

H O M E D E S I G N

DEPARTURES

FALL

THE PRIVATE WORLD
OF THE OTHER
VERSAILLES

MATERIAL
COMFORTS

LONDON IN
FULL COLOR

MODERN
MEXICO

OJAI,
CALIFORNIA

A TUSCAN
KITCHEN



THE FOUNDERS

From left: Claudio Mariottini, Francesco Barthel and Alessandro Grassi in the open Tuscan piazza that forms the center courtyard among Desinare's various arms

TO DINE & DESIGN

IN FLORENCE

The complete Tuscan lifestyle—furniture, fabrics, tiles, kitchenware—can be experienced and purchased in one location. At its center is Desinare, a new retail shop-cum-cooking school that's reimagining the possibilities of interiors and food.

BY LEE MARSHALL | PHOTOGRAPHS BY FEDERICO CIAMEI



As one of Italy's leading luxury travel and lifestyle public relations figures, Alessandro Grassi is good with words. But when it comes to Desinare, the new food-and-wine venture he and Florentines Francesco Barthel and Claudio Mariottini have launched, he riffs for several minutes before hitting on the elevator pitch. "It's an Italian-style school of life," he decides, "with a kitchen at its center."

Pinning down Desinare is not easy, because there's nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world. It's a cooking school and wine academy, sure—but it's also a unique community connected to Riccardo Barthel's rambling interiors workshops, store and design studio in Via dei Serragli, just inside the town gate of Porta Romana, in Florence's bohemian-chic Oltrarno quarter. The best way to describe it is as a lifestyle concept with food—and all its accoutrements—at its heart, encompassing culinary and wine classes, custom kitchen retail and artisans' workshops, all centered around an open village piazza. It is also a testament to the very special spirit of Riccardo Barthel, a man who has progressed from selling construction materials to becoming the éminence grise behind a certain very recognizable genre of rustic-elegant Tuscan interior: hand-painted ceramic tiles, brass door handles, shell-pepper marble work surfaces.

The artisans' workshops within Barthel's Florentine fiefdom itself have grown organically since 1976, when Barthel began to assemble a group of local artisans to meet a demand for traditional, high-quality home materials and fittings—door and drawer handles, table lamps—that, he believed, was being ignored in this age of industrial design and technological optimism.

Barthel was also what the French call a *brocanteur*, a dealer in secondhand furniture and architectural salvage items. Before long, the rooms of his house that weren't occupied by carpenters, stonemasons and upholsterers were overflowing with old factory lights, copper washbasins and vintage French bottle drying racks. So in 1994 the business bought itself some breathing space by moving into its present Via dei Serragli premises, previously occupied by a former automobile workshop, where a central courtyard provided the bonhomie of the public square. (It's probably no coincidence that 10 Corso Como, which had opened three years earlier in Milan, was also housed in a former auto workshop with a similar layout.) By this time, Barthel's Tuscan interior style had come back into fashion, and insiders who went to Procacci for truffles and Stefano Ricci for bespoke shirts started including Via dei Serragli on their style itineraries.

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BEST IN CLASS

Chef Arturo Dori (top left) demonstrates how to fill fresh ravioli with ricotta before rolling them into dumplings and cutting the pieces into individual pasta; strainers and ladles hang in the showroom.



HANDS-ON

Chef Dori teaches a group lesson on how to make pasta in the school at Desinare, which also offers courses on wine pairing, food photography and table design for the visually inclined.



AROUND A TUSCAN VILLAGE PIAZZA IS A CHARMED SPACE, AN

ARTISANS' VILLAGE WITH WORKSHOPS AND ANTIQUES.



ARTISANAL WARES

Clockwise from top left: Ceramic tiles and textiles in the showroom; a craftsman restores an old frame; painting an old door in the workshop; antique chandeliers, a vintage dresser and a leather armchair wait to be restored by artisans.



Soon Barthel's son, Francesco, was helping out, and he, with friends Alessandro Grassi and brand consultant Claudio Mariottini, came up with what Francesco calls "the logical next step" for the interiors emporium. "Part of it is about continuity," he says. "We make beautiful kitchens, so why not practice what we preach and make a beautiful working kitchen right here in Via dei Serragli?" But it has also, he adds, to do with taking his father's focus on natural materials and quality workmanship and applying it to the field of food and wine. "Desinare is about skill as expressed in the hands of the craftsman, of the chef," says Grassi, "but it's also about authenticity and beauty and *convivialità*, in the true Italian sense of the word."

Desinare—an old-fashioned Italian word that means, approximately, "to sit down and eat in the company of family and friends"—includes two upstairs spaces at the Barthel emporium and workshops. The first is dominated by a chef's table that feels like it belongs in the dining room of a rather grand farmhouse in the hills around Florence. The second

is the demonstration kitchen, with an inviting Tuscan ambiance for groups of up to ten, which discreetly conceals more than \$200,000 of culinary technology. On the first level, there's also a store of exclusive kitchen accessories.

Next to the dining room and wine-tasting area is an office where computer monitors vie for space with boxes full of terracotta tile samples and swatches of brocade. Downstairs are the showrooms—warmly elegant places one could imagine living in, though some are all mirrors and another contains little but finely worked door-knobs, drawer pulls, towel rails and curtain rod finials. Across the gravel courtyard are a series of workshops where carpenters carve botanical flourishes on table legs and lampshades that are assembled by hand. One whole area of the courtyard is taken up by the *brocante* side of the business, a maze of antiques and salvage items selected by somebody with unerring taste.

Clients who have heard of Desinare through the grapevine ("Word of mouth is our best marketing tool," says Grassi) come for individual or small group courses that can be tailored to personal needs. Cooking lessons often

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revolve around Tuscan and Italian classics like crostini with chicken liver pâté, or *cantucci* (sweet almond-studded biscuits, designed to be dipped in Vin Santo dessert wine). Typically a morning session will be led by the personable chef Arturo Dori—one of those salt-and-pepper-haired, blue-eyed Italians who know how to command attention. Founder of Cavolo Nero, a legendary Florentine restaurant he sold in 2009, Dori now works in between Desinare duties as a private chef for selected clients, who included the Dalai Lama (“I prepared a number of vegetarian dishes,” he recalls, “and added others when his people told me His Holiness liked nothing better than a good *spaghetti alla carbonara* and *maccheroni alla bolognese*”).

Wine courses might involve an evening tasting of four Super-Tuscans from the Bolgheri area on the Tuscan coast with Chiara Giovoni, an economics graduate who has become one of Italy's leading sommeliers. Florentines tend to opt for Desinare's regular courses, some of which stretch out over several weekly sessions. But it's the morning or evening group or individual lessons, popular with international visitors, that Grassi places at the heart of Desinare's “made-to-measure” approach.

“This is a place for friends, for families,” he says, “a place where people can reconnect with the land, with authentic flavors, with the pleasure of making food and talking about it.” He speaks of a group from Hong Kong, all high-octane businesspeople, who signed up for one of Dori's morning sessions recently while in Florence for a wedding. “By the end they were in tears,” Grassi says. While a cynic may find it all a little touchy-feely, Grassi has a simple response: “Getting back to real food and learning how to prepare it can do that to you—it's very emotional.” ♦

Desinare is within the complex at Via dei Serragli 234R. Exclusive bespoke cooking courses for one to four people start at \$240 per person; group lessons, for five to ten participants, cost \$160 per person. The entire complex of the interior design workshops and retail store is open to the public from 9 A.M. to 1 P.M. and 3 P.M. to 7 P.M., Monday through Friday. To book, call 39-055/221-118 or go to desinare.it.

HEAD TO RETAIL

The kitchen-accessories store, where one can find trusted names such as Zwilling and KitchenAid as well as Staub cast-iron cocottes, flatware by knIndustrie and plates by Bitossi Home

