

LODESTARS

ANTHOLOGY

ITALY





Podere di Poggio

One short jump towards Arezzo and one little Fiat Panda was climbing the Arentine Hills up to Podere di Poggio. At the top we were rewarded with our first view of Arezzo from above, and a warm welcome from Marco Rossi who, along with his brother Jacopo, runs this one-family winery.

The land that Podere di Poggio made its own bought in 1991 by Marco and Jacopo's father as a place for whole family could call home. The 25 hectares include accommodation for holiday guests and fields that soil around the hills and produce honey, olive oil and 11,000 bottles of wine a year. Firstly, the business has grown organically; Jacopo, with his education in agriculture and viticulture (vine-growing and grape-harvesting), was the driving force behind the first vintage in 2005, while Marco's background is marketing, and his subsequent training as a sommelier, has provided a strong platform on which to promote the winery.

It was Marco who showed us the winery's routine, the room that perhaps best encapsulates what Podere di Poggio is all about. Designed by an eco-architect and the joint recipient of many architectural and ecological awards, this is where the wine-making and bottling takes place. Connected with the winery's mission to mind - 'where, when, why and where' - the room is built with rocks from the original farmhouse and paved with used hand tiles to avoid contamination of the wine.

Just what of the wine? We were invited to discuss this for ourselves as a tasting session with the two brothers, who were so charming as they were eloquent about the winery's produce. First up was *montepulciano*, a refreshing red with a pop-art inspired label whose name, quite literally, means 'autumn pink'. It was delicious, but my personal favourite was *Poggio*, a red that managed to be both rich and light in flavor, made entirely of the Sangiovese grapes for which the Chianti region is famed. According to Marco, the ancient Romans were other engineers, architects or winemakers, a heritage which was evident in every up I took.

"Do the brothers ever argue?", I requested somewhat awkwardly, before leaving. Only about Marco becoming Jacopo's brother around 1990 without permission, and over the winery's name, Podere di Poggio, as the eventual choice, down on the Italian word for a country estate with a farmhouse, and the Latin word for fruit, which is easy to grow in the rich Tuscan soil. The whole is emblematic of community, family and nature's beauty - an apt description of this winery.

Fattoria La Vialla

Down in the Arentine Valley, twenty minutes from Arezzo as the crow flies (or as the Fiat drives), lines of cypress trees march up towards a restored farmhouse shaded by huge fig trees. This is the heart of Fattoria La Vialla, an organic-biodynamic farming estate that sprawls over 1,342 hectares of Tuscan landscape. Upon arriving we didn't venture far, settling, as the daylight faded, into the courtyard at the foot of the hill.

As we feasted upon some of La Vialla's produce - two types of Pecorino served with *Peperonata dolce*, a sweet pepper jam, cuts of cured meats and glasses of Lo Chiffon, a pale unfiltered sparkling wine - we learnt a little more about the estate's history (storytelling and food once again proving loyal companions). The land was purchased in 1978 by the Lo Franco family, who still own and run it today. Named after La Vialla, an uphill type of plough for vegetable gardens that is proudly displayed on the estate's products, the initial idea was to run a *fattoria* - a farm that also sells its own produce. Since then, La Vialla has developed into a leading example of effective agro-tourism with a traceable carbon footprint, employing farmers, viticulturists, oenologists, chefs and hospitality staff, all of whom display a singular passion for the work they do. The fruits of their labour are available to purchase by catalogue or at the Aladdin's cave-like shop on the estate, and taste just as good at home as they do in Tuscany.

Arriving early the next morning we met Dimitri, the miller and baker who had been up since dawn preparing fragrant loaves of Tuscan bread, traditionally unsalted due, as one theory has it, to the heavy taxes that were once placed on salt. From here we headed to the farmhouse for breakfast served *al fresco* under yet more fig trees, a sociable meal that is put on twice a week for guests staying on the estate.

Suitably fed and caffeinated, we proceeded to the grapevines. Perched high in the hills, La Vialla's vines benefit from good exposure to the sun. Rows of grapes, Sangiovese and Trebbiano, are evenly spaced along the hillside, with wildflowers and legumes growing in between to enrich the soil. Here we learned of a curious tradition that best demonstrates the marriage of ancient and modern agricultural techniques utilised at La Vialla - a practice whereby cows' horns are filled with manure and buried in October. When spring rolls around they are unearthed again, by which time the manure has transformed into rich hummus, used to fertilise the earth.

At the family's old olive mill, used again for the 2015 harvest for nostalgic reasons, we chatted with Gianni, Antonio and Bandino Lo Franco, the charismatic trio of brothers who run La Vialla. This picturesque building has a cherry tree growing from one of the walls - the brothers' father, Piero Lo Franco, founder of the estate, had decreed that the tree couldn't be cut down, so the wall was simply restructured around it. Conversation ranged from topics such as oliphenolia, the La Vialla drink made from an extract of olive pulp and grape juice (drunk by the brothers' Grandma Catherina, its health benefits are impressive, and said to increase longevity), to what characterises Tuscans - their ability to see the funny side of life. And of course an intrinsic appreciation of beauty.





These sentiments were repeated by Ginesio, a Sardinian shepherd who was tending his flock of sheep. All La Vialla's shepherds hail from Sardinia, which is one of the prime sheep-rearing areas of Italy; shepherds from this area are considered experts in their field, if you will. We learnt, rather poetically, that the secret to being a shepherd was to follow the sheep rather than the other way around. Clearly wisdom and humour are interchangeable.

Throughout the estate are the beautifully restored homestays, available to guests wishing to stay for a week (or a few). They include Spedale, which has an open plan ground floor with graceful terracotta tiled arches and bedrooms furnished with delicate glass lights and 100-year old beds. One house even has a chapel attached; a tiny horseshoe-shaped construction, dark and cool, whose existence reflects the fact that this estate was once part of a pilgrimage trail. It's not surprising to learn that pilgrims in days gone by stopped, just for a moment in time, to take in the beauty of the land that Fattoria La Vialla now stands on, or that you find yourself doing the same all these years later.

There is so much worth visiting in Tuscany - the bell towers of San Gimignano, the Piazza del Campo in Siena, but I would be remiss if I did not mention Arezzo. This sunlit city can be found in the southern corner of Tuscany, and boasts a lovely cathedral, frescos, and Mest, a restaurant near Piazza Grande (the main square) that serves light and delicate food. The Piazza Grande was also used as one of the locations for *Life is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni's joyful, heart-breaking film set during the Second World War. And if you're searching for a guide to Tuscany, look no further than Italian Eye, a friendly and informative outfit who took us to see hilltop villages Castelmuzio and Trequanda, Borgo Sant'Ambrogio, a delightful hotel that used to house a pope's retinue, and Sant'Anna in Camprena, the convent where *The English Patient* was filmed. In exploring Tuscany, the undulating hills and city spires that reflect the changing light, I understood why it has served as inspiration for countless years to artists, architects, wine-makers, farmers and chefs, and continues to foster the fascinating, talented individuals we encountered during our stay.