

on. We all gazed out of the train windows at the countryside, green after recent heavy rain. Even our unplanned detour didn't dent our excitement, though it was a good job I had a pack of cards in my bag. (OK, I got us lost and added three hours to the journey. But hey kids, we can play rummy!)

When we got to our destination at Valledunga, Anna's husband, Venceslao, and her sister, Costanza, were there to meet us. Costanza took us off to her house, where we were staying, to freshen up before dinner when we met the other people on the course. Anna has a wide reputation in the United States, and a measure of her standing is that two chefs were among the 'students'. George and Johanne have had their own restaurant in Providence, Rhode Island, for 25 years, are now setting up in Provence and had come to cook with Anna for a few days. As we all sat and chatted in the warm, southern dusk in the large courtyard, surrounded by tubs of flowers and herbs and overlooked by a stalwart palm, it was clear that this was going to be a very special experience.

After a glass or two of Regaleali wine (juice for the girls, who were made much of), we moved in for dinner – spaghetti with lamb and potato – a peasant dish that Anna had discovered and which was the best kind of comfort food after a

day which had begun hundreds of hours earlier. This was followed by fried ricotta and tomatoes and a fruit tart full of the smallest, sweetest grapes. Then came *nocino*, a local liqueur made with green walnuts. After that, not even the crickets and the close attention of the mosquitoes could stop us falling into the deepest sleep.

Next day, from Costanza's terrace we were able to appreciate properly the beauty of the scenery. The hills rolled away to the horizon, with

Abigail downed the olive oil and went a little pink, but was clearly pleased by her culinary courage

smart rows of vines marching over them and ancient olive groves encamped on their flanks. It was harvest time and the voices of the olive-pickers away down the slope came clearly through the pure air.

We were in the right mood for the first demonstration. We learnt how to make pizza dough and focaccia. We watched, took notes, rather diffidently kneaded and rolled. The pizza was adorned with sardines, blanched onions, chopped tomatoes, salsa and pecorino, breadcrumbs and oregano. One focaccia was stuffed with sausage, ricotta, chard and

red pepper, the other with sausage, parmesan cheese, home-made tomato sauce and fried courgette. We ate these for lunch, the girls' eyes widening in surprise at how good it all was.

In the afternoon – after free time which the girls used to have a siesta – we learnt about *crostata* (pie-crust) and made a peach and almond pie. Costanza then demonstrated her mushroom risotto – which is one of those dishes you never want to stop eating, even if, like the girls, you normally 'hate mushrooms'.

By the end of another convivial dinner we had fallen into a blissful rhythm which was to continue the next day as we made aubergine rolls (who would ever think of rolling up an aubergine?), beef rolls (stuffed with onions, ham, parsley, smoked and unsmoked cheese and pistachio nuts), bean soup and Sicilian doughnuts. The girls tried their hand at mixing, chopping and rolling – but rather thought they'd pass on gutting a sardine.

We went on a tour of the winery which – with the exception of one atmospheric cellar full of huge, wooden barrels – is a laboratory of gleaming metal. But the old traditions are honoured. Standing on top of enormous steel storage tanks is a shiny steel Madonna giving her blessing to the wine.

Although the days were leisurely and long, it felt as if everything had gone by in a trice when it came to our final dinner. The girls made the pudding for 16 – lemon and persimmon squares, which turned out perfectly. Their confidence – both in cooking and conversing – had risen and has stayed with them since their return.

We left the estate to spend a night and day in Palermo. Our hotel was a little outside the noisy city centre, but a large and very busy fruit and vegetable market close by, whose traders yelled their wares and revved their vehicles from long before dawn, to the enthusiastic accompaniment of the canine population, provided a tad more local colour than one really wants in the middle of the night.

Still at least it made sure we were up in time to explore. The city, a mix of Oriental and European influences, is small and dishevelled but has a tremendous vitality, fascinating architecture and an abundance of palaces and churches. Enormous palm trees remind you just how close to the edge of Europe you are.

Our main ambition on a tight timetable was to soak up the atmosphere. Should we go and visit the cathedral? 'Frankly,' said Harriet, 'given that we're here for the food, I'd rather we went and ate *gelato*.' So we did.