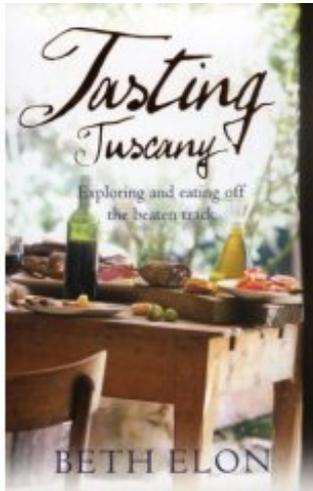


## Tasting Tuscany

Scritto da Ristorante Venanzio

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*"Venanzio was the first of this little gem of a restaurant on the main piazza of Colonnata. Thirty years old, quarry workers would end their days with a drink and something to eat here. Two long-time employees took it over a few years ago and kept the name. Today, rather than workers, owners and managers of the great quarries arrive with their foreign business associates - buyers and agents - for a lunch that's a touch more sophisticated."*

*He is still in his twenties, but chef Alessio Lucchetti has already been working in the kitchen for twelve years. He began to work summers for Venanzio while still in hotel school in nearby Massa. Roberto Ferlini, the genial manager and host, has been at Venanzio's for twenty years. He works the lardo, seasons and stores in the marble vat. He has become master of the art. Restaurateurs from all over Europe, and even, surreptitiously, from the United States ... come to buy chunks of lardo from him. He delights in discussing the process of ageing it, and showing off the marble vat in which it soaks up all the goodness. He's also developed a carpaccio of beef that's put for a week or so into the seasoning. The restaurant is still pretty much a family affair. Roberto's wife Anna is in the kitchen with Alessio - she makes the light delectable pasta - while Alessio's wife Pamela is out in front with Roberto.*

*This is a restaurant where I'd go for the menu degustazione, a taste of everything. The great variety and taste of all the starters makes it hard to choose, so it's easier to choose them all. There is, to begin with, the paper-thin slices of lardo served on warmed, almost toasted, bread. From there go to delicately stuffed courgette flowers, the torta di zucchini and the simple platter*

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*of the single-layered melanzane alla parmigiana. Pasta arrives next, ravioli stuffed with meat and Swiss chard, enhanced with a bit of chopped fried lardo and topped with a fresh tomato sauce. Another pasta is lasagnetta, thick green noodles made with borage - a wild green mushroom used in the northern Tuscan home kitchen - and served, in autumn and winter, with a sauce of wild mushrooms. Main courses include rabbit, boned and stuffed with lardo, or a guinea hen stuffed and served with a truffle sauce (black in the early autumn, white when they come into season later). ... The dessert are good. My favorite ending to the meal is a local sheep's cheese that's also been aged in a marble vat and is served with a candied-fruit mustard. Other desserts are seasonal; there's a coconut or chocolate mousse served with fresh-fruit sauce or an apple tart made with Calvados. Others come according to the whim of the day."*