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# Mangia, Mangia!



Chris Warde-Jones for The New York Times

In Abbateggio, Abruzzo, Nicoletta De Thomasis, left, and her family and friends have outsiders in to try regional specialties through the Home Food program.

By MATT GROSS  
Published: April 11, 2010

NICOLA DE THOMASIS, a round-bellied, bearded, bespectacled man from the rough-hewn hills of Abruzzo, stood near the head of his dinner table, holding a pair of tongs — and my fate — in his hand. He had already placed on my plate an almost lethally large portion of spaghetti alla chitarra, dressed with the region's traditional tomato-and-lamb ragù, and his tong-bearing hand kept inching closer and closer to the communal pasta platter until, at last, he dove in with the instrument, scooped up a final, fatal tangle of noodles and added them to my dish. I was done for.

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But if I was going to die, this was absolutely the way to go. I had already sampled the family's wild-boar sausage, chunky prosciutto whose craggy appearance belied juicy depths, and sharp pecorino from the sheep that outnumber the humans in Abbateggio, this village (population 420) at the edge of Majella National Park. The spaghetti was thick and toothsome, made by the expert hands of Nicola's wife,

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Home Cooking in Italy

Nicoletta, who'd sliced it on a chitarra, a guitarlike box of wires that gives the pasta flat, almost crisp edges. After that would come more: lamb chops, breaded and fried and drizzled with lemon, their rib bones arcing elegantly away from the meat; simple roasted potatoes; Savoy cabbage sautéed into the warm, vegetal equivalent of a grandmother's hug.

In the end, after the wine (a soft Cerasuolo d'Abruzzo), and the "pizza" (a towering spongecake) and the coffee spiked with centerba (made, as its name suggests, from 100 mountain herbs), I survived. How could I have done otherwise? Nicola, Nicoletta, their teenage daughter Francesca and Nicola's 91-year-old mother had welcomed me into their home that Saturday night; to perish from overeating would have been the height of rudeness.

I am, however, willing to risk death for a chance not only to eat real, true authentic Italian food but to do so with real, true authentic Italians — to learn not just what the citizens of this most food-proud nation consume but how and why. Restaurants are great, but they don't give transient tourists much opportunity to establish a relationship with the people making and serving the food. No, if the family is the fundamental social unit in [Italy](#), then family meals must be the fundamental way to experience Italian society. You just have to have an in.

This may sound impossible, but it's made vastly easier by Home Food, an Italian organization dedicated to, as its promotional literature states, "the protection and increase of the value of typical Italian gastronomic and culinary legacy." That is, it's all about preserving and showcasing the cooking of individual Italian families. From Piedmont in the north to [Sicily](#) in the south, from cities like [Florence](#) and [Milan](#) to hamlets like Abbatteggio, Home Food seeks out exceptional home chefs, puts them through a training course and dubs them Cesarinas — little Caesars, emperors of the kitchen. Then, a few times a month, the Cesarinas host dinner parties at which they open their homes to strangers.

All an intrepid eater has to do is register with Home Food, pay a membership fee (3.50 euros for foreigners, or about \$4.60 at \$1.31 to the euro; 35 euros for Italians) and scour the monthly listings for a meal that appeals. Would you like goose-meat salami in Lombardy? Fried chicken bones with red chicory in Emilia-Romagna? Rabbit in a pot in [Tuscany](#)? All are part of dozens of meals on offer throughout April, with participation fees typically 34.90 or 39.90 euros per person.

Over two weekends in March, I attended three Home Food events in Abruzzo, the mountainous region that stretches from just east of Rome down to the Adriatic Sea. Why Abruzzo? In part for scheduling reasons, but more because I was curious. Unlike, say, the cuisines of [Naples](#) and [Bologna](#) (where Home Food is based), Abruzzese cooking is little known beyond its borders. The mystery enticed me, as did the chance to explore corners of Italy rarely seen by casual tourists. What's more, I wanted to see how the region was faring one year after a 6.3-magnitude earthquake nearly destroyed L'Aquila, Abruzzo's capital.

And so, one crisp and sunny Saturday morning, I sped east out of Rome in a rented Alfa Romeo. At my side was my friend Fleur Cowan, the United States Embassy's deputy cultural attaché, whose near-fluency in Italian would make up for my own rusty language skills. Within 30 minutes, the landscape shifted. Mountains rose quickly, sheets of late-season snow at their crests, and the autostrada wove around and straight through them with an invigorating sinuousness. Around every curve we spotted picture-perfect medieval towns atop small hills, often with shafts of light beaming down on them from between the clouds. Those images you know from paintings and movies? They're real.

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IN less than two hours, Fleur and I arrived at the town of Sulmona, well in advance of our 1 p.m. lunch. With time to kill, we wandered around the historic center of Sulmona, a classic Roman town of brick and stone buildings (some bearing signs of post-earthquake reconstruction), famous as the birthplace of the poet Ovid and of confetti, the candied almonds served at Italian weddings. In one piazza, we found a big group of people milling around, and wondered excitedly: Was some unique local event about to occur?

No, an old man explained. It might seem strange to us, he said, but in small places like this, when the weather's good people just come outside and talk: "C'è relax." It's relaxing.

We, however, couldn't relax — we had a lunch date.

Anna and Rosanna, the Cesarinas who'd put together this first meal of the day, were old friends in their early 50s whose elegant looks — pearls, fine wool — matched the elegance of Anna's apartment, in a new building, with views (from two terraces!) of the surrounding mountains. The walls were hung with tasteful paintings, and a grandfather clock tick-tocked in a corner. And then there was the table — covered in fine lace, set with gold-edged plates and shining silver and attended by Anna's husband, Salvatore, and Vittoria, a good friend of theirs who spoke English.

Lunch began immediately, with one of the best things I ate on the entire trip: *taccozzelle alla cucuzzara*, hand-cut triangles of pasta with juicy zucchini, a dollop of sweet roasted pumpkin and a rosemary sauce bound with sheep's-milk ricotta. It was one of those dishes that seem so easy you could make it at home, but good luck replicating the quality of the ingredients and the skill of the four hands that blended them! (Technically, six hands, for it was Salvatore who showed us how to finish the dish — with a dusting of crushed dried chilies, a popular Abruzzese additive.)

And how could you eat *taccozzelle* without Anna, Rosanna, Vittoria and Salvatore to explain all its connections to the Sulmona area? The pasta takes its name from *tacco*, a local style of shoe heel, while a *cucuzzara* is (roughly) a pumpkinhead, the friendly epithet for a boring person.

Everything we ate for lunch, in fact, was not just local but hyperlocal. Here in the mountains, goats and sheep are prime resources, producing untold varieties of rich cheeses. Before that meal, I'd never really thought of pecorino — from pecora, or sheep — as anything more than a grating cheese, but these Cesarinas showed that pecorino could be soft and porous, hard and salty, an adaptable wonder. And goat cheese, so often insipid, here was marinated in olive oil until sharp as the knives that had cut the *taccozzelle* so precisely. A sweet Montepulciano wine sauce and a herbaceous honey made stunning counterpoints.

And the sheep provide meat, some of which the Cesarinas ground with veal to make a *tureen* full of moist meatballs, which they served alongside a *sauté* of field greens, the kind that everyone at the table had scavenged from the hills as children in the lean postwar years. Things were different now, of course. Easier. Salvatore, retired from his job as a bank director, was even a candidate in the coming regional elections, running with [Silvio Berlusconi](#)'s People of Freedom party. This drove Vittoria insane. Throughout the meal, they tried and tried not to talk politics — and failed. My Italian wasn't good enough to follow their heated argument, but at one point Vittoria turned to me and Fleur and said, in English, "I haaaate him!"

But she said it with a big smile that suggested their dispute was a long-running one, and that as much as it divided them, it wasn't the kind of thing that could keep them from sharing a wonderful meal.

When we'd eaten as much as we possibly could (including two cakes, coffee and liqueurs they'd made with 100 basil leaves, 200 rose petals, or a handful of gentian-violet roots), Salvatore led me into his study to look at pictures of his beloved grandchildren — and his

blue 1961 Alfa Romeo — and smoke Toscano cigars.

“Do you eat like this every day?” I asked between puffs.

“Più o meno,” he said. More or less.

For Fleur and myself, it would be more. Not realizing how substantial lunch would be, I’d signed us up for dinner in Abbateggio, set to commence in just four hours. As we drove the 30 miles north, first on the autostrada, then on the switchbacks that wound high up into the hills and through villages where sleeping dogs refused to budge for speeding cars, I hoped my digestive system would kick into high gear. A nap by the fireplace at the stone villa we’d rented in Abbateggio helped, as did a brief walk in the evening. Still, by the time we arrived at the De Thomasis house, perched above the valley, I wasn’t entirely ready to keep eating.

What got me through the excellent dinner was a subtle distraction: comparing this home and family to the ones in Sulmona. Like Anna and Salvatore’s, this was an elegant living space, with art on the walls (including a painting of Abbateggio that included the house where Nicola was born) and fine lace and cut glass on the table. But Nicola and Nicoletta’s world was a different one: They hadn’t traveled much, and even Sulmona, less than an hour away, seemed like a distant land. There’s a reason Italians use the word “paese” to describe their homes: up here, each village is its own country, with its own dialect and customs, and although the borders are invisible, their presence is felt. “Sulmo mihi patria est,” wrote Ovid. Sulmona — not Rome — was the poet’s land.

Which is why Anna, Rosanna and the De Thomasis family had signed up for Home Food, despite neighbors’ raised eyebrows. If they couldn’t go see the world, they would bring the world to them.

This idea — of an Italy splintered into thousands of quasi-independent regions, with the family as the only indivisible unit — is not a new one. And it’s not universally true, as my trip to Abruzzo the following week proved.

Once again, I was driving into the hills, this time in a pokey Fiat Panda with Vincent Vichit-Vadakan, a literary agent, as my Italian-speaking companion. And once again, the scenery was glorious. The autostrada arced out over canyons and tunneled for miles through the hulk of the Apennine Mountains (where I spotted a mysterious underground exit for a particle-physics lab nicknamed “Il Laboratorio del Silenzio Cosmico”).

Off the autostrada, winding roads led up through ever-smaller towns, until we crossed one last bridge into Carpineto della Nora. From the beginning, this was an experience unlike the others, both more traditional and more modern. For one, as soon as we arrived at the home of Valeria Mosca and her husband, Silvio, they invited us right into the kitchen — a surprise, since the other families hadn’t. But Silvio’s grandfather had built this house, and Silvio wanted us to see the wood-fired oven and stove he’d designed, not to mention the pasta Valeria was about to toss in a cauldron of boiling water.

Sagnarelle, they were called, three-inch shreds made of hard and soft flour. When they appeared in the dining room — where we’d taken our seats alongside Silvio and Valeria’s daughter, Roberta, her boyfriend and Janet, an American friend who lived in Vicoli, a neighboring village, for 33 years — they were dressed in a sauce of puréed and whole chickpeas (which the family had farmed itself). As Salvatore had done, Silvio suggested we add some spice — crushed dried chilies in oil — and the resulting bowl was a humble masterpiece: rich and nutty, soft and crunchy, infused with heat both gentle (from the cooking) and savage (the chilies). I ate two bowls. Or three?

However many I ate, it was one bowl fewer than I had of the main course: pecora alla callara, a mutton and potato stew named for the tripod-supported pot, or callara, used by shepherds guiding their flocks across the province. I’d worried that the mutton — from a five-year-old ewe in Silvio’s sister’s herd — would be gamy, but no, it was light

and fresh, and the golden potatoes almost magically held their shape until I bit in, then went blissfully creamy.

Praising them prompted a discussion about the proper altitude at which to grow potatoes: Silvio did it on a patch of land high up the Voltigno, the mountain on whose slopes Carpineto lay, while his olive trees flourished lower down. Like many people in Carpineto, he owned separate parcels of land, eight in his case, and grew much of what he ate and drank. And what he didn't grow, he hunted, like the wild boar he'd turned into prosciutto, whose saltiness had a hint of pecorino cheese.

Hunter-gatherer-farmer Silvio may have been, but he was not isolated (even if he dismissed the dialect of his daughter's boyfriend, who lived five miles away, as incomprehensible). For this family, having strangers — foreigners even — was no novelty. Silvio's job at a manufacturer in Pescara, a seaside city an hour east, put him in contact with everyone from Moroccans to Ohioans, and whenever he could he'd bring them home for dinner. Home Food was just a way to do this even more often.

Nico, a friend of Silvio's who showed up toward the end of lunch, when we were polishing off glasses of homemade gentian-root liqueur, was another example of this worldly but isolated duality. An ironsmith born in Carpineto, he'd moved to Switzerland as a young man and had retired to Pescara, but still spent weekends here. When he spoke to Silvio, he used the local dialect, and when he spoke to us — as we drove up the snowy Voltigno for a postprandial stroll — he used Italian, though all I could understand was "I'm scared." The road was, after all, pretty icy, so we parked the Fiat and marched up to a valley, utterly blanketed in snow, where Silvio said farmers take their cows to graze in summer.

Fog was moving in, and the trees began to fade and vanish, and all I could hear was the cosmic silence of Abruzzo — which was broken only, at last, when Silvio and Nico began arguing, as Italian guys often do, about where to find the most beautiful women. Not Carpineto, surely, nor even Abruzzo. No, their sights were set far beyond these hills and villages, on the exotic women of Turkey, the Arab Middle East and the Berber lands of Morocco.

I wanted to interrupt them, to ask if this was just another normal Saturday afternoon, but I already knew the answer, more or less.

## IF YOU GO

Home Food events take place all over [Italy](#), but if you want to visit Abruzzo, your best bet is to fly into Rome on one of numerous airlines, including American, Delta and Alitalia, that have nonstop flights between the New York area airports and Rome. A recent Web search found early-May nonstops from Kennedy Airport starting at \$765.

Trains reach only major towns in Abruzzo, not the villages in the hills, so rent a car for the two-hour drive east. I had good luck with **Car Italy and Tours** (866-482-5227, [caritaly.com](#)), which rents vehicles at Termini railroad station in Rome and at the airport for as little as \$50 a day.

## HOW TO EAT

To register with **Home Food**, go to [www.homefood.it](#), where you'll fill out a questionnaire. Afterward, a Home Food representative will contact you to confirm membership. Supposedly, you can reserve a place at dinner solely through the Web site, but I had to resort to e-mail and phone calls, all of which were answered promptly and helpfully.

## WHERE TO STAY

Although the hill towns may seem isolated, most have at least one bed-and-breakfast or agriturismo, a kind of farming-themed hotel. In Abbateggio, we stayed at **Colle della Selva** (39-085-417-5528; [colledellaselva.it](#); 55 to 150 euros per night, or about \$73 to

\$199, at \$1.31 to the euro), a beautiful two-bedroom stone house. We didn't spend the night in either Sulmona or Carpineto Nora, but near Sulmona is an agriturismo called **Casale Falconero** (39-347-497-4108; [casalefalconero.com](http://casalefalconero.com); 70 euros a night for two), while Carpineto has a modest B&B, **La Coccinella** (39-346-844-1343; [lacoccinellabb.it](http://lacoccinellabb.it); 40 to 60 euros per night for a double room).

*MATT GROSS writes the Frugal Traveler blog, which appears every Wednesday on [nytimes.com/frugaltraveler](http://nytimes.com/frugaltraveler).*

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