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Fresh from the farm ... in Italy, that is

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Melissa Pellegrino, above, and co-author Matthew Scialabba lived and cooked on dozens of northern Italian farms to absorb the nuances of the lesser-known regional styles of Italian cooking.

Cookbook by Connecticut authors features recipes From northern Italy

Matthew Scialabba and Melissa Pellegrino's courtship offers a recipe as savory as those in their new book: Grow up in Guilford, fall in love in Italy, share culinary adventures in the country's northern region, get married, return to Guilford, and publish a book gleaned from intensive research and real-life experiences.

Their cookbook, "The Italian Farmer's Table: Authentic Recipes and Local Lore From Northern Italy (Globe Pequot Press)," features 150 recipes the young professional chefs have transcribed from more than 30 agriturismo-working family farms that provide travelers with fresh, seasonal home-cooked meals and lodgings for a reasonable price.

Scialabba and Pellegrino vaguely knew each other in high school, but they met through a mutual friend while each was studying and working in Italy after college.

"We were both raised in Italian families and found we had the same interests, talents and passions for the food culture," Scialabba says.

Traveling together throughout the Italian countryside was their first exposure to agriturismo.

After returning to the States, both attended the Institute of Culinary Education in Manhattan, graduating in 2003. Three weeks later they were on a plane back to Italy where they spent the next year working on farms in exchange for room and board through WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms).

"We wanted to grow as Italian cooks and have a closer connection to the land and the slow food movement," Pellegrino says.

They went to work as chefs for two different families in Greenwich after completing the WWOOF program and began formulating the concept of "The Italian Farmer's Table," discovering in their research that there were thousands of these farms in Italy and not many books written about them.

They chose the north of Italy because they agreed most Americans think of Italian food as sauce and spaghetti, since most Italian immigrants are from southern Italy. They wanted to show off a different side of Italian cooking, and liked the diversity of northern food due to all the influences from the bordering countries of France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia.

They sent letters to 50 farms asking to spend about four days on each and cook in their kitchens. The response was mostly favorable, but there was one hitch: They didn't have a publisher and knew they'd have to fund the project themselves.

"We had positive encouragement, but publishers weren't about to send two nobodies to Italy," Pellegrino says.

The couple began squirreling away the money they were making as private chefs, and after three years they were able to pay for the trip back to Italy.

They quit their jobs, sold their cars, stored their furniture in their parents' basements, and plotted a four-month itinerary through northern Italy.

Scialabba says that although the 30 agriturismi they worked at were all very different, the common thread was that there were no menus for the meals they served.

"They make whatever is fresh - whatever they just picked or butchered. It's different every day. There's always a lot of food," he says. "People associate farms with 'country bumpkin,' but they're not all like that. Some are more rustic, family-style, with bowls of food passed around, and some are more elegant with silverware and linen table cloths."

Although it sounds like an incredibly romantic adventure-eating juicy figs right off the tree, making goat cheese from fresh milk-Scialabba and Pellegrino admit the project was also a lot of hard work with the stress of funding the project themselves and no guarantees that the book would be published.

They say they never could have written the book if they weren't fluent in Italian, as little or no English was spoken in the outlying regions.

Recipes handed down through the generations were rarely written down, so they had to translate "a pinch of this and a scoop of that" into a publishable format.

"We also adapted and changed any obscure ingredients used in Italy," Scialabba says. "We didn't want to include all these esoteric ingredients you could only find in New York City."

After arriving home, they had tons of material and still no publisher. They put together a book proposal and found a great fit right in Guilford with Globe Pequot Press.

Scialabba and Pellegrino are now on a book tour promoting "The Italian Farmer's Table" and working at the "real" jobs they needed to get when they returned from Italy.

Pellegrino is an assistant food editor for Fine Cooking magazine based in Newtown, and Scialabba works for Artisan Wines, an Italian wine importer in Norwalk.

And they're already thinking about their second cookbook on the foods of central and southern Italy.

Scialabba notes, "Italy has 21 regions-we've only covered eight so far."