

# MORE PUKKA THA

Inspired by Jamie Oliver's Italian adventure, Elizabeth Meryment puts cooking tours and courses on the menu

**W**ITH his direct language, fictitious words and rambunctious demeanour, it's easy to be dismissive of Jamie Oliver. But as he hits 30, the English celebrity chef is emerging as a serious figure of social change in Britain. Most recently it was through influencing school-lunch policy by exposing the poor nutritional standards in British schools, in his amazing series *Jamie's School Dinners*, and now it is through his expedition to Italy, in the show, *Jamie's Great Italian Escape* and resultant travelogue-cookbook *Jamie's Italy*.

Currently showing on Ten, *Jamie's Italy* is a paean to that magical Mediterranean boot. But it's more than that; it's also an attempt to show Brits, and Australians for that matter, that good food is attainable each night in the family kitchen.

Oliver has some interesting theories about why the food in Italy is so great.

"I think the main reason comes down to a lack of choice. In the countryside, especially, the working class definitely don't have the same kinds of choices that people in many other parts of the world have.

"I've witnessed so many young people and teenagers in Italy living a 'modern-day' life which we would have seen in Britain 70 years ago — yes, they have mobile phones and computers, but they're not seen as an essential part of everyday life ...

"There's also a massive working-class population and a very small proportion of wealthy people.

"I think Italy has managed to retain a lot of its brilliant things because there hasn't been a lot of choice available. I really believe that. And for me, it creates a profound emotion because sometimes when you have too much choice, you can lose sight of the things that really matter."

In his book, Oliver implores others to go to the Italian countryside to sample the "real Italy": to buy fresh artichokes from markets, ciabatta from small-town bakeries and porchetta made from home-raised pigs.

But if you find the idea of taking on a nation of Italians a little daunting, there are plenty of Australian-led gourmet tours that take the hard work out of it. Here's a sampling of what's on offer this year.

**1. The three regions of Italy:** 16 days in Umbria, Lazio and Campania. May 2-19.

Billed as a "connoisseur's tour incorporating food, wines, gardens and art", Convivial Times's tour starts in Rome and winds through these three beautiful regions. Included are several demonstrations by local chefs, visits to farms (including truffle properties and vineyards), four lunches, 11 dinners, trips to markets and accommodation in four and five-star hotels. Price: \$12,500, including economy-class air fares. More: Leonie Furber, (02) 9388 8327; www.convivialtimes.com.au.

**2. A Taste of Italy:** 16 days in the cities of Italy. May 8-24.

Starting in Rome, this tour includes stays in Montefalco in Umbria, Lucca and Florence in Tuscany, and Rome. Food and cooking are a particular focus and included are three cooking classes in Umbria, the first at the Villa Pambuffetti, Montefalco, learning to make Umbrian antipasti and prima piatti; the second at an olive oil and vegetable farm, cooking with local produce; and the third making Italian main courses. Cheese making, truffle hunting and oil tasting are also features. Price: \$6800. More: Mary Rossi Travel, 1800 815 067; www.livingitaly.com.

**3. Three Islands of the Med:** Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica. May 17-June 4.

Victorian-based Gourmet Tours flags its gastronomic focus and this extensive journey through three key Mediterranean islands takes in each island's regional cuisine as well as historic sights. The food focus will be on



**Musseling in:** Jamie Oliver catches his own supper in the waters of the Mediterranean under the approving gaze of two Italian fishermen



**Pasta masters:** Learning from the experts in an Umbrian kitchen

seafood and other specialties, including olive oil and varieties of wine. Wine tastings, meals and entry to locations are included in the cost. Guests can choose to travel to one, two or three islands. Price: \$17,500 (land content only but includes the air fare between Sicily and Sardinia). Single islands from \$5400. More: Howqua Dale Gourmet Tours, (03) 5777 3503; www.gtoa.com.au.

**4. Fabulous Food Experience:** 10 days in Tuscany. May 24-June 3.

Australian-based Buzz McCarthy owns the villa I Cinghiali near Capriana in northern Tuscany and throws open its doors each May and June. This year, NSW south coast-based chef Georgiana Adamson will conduct cooking classes at the villa. McCarthy also hosts day trips to markets, restaurants, villages, towns, walking tracks, plantations and vineyards. Guests stay in the villa, with 10 guests maximum. Price: \$4900 (including food). More: Buzz McCarthy, (03)

9822 9447; www.italianexperience.com.au.

**5. Art in the Heart of Italy:** 16 days in Tuscany. June 2-20.

Hosted by well-known Sydney opera figure John Wregg, this tour features "art, music and cucina" in Tuscany, with five nights in Volterra, one of Tuscany's most spectacular medieval villages, five nights in Arezzo and five in Parma. While great food and wine are a focus, there will also be a heavy emphasis on the wonderful musical, artistic and cultural life of this region. Price: \$10,950 (including air fares) or \$9350 (land content only). More: Leonie Furber, (02) 9388 8327; www.convivialtimes.com.au.

**6. Art, Food and Life:** French and Italian Riviera. September 15-30.

Starting in St Paul de Vence, France, and winding for 15 days through such gorgeous towns as Villefranche, Roquefort de Pins, Nice and, on the Italian side, Portofino, the five towns of the Cinque Terre, Lucca and Pisa, this tour takes in the best of the



**Top shelf:** Oliver's most recent bestseller

beautiful Riviera. It focuses on fabulous food in well-known and out-of-the-way restaurants and incorporates visits to art galleries, architectural sights of note and shopping areas. Price: \$7380. More: Travel on Q, (02) 9357 6800; www.travelonq.com.au.

**7. A Taste of Umbria:** 14 days in Montefalco. October 10-24.

For the first eight nights of this tour, guests stay at the Fabrizi family *agriturismo*, or farmstay hotel, in Montefalco. Daily visits are arranged to nearby towns and villages but a highlight of the accommodation is the property's still-functioning farm, which produces grapes and olives for wine and oil. The meals made from farm produce are a feature. There are also several cooking classes, including one at the Villa Pambuffetti and an olive-picking excursion that concludes with a "medieval" feast. This tour also visits Assisi, Perugia and Orvieto. Price: \$5950. More: Mary Rossi Travel, 1800 815 067; www.livingitaly.com.