

cooking school

BY CARROLL STONER PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER KRUMHARDT AND TIM CLINCH



CHEF
GINA STIPO

American-born Gina Stipo is proprietor of a “have-tools-will-travel” cooking school called Ecco la Cucina that operates in both Italy and America. She arrives with her favorite kitchen tools and staples. “I teach Italians about American food, and Americans about Italian food,” says Gina, who often goes into clients’ homes to give cooking instructions. “In Italy, I take groups to markets and into the countryside to show them where things are made—like the local olive oil, cheese and sausages we eat, and the wine we drink.”

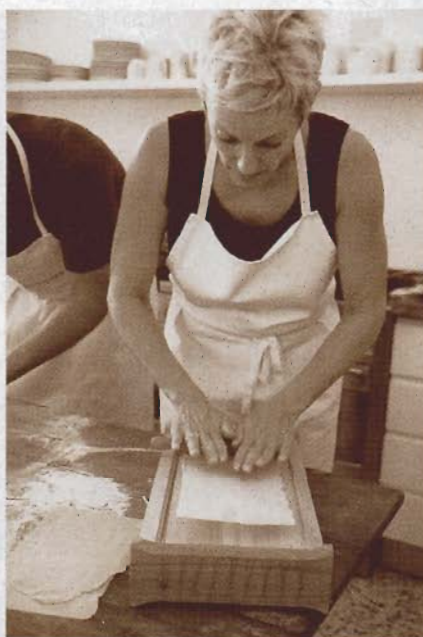
Gina relishes life in Tuscany, especially around Siena where she has settled, and adds that she’s thankful

she was born into an Italian-American family that loves food. “At breakfast we talked about lunch, and at lunch we were planning dinner.” Gina’s father was a career Army officer and her family lived all over the United States. When she was 6 years old, they moved to Italy, where they lived for four years and got a taste of their heritage. “We fell in love with the way of life there, especially mealtimes,” she says.

Gina was marked for life—and today tries to communicate that passion for cooking to students in her classes. She explains how she was taught “to listen to your food. In my first professional food job, the chef never wanted a ▶

have
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An enthusiastic Italian-American chef teaches cooking classes for vacationers in Tuscany.



Far left: A terrace view of Tuscan hills and vineyards. **Middle:** Traveler Sujo Offield of Chicago carefully attends to a new cooking technique. **Above:** Chef Gina Stipo with students Tony Ciavola, Tom Stringer, and Offield.

radio in the kitchen. She wanted us to hear the variety of sounds that food makes as it cooks."

During a recent class, Gina had just shared that story when the sound of the peppers cooking for the Peperonata changed. "And although we were all talking up a storm, several students and I heard it at exactly the same

second," says Gina. "Those peppers needed attention!" (They added olive oil, and the peppers were fine.)

She adds that Italians are wildly parochial about their food preferences. "Tuscans can be apprehensive about a dish made in Emilia Romagna—100 miles away. I try to help everyone get over their fears," she explains.

"Americans who don't know food are so afraid! Our fear of germs means we serve our food too hot and too cold, both of which diminish flavor. We should learn to be more relaxed. Food and cooking are not brain surgery. They're something to enjoy. I try to get everyone in class to talk and participate. Then they relax and learn," she says. ➤

peperonata *This favorite Italian vegetable can be served as a side dish, on sandwiches or pasta, or in omelettes.*

- 5 red and/or yellow sweet peppers, seeded and coarsely chopped or cut into thick strips
- 1 large onion, halved and thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ cup olive oil, divided
- 1 cup chopped plum tomatoes or 1 cup drained and chopped canned Italian-style whole tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon snipped fresh parsley
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon snipped fresh basil

Cook sweet peppers, onion, and garlic in 2 tablespoons oil over medium heat about 25 minutes or until tender; stir occasionally. Add remaining oil, tomatoes, and parsley; season with salt and pepper. Cover and cook 20 minutes more; stir occasionally. Add basil just before serving. Makes about 4 cups.



cooking up a birthday



Tom Stringer and Sujo Offield after picking herbs from a hillside garden. Some herbs were for kitchen use, while others decorated the vacation home.

Chicago interior designer Tom Stringer thinks chef and cooking teacher Gina Stipo is as good as they get. And so when he was looking for a way to enhance his 40th-birthday trip to Tuscany, he presented himself (and his friends) with a special gift—a day-long cooking class with her.

And what a gift it was! “Gina’s flavors were phenomenal,” says guest Dan Paul. “Every dish we made was simple but tasted complex.” Though classes were casual and students could walk in or out, Dan assures us he didn’t miss a minute, took copious notes, and left with a long list of new recipes.

Fellow student Sujo Offield said, “I loved the way Gina told stories while she cooked, and how we participated. I also enjoyed celebrating Tom’s birthday with a meal we made. We ate on the terrace with a view of the countryside. It doesn’t get much better than that.”

“Gina became part of the family and took over the kitchen,” says Tom.

“I could ask dumb questions without being embarrassed,” another guest adds. “With Gina, it’s like asking your sister how to boil water. Everyone might laugh, but it’s your family laughing with you, not at you. That family feeling is what I remember most.” ❏

the tools

“I had well-used Forschner knives when I attended cooking school,” says chef and cooking-school teacher Gina Stipo. “I’ve never been tempted to exchange my nylon-handled knives because they feel good in my hand, and I especially like their weight. They’re also known for holding a sharp edge.” Made by Swiss Army Knives, Forschners are also sold under the name Victorinox (www.RHIForschner.com (800/243-4074)).

logistics

Travelers to Tuscany often fly into Rome and drive north for several hours. Siena, where Gina lives, is a 3-hour drive from Rome, and an hour from Florence. For information visit www.italiantourism.com.

Gina’s classes vary in price according to content and class size. Package prices run from \$170 per person a day to \$2,800 a week, depending on accommodations—either at your place or at a glamorous villa located just 15 minutes from Siena.

- In Italy: Gina Stipo, Ecco la Cucina, Via della Piaggetta 3, 53010 Rosia, Siena, Italy. (Call 011 39 0577 343011.);
- In the United States: Mary Stipo Potter, 6317 Courtland Drive, Plano, TX 75093 (972/378-3723).
- Or visit www.eccolacucina.com; e-mail ginastipo@yahoo.com.