

SOUL FOOD

Escape the hustle and bustle of city life by indulging in a piece of Italy just 20 minutes north of Auckland.



Villa Romantica is an idyllic retreat hidden in a lush valley just outside Auckland. The essence of Southern Italy is drawn into the house through tall windows that invite the sunshine in, soft Italian music playing inside and the smell of natural timber and herbs. Surrounded by Italian furnishings, Raffaella invites guests into her house with the sincere welcome of a true Italian host.

Most people think of the Italian kitchen as a noisy, cheerful, informal place with a big wooden table, lots of food and family around. "This is true", says Raffaella, "but it is important to realise that Italians see themselves as hailing from distinct regions. Each region develops different traditions. In Milan, the climate is cooler, so they eat polenta and risotto as comfort food, spaces are

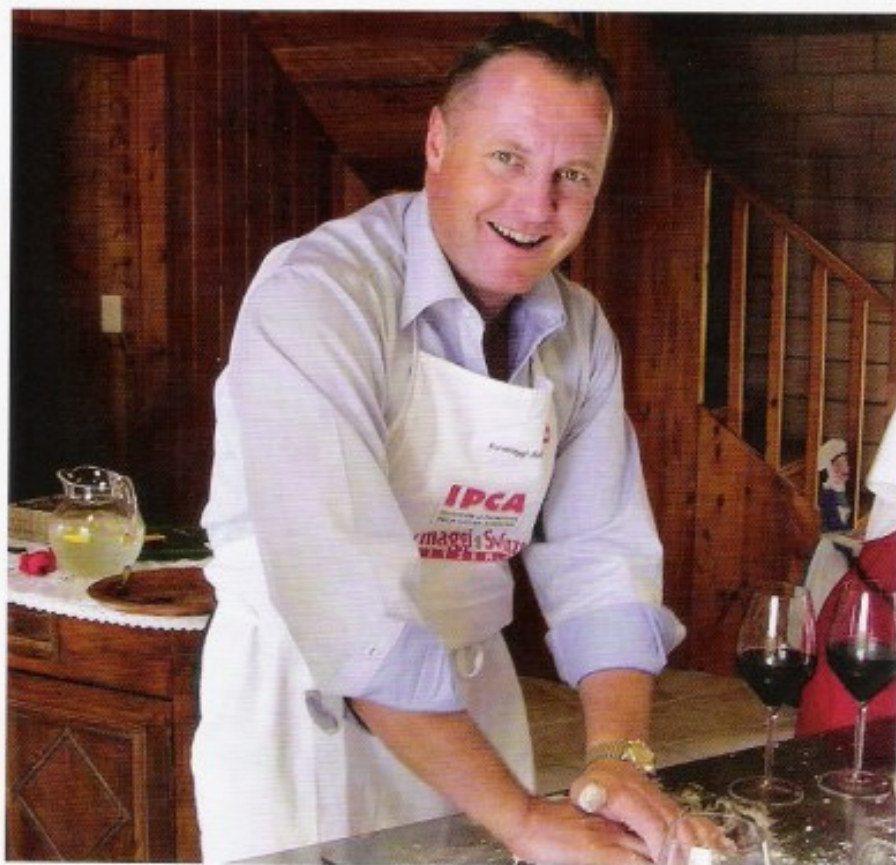
enclosed and dinnertime is often earlier. In Tuscany there is sun in their recipes, late dinner times, large open spaces and fresh pasta; they wouldn't even know what polenta was!"

Raffaella and her husband Paolo were chartered accountants in Milan before moving to New Zealand in 1997, seeking a slower pace of life. However, since then, they have been very busy. Not only are they raising a family of three daughters, they run Al Dente Italian cooking experiences, an innovative team building business as well as a food consultancy service and Italian chef at home. Raffaella's resume also includes prize-winning author and various roles as a culinary expert.

Companies send their teams to learn about the cooking and culture of Italy,

in the welcoming and inclusive cucina of Raffaella. When the team members, or guests arrive they are welcomed with food. There may be a Grana Padano cheese wheel, home made bread, calendula butter, and platters of fruit, like figs and quinces. Always the best and always just a little different, the sort of Italian delicacies not found in the supermarket, maybe not even found in Auckland.

Raffaella divides the group into teams and gives basic cooking instructions, while she demonstrates techniques. Nobody has to cook. In fact people are encouraged to sit back and watch, if they prefer, or even wander into the garden to soak up the scents and have a little time out with a glass of wine. Equally, others are encouraged to join in the fun of cooking.



There is friendly competition as groups vie to create the best pasta. They prepare the dough and use the natural food colouring and flavours of beetroot, tomato, saffron, chilli and spinach. The dough is rolled out and put through the pasta machine to make tagliatelle. The teams proudly display their colourful creations. "They are having so much fun and they haven't eaten yet," laughs Raffaella.

After creating their pasta each team is challenged in making Tiramisu. There is no recipe, they all have different ingredients and are encouraged to use taste to decide on quantities.

There is always time for wine tasting as Raffaella talks about the wine's heritage. "Sicilian wine is a little salty and the grapes are picked at night, as it is so hot"...her words transport her group to a

place of sultry nights, long sunny days and traditions as solid as the stone courtyards, where the families gather after the harvest.

"Cooking is a timeless art that has always brought people together around a hearth, a safe place. And in Italy it should also be a place of conversation and good times. We aim to bring this to our teams."

"There are no expectations and no formalities; there aren't even recipes to start with. This means that people can relax and get to know each other, away from their often sterile and compartmented workplace. Trust, better communication and understanding between the team members evolve naturally."

And even more than getting to know your colleagues, you may go away resolved to live your life with a little more flavour, flair and joy. ●

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