

T MAGAZINE

Secret Tuscany

By JANINE DI GIOVANNI MAY 21, 2006

It's Saturday evening at Castello di Vicarello, and Aurora Baccheschi Berti has made soup as her first course. It has only basil, parsley, spinach, tomatoes, onions and celery, but it simmers for hours on her stove. When Aurora, who is tiny but exudes enormous energy, serves it from a big iron pot, everyone around the table looks warm and content. She got the recipe from a local; she says the peasants used to make it when they had no money for meat.

The people around Aurora's table tonight are anything but peasants. Except for one, they all choose to live in Maremma, which is a rare thing. The region, an undiscovered part of Tuscany, stretches inland from the coast to Montalcino and ends at the border of Lazio, near Capalbio.

I have spent many happy moments in Italy, but it's my first time in the depths of Maremma. My guidebook calls it a region of "melancholy beauty; an erstwhile land of evil spells and dark legends and quiet rusticity." There are herds of buffalo and horses here, once raised wild. There are wild boars, fallow deer, wildcats, cormorants and kingfishers.

The Etruscans settled Maremma in the sixth century B.C., making wine. Over the centuries, there were pirate raids, barbarian invasions and attempts to drain the marshes that edge the region. The Siennese controlled it, then the Medicis, then the Hapsburg-Lorraines.

Their descendants are here now, along with newcomers. On my journey, I meet fishermen and hunters, vintners and aristocrats, artists and writers and

fashionistas.

Then there are what my friend Alessandro Grassi, who has been coming to Maremma since he was a child, calls a new breed of landowners — urbanites who are escaping Rome, Milan or Florence. Nicolò Dubini, a financier who has a house on the bluffs of Capalbio, describes it like this: "I came here because it reminded me of the Hamptons in the early 1980's, before it got so crowded. There's the same kind of beauty, of ambience."

Maremma divides into two regions. In the south, there are the glamorous beaches of the Argentario and Capalbio, where you get low-key celebrities, wealthy businessmen, beautiful women. In the north, there are the untamed beaches, which remind me of La Camargue in France, with wild horses and wind-swept landscapes. There are winding wine routes that cut through ancient, ochre-colored villages. Each area is different, and the inhabitants are equally sniffy about the others.

"Oh, the south is more social, party people from Rome," a northerner told me. "In the north, we like our solitude."

I crisscrossed both, stopping off to meet people, all friends of friends (Italy is like that), for lunches and dinners and pasta with wild hare and endless glasses of local wine. Everyone, even with the great north-south divide, seems to know one another; everyone works in some kind of creative or artisan trade; everyone seems slightly drunk on the bucolic life. And they are all — in that casual but annoyingly Italian way — beautiful.

This evening, I am a guest of the Bertis. The other guests include a handsome sailor, Alessandro Roncallo, who lives down the hill. He is a romantic who met the love of his life, a Spanish woman, at this very table when she came for a few days as a guest of Castello di Vicarello. Tonight he is alone because the Spanish lady has returned to Madrid to pack her bags and return to Maremma forever.

"It's like that here," Aurora says quietly. "People fall in love with the place, and with each other."

There is also a garden designer, David Palmi; a photographer named Andrea Marchionni, with pale blue eyes; Alessandro Grassi, a bighearted fashion publicist; a flock of lovely teenagers with pre-Raphaelite hair; and the

40-year-old Elisabetta Geppetti, who runs Fattoria Le Pupille, a vineyard down the road. Elisabetta is beautiful. Tall and sinewy, with a shock of red hair and eyes the color of aquamarines, she is wearing tight Miss Sixty jeans tucked into riding boots. She does not walk; she glides. She is the mother of five children with magical names — Clara, Ginevra, Ettore, Domitilla, Diletta — and she is a winemaker. Her wines are so exquisite that she recently won a Critics' Choice award from Wine Spectator, which apparently is a big deal.

Now she is moving languidly up and down the table, rinsing out our wineglasses with mineral water and opening new bottles with each course.

There is a lot of food and drink on the long wooden table. After the acqua cotta comes the homemade tortellini with spinach; after that comes a roast chicken and small, sweet potatoes from Acquapendente, a town just across the Lazio border; after that comes handmade pecorino cheese. Then two homemade pies: one almond, one fig.

After dinner, I light the fire in my room, which has a Javanese bed (Aurora speaks Indonesian) and a Florentine desk. I throw open the shutters and look out to the dark, ancient hills. Until now, my Tuscany has always been places like Cortona or Arezzo, or the area the English call Chiantishire, which is wonderful but full of, well, English people. In my mind, Tuscany is summer parties, floaty dresses and picnics, the smell of lavender and hay. Since Frances Mayes wrote her sentimental memoir, "Under the Tuscan Sun," it is hard not to bump into four people you know, none of whom are Italian.

But Maremma is different. "People come here, but only a certain kind of person," says Giulia Puri, an art curator. "People who want nature and beauty and quiet."

When you drive — and that is what Maremma is for, to drive — this is what you see: winding roads lined with chestnut, wild olive and cypress trees; rivers and marshlands leading to the sea; formations of migratory birds; small pale-yellow and pink villages and walled medieval towns. Once this was an area riddled with malaria, and people fled the epidemic. As I drove down the coast from Pisa toward Capalbio, then cut inland,

I found people who have fled their other lives to find this place.

My road trip begins in Pisa, where I arrive late and spend the night in the

Bagni di Pisa thermal spa. I ask the waiter for a simple meal, expecting soup. He nods and goes away. Some time later, as I am preparing for bed in my nightie, a three-course banquet arrives, including white truffles on toast; tagliolini alla bolognese and a piece of "hound" — I did not ask — encrusted with fresh herbs. The waiter looks embarrassed as he unloads dish after dish. I eat it all and spend an extra half hour the next morning in the mineral baths underneath the hotel trying to atone. My husband, Bruno, and I drive south to Bolgheri listening to a local jazz station. There is a slowness of time here. We are late meeting Allegra Antinori for lunch.

The lunch is at Tenuta Guado al Tasso, a winery on land the Antinori family has owned since 1932, when her grandfather Niccolò Antinori married Carlotta della Gherardesca, from one of the grandest landowning families in the region. This was a marriage of two great Italian aristocratic families. The della Gherardescas have been making wine since the 17th century and the Antinoris since the 14th century, but today we have come to inspect Allegra's pigs.

Allegra Antinori is from a Florentine family of ancient and noble origins. Her father is a marchese; her mother, a princess. She is one of three sisters who grew up in a palazzo full of Renaissance art, reared by strict English nannies. But when she comes bounding down the stairs of her country home, Le Sabine (a house that Sting and his family once rented), wearing worn corduroys and scuffed boots and with her light brown hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, she looks more like an American college student who is late for class.

She speaks rapid English with no accent. She is a little bossy, which is endearing. "Come on, come on, let's eat — I want to show you the pigs before it gets too dark."

Allegra also has chickens. Her father smuggled eggs from the famous French poulet de Bresse in his suitcase over the Italian border, and the two of them hatched the eggs and crossed them with an Italian chicken called the gallina Livornese. The result is a kind of superchicken, of which she is extremely proud. "These chickens are a little spoiled," she says. "They only eat goats' milk, so their eggs taste lightly of almonds."

But back to the pigs. There are 200 of them. Their meat is exquisite: "Like nothing you will ever taste!" Allegra says. The Four Seasons Hotel George V in Paris orders Allegra's lard. She's especially proud of the ham. She goes into great

detail describing the differences between two kinds of sausages. She drops us off at our hotel and bossily says that she will pick us up the next morning, early, to go horseback riding on the beach.

That night, I sleep in a hotel that her father has lovingly transformed from a Mussolini-era camp for children into a beautiful 1920's-style thalasso-therapy center. Allegra's husband (who turns out to be the cousin of my best friend, another Allegra — everyone in Italy on a certain level is somehow related) manages the property. Before dinner, I go to the grotto area to have a thermal bath. There is no one there, and everything is bathed in a blue light. There is pool after pool of steaming hot seawater and high-power jets that you can adjust to hit you on the sore part of your back or your aching foot. Hours pass. Someone has to drag me out of the pool at closing time; otherwise, I would have slept there.

Dinner is at La Pineta. This is an event.

When you say you are going to Maremma, everyone you meet says the same thing: go eat at La Pineta. But they say it rather sheepishly, because inevitably they always add: you'll never find it. In my bag are three hand-drawn maps by three people. All of them are different.

It's true. It is impossible to find La Pineta. But persist because, as with most things in life, eventually you get there. You drive for miles on sandy beach roads, and then suddenly out of nowhere, you see a kind of shack on the edge of the water. This can't be it, you think, but you open the door, and the shack becomes a room full of light and lovely wood furniture and wonderful smells. And Luciano Zazzeri, a local fisherman whose father and uncle opened the place in 1964, grasps your hand and seats you at a table overlooking the darkened surf.

La Pineta used to be a kind of lunchtime shack for bathers on the sea; now it has one of the best reputations in Italy. Alain Ducasse, who co-owns L'Andana, a hotel farther south near Castiglione della Pescaia, stopped by recently, and Luciano whispered to a friend: "My God, it's Alain Ducasse! I am so nervous I am shaking."

"Relax," his friend, a Florentine businessman, reassured him. "It is Alain Ducasse who should be shaking." Luciano is loved.

He chooses our menu: crostone al lardo; gnocchi speck e carciofi; and

ravioli di tartufo. There is also codfish and gnocchetti with sepia, tagliolini with radicchio and gambas, and crisp focaccia with rosemary.

In between courses, we go for a walk out on the cold sand. We walk far out. The beach is black and empty, but there is one light down at the end, and that is Luciano's restaurant.

have been invited many times, but never got to Capalbio, until a cold and gray winter afternoon this year, when I had lunch with Carlo Puri Negri and his wife, Giulia. Capalbio is a beach town, but more than that, it has a kind of quiet and understated glamour and refinement, a wild beauty. A group of friends stay in houses on the bluffs, on protected land that they look after in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund.

For that, they have private access to the sea. It's about two hours from Rome, but in the summer, when Italian beaches become packed and the beaches here are just a private picnic for a select group of people, it's something unique.

It was pouring with rain when I arrived, but Giulia, who is an art curator from Turin, had just been out riding her horse on the beach. She wore a baggy and slightly damp cashmere sweater, a floppy hat that would have looked silly on you or me but looked wonderful on her. She has what I think is called an electric smile. She chain-smokes, and laughs about it.

There was a fire laid in their cottage, which overlooked the bluffs and marshes of Capalbio, and we drank glasses of local wine before lunch.

There were platters of local salami. There were several beautiful children wandering in and out of rooms.

Carlo Puri is a former actor and now a real estate mogul, the chief executive of Pirelli RE. His name is always linked with Capalbio. "You cannot go to Capalbio and not meet Carlo Puri," Nicolò Dubini told me adamantly. Puri has been coming here since he was a teenager, when his parents bought a Saracen tower on the beach. At the time, he was furious, waiting until dark to row his boat out toward the parties and bright lights of the Argentario across the bay. Now his teenage prison is a retreat from pressures and reality.

After lunch, we pile into his Jeep. Puri points out the different fauna and trees, and tells his 4-year-old daughter, Penelope, about the different kinds of

animals in the woods. Then it begins to rain hard, and we go back to look at the horses.

"It's like a dream here," Giulia says. "A beautiful dream."

Inland, we drive through places with names from a Renaissance poem. We pass Il Calidario, a natural hot spring the size of a small ocean. We stay at L'Andana, the new Alain Ducasse hotel, and in our room is a pool, reminiscent of orgiastic Roman times.

The room is very expensive, and my husband remarks cheerily that probably the only people who could afford it are Russian tycoons (the Russians love Maremma and are apparently buying up land quickly) and that unspeakable acts have probably been committed in the pool. On this note, I have a bath. It takes nearly an hour to fill the pool.

The next day we get lost on back roads, which is fine, and arrive in the dark at Castello di Vicarello. "Go have a bath, dinner is in an hour," Aurora says maternally.

But first I hear their story. How they lived in Bali for years running an extremely successful textile business, until one day, while visiting Maremma, they wandered into an olive grove and found a 900-year-old castle that had been a stable for cows since the early 1950's. It was once the site of a Roman chapel. The castle had been destroyed by fire, and was rebuilt in the 1300's.

Something about the place made the Bertis want to change their lives.

Aurora says thoughtfully, "We think it was used as a place where they studied the stars. Because what you see here you don't see anywhere else in the world."

They opened in 2003, renting out six rooms to people who often ended up becoming their friends. If you feel like cooking, you can help Aurora in the kitchen (she runs an informal cooking school). You can pick vegetables, join in on the dinner parties or just lie around with a book by the pool.

There are always interesting people hanging around.

Elisabetta wears an emerald-green sweater that matches her eyes. She wants to show us her cave.

Hers is a boutique business. Fattoria Le Pupille manufactures only five kinds of wine amounting to 450,000 bottles a year, which is tiny compared with the Antinori vineyards. But Elisabetta, whose daughter Clara designed one of her wine labels when she was 5, and who uses expensive corks from Sardinia for her best wines, says she wants to remain discreet. Over dinner the night before, she said: "This is my wine. I want it to represent me."

Today, she describes it like this: "I prefer it to be small, but a very sharp quality."

I am not a wine connoisseur, but my husband is, and he tells Elisabetta that her wine is unique, that he never tasted wine like that anywhere. And he is French and snooty.

"It's without taboo," he says later. "She is trying to make her own special wine, wine that is like her. It's pretty rare."

We go to look at the oak casks, and everyone falls quiet in a kind of reverence. I ask a question too loudly, and someone — I think it's Alessandro — says, "Shh, the wine is sleeping." I think he is joking, but everyone in the darkened vault has a look of godliness on their face.

We have lunch in her sitting room: pasta with cinghiale (wild boar), cheese and three types of wine. We get a bit drunk and sleepy, and someone talks about poetry and someone else about the constellations. Such is the art of living in Maremma. Then, sadly, it's time to go home.

Nice pork if you can get it Allegra Antinori's pigs feed freely in the forest of her wine estate.; Turf and surf From left, the road to Tenuta Argentiera; Luciano Zazzeri of La Pineta restaurant; Niki de Saint Phalle's "Tarot Garden" near Capalbio.; Saturnia rising The sulfur hot springs of Terme di Saturnia stay at 99 degrees year-round.

Getting There

Within Europe, easyJet flies cheaply and easily into Pisa's airport. From there, Maremma is 90 minutes away by car. From Ciampino airport in Rome, it's about two hours.

Hotels

Bagni di Pisa A luxurious spa hotel 15 minutes from the airport on the road toward Lucca. www.bagnidipisa.com; 011 39 050 88 501. tombolo talasso resort Spa hotel right on the beach. www.tombolotalasso.it; 011 39 056 574 530. L'Andana Alain Ducasse's first hotel in Italy. Superluxurious, on opulent grounds, with an amazing restaurant. www.andana.it; 011 39 056 494 4800. Castello di Vicarello Heaven! www.vicarello.it; 011 39 056 499 0718.

Restaurants

All of the hotels above have great restaurants, but one place that is a must is La Pineta. Reservations are mandatory. Via dei Cavalleggeri Nord 27, Marina di Bibbona; 011 39 058 660 0016. Antica Osteria dei Tre Briganti Typical Tuscan food, inexpensive (\$12 for a delicious plate of pasta), with a waitress who is a Monica Bellucci double. Via Matteotti, 45, Suvereto; 011 39 056 582 8186.