at my table

ROMAN HOLIDAY

Reinvigorating the intellectual life of an academic enclave in Italy starts in the kitchen.

The American Academy in Rome, blanketed by a rare snowfall.
the American Academy in Rome, housed in the elegant 17th-century Villa Aurelia, is a haven for scholars, composers, writers, and artists. The institution’s highly regarded Rome Prize offers up to 30 honorees the chance to think and create amid its neoclassical salons and sloping, manicured gardens, unfettered by distractions. (Past fellows have included luminaries as Roy Lichtenstein and Wallace Stegner.) “This is a paradigm-shifting experience,” says Kimberly Bowes, the director of the Academy. “You live and work with people who practice in fields that are totally different from your own, and it forces your mind into a different space. When fellows leave, they see the world and their work in a new way.”

But even geniuses have to eat. “In Italy, collaborative work and thinking traditionally takes place at the table,” says Bowes, “but at the Academy no one came to meals, because they were so awful.” That started to change in 2007, when chef Alice Waters founded the Rome Sustainable Food Project, a much-needed reinvention of the Academy’s kitchen based on the hallmarks of her storied Berkeley, California, restaurant Chez Panisse: local, organic, and sustainably sourced. Her goal was to transform not just the food itself, but also the culture and community of the entire institution.

“We now have extraordinarily tasty food,” says Bowes. “It brings people together because it tastes so good, and it tastes so good
Fettuccine with ham and peas, a favorite dish from the Rome Sustainable Food Project’s third cookbook, Pasta.

because it’s local—the time and distance from farm to table is really minimal.” Mealtime has given a rhythmic structure to each day at the Academy: A light lunch of celery-root soup and chard gratin allows fellows to dip into conversation and recharge before returning to their work, while dinner is a laughter-soaked family-style affair that can stretch for hours—fusilli with kale pesto, local game like quail or rabbit, all crowned with fresh fruit from the orchard or small, sweet cookies and a cup of tea. “There is attention to the fact that this is a working community,” says Bowes. “Eating like this creates an alchemic atmosphere where exciting things are happening.”

In keeping with the Academy’s mission, its kitchen is staffed by a team of interns who come to Rome to learn the principles of sustainable cooking, gardening, and sourcing. The kitchen has also produced four charming, intimate cookbooks—Biscotti, Zuppe, Pasta, and Verdure—love letters not only to delicious recipes, but also to the vibrant community that revolves around those dishes. “The tenor of the place is very much changed; It has become a creative laboratory rather than just a research center,” says Bowes. “The kitchen has been a critical component of our transformation into a cultural powerhouse.”

WRITTEN BY KAITLIN PETERSEN
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