



By Catherine Van Brunschot

Let me be upfront: I never read Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun*. Never saw the movie. I'm unaccountably indifferent to pasta (and Italian food in general, if truth be told). Yes, I missed the boat completely on the raptures of Tuscany.

Friends who'd spent time in the popular Italian region said this was a gap in need of remedy. Stat.

So I booked a culinary walking tour of Tuscany, offering hillside rambles and an abundance of wine. Now THAT'S something I could commit to.

Siena

The tour begins in Siena, Tuscany's largest hill town, whose beating heart since the 12th century has been Piazza del Campo. As I join the aperitivo-sippers along the plaza's edge, I try to imagine 10 horses careening past the cafés around the tilted perimeter. This is the site of the famous Palio, a bareback race that's been fuelled for centuries by the fierce rivalries of Siena's 17 contrade (neighbourhoods). Here, the winning steed is allowed to cross the finish without its jockey— and often does.

I become a fan of the Onda (Wave) contrada at its carefully curated Palio museum, where I got to witness on video the horse race in all its chaotic glory. But deep in Leocorno (Unicorn) territory, a piece of my culinary heart is stolen. At cozy **Osteria Babazuf**, we are plied with course after delicious course — 15 dishes in all — ranging from asparagus pie and rabbit terrine through hand-made pastas, lamb and suckling pig, to three final dolci featuring the magic of chocolate, coconut, caramel and oranges.

My conversion to Tuscan pleasures has begun.

Chianti

Next day finds us walking the Chianti countryside, forested with oak, cypress, and honeysuckle, with 2500-year-old Etruscan tombs poking the hills. Our destination is **Fattoria Tregole**, a family-run winery housed in a restored podere (farm estate). Here,

Dario Castagno— writer, tour guide, and self-taught Chiantigiano historian— regales us with stories, walks us through the tasting of three of the winery's robust reds, and concludes our amble around the estate with a candle-lit foray through cellars reverberating with Italian opera. Lunch under the chestnut trees includes a pappardelle with pulled wild boar that has me beginning to see the light on the merits of pasta.

Back in Siena at **Dante Alighieri Culinary School**, beneath a quote from that famous Italian poet, all hands are put to work to conjure a four-course meal of Tuscan specialties. We stumble a bit with the hand-cranked pasta machine, but deem our results a resounding success: grilled zucchini crostini; fresh stracci pasta with olive sauce; rich Chianti-style chicken; and luscious lemon bavarian with strawberries.

San Gimignano

The hilltop village of San Gimignano was once a welcome beacon for medieval pilgrims travelling to Rome along the Via Francigena. Today, its 14 intact stone towers remain a strong visual presence behind us, no matter how far we walk through the surrounding hills. The vineyards here produce Vernaccia di Sangimignano, Tuscany's best white wine, and the acacia blossoms that perfume the air provide a popular local treat when fried as sweet and crunchy fritters.

Just as the trail takes a serious incline, a beefy young man dressed in camouflage materializes on a dirt bike. He is introduced as a member of the Ganozzi family, whose **Sant'Ulivieri** agriturismo is our lunch destination. Some take up his offer of a lift up to the farmhouse and I watch them bounce alarmingly around the potato mounds. Prudence keeps me on a steady plod past fields of ancient grains, taking strategic pauses to admire rows of deep purple artichokes.

Lunch is a feast focused on all that the property produces, including pecorino cheese, prosciutto and salumi; spelt and tomato salad; leek soup; and crostini topped with house-made spreads, marinated vegetables, and preserves. We wash it down with generous quantities of the Vernaccia until the camo-clad lad re-emerges with a polished accordion and Signore Ganozzi himself arrives with armloads of poppies to decorate the biscotti tray. The younger Ganozzi proves to be a virtuoso, whose repertoire from folk songs to Italian opera brings us to our feet. When the elder Ganozzi is moved to share his considerable dancing prowess too, the gathering builds to a full-blown kitchen party— until thundering skies have us running for cover.

Montalcino

Within minutes of our arrival, I discover two things in the town of Montalcino: medieval streets chock-a-block with wine-tasting rooms AND the best espresso I have had anywhere, pulled from a circa-1961 espresso machine at **Caffe Fiaschetta Italiana**. This wine bar was founded in 1888 by the creator of **Brunello di Montalcino**, a wine that's become one of Italy's finest, and the central preoccupation of some 240 nearby producers.

Our walks through **Brunello** country take us to two of them. At **Casato Prime Donne**, Italy's first winery helmed by all-female winemakers, Donatella Cinelli Colombini and her team serve as leaders in wine

tourism and promoters of the arts and journalism. Meanwhile, **Podere Il Cocco**, an organic wine venture run by siblings Giacomo, Ettore, Domotilla, and Stefano Bindi, is representative of a tide of young people who have returned to the Tuscan countryside to resuscitate the poderes abandoned by their ancestors during Italy's post-war industrial boom.

The youthful tide can also be found at **Locanda Demetra**, where an energetic team of DIY millennials has turned a formerly decrepit farmhouse into a cooking school and inspired farm-to-table restaurant. Here, homey hospitality combines with contemporary cuisine in an alchemy that sees effervescent frontman Alessandro Paris as both our host through a parade of creative dishes (with standouts like caramelized eggplant & mozzarella, and Cinta Senese pork wrapped in its own bacon), and cool uncle to the baby who passes amiably from guest to guest as we polish off our chocolate cream mille-feuille.

Pienza, San Quirico d'Orcia and Beyond

The week speeds by with a trove of memorable experiences: Sant'Antimo Abbey, thick with incense and the chants of monks; San Quirico d'Orcia's handmade pasta, craft beer and cold-pressed olive oil; and Renaissance Pienza's hidden squares and impossibly emerald views.

Our final day's walk takes us through that view to the cheese-makers of **Podere il Casale**. Here we make acquaintance with the sheep, learn the magic wrought by seasonality, terroir and aging, and linger over a tremendous cheese platter that concludes our al fresco lunch.

Loathe to end my Tuscan immersion, I opt for a return trek to Pienza, through a landscape of badlands and poppies and golden broom that puts me in a reflective mood.

I wonder what the asking price would be for Frances Mayes' place!

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Read more of her travels at catherinevanbrunschot.com

*I booked my tour with **Walk About Italy**, owned and operated by Siena native, Gianni Stanghellini. Tours include accommodations, transport, meals, and tastings and are led by passionate and professionally qualified local guides. Walk About Italy also conducts culinary walking tours of Sicily and the Amalfi Coast. www.walkaboutitaly.com*

***Under the Tuscan Sun** is a memoir by American writer, Frances Mayes, detailing her growing love affair for Tuscany as she buys and renovates an old abandoned villa. The book spent more than two-and-a-half years on the New York Times bestseller list and was adapted for the 2003 film of the same name, starring Diane Lane.*

SEE PAGE 17 FOR POLLO ALLA CHIANTIGIANA RECIPE.