

Under the Tuscan Sun

What is it about this rural area of Italy that mesmerizes so many people? The bread basket of the country, literally, as it grows the durum and semolina wheat to make bread and pasta. It is so much more than that. It offers rolling countryside with sun-soaked hills, well-manicured fields and rustic 16th century farmhouses that have stood the test of time.



Tuscan farm villa with a vineyard nestled into the hillside and olive trees in the foreground

From sun-dried tomatoes, sumptuous olive oil, home-made pasta and several regions of stupendous wines along with kind and friendly people, this area offers the quintessential Italian experience.

We left Rome after one night (we will visit you again) and took a bus toward the Tuscan hills. This was a pleasant recommendation from our guide as we were able to experience the gradual shift in the landscape from the large windows of the coach. Disembarking the bus at Siena, we started our journey. Situated at the top of 3 hills, the city was well above the bus station and we took a series of escalators (its own story) just to reach street level. After much street wandering and the kindness of a passerby, we found our hotel.



Siena from the countryside



Siena from the ground



Siena from the “level”

We had arrived a day early so had the evening to ourselves to wander the city and sample the cuisine. The streets are quite confusing and it took over an hour to find our restaurant!

Siena is a lovely medieval city and appears today much as it did in the 1300's, its Gothic architecture still well preserved. Local legend has it that the city was founded by two sons of Remus who, along with his brother Romulus, founded Rome. Like other hill towns, Siena was first settled in the time of the Etruscans (900-400 BCE). In the 1300's it was one of Europe's largest cities and was a big rival to Florence, 35 miles to the north. Its population was around 50,000 people, similar to its size today. Siena is historically linked to commerce and banking and is home to the oldest bank in the world, Monte de Paschi Bank. As such, as opposed to other Italian cities whose main square is built around a church, Siena's main square, the piazza Il Campo, is built around the city hall and its tower, the Torre del Mangia somewhere between 1297 and 1310.



Siena's piazza Del Campo and Torre del Mangia

The piazza is quite large and is home to the annual horse race called the Palio where different city districts called “contradas” compete for bragging rights.

The city center is a UNESCO world heritage site and the wall around the city built in 1000 CE still surrounds the 170-acre site.

You may notice the city architecture is built from bricks, not quarried stone. The bricks were made from the local soil and is a unique brown color. That color has been duplicated by many organizations and is has been renamed ‘burnt sienna’ and is a color that is in countless boxes of crayons the world over. (it certainly was in my box)



The Siena Cathedral begun in the 12th century, is a masterpiece of Italian Romanesque – Gothic architecture. (see below)



A proposed expansion of the eastern transept would have transformed the church into an ambitiously massive basilica, the largest then in the world. However, the scarcity of funds, in part due to war and the Black Death, truncated the project. Two walls of this expanded eastern transept remain. (see below). The area is now a parking lot.



With Siena as our first base, we ventured off into the surrounding hillsides in pursuit of the Tuscan experience.

Our first hike (yes, it is advertised as a walking tour but all traversing was basically hiking) was to the Chianti region, very well-known for its wine. (see region below)



Along the way, our guide, Sara, explained the history of the area we were traversing and led us to some astounding hilly mounds that had been discovered centuries ago to reveal Etruscan burial sites. The tombs themselves are about 2500 years old. (see below)



These are protected sites now but centuries ago they were exhumed and looted for any valuables buried with the occupants. The Etruscans pre-dated the Romans and left some valuable documents on their self-governance that Rome incorporated into their structure,

however, concepts the Etruscans valued such as gender equality and democracy were tossed aside by the Romans. There was no Greek interlude between the Etruscan era and the Romans in this region as the Greeks never ventured this far north after discovering the peninsula now called Italy.

After roughly 8 kms of trekking through the beautiful Tuscan countryside under an unusually hot Tuscan sun for the month of October (the temperature averaged 28C every day and although we were blessed with blue sky and sunshine *every day* of our whole Italian adventure, it did make for some sweaty hikes) we arrived at the *Fattoria Tregole*. (see below) It is an organic estate farm/vineyard nestled in an intimate corner of the Chianti region and perched on a hill enveloped within three deep gorges. It's a unique place, with an intriguing history that dates back to the Etruscan dominion and documents that mention the farm being in total activity as far back as the tenth century. The altitude and the combined variety of earth and stony soils generate the ideal conditions for the cultivation of the local Sangiovese grape.



Fattoria Tregole

Relaxing in a very pleasant outdoor courtyard (see below), we met Dario Castagno, who explained the history of the vineyard and area as well as touring us around the site. The winery is run by the Conte family with daughter Sophie as the wine maker. The cellar is divided into two areas. The winemaking, in an ancient shed containing vitrified concrete tanks, with controlled temperature for careful and clean work. Aging, in the historic cellar, composed of Barrique Tonneau and French oak barrels for maturation.



Dario explaining the virtues of this unique area to our group over a glass of white wine

Tregole's wine style is intimately linked to the Chianti Classico denomination and exhibit great personality. Sophie has done a great job creating wines that are true to the region's terroir and its values. We enjoyed more than one varietal while enjoying a sumptuous farm-to-table lunch on the outdoor courtyard.

Our Tuscan group consisted of seven people: Laura and Gerald, a woman from Australia, who spoke quite good Italian, a mother and son team from Colorado and a couple from Wisconsin. The other walkabout groups we would encounter were larger than this one so we quite enjoyed the intimacy of a smaller group for our first regional tour.



Our group lunching at Tregole: Sara, our guide on the right in the pink and Dario on the right at the far end of the table. Gerald was behind the camera.



The typical Tuscan kitchen at Tregole

Dario proved to be quite multi-talented as, not only is he an author of a number of books about the region and his life, he is also involved in the local scene of producing olive oil.

Partnering with a one-person operated olive oil property, Dario waxed philosophically on the unique characteristics of this oil making it the “prince of products” in these parts. Naturally Laura had to inquire about purchasing and shipping some product home and Dario made it happen. We now have three 1 litre tins of the finest IGP certified extra virgin olive oil in the world.

That evening we attended a Tuscan cooking class where we made our supper. Arriving at the Dante Aligheri Cooking School in Siena, we were immediately put to work under the tutelage of chef Massimo and his effervescent wife. Gerald was relegated to the pasta squad “pasta fresca” and Laura was sequestered to the sauce preparation “ragu di maiale e finocchietto” (pork with fennel and tomato).



rolling and cutting the pasta



Laura starting the ragu



Checking the final product before inspection



When in doubt, add more wine



Our group with the “capo donna della cucina” (in yellow) and our finished pasta

We enjoyed a wonderful “home cooked” meal consisting of an antipasto, primo piatto, secondo carne and a dolce. We also received the recipes for our dishes which we took home.

Our next Tuscan adventure was to the town of San Gimignano. It is a small, walled medieval town about 40 kms from both Siena and Florence. The site was an Etruscan village in the 3rd century BCE but in the Middle Ages and Renaissance era it was a stopping off point for Catholic pilgrims on their way to Rome as it is on the Via Francigena. Noble family rivalries in this town resulted in the construction of towers of varying heights to “one up” your neighbor. At one point there were 72 towers in the town. Only 14 remain today. One set of towers, still standing, is notable as there was a rule that no vanity tower could be higher than the old city hall at about 50m tall. So, the Salvucci family built 2 side by side towers of 30m height. These have remained intact for 700 years and were the inspiration of Minoru Yamasaki, the architect of the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York.



The Salvucci “twin” towers

In the main square of the town, Piazza della Cisterna, is a well which was the main source of the resident's water. The structure dates from 1346. Although much of it has been renewed in the late 20th century, parts of the paving date from the 13th century.



At the Cisterna well, San Gimignano

As with all Tuscan towns, the food is sublime in San Gimignano. The markets are teeming with fresh produce and this area is known for growing the most expensive spice in the world, saffron. In addition, *cinghiale* (wild boar) is available here as is the porchetta.



Our walk to this town took us through the vineyards of Vernaccia di San Gimignano, the most famous white wine of Tuscany. The most famous aspect of San Gimignano, however, is that of all the gelaterias in Italy, only one is the “world champion” and that resides here, and boy was it good! (see below)



The World Champion Gelateria - Dondoli

As we were discovering, the food experiences in the rural villas and farmhouses we visited were unparalleled. The freshness of the produce, the savory cured meats and the impressive wines were only matched by the warm and friendly people who hosted us at their farms. They only served what they grow or produce.



Hanging produce at the Ganozzi family farm



Lunch with Vernaccia wine at the Ganozzi's



The group lunching at the Ganozzi farm wearing our "walk about Italy" T shirts

We transitioned from Siena to a tiny village in southern Tuscany in the beautiful valley of Val d'Orcia called Pienza. It is situated between the two outstanding wine regions in Italy: Montalcino and Montepulciano.



Pienza

Naturally, our first sojourn was to a vineyard/winery in picturesque Montalcino. Our morning trek led us to Il Cocco, a small organic, estate vineyard. (see below)



Il Cocco organic, family run estate winery, the farmhouse, dating from the 1400's



A legacy from his grandfather, the operation is managed by Giacomo Bindi who, in addition to having developed the production of organic/biological wines since the 2000s, has focused on the enhancement of tourist hospitality, renovating the rooms and opening in 2015 a small restaurant inside the farm itself. With a philosophy of chasing beauty by enhancing biodiversity, they produce both Brunello and Rosso di Montalcino as well as a rose, a sparkling wine and grappa.

As it was harvesting time in October when we were visiting, they were still bringing in and crushing the grapes. (see below)





Wanting to help out in the operation, I decided to shovel the discarded grape stems into the trailer and they will be used for compost material.



Our group enjoying a glass of Giacomo's rose before continuing our tour, Laura at the camera



Laura with Giacomo in his wine cellar

Pienza, our new base has its own story. This charming village is widely known as the "ideal city of the Renaissance". The birth place of Pope Pius II, he rebuilt the village in the 1400's and transformed it into what he considered the Utopian city should be, exemplifying the principles and philosophy of classical times and of the great Italian Renaissance. It features an octagonally shaped bell tower standing over the village. (see below)



Pienza is just one of the elements that form the fantastic and harmonious landscapes of the Val d'Orcia. The entire area is protected as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

We visited some of the highlights of the area including the thermal hot springs at Bagno Vignoni. (see below)



Structures built directly over top of the natural thermal vent



Spill over from the springs running towards the d'Orcia river

San Quirico offered an excellent example of fortified walls, over 1000 years old (below)

...



... and the remains of the Torre del Cassero, an ancient medieval tower that used to rise over 39 meters but unfortunately was a casualty of the Second World War. (below)



This region is rich in high quality food items such as "pecorino" cheese, extra virgin olive oil, gorgeous wines, saffron, mushrooms, chestnuts, truffles, game such as wild boar and other specialties.

Val d'Orcia offers a special journey between flavors and marvelous panoramas that you will never forget. The most beautiful photos you see of Tuscany come from this paradise. Our time here was in the month of October so the landscape is brown (after the wheat harvest) but in spring and summer it is a luscious green.



Typical Tuscan landscape in the Val d'Orcia, Pienza in the distant background



Tuscan poderes
(farms)

Our last visit in Tuscany turned out to be one of our most memorable. We started our trek in the Monticchiello area with our destination being Podere Il Casale. What we encountered was a quaint, picturesque, rustic podere that epitomizes the Tuscan farm experience.



Originally from Switzerland, Ulisse and Sandra first laid eyes on Podere Il Casale in 1991. Their dream was all about healthy, delicious and self-grown food. What started out as a community of friends and volunteers has become a more professional, family run business that – through it all – has retained its soul.



Resting at our destination before the tour and lunch.



The view of the Tuscan landscape from our Il Casale vantage point

Il Casale also makes high-quality, refined, and expertly prepared pecorino cheese. We were to sample several varieties of the pecorino for lunch.



Ulisse (white T shirt close to the tree) welcoming us and starting the tour



The sheep pen for the sheep's milk for the pecorino cheese production



A section of the gardens yielding the produce of the farm



Ulisse toured us around the podere, telling us their story and explaining their philosophy on food and life. They produce olive oil, pecorino cheese, saffron, grains, meat and wine as well as some of the finest produce in the valley along with wild truffles.

As Ulisse was recounting his family's story in the area, Laura remarked to me that she seemed familiar with this story and the people. After the presentation, she talked with Ulisse about the family and their genesis here and asked if this was written in a book. Indeed, a book was published in 2020 by two of his son's wives. Laura looked at the volume and exclaimed, "I have this book". She purchased it at the Cook Book Company store in Calgary. Ulisse then asked if Laura knows Gail Norton who runs the store. Laura absolutely knows Gail and has for years. Well said Ulisse, she will be visiting us next week, she runs a cooking school in this area of Tuscany. So, how is that for 3 degrees of separation!

The full and magical story of this family is better told in the book, simply titled *Podere Il Casale* and you can pick up a copy if you are interested. It also contains some marvelous recipes.

Our lunch was spectacular: fresh produce from their garden bathed in their own olive oil, many styles and ages of pecorino cheese, fresh white wine and luscious red, perfect pasta and wild boar.



Laura at our lunch spot at Il Casale, Tuscan scenery in the background



The group enjoying lunch at Podere Il Casale



Our time at Podere Il Casale was special and Ulisse, Sandra and their team truly exemplify the Tuscan farm experience.



Laura and Gerald in Tuscany

Our time exploring the Tuscan landscape, its treasures and its people was drawing to an end so we will close this, the first chapter of our Italian Adventure. The essence of this

special region of Italy can be embodied within the verse on this plaque we came across in front of a hotel in San Quirico:



The next chapter of this Italian Adventure will be exploring the Amalfi Coast.