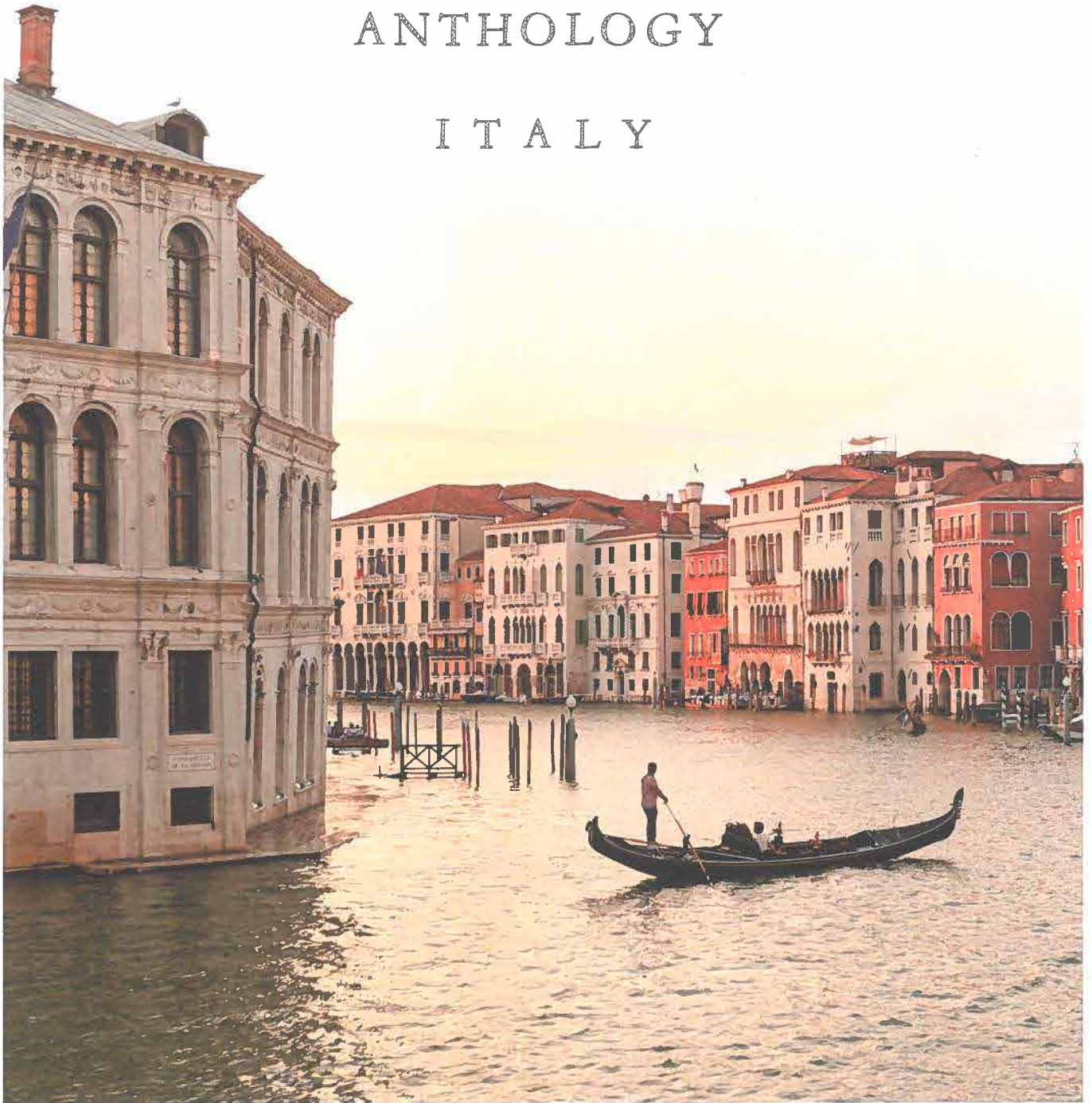


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TOSCANA IDYLL

Words by Sarah Kelleher & Illustrations by Naomi Ann Clarke

Beauty, healing waters and wine - all you need for an idyllic Tuscan escape.

Approaching from the north, skirting gingerly round Florence (beautiful city, horrible traffic), memories of Tuscany come crowding back. The family holidays when I was younger, a hazy blur of terraced swimming pools glinting under the sun. Years later, a visit to Siena to see the flamboyantly talented Sieneese horse riders racing for the glory of their districts in the Palio Di Siena - a spectacle that's over in a mere 75 seconds yet preceded by four days of pageantry. A day trip to Lucca to see a teenage-blush-inducingly handsome tenor sing the role of Nemorino in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* beneath the city's famous tower houses. Captured in countless travelogues and works of literature, art and film, Tuscany holds an evergreen appeal - and is a place that forever calls me back.

My journey this time took me south towards Arezzo (the stunning setting of Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful*) for a lazy afternoon at Fattoria La Vialla, a biodynamic, family-run farm occupying more than 2,000 hectares of fields and forest in the lushly appointed Arentine Valley. The land was purchased in 1978 by the Lo Franco Family, who still own and run the estate - their initial idea was to run a *fattoria*, a farm that also sells its own produce. Since then, La Vialla has evolved into a leading example of effective agro-tourism as the largest Demeter-certified (or super-extra organic, if you will) area in Italy. The fruits of the estate's labour are available to purchase by catalogue or online year-round, or at the Aladdin's cave-like shop on the estate between April and October - the golden extra virgin olive oil and *sugo alla melanzane* (tomato and aubergine) pasta sauce are personal favourites.

Of course La Vialla has to be seen to be believed - upon arrival I'm greeted by twin lines of cypress trees marching up towards a restored farmhouse, shaded by huge fig trees. Guests staying in the beautifully revamped homestays dotted round the estate, with their delicate glass lampshades, vintage furniture and splendid views, can enjoy *merenda* here, which roughly translates as late breakfast, light lunch or early dinner. And, if they choose to explore the estate, they can join guided tours and wine-tastings, or marvel at the sight of one of the estate's Sardinian shepherds expertly manoeuvring their flock over the rolling hills.

Not every traveller makes it past the charms of Florence and Siena down to the sleepier Arezzo, with its antique stores, Piero della Francesca frescos and Roman amphitheater. Fewer still journey as far as the Maremma, which extends from the Tyrrhenian coast to the Appenine foothills. But those who come here are richly rewarded, for the Maremma represents a different side of Tuscany - equally sun-drenched, but wilder, more rural and steeped in tradition.

With around 70 percent of its guests hailing from Italy, the Terme di Saturnia hotel and spa, located near Saturnia in the lower right-hand corner of the Maremma, feels like a well-kept national secret - one that I was thrilled to discover. The hotel is innately luxurious, built to wrap around the natural hot spring at the property's heart so that guests enjoying dinner or relaxing in their rooms can look out over the steam curling above the turquoise waters. This opulence belies the hotel's humble roots.

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da Vialla

Casa Rosa

2022

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