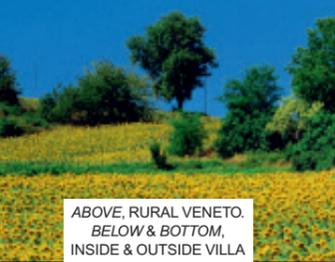


RECIPE FOR PLEASURE

Whisk yourself off to a ravishing hotel, learn how to become a chef extraordinaire, return, throw a dinner party, become the most popular person you know. It's that easy



ABOVE, RURAL VENETO. BELOW & BOTTOM, INSIDE & OUTSIDE VILLA CASAGRANDE



STIRRED, ITALY

If you're going to sharpen up your cooking skills, you might as well do it in a ravishing 15th-century palazzo. And if that palazzo happens to be owned by a charming Italian count and countess – the Conte and Contessa Brandolini d'Adda – then so much the better. This is Villa Casagrande in rural Veneto, the setting of Stirred, a new culinary course that focuses on traditional Venetian cooking with a modern spin – and all so relaxed and enjoyable it feels like a week-long house party with people you want to talk to and food you really want to eat.

Daily classes are all about local and seasonal, so it's artichokes in April, cherries in May, mushrooms and truffles in the autumn. We were given rubber gloves to extract ink sacs from cuttlefish to make a black risotto. We stuffed our ravioli with hand-minced beef cheeks and cut the heads and feet off still-warm guinea fowl to make *faraona con salsa peverada*. Not for the squeamish.

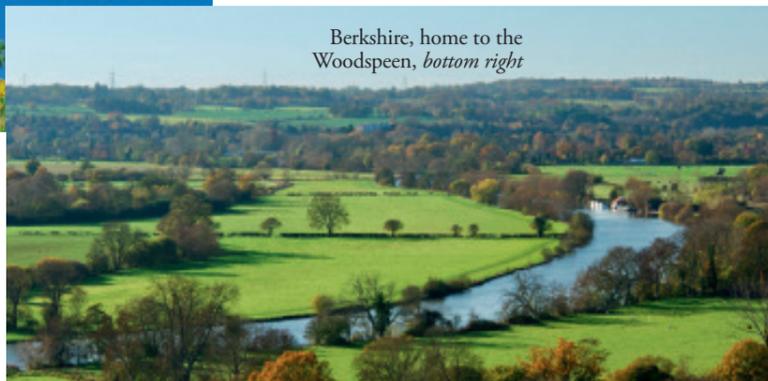
Each morning session led to long alfresco feasts in the courtyard among old olive-oil barrels; afternoons were free for snoozing under giant oaks, strolling around the countryside or dipping in the pool. Between lessons, we were whisked off for tasting trips: cheese infused with raisin wine; champagne-quality Bisol prosecco. One morning we cruised down Venice's Grand Canal by vaporetto to buy the day's ingredients from the fabulous Rialto open-air market. Cook like a count; eat like a king. What could be better?

Chris Caldicott

BOOK IT Six nights, full board, including activities, £2,495 a person (stirredtravel.com).



The foothills of the Dolomites, the setting of Stirred at Villa Casagrande



Berkshire, home to the Woodspeen, bottom right

THE WOODSPEEN, BERKSHIRE

It seemed like such a good idea at the time, but now you've got six people to feed (read 'impress') at the weekend. Blind panic. You want the sort of elegant yet unfussy food you imagine Sam Cam might whip up for a kitchen supper, and a frozen lamb tagine from Cook really won't cut it. Stave off the panic by getting yourself to the Woodspeen cookery school, near Newbury. In a restored 19th-century farm building with state-of-the-art gear and views of deer-dotted Berkshire countryside, chef John Campbell shows you how to sprinkle a little stardust over your efforts. He's been anointed by Michelin more than once (most recently at Coworth Park), but he's changed gear at his new restaurant and cookery school. Yes, he's mates with Heston and you'll pick up zillions of fascinating gastro-science facts (such as cook a casserole at 90°C tops – the collagen in the meat turns to gelatin, so you get a tender stew with wrinkle-reducing powers), but he's also planted a kitchen garden, shoots his own game and will teach you how to skin a fish like a pro. So he'll share the secrets of cheffy swirls if you want, but you're not here to produce fiddly 'Argh! I wish I hadn't started this!' primed plates. Simply turn up, make three utterly delicious and impressive yet easy-peasy courses (smoked haddock risotto, perhaps, or buttermilk panna cotta), feast on the fruits of your labour and leave with a foolproof plan. **Kate Lauer** **BOOK IT** Seasonal dinner-party course, £165 (thewoodspeen.com or visitengland.com).



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK; CHRIS CALDICOTT



Monteverdi, Tuscany

SOMETHING'S COOKING IN LA CUCINA

Three more Italian cooking courses to get excited about this year. First up, the Michelin-starred Quattro Passi restaurant in Nerano, on the Amalfi Coast, is launching a school presided over by Antonio Mellino. Expect traditional yumminess from the Campania region. *Overnight-cooking package, from £280 per person* (ristorantequattropassi.com).

Up in Tuscany, breezy-chic Monteverdi is launching five-day cooking academies. The next one, in November, is led by Giancarla Bodoni, a whizz at the whole organic, farm-to-table thing, and will focus on rustic Tuscan cooking – local *pici* pasta, say, or wild boar. *From £6,500 per couple* (monteverdituscany.com). Also in Tuscany is a new wine and spa weekend at the wine-estate hotel Poggio Al Casone, including biking through the vineyards, drinking lots of lovely wine and learning to cook Tuscan-style for half a day (so not too taxing). *Four-day break, from £470 per person* (winerist.com).



ABOVE, BOUILLABAISSE & BELOW, SHORTBREAD & COOKIES AT BELMOND LE MANOIR AUX QUAT SAISONS.



BELOW RIGHT, FRANCISCA KELLETT & RAYMOND BLANC

BELMOND LE MANOIR AUX QUAT'SAISONS, OXFORDSHIRE

Raymond Blanc talks a lot. And waves his hands. And tells stories, endlessly. His newest cookery course, Maman Blanc, is all about what he learned from his own *maman* – rustic, regional-French home cooking – and he is full of stories.

The course starts with a walk (more of a jog – Raymond doesn't so much walk as spring about, like a talkative terrier) through the extraordinary kitchen gardens of his flagship, Le Manoir. 'Be loving with your potatoes!' he shouts while rooting around in the earth. Evil rabbits are after his veg, he assures us darkly, as he plucks up muddy spuds and flings them in baskets before hurrying over to his kitchens.

Here begins the lesson. He demonstrates a cheese soufflé, all the while talking, talking, talking: about where he comes from (Comté, which has 'the best milk and sausages

in the WORLD'), how his mother cooked ('with a pressure cooker, ALWAYS'), about the importance of eating locally ('I did not try a peach until I was TWELVE'). Watching him is like watching a magician – but then he has trained hundreds of chefs, some 30 of them now Michelin-starred themselves. He is also completely charming and full of brilliant advice, like laying cling film over pastry before rolling it out, and never using olive oil over high heat.

His soufflé emerges from the oven as a sky-high cloud of scrumptiousness. And then we cook rabbit – he helps us gently pan-fry it with tarragon and onions and vinegar. It's utterly gorgeous. Raymond's mother loved cooking rabbit, 'but sometimes I'd see a tear rolling down her cheek'. There's always a story. **Francisca Kellett** **BOOK IT** One-day course, from £365 a person, with head-tutor Mark Peregrine (belmond.com/le-manoir-aux-quat-saisons-oxfordshire).



Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat Saisons