

# The Green Heart of Italy

An Italian estate holds the key to the merits of slow living and offers life-changing lessons, *Sunshine Lichauco de Leon* discovers



**LA VITA È BELLA** The village of Paciano is only one of many beautiful small towns you will see as you explore Umbria; (inset) Bales of hay are the perfect backdrop for an impromptu photo shoot. Local hay, used to feed the village horses, is sold to local companies in the area

PHOTOGRAPHY: SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON



**S**WINGING IN A HAMMOCK under a giant tree surrounded by green vineyards, rolling hills, and olive groves of the Umbrian countryside, I had one thought flowing through my mind: the secret to life is learning to live slowly. And there is nowhere more serene to enjoy life and practice the art of “living slow” than at Country Slow Living. Its stunning villas, culinary school, and organic farm are a haven for anyone who wants to be reminded of what beauty there is in lingering in the moment, of the power that resides in feeding your senses.

This is a place where life quiets down to a whisper, granting you the freedom to breathe deeply and exhale slowly, giving you time for yourself and those you love, while being surrounded by excellent food, wine, and extraordinary natural beauty. The Country Slow Living estate, located on the border of Umbria and Tuscany in central Italy, consists of four luxury properties spread on 40 acres of greenery—with 2,200 olive trees and a small vineyard from which the farm produces its own golden olive oil, wine, and honey.

The estate offers a range of accommodation options. It can provide a home for one person or 48 travellers. Guests may rent all the villas, individual villas, or the apartments within the villas.





**THE GOOD EARTH** The captivating views from the road; Ravioli filled with Pecorino di Pienza and organic tomatoes; The organic kitchen garden grows seasonal produce



## COOKING WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN

### LESSON FROM AN UMBRIAN KITCHEN

I learnt that "eating is also done with our eyes," so when I went to the garden to pick a few flowers to decorate the fruit tart, I knew I would never be able to leave a plate undecorated again.

A friend and I slept in high comfort and simple elegance in Villa Brunello at the Tartagli estate, whose interiors, like the other villas, are beautifully outfitted with Tuscan and Umbrian antique and country style furniture, along with pieces collected from the owner's global travels. We felt immediately at home the moment we arrived, and found the villa so full of many wonderful places to lounge in we could not decide where to relax first.

There is so much to do in the region, and exploring the villas' treasures made us realise that keeping still could be as rewarding as moving forward. Stand on the covered deck and listen to the gentle wind rustling through the trees. Notice the many shades of green that nature paints. Or read a magazine while catching the lazy afternoon sun on the loungers surrounding the infinity pool or curl up with a glass of wine, watch a movie

in the cosy living room, or whip up a delicious meal in the fully equipped kitchen.

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All the villas are a short walk to Paciano, a typical village of the region whose name reflects its spirit. Named after the God of Peace who, possessing two faces, can see both past and future, this medieval wall-surrounded village is perfectly preserved in time.

The town boasts several restaurants offering regional specialities such as pizza dressed with organic onion and fresh sage.

A pharmacy, grocery store, and ATM are just a stone's throw away, so you don't have to go very far for any supplies you need. And on the way home, don't forget to stop for a creamy latte with the welcoming locals and enjoy the sweeping views from the veranda outside the stores.

There is nothing quite as special as being shown Italy by an Italian, and Alina Pinelli,



**LAZY HAZY DAYS** The Villa Brunello; A swing hammock; The author with Lucia, Alina, Ciccio the cat and Bacco the dog



our hostess and now friend, is a one-woman guide to all one needs to know in order to be happy here. The Umbrian countryside is her paradise, and not only does she know its hidden treasures well, she also delights in showing them to you.

As Alina and her mother Lucia live on the property, and with a blog dedicated to guests listing all current events and other useful information, no question goes unanswered. A professional wine and olive oil sommelier by training and chef by hobby, she'll give you very practical tips on where to eat, what to order, how to get there, and even where to park, which is essential when exploring hilltop medieval towns that can leave you with a long climb if not careful.

Alina's joy in showing guests the beauty of the Italian countryside is fuelled by the knowledge that she is making her father's dream come true. After purchasing the crumbling farm in 1976, her father slowly worked on its restoration over the years to build it into a family business. But when he passed away suddenly in an accident in 2010, Alina stepped in to complete what he started.

She related, "I was working in marketing in Rome and a slave of myself without bothering to dream but just living each day. I felt him

inside my heart and found the courage to leave, all to make my father's dream true."

If geography is destiny then there is reason to be envious of Paciano. Located less than 170 km from Rome and Florence, it's the perfect starting place for day trips to the Vatican or the Uffizi, as well as an ideal base from which to explore famous countryside villages whose names we know from wine labels or famous movies.

The region is as rich in history and crafts-making as it is in nature and food. Within





**GARDEN TO TABLE** Organic grilled tomatoes straight from the garden; Sifting organic flour to make pasta; With 2500 bottles of exquisite wine, Alina's wine cellar is a treasure in itself



40 minutes in your rental car, you can visit the Etruscan museum or leather shops of Cortona, the city made famous by the film *Under The Tuscan Sun*. Or you can follow the signs to Montepulciano, where Enrico of Cantina de' Ricci will greet you as an old friend, offering a light lunch paired with delicious wines, while giving you a history of wine-making in the region.

Alternatively, you may traverse the pristine countryside to visit Assisi, and follow the steps of St Francis to the Basilica, on a guided tour by a Franciscan friar. Follow this with a five-star dining experience at Locanda del Cardinale, located over the ruin of a Roman Villa, and feel a special kind of fulfilment.

If satisfying your taste buds is a goal, visit the open-air weekly food markets or take a cheese tour where the owner explains how to make pecorino or ricotta. If you want to sweat it out and the time is right, stay on the estate's farm and help harvest honey and saffron or produce olive oil.

Sports lovers can go horseback riding, play golf, or sail in the nearby lake. If shopping is your pleasure, a visit to outlet stores such as Gucci, Prada, and Dolce & Gabbana is a must.

#### Cooking Lessons

Part of the love that Italians have for life is rooted in their long-standing traditions, and although tradition here is everywhere, there is no better way to learn it than in the kitchen.

Hands-on cooking classes, taught by Alina and her mother, take place at Il Fontanaro, their beautifully restored two-storey stone farmhouse built in 1892 surrounded by landscapes that beg to be painted—rolling green hills, a large grass lawn, rows of grapes, orchards of lemon trees, old English roses, and an incredible variety of flowers.

Sitting in a homey, dreamy country kitchen, with wine glass in hand and Italian opera serenading us in the background, Alina introduced us to the regional recipes handed down by her grandmother. As we learnt about each ingredient, we were



**UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN** Sunset view from villa, with Brunello-Umbria and Tuscany in the distance

reminded of how important flavour is to life.

When we were introduced to Il Fontanaro's award-winning olive oil, we were told that olive oil is not a condiment but a staple. And after a few tastings, we could discern the difference in quality. Alina said, "Good olive oil can be drunk like wine. It has its own bouquet and the flavour lingers."

She reminded us that organic extra virgin olive oil is very good for our health; it can help with digestion, protect against heart disease, and reduce the risk of cancer.

As we were making fresh pasta, our hands kneading the dough and shaping it into perfectly formed gnocchi, ravioli, and tagliatelle, something magical happened—with each repetitive motion, our mind suddenly freed itself from thought and only the feeling remained.

Cooking, we were told, is about making simple dishes without too many ingredients, and making them well with passion.

Serving fresh, natural sustainable ingredients and minimally processed natural foods is the cooking mantra in Alina's family. It has become our mantra as well, after experiencing the sheer delight of

gathering vegetables and fruits from their organic garden by plucking them from a tree branch and pulling them from the soil.

The seasonal organic garden offers the summer's best tomatoes, artichokes, zucchinis, chili peppers, apples, peaches, pomegranates, and lemons, which are later infused into homemade limoncello.

Menus are designed with guest preferences in mind, and children-friendly or gluten-free cooking classes can also be arranged.

Though you leave the class with essential cooking tips and techniques, the experience is more like hosting a dinner party with family and new friends. Cooking is as much about sharing experiences and stories as it is about making a meal.

Whether you spend a few days or a few weeks at Country Slow Living, you leave feeling wiser, very alive, and incredibly at peace. I am not sure if the key to this is that Alina and Lucia welcome you into their lives like family. Or it comes from being surrounded by a kaleidoscope of colour, beauty, and flavour. But, certainly, it is a place that you are not sad to leave because you know you will return. ●

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