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PHOTOGRAPHY: *Tktktktkt Tktktktkt*

TOQUE OF THE TOWN

In an 18th century palace-turned-cookery school in Emilia-Romagna, tradition and a celebration of Italian ingredients is teaching a new generation of chefs.

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“Italian cooking, together with French, Japanese and Arab cooking, is one of the fountainhead cultures of cuisine,” says Matteo Berti, director of Alma cookery school’s curriculum, as the scent of simmering onions wafts through the kitchen classroom where he sits in a pristine white tunic. “Every chef needs to understand Italian cooking – it’s the foundation of so many dishes and philosophies.”

Berti’s statement is grand but fitting for the setting. He’s sat inside the grandiose, golden-hued Ducal Palace of Colorno – the so-called “Versailles” of the Duchy of Parma – which was finished in 1706 as a 400-room royal estate. Today its Renaissance-style topiary garden, cobbled inner courtyards and fading frescoed passageways house a rarefied school that counts some of Italy’s top chefs among its

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alumnus. The school’s mission? To pass on the country’s rich patrimony of cookery and rich range of ingredients.

The Alma, founded in 2004, has taken over most of the palace as it is today, save one floor of municipal government offices. The rooms where aristocrats were once entertained and dallied are now white-walled kitchens lined with stainless-steel pans, skillets, dishes and decanters.

The school launched with a class of just 17 but in a few short years has become perhaps the most prestigious place in the world to study Italian cuisine: it is currently training chefs from 56 different countries with five months of immersive lessons followed by a five-month internship at a top kitchen in the region. After graduation, nine in ten graduates are employed in their field, either launching their own venture or taking to the ranks of restaurants around the world.

In keeping with the grand setting and immersion in the craft and traditions of cookery Alma’s students are dressed in chef’s whites and toques from the first day and thrown from the very first into



Students

Caterina Geppi

Age: 19

Hometown: Biella

Goal: I just finished high school and I want to do something for other people.

Roberto Ghezzi

Age: 23

Hometown: Bologna

Goal: I worked as a head chef in Toronto but I came back to study so I can move up into a top-notch Italian kitchen.

Filippo Gemignani

Age: 25

Hometown: Viareggio

Goal: I studied viticulture and oenology but I’m ready to start to cook on cruise ships.





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‘For today’s chefs, cooking is more about thinking than physical labour but you have to create something impressive to get noticed’

honing their preparation techniques, but they are also encouraged to eat well. Trips to some of the country’s finest restaurants are complemented with visits from chefs hailing from throughout Italy and always bearing local products to taste and acquaint themselves with. Students are also subject to expeditions to producers where the young chefs learn how to prepare ingredients, or recently, how different a Sicilian sheep’s milk ricotta tastes when served fresh at a farm.

“Travel is an ever-bigger part of our curriculum,” says Berti, who believes his students will work harder to source their own ingredients out in the professional world if they’ve been properly introduced to and enamoured by them at the school. “If not for the products, you could do this course by Skype,” he says, flashing MONOCLE an amused grin.

At the heart of the school is a slightly haughty restaurant – minimal dark-wood chairs surround thick, white cloth-clad tables – where students put their learned skills into serving up to 40 guests at a time in restaurant conditions. On opening day



Alma International School of Italian Cuisine

Location: Ducale Palace of Colorno, near Parma, Italy

Student body: 1,200

Cost: €16,000

Duration: 10 months

Courses: Italian cuisine, pastry making, sommelier training, waiting and bartending, restaurant management

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of the academic year, Paolo Lopriore, the chef and owner of Il Portico on Lake Como, prepares the semester’s first meal.

Lopriore, a school board member who also teaches twice a week, trained with Gualtiero Marchesi, a celebrated architect of modern Italian cuisine (and the first non-French chef to earn three Michelin stars) and of Alma itself, who served as the school’s dean up until the last year of his life in 2017.

As one of the star chefs at the school (which collaborates with chefs numbering Carlo Cracco, Enrico Crippa and Davide Oldani), Lopriore feels duty-bound to “simplify the problems of starting out in the kitchen”, as he puts it. “For today’s chefs, cooking is more about thinking than physical labour – there’s more technology in the kitchen, restaurants have fewer tables – but you have to create something impressive to get noticed.” He stands facing the rows of trimmed bushes spanning the palace garden. “I just want to teach our students that our work is still manual. It’s not about painting plates, it’s about exalting the flavours.” — (M)