C and grease an oven tray. Roll out pastry on a lightly floured surface to a 2mm-thick oval. Spread jam over pastry, right to edges, then top with apple slices, leaving a 2cm border. Sprinkle with sugar, dot with butter, currants and sultanas, then sprinkle with cinnamon and cloves. Gently roll up one side of pastry over apples, then continue rolling pastry and apples to make a layered strudel. Using two wide spatulas, carefully pick up apple strudel and lay on prepared tray.

4 Baste strudel with remaining 65ml milk mixture, then bake, basting twice with the buttery syrup oozing onto the baking tray, for 25 minutes or until golden and cooked through. Basting while cooking will ensure a shiny and golden apple strudel. Serve warm with vanilla ice-cream or rich cream.



Left: a four-legged friend stops to say hello. Below: Katrina Pizzini in front of the A Tavola! Cooking School.

A TAVOLA! COOKING SCHOOL

Katrina Pizzini moves with ease in her family winery’s impressively equipped kitchen. In the time it’s taken us, her students, to cut a higgledy-piggledy row of potato gnocchi, she’s whipped together a mixture of ricotta, pan-fried silverbeet and egg yolk, and has already begun moulding and cutting perfect diamonds: a gluten-free alternative to gnocchi that we enjoy later with a rich and creamy blue-cheese sauce, alongside stuffed quail and a crisp, green salad picked fresh from the 250-hectare Pizzini estate.

Karen works with such grace, cooks with such surety, that it’s difficult to believe she herself is not Italian-born. “We married when I was 17 years old,” Katrina says, smiling at the memory of her long-ago wedding to Fred, the son of Roberto and Rosetta, immigrants from northern Italy who established a tobacco farm here in the 1960s. The family later turned to grapes, and Fred and Katrina established the Pizzini wine label in 1994, after Fred’s parents had retired.

Living under the Pizzini roof as a young wife and mother (the couple had four children by Katrina’s 24th birthday), Katrina had little choice but to learn the ways of an Italian household, “especially if I wanted Fred to sit in my kitchen, and not the kitchen of his mother,” she says with a grin, but one senses the truth behind the punch line. Fred wanders in, attracted by the wonderful aromas of the food in mid-preparation – clearly Katrina’s efforts to ensnare him in her culinary net have proved effective.

We, too, are captivated because Katrina is a natural-born teacher. Her cooking instructions are clear and precise, her encouragement is frequent and her guiding hand is strong, especially when the pupil’s conversation drifts away from the task at hand. The pace is leisurely as we learn to make perfect risotto (cook on low, simmer heat with no stirring), roll gnocchi, stuff quail and make our own apple strudel (see recipe left), “one of Nonna’s favourite recipes,” adds Katrina.

Katrina’s relaxed teaching method is a soothing antidote to celebrity chefs and their obsession with speed. She encourages us to work slowly, allowing us the time we need to really enjoy the process. “For me, cooking is about thinking of what can be done in one hour and then spreading it over three hours,” she confesses.

Certainly it makes for a pleasant experience, culminating in sitting down to a beautiful yet casual meal at the communal table in the adjoining tasting and dining room: a bite of salad, a nibble of gnocchi, a few forks of juicy quail and a sweet finale of golden, spiced apple pastry. And a tipple of vibrant Pizzini sangiovese, of course. *Katrina Pizzini runs cooking classes throughout the year on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Pizzini Cellar Door, 175 King Valley Rd, Whitfield, (03) 5729 8030, pizzini.com.au.*



POLITINI WINES

The story of Salvatore “Sam” Politini’s life is written in his hands. Large, capable and rough from hard work; hands you can imagine building a life for his wife and children at the King Valley farm they call home. They show evidence of the effort to maintain economic pace once government quotas stunted his tobacco profits, the cherry orchard he planted as a replacement, then ripped out, and the scenic vineyard that still stands today.

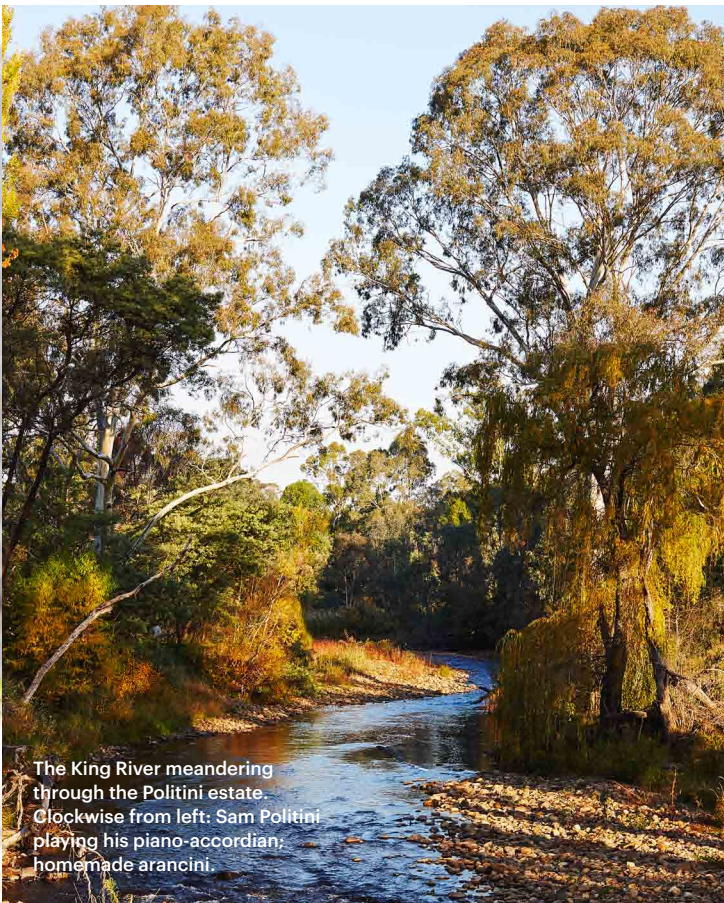
But it’s the promise of salami that’s now attracting the crowds. Every weekend, enthusiastic visitors descend on the house to debone pigs, mince kilos of meat and mix spices under the expert tutelage of this hands-on Sicilian family.

Sam’s infectious laughter leaves you in no doubt that his recent venture has only added to the pleasure he finds in life. “It happened by accident,” explains Sam’s daughter, Bianca. “In 1999, we had some friends over, who wanted to make salami.” Up until that point Sam had made it perhaps four times in 40 years. “I agreed, but only if they did it exactly my way, without questions, then everyone would love it.” Sam says, his grin as broad as his hands. “And they did!”

The salami itself is eye-opening – spiced with black pepper, speckled and made rich with just the right amount of fat. “We Italians like to make our food from scratch,” explains Sam’s wife, Josie, as Bianca demonstrates twisting the rope around the salami the family has just stuffed, the skin softened and made fragrant in her custom mix of slowly simmered water, lemon, bay leaf, black peppercorn, cinnamon quill, cloves and apple. “And people seem to want to eat whatever we make,” she adds.

And it’s not just the salami the students love. It’s the Politini family, too. The easy, welcoming manner; the steaming bowls of caponata, arancini (see recipe right), cannelloni and polenta-topped stews laid out for lunch; and then there’s Sam’s serenading on the piano-accordion while enthusiastic salami-makers linger over coffee and ricotta-stuffed cannoli.

Salami-making courses run most Saturdays from June to August. Politini Wines, 65 Upper King River Rd, Cheshunt, (03) 5729 8277, politiniwines.com.au



The King River meandering through the Politini estate. Clockwise from left: Sam Politini playing his piano-accordion; homemade arancini.

ARANCINI

Makes 24 • Prep 1 hr

• Cooking 2½ hrs

This is Josie and Salvatore Politini’s recipe for arancini, which they serve at their salami-making workshops.

300g (3 cups) seasoned, dried fine breadcrumbs, plus extra, to scatter
250g mozzarella, cut into 1½cm cubes
60g (½ cup) frozen peas, blanched, refreshed
3 hard-boiled eggs, thinly sliced
½ cup flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped
6 eggs, lightly beaten
Vegetable oil, for deep-frying

Rice mixture

60ml (¼ cup) olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
400g can diced tomatoes
125ml (½ cup) vegetable stock
1 basil sprig, torn
800g (4 cups) long-grain rice
25g (½ cup) finely grated parmesan

Meat filling

¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
250g pork mince
250g veal mince
700ml tomato passata
½ cup (125ml) vegetable stock
1 basil sprig, torn

1 To make rice mixture, heat oil in a saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and garlic and cook, stirring, for 3 minutes or until softened. Add tomatoes, stock and basil. Season with salt and pepper, reduce heat to low, then

simmer, stirring occasionally, for 1 hour. Meanwhile, cook rice according to packet instructions with 1 tbs salt. Set aside to cool completely, then stir in parmesan and 250ml tomato mixture
2 To make meat filling, heat oil in a saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and garlic and cook, stirring, for 3 minutes or until softened. Add both minces and cook, breaking up meat with a wooden spoon, for 6 minutes or until browned. Add passata, stock and basil, season with salt and pepper and bring to the boil. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 1 hour or until thickened.

3 Scatter extra breadcrumbs on a large tray. Using damp hands, place 2 tbs rice mixture in your hand. Press 2 mozzarella cubes into centre, then top with some peas, a slice of boiled egg, a little parsley and some meat filling. Cover with another 2 tbs rice mixture and shape into a ball. Coat arancini in beaten egg, then coat in breadcrumbs and place on prepared tray. Repeat with remaining ingredients to make 24 balls. Refrigerate arancini for 1 hour or until needed.

4 Fill a deep-fryer or large saucepan one-third full with oil and heat to 170C (or until a cube of bread turns golden in 15 seconds). Working in batches, deep-fry arancini for 4 minutes or until golden and crisp. Drain on paper towel and serve immediately.



PATRIZIA SIMONE COOKING SCHOOL

A matriarch of Umbria's impressive culinary scene, Patrizia Simone is a passionate cook who, clearly, still feels a frisson of delight at frying up fresh zucchini flowers or foraging mushrooms from nearby hills. It's an excitement upheld in her custom-built cooking school kitchen, an inviting space of wood, stone and steel attached to the back of her award-winning restaurant, Simone's, now run by her son, Anthony.

"This is what the grandmothers traditionally make as a snack for their grandchildren, sprinkled with sugar," she says as she whips up a thin batter of flour, water and salt, into which she tosses zucchini flowers before frying them in hot oil. For us, she sprinkles these small discs of floral pleasure with salt, a treat to keep appetites whetted during her four-hour class.

Not that time lags. Between explaining simple cooking techniques (how to hollow and seed a cherry tomato), further tastings (Anthony's sourdough doused in olive oil from her father's grove in Umbria), and a whole lot of hands-on cooking, it seems as if lunch is upon us in an instant. And what a lunch. The sun is shining and, settled under the shade of a Japanese maple, we share *pancotto di pomodoro e pane* (tomato and bread soup), eggplant parmigiana and gnocchi (our own) in a Taleggio-gorgonzola sauce, echoing with the faintest bite of chilli.

A single bottle of wine, chosen by Simone's husband George, soon turns into a second as we enjoy a pre-prepared dessert of tiramisu – with all our chatter, the chance to prepare *dolce* (sweets) has escaped us. Not that anyone minds. It was well worth it to hear the story of Patrizia's move from Italy to Melbourne, and then from Melbourne to Bright, more than 25 years ago. "When we first talked about it, I thought 'Bright' meant 'Brighton', and I couldn't figure out why we kept driving further from the sea," Patrizia laughs as she remembers her excitement at the thought of moving to live by the water, so very different from the mountain landscape of her Italian home.

Simone's pleasure in her adopted home is evident in her ready smile and generous way with food. "Although there's always something alluring about the landscape of your childhood, I've fallen in love with living here. It is a beautiful place to call home," she muses. *Patrizia Simone runs cooking classes throughout most of the year. Patrizia Simone Country Cooking School, 18 Riverside Ave, Bright, (03) 5755 2266, simonesbright.com.au.*



Ripe tomatoes are transformed into tomato and bread soup (below). Left: Patrizia Simone with her bounty of mushrooms.



PANCOTTO DI POMODORO E PANE (TOMATO AND BREAD SOUP)

Serves 6 • Prep 25 mins • Cooking 40 mins

"At Simone's Restaurant, we serve a version of this simple country dish puréed in a glass, then topped with a drizzle of oil, burrata and a sprig of basil," explains Patrizia. "All versions rely on full-flavoured tomatoes, high-quality olive oil and good bread."

2 kg full-flavoured ripe tomatoes, such as San Marzano, roma or ox-heart
175ml good-quality, extra virgin olive oil, plus extra to drizzle
1 cup basil leaves, torn, plus extra to garnish
6 slices ciabatta
1 garlic clove, cut in half
Torn burrata* and finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano* (both optional), to serve

1 Cut tomatoes into large chunks, reserving the juices and discarding the seeds. If there are lots of seeds, squeeze the tomatoes into a sieve over a bowl.
2 Place oil in a large saucepan over low heat. Add tomatoes, basil and a good pinch of salt and cook, stirring occasionally, for 30 minutes.
3 Meanwhile, grill ciabatta on both sides until just golden, then rub both sides with the cut-side of garlic. Arrange ciabatta slices in the base of another large saucepan, layering if necessary.

4 Press tomato mixture through a fine sieve over toast, pressing down to extract as much juice as possible. Discard tomato solids. Add a little reserved tomato juice if ciabatta slices need to soften a little. Place pan over low heat and simmer gently for 5 minutes, stirring to ensure mixture does not stick to base, until bread has broken down. Ladle into bowls, drizzle with olive oil, scatter over cheeses, if using, and serve topped with basil.

DRINK 2011 Chrismont La Zona Arneis, King Valley, Vic (\$22)

* *Burrata are fresh cheese rounds with stretched mozzarella on the outside and a buttery mix of shredded mozzarella and cream on the inside. Substitute buffalo mozzarella. Parmigiano-Reggiano is the finest Italian parmesan cheese. Substitute regular parmesan or Grana Padano. Both are from Italian delis, select supermarkets and good cheese shops.*



A slice of orange and chocolate semifreddo heaven. Clockwise from right: a tour bus drops off hungry guests; Adam Pizzini; outdoors at Rinaldo's Casa Cucina Restaurant.

PANETTONE, ORANGE & DARK CHOCOLATE SEMIFREDDO

Serves 6 • Prep 35 mins, plus overnight freezing

200g panettone* or brioche, thinly sliced
3 eggs, separated
300ml thickened cream
1½ tbs Cointreau
150g caster sugar
1 orange, zested
100g dark chocolate, coarsely chopped
Chocolate sauce and candied orange slices, to serve

1 Grease a 1.5L terrine mould and line with plastic wrap, leaving an overhang. Cut panettone slices to fit terrine base, reserving remaining slices.

2 Whisk egg whites to stiff peaks and set aside. In a separate bowl, whisk cream and Cointreau to soft peaks. In a third bowl, beat egg yolks with sugar and orange zest until thick and pale. Fold whipped cream into egg yolk mixture. Working in 2 batches, fold in egg whites, then fold in chocolate. Pour mixture into panettone-lined terrine, then cover with another layer of panettone, trimming to fit. Cover with plastic wrap. Freeze overnight.

3 Turn out semifreddo onto a serving platter and cut into slices. Serve with chocolate sauce and candied orange slices.

* This traditional Italian Christmas cake bread is available from select supermarkets, Italian delis and specialist greengrocers.



RINALDO'S CASA CUCINA

“You can’t swing a stick around here without hitting a Pizzini.” This comment by a food-loving local springs to mind as I head up the driveway to meet Adam Pizzini, owner and head chef at Rinaldo’s Casa Cucina restaurant and cooking school. Adam laughs when I repeat the line to him, admitting that the Italian clan does indeed have a long culinary reach over the region.

Adam’s father, Rinaldo (brother of Fred Pizzini of Pizzini wines) sadly passed away when Adam was just 12 years old. Although Rinaldo Senior was a farmer, not a chef, he was a keen cook and Adam named the restaurant after his father, as a way of keeping him close.

As well as specific dishes, the extensive three-hour cooking class at Rinaldo’s Casa Cucina aims to teach techniques, including deboning chicken and knife skills. We knead silky pasta dough by hand, roll chicken around a creamy mousse to make chicken ballotine and learn how create a semifreddo base.

“I learned how to be a chef through my apprenticeship,” Adam explains of the job he undertook as a cooking-obsessed 15-year-old. “But I learned how to taste from my Nonna,” he adds. His Italian-born grandmother was undoubtedly a culinary inspiration, a woman who tossed parsley by the handful over every finished dish (a tradition Adam has continued), and whose instinctive feel for food made her a natural cook.

Cooking classes are held at the restaurant between lunch and dinner service, stationed at a long table overlooking the front window. While we enjoy a delicious afternoon tea (a mix of homemade Italian-style biscuits and coffee), the food from the class is packaged up for us to take home. Adam also encourages students to stay on and book for a celebratory dinner in the restaurant of the chef with whom they have shared their afternoon. “It’s really all about having a bit of fun,” Adam says of the classes, “and getting some techniques across to give people something to build on at home.”

Adam Pizzini’s classes run from May to October. Rinaldo’s Casa Cucina, 8/10 Tone Rd, Wangaratta, (03) 5721 8800, rinaldos.com.au.





Visitors to this alpine region can take advantage of nearby ski fields in winter and the local pool in summer (left). Below: goat's cheese from Milawa Cheese Company

★ THE HIT LIST ★

EAT

Simone's Restaurant

Rustic Umbrian cuisine and wines in a fine-dining atmosphere.

98 Gavan St, Bright, (03) 5755 2266, simonesbright.com.au.

Ginger Baker

Enjoy meals by day and tapas by night in a riverside setting framed by willow trees. **127 Gavan St, Bright, (03) 5755 2300.**

Tani

A touch of modern Asian cuisine crafted from local produce.

100 Gavan St, Bright, (03) 5750 1304, tanieatdrink.com.au.

Dal Zotto

A family-run vineyard, cellar door and restaurant with regional Italian food. The Friday night pizza, pasta and vino night is a must-do.

4861 Wangaratta-Whitfield Road, (03) 5729 8321, dalzotto.com.au.

EXPERIENCE

Milawa Cheese Company

A great selection of fresh and matured cheeses made with cow and goat's milk. **17 Milawa-Bobinawarrah Rd, (03) 5727 3589, milawacheese.com.au.**

Bright Brewery

Tours and tastings every Friday at 3pm or by appointment.

121 Great Alpine Rd, Bright, (03) 5755 1301, brightbrewery.com.au.

Myrtleford Butter Factory

Grab a bite to eat at the cafe or join in the guided tour every Thursday at 11am. **15 Great Alpine Rd, Myrtleford, (03) 5752 2300, thebutterfactory.com.au.**

STAY

Casolare at Politini Wines

Meaning "little house in the country", this two-bedroom renovated B&B has a wood heater, modern kitchen and cute deck overlooking the King Valley on the Politini Wines estate. **65 Upper King River Rd, Cheshunt, 0427 567 377, politiniwines.com.au.**

The Sorting Shed

In the middle of a working Angus cattle stud, this three-bedroom house has a modern kitchen, sauna and deck with mountain views. It's one of three properties available to rent through The Kilns. **Cavedons La, Porepunkah, 0400 733 170, kilnhouse.com.au.**

