



Under the Tuscan sun

#ITALY #TUSCANY
#SUSTAINABILITY

In the Chianti hills outside Siena lies an Italian estate that not only oozes style, but offers visitors an agritourism stay. *By Cindy-Lou Dale*



Everything is managed by the Castelli family and their close-knit team. I'm walking with Mania Castelli, a former veterinary surgeon and carer of all creatures great and small. She speaks of her grandfather, telling of when he purchased the property in 1950, undertaking a 17-year restoration project.

"This was once a share cropping farm, which now produces organic wines and extra-virgin olive oil," says Mania, while we wander past ancient outbuildings, with antique tools displayed on the walls. "A few of the original farm workers still live locally. They often visit and reminisce of the once simple life they lived here."

"My father undertook research in Siena's archives," she continues, "and discovered the property's origins date to the 700s, when it was a lookout tower. As you can see, it still stands today. He also discovered that the vineyard was first planted in 1316."



OPENING SPREAD: Tolaini Estate in all its glory. THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: La Torre alle Tolve's tower; the same property's manicured grounds; fireside in the La Torre alle Tolve homestead; the barrel room; seasonal dining. All images © Alfredo Falvo



AMID THE VINES

Today, Giacomo Mastretta is the estate's oenologist, and he produces wines that are deliciously unique to the 40 hectares he tends. I meet him in the cellar. There is no technology, no temperature controls – it's almost a museum, rather than a vault to store wine. Giacomo explains: "It's much easier to be creative here. Millions of years ago, all this land was under the sea – we still find fossilised oyster shells in the vineyard. All of this has a salty effect on the soil and tannic structure, which has a manifestation on the wine. My task is to replicate this through the vines. I let the fruit express itself the way it wants to."

I'm soon to taste that expression over lunch. Chef Ricardo is all about the seasonal farm-to-fork concept, as many Italian chefs have been for centuries. Just about everything is made with traditional ingredients sourced from the estate's vegetable garden, then served in a little temple of great food and ambience. Visit in autumn, and porcini mushrooms, chestnuts and truffles will likely be on the menu.

"It's all about the soil, the sun, the fertile spirited lands of the estate, it's about the landscape, the aroma hovering above the table," Ricardo tells me. He demonstrates this by presenting a seduction of courses

using colour, emotion and history, which he translates into a food story that plays tricks on the palate. Dine alfresco and you'll enjoy views over the Chianti countryside, including forests home to deer, badgers and all manner of songbirds.

Outside of meal times, chef allows a few guests into his kitchen to partake in a cooking class. I learn how to make fresh pasta with zucchini sauce. Deceptively simple, but oh-so-moreish. While it's easy to linger, sampling fresh olive oil or rosato at the cellar door, I decide to explore further afield.

A TASTE OF TUSCANY

The Tuscan countryside is like the wine it produces – meant to be savoured rather than gulped. Scenic routes link fairytale castles, artistic treasures and an embarrassment of vineyards – one of which is the Tolaini Estate.

In 1956, Pierluigi Tolaini immigrated to Canada with a one-way ticket and two big dreams in his suitcase: to make money in North America, then journey back to his homeland and make a great wine. Having achieved his first dream, he returned to Tuscany in 1998 to realise the second.



Over the past 22 years, the now late Pierluigi and his daughter, Lia Tolaini Banville, have made the estate into a wine-making shrine, honouring the distinctive terroir in the commune of Castelnuovo Berardenga. My three-hour wine tour here begins with a private cellar visit, followed by a guided 'in the barrel cellar' tasting of five red wines, which is accompanied by fresh Tuscan bread and

extra-virgin olive oil produced on the farm. We drive around the estate and find a shady perch to lay down a picnic rug and enjoy yet more wine and nibbles.

While looking for something different among the usual famous names in nearby Montalcino, I find a small, artisan winery that's well off the regional tourist hotspots. At Casanuova delle Cerbaie, Simone Carlotti speaks of the wonders and flavours

of the soil, of conservation, maturation, and the route from vineyard to bottle, which delivers an impeccable brunello.

In the tasting room, with its views of lush green vineyards and azure skies, a light Tuscan lunch is served, alongside four bottles of refined, near handmade wines. Each sip is delicate and complex, with a thousand unexpected nuances. A bit like this pocket of Italy in a mouthful, really. ☺

TRAVEL FACTS

STAYING THERE

La Torre alle Tolve's 16-bedroom villa opened its doors as an agritourism stay in 2018. Several former farm buildings have been converted to apartments with long views towards Siena. Ten are available for short-term holiday rental. latorrealletolve.com

EXPERIENCES

Tolaini Estate
tolaini.it
Casanuova delle Cerbaie
casanuovadellecerbaie.it

INFORMATION

italia.it