



Breakfast in Tuscany

Description

Some mouth-watering delights from Italy

By **Eva Stelzer**

Starting breakfast with dessert is a slightly wicked Tuscan tradition that I thoroughly enjoy. At Florence's Hotel Il Guelfo Bianco, the chef's freshly baked crostata is a sensory delight. The sweet jam oozed in my mouth as the buttery crust crumbled onto my tongue. Manager Antonella Rocchini says the cheerful chef can be heard humming and whistling while baking. "Of all the treats on our menu, crostata is the most popular," she adds. After devouring too many pieces of the lattice masterpiece, I understand the attraction.

The tiny, unadorned breakfast room hardly seems like the setting for such delicious food, but the morning buffet is filled with goodies from melt-in-the-mouth burrata cheese to warm apple tarts topped with smooth, creamy ricotta. As in most small Italian-owned hotels, a barista makes guests the perfect morning coffee. A barista is a professional coffeemaker who understands the important harmony between milk frothed into white airy peaks and the bitter dark espresso base. The combination of taste and texture creates the perfect balance.

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When did breakfast in Italy become an artful delight? Italian food has three main cultural influences: the Arabs, the Etruscans, and the Romans. There is some consensus that the Arab flatbread is the precursor to the Etruscan grape cake—which is still served during harvest festivals—and used as the basis for crostata. Every October, the chef at Il Giglio in Montalcino bakes this treat using an old family recipe and freshly harvested Brunello grapes. For a two-week period guests can enjoy this ancient culinary magic.

The Etruscans didn't leave cookbooks, but archaeological findings suggest that banquets, close-knit families, and eating in groups were an important part of social life. Today's Tuscan traditions still honor the centrality of food and eating in the company of others. Locals boast that it's the quality of ingredients and the pleasure of eating rather than complicated techniques and modern cooking utensils that make perfect Tuscan meals. Most recipes include only four to eight ingredients.



Bruschetta with buffalo mozzarella cheese

In search of more great food, I go deep into the Tuscan countryside. Heading east from Florence, I drive the 100 kilometres (60 miles) to the famous hilltop town of Montalcino for some authentic bruschetta. The grilled bread—spread with a light covering of olive oil, heaped with organic tomatoes, mounded with creamy buffalo mozzarella, and decorated with a sprinkling of basil—marries flavors and colors to perfection. Sure beats the bagel and cream cheese I eat at home!

First on my list is Relais Castiglion del Bosco's indulgent buffet. From the hotel's terrace I watch the sunrise over the Val d'Orcia's UNESCO-protected Natural Park before eating. Communications Director Azzura Casini says the hotel's executive chef personally selects artisanal Pecorino di Pienza (sheep's cheese) and delicious cold cuts unique to this part of Tuscany. Casini suggests pairing them with the extra-virgin olive oil and organic honey, all made on the property. The fresh baked breads are her favorites, made from naturally fermented yeast that improves its digestibility. "There is a return to making things as our grandmothers did," she adds.

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Breakfast Cakes

At Il Giglio one of the staple breakfast cakes is a torte made with almonds, eggs, butter and a modest amount of sugar. Owner Michele Machetti tells me that the locally grown carrots already have such natural sweetness that very little sugar is needed. Next, I drive an hour and a half east of Montalcino to Cortona, a must-visit city for serious foodies. Made famous by author Frances Mayes's *Under the Tuscan Sun*, it is also recognized for its solid Etruscan history. These enigmatic people left a legacy that has become what we know today as the Tuscan lifestyle. In the hilltop city center, travelers can visit the Etruscan Academy Museum, housing one of the region's most alluring displays of Etruscan artifacts. Located in a 13th-century palazzo, the pottery, eating utensils and other food-related artifacts are impressive. Etruscans were excellent farmers and perhaps planted the first hillside olive groves and introduced many of the organic crops so revered today. For an insider's view, ask for guide Giovanni at any of the hotels.

Presentation is everything at privately owned Italian hotels. Every guest is treated like family and great care is given to please the eye as well as the palate. Nowhere is this more evident than at my number-one pick in the region, Relais Corte dei Papi, where breakfast is lovingly and artfully prepared. Owner David Papi says that it is the chef's "careful attention when baking, his knowledge of how and where to choose the best produce—always fresh and of excellent quality—the use of original recipes of Tuscan tradition and his great passion that makes all the recipes very special."

At Corte dei Papi, the chef even makes his own yogurt. The most important element he adds is "good milk, and we use milk from local producers." Each morning, mounds of fresh yogurt are heaped into the family's centuries-old gleaming silver terrine that is placed front and center on a wooden table set against a backdrop of massive stone walls. The yogurt is surrounded by colorful jams and baked goods. David welcomes his guests with such warmth that you'll believe you are part of the family and you may never want to go home.

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Tuscan food requires an appreciation and passion for fresh ingredients and simple preparation. I've been in the cubbyhole kitchens of some of these hotels and I'm amazed at what comes out of them without a name-brand cooking gadget in sight. Here is a tasty recipe to try at home.



Il Guelfo Bianco's Crostata

2 cups (250 g) unbleached flour
1/2 cup (125 g) unsalted butter, diced
1/2 cup (110 g) sugar
1 medium egg plus 1 yolk
1 cup (260 g) fruit jam (such as apricot or plum, preferably homemade and with a low sugar content)

Preheat oven to 400 degrees Fahrenheit. Mix the flour and sugar. Work in the butter until the mixture resembles wet sand. Add the egg and yolk and work briefly until the dough just holds together. (These steps are best done with your fingers and not with a machine.) The key to a good crust is to not overwork the dough.

Wrap the dough in wax paper and let it rest in a cool place (not the refrigerator) for at least 30 minutes.

On a lightly floured board roll 2/3 of the pastry dough to a 1/8-in (3 mm) thickness, and line the bottom and sides of a 9-in (23 cm) tart pan with scalloped edges and a removable bottom. The sides should be lined with a slightly thicker layer of pastry than the bottom, about 1/4-in (0.5 cm). Fold back in the dough that is hanging over the sides to make a thicker lining along the sides. Cut off the excess. Prick the pastry bottom with the tines of a fork in a few places. Cover the dough with a layer of jam.

Roll the remaining pastry on a lightly floured board slightly thicker than 1/8-in (3 mm). Use a sharp knife to cut 1/4-inch (0.5 cm) wide strips. Make a lattice on top of the jam layer.

Bake until golden, about 25 minutes. Unmold the tart as soon as it is ready and cool on a rack. If left in the pan it will turn soggy. Amazing when freshly baked and definitely still wonderful after a day or two. To store, keep in a closed container.

Prepare a perfect cup of coffee and enjoy. Yum!

For more recipes and travel ideas contact me: info@eviaactive.com or check out our culinary adventures in Tuscany at eviaactive.com

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Images courtesy of Eva Stelzer.



Eva Stelzer, former academic writer-turned-freelancer, specializes in travel, fitness, and anything active. She calls Montreal home, has studied in Paris, France and Cuenca, Spain and has lived in Italy. She speaks English, French, Spanish, and Italian.

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