

Series: [Rachel Cooke on food](#)

Spaghetti malfunction

A trip to Tuscany proved to me that Italian food is getting better and better. But now I have to face facts: I just can't make pasta

•



•

◦ [Rachel Cooke The Observer](#), Sunday 15 August 2010

The first posh, grown-up food I ever ate was French because, in the 1980s, France was where aspirational British families went on their holidays. In their cars, with maps, green Michelin guides and plenty of soluble aspirin (to be taken after one of the inevitable Périphérique-induced marital rows). And perhaps many of them still do this – though if so, I'm not quite sure why. French food has gone into a serious decline since I was a girl: the local restaurant where Monsieur worked out front and Madame sweated backstage is no longer.

In Gascony, where my family holidayed, this was typical of my parents: it wasn't remotely near the sea, none of our friends had heard of it, and there was absolutely nothing to do except eat – the best places have either closed, or are on their knees. A few even dish up stuff – Coquilles St Jacques, usually – that they've bought in pre-prepared. It's incredibly sad. In particular, I mourn Restaurant La Rapiere in Mauvezin, Gers. Technically, I believe it still exists. But oh, it's not what it was. When I was 14, I would have eaten its garlic soup, confit de canard and fig ice cream every night.

Oh, well. We still have Italy, where the food gets better and better, even in the most touristy places. Assuming you've saved up – nowhere in Europe is cheap any more – you can eat in a different place in Florence every night for a week, and not be disappointed (if you are on your way there, my tip is Osteria Santo Spirito, which is

unexpectedly hip but is also where, last month, I ate the best ravioli of my life). The disappointment only comes when you leave, at which point you remember a) how far removed most British Italian food is from the real thing, and b) how awful our tomatoes are. I go to Italy every year and, if I remain in employment, would like to do so for the rest of my life. I stuff myself, and drink too much brunello. It's great. Then I come home, at which point I start trying to recreate all that I ate. Sometimes, I pull it off. I'm a dab hand with the crab, chilli and spaghetti; and I live in London, so I can buy proper ravioli at Lina Stores in Soho. But other dishes remain agonisingly out of reach.

Like what? OK. Here goes... My new obsession: Cappelletti in brodo. How did this happen? I go to Tuscany, and cappelletti – pasta knots stuffed with cheese, capon and pork, served in a clear capon broth – come from Emilia-Romagna, where they're a Christmas treat. This holiday, though, I ate a bowl three nights on the trot at a **Restaurant, Alla Pieve, in Pievescola, near Siena**. We go there every year, me and T; we are devoted to it. It is run by a husband and wife, **Villiam and Paola**, who met as teenagers on a camping holiday. **Paola**, who cooks, is from Germany; **Villiam**, an excellent sommelier, is from Emilia-Romagna. Naturally, in order to please both her now 92-year-old mother-in-law and her husband, Paola had to learn to make cappelletti in brodo, and this year, rather daringly, she has put it on her menu. Her cappelletti are so good: intensely savoury, a feast both comforting and light. When, on night three, she emerged from her kitchen to say hello, it was all I could do not to kiss her feet. I leapt up. She looked alarmed. "I'm very stinky!" she said, making a stop sign with her hand.

Why can't I make them myself? The truth is, I'm awful at pasta-making. Nor am I sure I can come by exactly the right grisly bits of chicken for the stuffing (Paola mentioned boiling stomachs for several hours, at which T turned the colour of pannacotta). And I have no children, and no elderly grandparents. Making cappelletti is labour intensive. In Emilia-Romagna, the extended family sits down together, making hundreds at a time; children are useful, as their fingers wrap the tightest dumplings. I could enlist all the nieces, nephews and godchildren, but turning myself into pasta's Fagin may not go down too well with their parents (I already have a bad reputation for feeding people's children sweets). I've tried to buy "homemade" cappelletti, but nothing doing so far. The new artisanal producers of pasta are sticking with tortellini; the old Soho stores with ravioli. So, I'm wondering...

When I wrote about ice cream, I was inundated with your suggestions. Do *you* have any ideas? This is not a matter of life or death. Nevertheless, the discovery of a secret hoard someplace would make this greedy post-holiday female exceedingly happy.
rachel.cooke@observer.co.uk