

# Around Italy in 80 minutes



Raffaëla Delmonte has been living in New Zealand for 10 years, yet still manages to produce Italian meals of remarkable authenticity through her business *Al Dente*. Rosalie visited her rustic cottage in Torbay to be taken on an Italian food lovers tour.

STUFFED COURGETTE FLOWERS



RAFFAELA AND TOURIST



**R**affaela Delmonte greets us with some strong Italian coffee and at 10am on a Saturday it's very welcome. And strong. She says Italian coffee differs from New Zealand coffee in that we drink only arabica, whereas Italians like a bit of robustica mixed in to give it an earthier cocoa flavour.

Fully alert, we pack our palates and begin our tour of Italy, starting down in Sicily with baked ricotta. Sea salt is added to the whey from goat, cow or ewe milk (or a mix of all three) and baked in a stone oven at 180-200°C for 30 minutes until a reddish-brown skin has formed; the ricotta is then removed from the oven and stood on a plate for 24 hours. We eat it with homemade broad bean dip – yum. Provola piccante also originated in the south but is now eaten all over Italy. A smooth, smoky and delicious cheese, we eat it on homemade bruschetta with tomato and basil salad. Chunks of grana padano dipped in balsamic vinegar top off the cheese course. Grana padano was created by monks in the 12th century as a way of preserving leftover milk. It is protected under Italian law and must be produced in one of several official geographically defined zones – the rind must bear the mark for the Grana Padano Consortium.

Delmonte and her husband Paolo make their own coppa using South Island organic pork neck joints (New Zealand pork is not fatty enough for salami). We watch as Paolo adds eight percent of the meat's weight in salt and pepper and rubs it in. He'll massage it every second day for two weeks before stuffing it into a swine intestine casing and hanging it to dry for a few months. Paolo says that making parma (prosciutto) is a much more time-consuming process, entailing the massaging of the meat every single day. The climate of Parma is ideal for prosciutto – hence the name. With the next course of freshly picked salads, bresaola, lonza (coppa) and prosciutto di Parma we're offered chardonnay/inzolia (a uniquely Sicilian grape variety), a dry white wine imported by Crema di

Balsamico and available from Sorvano in Pakuranga.

It's not until after the wine that we're allowed to eat the delicious fennel salad – Raffaela says the two must not be mixed. "While artichokes would make a good wine taste astringent and bitter, fennel makes a bad wine taste good/sweet (or rather impossible to recognise if it's good or not)," she says. "In older times the osterie (humble restaurants) would serve a bad wine together with fennel in order to 'infinocchiare' – fool the customers." The word 'infinocchiare' comes from finocchio, Italian for fennel.

Raffaela comes from Milan and was raised on traditional Lombardy cuisine. Over the years she has discovered Italian products that can be sourced locally. As well as her own seasonal garden, she's managed to find other expatriate growers who share her needs. She cooks according to the season. For this reason, when Raffaela hosts corporate events and team-building exercises in her Torbay cottage, she doesn't like to give out the menu in advance. "I may come across something the day before, or my garden will turn up something, so I do not decide what to cook until the day of cooking," she says.

She goes home to Italy every year to ensure she doesn't lose the taste of true Italian produce. "Italian friends of mine who have lived here for years and not visited home have forgotten what real Italian food tastes like. They think New Zealand-made Italian meats and cheeses are getting better and beginning to taste authentic, but because I go to Italy often I can notice the difference in flavours immediately. Mozzarella, for example, is so bland here that I do not use it." Raffaela recommends several local suppliers – notably Epicurean Supplies in Napier for organic vegetables, Kapiti olive oil, Casa Rinaldi balsamic vinegar, Matapiro Olives, Italian sausages made by Guillaume Desmurs, and says a friend in the South Island plans to make traditional Italian mozzarella. ■