




*Inspired by the richness  
of the Tuscan landscape,  
RAY McVINNIE fulfils*

*every  
cook's  
dream*

RECIPES AND FOOD STYLING BY RAY McVINNIE / PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIERAN SCOTT / STYLING BY WILLIAM CHEN

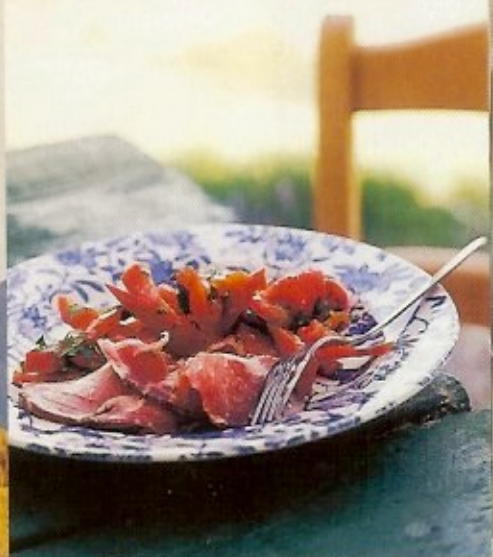




The first time I saw Podere Finerri it was in the depths of winter and I was completely unprepared for its astounding beauty. Coming from New Zealand where we know all about spectacular scenery, I thought that no new landscape could surprise me.

While I had been nervous that the Tuscan countryside might be a picture-postcard cliché, Finerri's 360-degree view across rolling hills with the muted mauves, ochres, jade greens and roses of winter was breathtaking, recalling the backgrounds of the Renaissance paintings which drew on this landscape.

I had come to visit Malcolm Ayres, a New Zealand art historian now lecturing at the University of Siena, and Daniela di Cesare, an architect from Naples. Perched on a hill and now transformed into a home with six rentable apartments, the rambling honey-coloured brick and stone Podere (farmhouse) Finerri began life as early as the 17th century on the local estate. It is not a grand palazzo but indeed a homely farmhouse, originally built without a plan straight on to Tuscan clay, with rooms added as they were needed.






Seeking a life to suit two people from different cultures, with separate careers and a growing family, Malcolm and Daniela had looked for a property which could potentially be a comfortable but income-earning base. Tuscany, or more specifically the Crete Senesi, 40 minutes from Siena, with its beautiful landscape and rich cultural and historical associations, was perfect.

After a long search and arduous years of restoration, Podere Finerri is finally complete. A tribute to the architectural skill of Daniela and the couple's sense of style and hard work, the result is a welcoming and comfortable fusion of traditional and modern features which preserve the integrity of the old house. Use of old farmhouse doors, recycled marble sinks, modern kitchens built in the traditional style with features like charming curtained sink benches teamed with stylish touches like new arches and staircases, has offset the historical in a stunning contemporary environment.

When I returned in late summer, the subtle winter tints had been replaced by ever-changing browns and golds of cut wheat fields and ploughed land, which brought to mind the robust textures and colours of thick tweeds.

With many towns and villages within easy reach of Finerri, simply immersing oneself in daily life is enjoyment enough. A lazy breakfast on the terrace, morning coffee in Asciano which is the nearest town, lunch in a traditional restaurant, a walk through the countryside, a rest, a swim in Finerri's pool, and then dinner is my idea of being on holiday.

But there's more. Etruscan tombs are just 10 minutes' walk from Finerri with excellent Etruscan museums in Asciano and neighbouring Chiusi. The town of Arezzo not only has prized Piero della Francesca frescoes in its church, but also a monthly antiques fair which takes over the town. Close to the hill town of Montalcino is Sant'Antimo, the austere elegant 12th-century Romanesque abbey

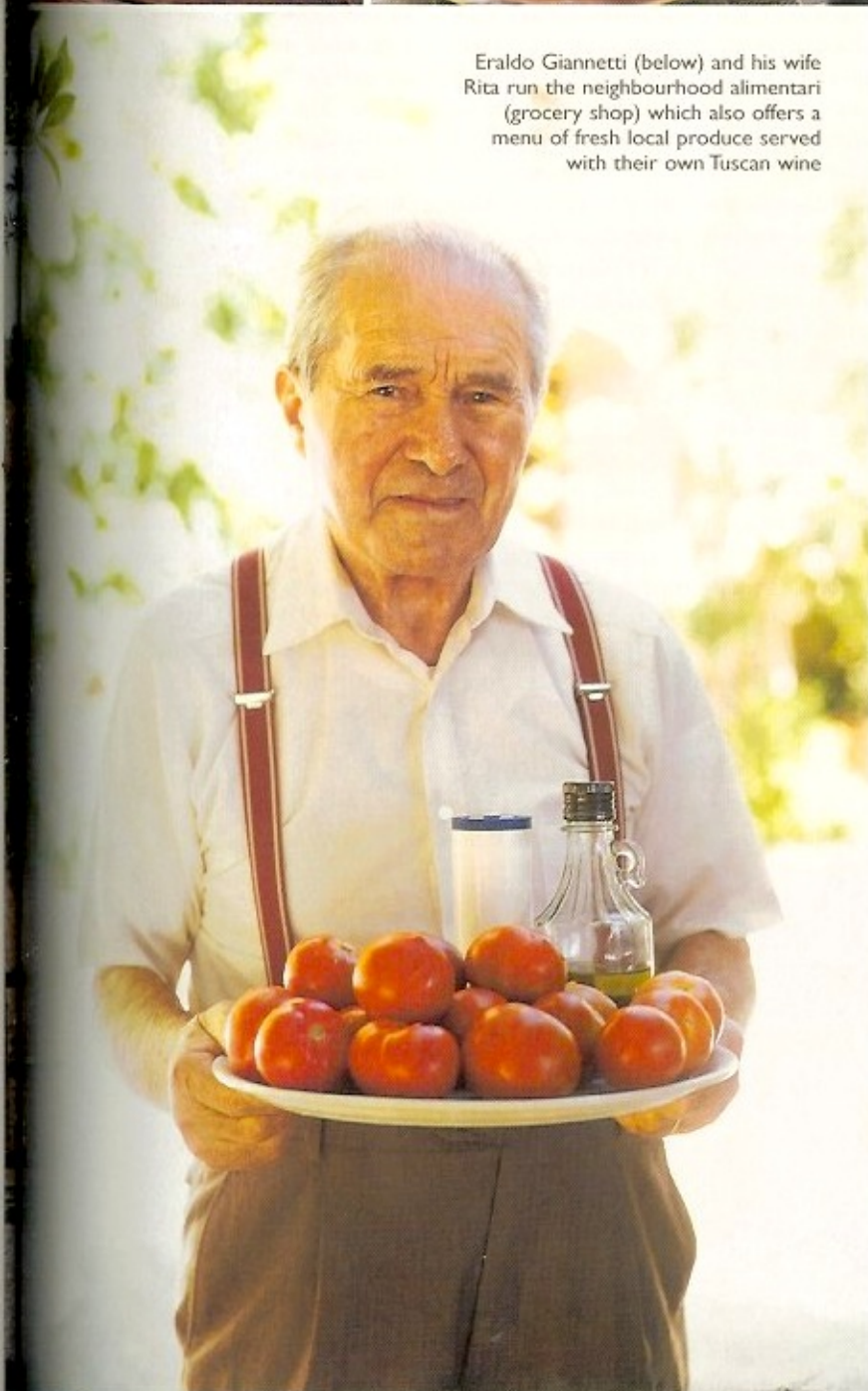


The view from 12th-century Romanesque abbey Sant'Antimo, close to the hill town of Montalcino





Eraldo Giannetti (below) and his wife Rita run the neighbourhood alimentari (grocery shop) which also offers a menu of fresh local produce served with their own Tuscan wine





This page: Fresh food and wine are served in the alimentari (grocery shop) of Ercole and Rita Giannetti; opposite page, top left: Podere Finerri owners, Malcolm Ayres and Daniela di Cesare, with their daughter

where you can hear the monks perform Gregorian chants and then go in to Montalcino for a restorative glass or two of the region's celebrated Brunello di Montalcino wine.

The area is also dotted with hot spas and springs which have been used for centuries. The main piazza of the village of Bagno Vignoni is actually a large thermal pool.

**A**s a cook I found Tuscany's legendary food particularly enjoyable. A market seemed to be taking place each day in one of the towns within striking distance, where we were able to buy local delicacies from the extensive catalogue on offer.

Tuscan cooking is sometimes thought of as simple to the point of austerity. But it would be a mistake to think of Tuscan food as poor. You may not find luxurious dishes like those of Bologna in this area but the presence of many high-quality ingredients like Tuscan wine and olive oil ensures a more-than-satisfying and sincere cuisine.

Tuscans are content to be called 'bean eaters' because of the extensive use of

pulses in the local cookery. Fagioli cotti nel fiasco (beans cooked in a Chianti bottle with oil and garlic in the embers of a fire) is a quintessential Tuscan dish reflecting the robust, thrifty, down-to-earth cooking based on local produce.

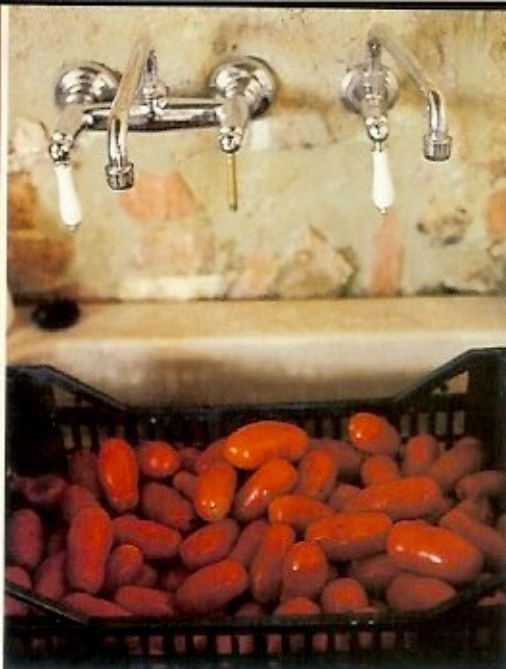
Wheat in the form of the saltless Tuscan bread is a cornerstone of the Tuscan cook's repertoire, deliberately made without moisture-attracting salt so that it will keep. The fresh version is eaten as bread, but dry (like a rusk), stale Tuscan bread is made into delectable dishes like panzanella (a salad of soaked stale bread, tomatoes, cucumber, basil, parsley, olive oil and wine vinegar). It is also used in the soups which are such an integral part of the Tuscan diet. Typical are pappa con il pomodoro (a well-seasoned mix of barely cooked fresh tomatoes, ripped-up bread and garlic drizzled with the best olive oil, sprinkled with basil leaves and served warm) and ribollita (a hearty vegetable and bread soup).

Another essential Tuscan ingredient is the renowned olive oil which transforms even the simplest dish into something memorable. I was fascinated when the owner of the large manor house to which

the neighbouring farmhouses would have all belonged in days gone by, took us downstairs to his cantina (store-room) and glugged out several litres of his own oil for use at Finerri. An unused olive press on his property housed in an elegant chapel-like building with vaulted ceilings. It made the century in me yearn to sweep it out, set a long table with a white cloth and a candlelit dinner there, a project I have not yet abandoned.

Tuscany is also known for its glorious sheep's milk cheese, pecorino Toscano. Young pecorino is, as cheese expert Harbutt says, supple, aromatic and with a complex flavour suggesting burnt caramel and walnuts. Aged harder with an intense tangy flavour. An array of other ingredients are also available and we tried pecorino with local truffles (sensational), chilli and pepper. I had a dinner plate of glistening black truffles the day I went to the speciality shop La Casina del Bosco. I passed on the truffles, however, and instead bought 1½ lb of fresh porcini for a rather grand meal.





Ossi di Morti (Bones of the Dead) cookies

As with any sensible diet, vegetables and fruit dominate in Tuscan cookery but they are supplemented with game like pheasants and wild boar (Tuscan cuisine includes many recipes for these animals). The hunting season began at the time we were there and the days were punctuated by the sound of shots and the baying of dogs.

We were privileged to be living with locals like Daniela and Malcolm who knew exactly where to shop, so we tasted Tuscan meat products of the highest quality. The renowned Chianina beef is made into the signature dish of Florence, bistecca alla Fiorentina, a gigantic T-bone steak grilled over charcoal and flavoured simply with salt, pepper and olive oil. I used this beef when I was there in winter to make a Scotiglia Toscana, a traditional mixed meat stew.

Whenever I go to Italy I seem to switch immediately to a cheese and pork diet and Tuscany was no exception. I love the pecorino and two of my favourite salami are also from this part of the world – the delicious finocchiona (fennel flavoured salami) along with capicollo, a sausage made from the meat from the neck of the pig. On market days in Asciano plenty of stalls were selling all manner of pork products including huge brawn-like preserved salami.

Being a slave to my wicked sweet tooth, I enjoyed a trip with Malcolm before Christmas to Nannini, a pastry shop in Siena. There we had a leisurely apéritif and snack from the free buffet before wandering to the cake-counter to

choose a couple of slabs of that other Tuscan speciality, panforte di Siena, a chewy cake of dried fruit, nuts and honey. I was familiar with the small round discs of panforte imported from Italy so it was with great delight that I fell upon wedges cut from huge wheels of the chocolate and marzipan varieties to take away.

I also could not resist a few ricciarelli, chewy little almond cakes. While we were there in late summer, the best fruit we had were sweet little figs picked off trees from down the road, halved, mixed with plenty of lemon jam and sugar, left for 48 hours in the fridge and eaten on a saucer with a dollop of mascarpone. For me, a benchmark use of figs.

Tuscan cooking methods are not at all complicated. The Tuscan genius is to emphasise and to intensify the superb flavour of the local produce rather than try to change it into something else. With such produce there is no need.

It is every cook's dream to cook while overseas as it is the best way to learn about the food of the region. My two stays at Finerri allowed me to get off the tourist track, to mix with the locals and to see agricultural Italy, in this case Tuscany, and what it has to offer the cook. Without exception, the locals were particularly helpful and friendly when it came to giving advice on what to do with ingredients.

No account of Tuscany would be complete without mention of the area's excellent wines. Well-known examples are Chianti, Brunello di Montalcino,

Vino Nobile di Montepulciano and Vernaccia di San Gimignano, but there are many more for the adventurous wine visitor to sample.

The following recipes are based on my interpretation of traditional Tuscan dishes for the New Zealand kitchen.

#### **CROSTINI DI FEGATINI** (Chicken Livers on Toast)

This very traditional Tuscan antipasto is like a coarse chicken liver pâté on toast. Food manufacturers have turned chicken liver pâté into yet another processed food and it wasn't until I tasted this recipe that I remembered just how good a home-made version could be. Excellent as a first course or as an hors d'oeuvre with drinks.

- 5 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- ½ carrot, finely diced
- ½ stick celery, finely diced
- 1 tablespoon very finely chopped rosemary leaves
- finely chopped zest and juice of 1 lemon
- 1 tablespoon drained capers, finely chopped
- 400g chicken livers, cleaned of all fat and sinew
- ½ cup Vin Santo or other sweet wine
- 2 tablespoons butter, softened, not melted
- salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 8 slices country-style white bread, toasted
- 1 cup hot chicken or beef stock
- chopped parsley, for sprinkling





Crostini di Fegatini (Chicken Livers on Toast)

## FAGIOLI CON SALSICCE

(Beans & Sausages)

For this earthy, delicious Tuscan take on sausages and beans, use any pure pork sausages that are mildly flavoured with garlic and pepper or make the following easy skinless version.

### For the sausages

800g minced pork  
1 teaspoon sugar  
1 teaspoon flaky sea salt  
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper  
3 large cloves garlic  
olive oil for brushing

Put half the pork and the remaining ingredients, except the oil, into a food processor and combine until the mixture is very smooth. Remove and mix with the remaining pork mince.

Divide mixture into 8 equal portions and form cylindrical sausage shapes.

Brush the sausages with olive oil and barbecue or panfry over moderate heat until well browned and cooked through.

Remove from heat and serve sausages sliced with beans (recipe follows).

### For the beans

2 cups cannellini beans, soaked overnight in plenty of cold water  
1 onion, peeled and halved  
1 carrot, halved  
1 stick celery, halved  
1 fresh bay leaf  
½ cup best-quality extra virgin olive oil  
1 small red onion, peeled  
flaky sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Put the beans, onion, carrot, celery and bay leaf into a large saucepan and fill with cold water. Bring to the boil and simmer until the beans are tender. Do not add any salt or the beans will not become soft.

Drain beans and discard the onion, carrot, celery and bay leaf. Put the hot beans into a large serving bowl, add the extra virgin olive oil and the red onion cut into small irregular pieces, and then season well with salt and pepper.

Good with a green salad. Serves 6.

Heat 4 tablespoons of the oil over a moderate heat and add onion, carrot, celery, rosemary, lemon zest and juice. Fry gently without browning for 15 minutes or until the onion and carrot are soft. Stir in the capers and fry for a further minute.

Remove from the pan, place into a bowl and reserve. Return the pan to the heat and add the remaining 1 tablespoon of oil.

Turn the heat up to high, add the chicken livers and then panfry until well browned and pink inside.

Add the Vin Santo, mix well and bring to the boil. Boil until the Vin Santo has evaporated.

Remove the chicken livers, scraping the pan out well with a wooden spoon. Chop the livers or coarsely process in a food processor. Add the butter and the chicken livers to the onion mixture, mix well, taste and season.

Brush the toast slices with stock and spread with the warm chicken liver mixture. Place on a serving platter and sprinkle with parsley just before serving. Serves 4-6.





Fagioli con Salsicce (Beans & Sausages)





Stufato di Calamari e Scampi (Calamari & Scampi Stew)

## STUFATO DI CALAMARI E SCAMPI (Calamari & Scampi Stew)

One forgets that Tuscany has a coastline and a rich seafood culinary tradition, so that even well inland, we ate very good fish dishes. I have tried this delicious combination both as a soupy stew and with the inclusion of rice as a rather thick risotto. I prefer the following version of the stew.

- 6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 1 small dried red chilli, finely chopped
- 4 squid tubes, opened out flat, scored inside in a grid pattern, then the tube sliced into 4cm-thick slices
- 6 scampi, split in half lengthwise
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup dry white wine
- 8 large vine-ripened tomatoes, cored, peeled, seeded and flesh chopped coarsely
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 cup fish or chicken stock
- flaky sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup basil leaves, to garnish

Heat the oil in a deep frying pan over moderate heat and add the garlic and chilli. Gently fry for 10 seconds.

Add the squid and panfry until just coloured all over. Remove the squid to a bowl and reserve. Add the scampi and fry until slightly browned. Add the wine, bring to the boil and then let it almost evaporate.

Add the tomatoes, tomato paste and stock. Mix well and bring to the boil. Simmer for 5 minutes then taste and season with salt and pepper. Add the squid back to the stew, mix well and let it just heat through.

Serve with basil leaves sprinkled on top and crusty bread on the side. Serves 6.

## POLLO ALLA SENESE

(Sienese Chicken)

This is my version of a Tuscan dish which usually uses pheasant or guinea fowl. While it lacks a gamey flavour, I find chicken works just as well. The ingredients in this recipe reflect the Sienese love of spices. Traditionally the dish is served on pieces of toasted bread for mopping up the sauce. However, it is also good with roasted potatoes.



Slogans from the Fascist era on a farm building at Lucignano d'Asso

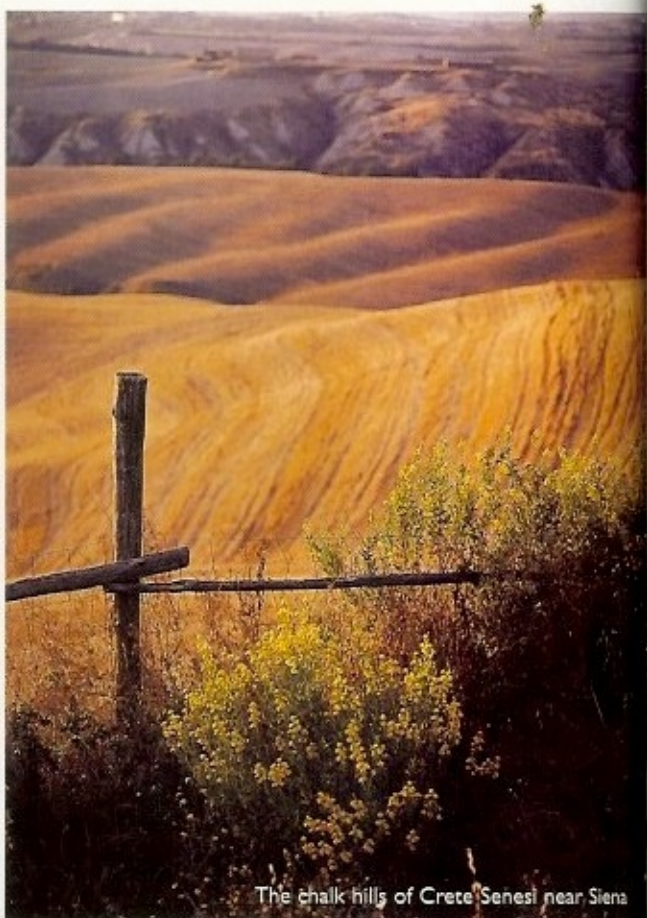






Pollo alla Senese (Sienese Chicken)





The chalk hills of Crete Senesi near Siena

8 organic chicken legs  
1 cup halved pitted prunes  
zest of 1 lemon  
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
75g prosciutto, chopped  
½ teaspoon cracked black pepper  
large pinch ground cloves  
¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
¼ teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg  
8 fresh sage leaves, chopped  
1 fresh bay leaf  
4 tablespoons olive oil, plus extra for frying  
50mls grappa  
100mls sweet Vin Santo or other  
dessert wine  
150mls dry white wine  
250mls beef stock (I used Essential  
Cuisine beef stock because it is  
rich and thick)  
2 tablespoons butter

Preheat oven to 200°C. Put the chicken and remaining ingredients apart from the beef stock and butter into a large non-reactive bowl, mix well, cover and set aside (this can be done up to 1 day in advance). Heat a frying pan with a little more oil, take the chicken out of its

marinade and fry until well browned. Remove the chicken from the pan and place in a roasting tray in the oven for 20 minutes or until cooked through.

Add the marinade and the stock to the pan and bring to the boil. Boil until slightly syrupy, add any juices from the chicken and stir in the butter.

Serve the chicken with the sauce over the top. Serves 4-6.

#### ZUCCOTTO

This is the dome-shaped cake which is said to resemble both the dome of the world-renowned cathedral in Florence, the Duomo, and a zucchetto (zuccotto in Tuscan dialect), the skullcap worn by certain Roman Catholic clergy.

Make 1 day in advance so that the cream filling has time to set.

#### Pan di Spagna

(Sponge Cake)

6 eggs, separated  
220g caster sugar  
finely grated zest of 1 lemon  
1 cup sifted flour  
pinch salt

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Brush a 25cm-diameter springform cake tin lightly with melted butter and then dust with flour.

Beat the egg yolks, sugar and lemon zest in an electric cake mixer or with a whisk until very thick and pale. Beat the egg whites until stiff but not dry and fold half of them into the yolk mixture, followed by the other half.

Add the flour and salt and carefully fold them into the mixture. Pour into the tin and bake 30 minutes in the oven or until a skewer inserted into the middle comes out clean. Remove sponge cake from the oven and cool completely.

#### For the filling

160g best-quality dark chocolate  
½ cup each almonds and hazelnuts,  
roasted and coarsely chopped  
1 cup mixed candied fruit (I used halved  
Amarena cherries, diced candied orange  
and diced citron, but while not  
traditional, sliced prunes, apricots,  
sticky raisins or even fresh dates  
would do as well)  
500mls cream, whipped lightly





Zuccotto





Podere Finerri

## TRAVEL TO TUSCANY

**See Tuscany with Kieran Scott and taste Tuscany with Ray McVinnie**

In September 2005 Kieran Scott will run a photography workshop for enthusiastic amateurs (and partners) at Finerri and Ray McVinnie will cater all meals.

The five-day live-in workshop will include aspects of portraiture, food photography and location, all set in the magnificent Tuscan landscape.

Each student will have the opportunity to explore his or her own particular vision and produce a Tuscan journal. The week will culminate in an informal presentation of their achievements at a special dinner in an 18th-century olive mill.

While catering every meal, Ray McVinnie will run an open kitchen that will reveal and celebrate the food for which Tuscany is famous.

For more information visit [www.kieranscott.co.nz](http://www.kieranscott.co.nz)

To learn more about Podere Finerri see [www.thelazyolive.com](http://www.thelazyolive.com)

■ Kieran Scott flew courtesy of Cathay Pacific. Cathay Pacific flies daily to Hong Kong from Auckland, with convenient connecting flights to Rome five days a week (every day except Monday and Wednesday). Return economy-class fares to Rome start from \$2449.



Zuccotto

Melt half the chocolate and finely chop the other half.

Fold the chopped chocolate, nuts and candied fruit into the cream and divide the mixture into 2 equal portions.

Fold melted chocolate into 1 portion of the cream.

### To assemble

½ cup rum or maraschino liqueur  
cocoa for dusting

Preline a 22cm-diameter x 10cm-deep bowl with plastic wrap.

Slice the sponge cake horizontally into 3cm-thick slices and then neatly line the bowl, making sure to leave enough cake slices to cover the top once the inside is filled with the cream mixtures.

Brush the cake lining well with the rum or maraschino. Cover cake lining evenly with a thick layer of the white cream mixture leaving a cavity for the chocolate mixture.

Pile chocolate cream into the cavity and smooth the top. Cover with the remaining cake slices.

Brush the top with the remaining rum or maraschino. Cover with plastic wrap, weight lightly with a couple of dinner plates and refrigerate overnight.

### To serve

Uncover and unmould on to a serving plate. Peel off the plastic wrap and dust the zuccotto well with cocoa. Serve in wedges. Serves 6-8.

Supplier: Amarena cherries, diced candied orange and diced citron from Sabato.

Credits: Anais plates and bowls and Duralex tumblers from Nest; metal plate and green glass jug from LA Imports; handmade Hector swizzle jug by John and Anne Crawford, La Rochère Périgord wine glass and Salvagno olive oil cruet and saucer, all from Sabato; Typhoon olive oil drizzler from The Homestore; Così Tabellini cutlery from Cranfields; old wooden chopping board from La Cigale; Danica tea towel from Destination Home. For full details, see Credits Index.