

essen & trinken

Perfektes
Paar

SÜSSES MIT
HIMBEERE
UND PFIRSICH

Der Clou zum
Salade niçoise ist
die Tomatenessenz
im Dressing

**ZEIT FÜR
BOHNEN**
Zu Lamm,
Pasta und
Crostini

TAKOYAKI
Japanische
Bällchen im
Trend

**AGRITURISMO
IN DER TOSKANA**

Tomaten auf Vorrat

Eingekocht, eingelegt, getrocknet oder als Essenz fürs Dressing.
So fangen wir den Sommer ein





THE DREAM OF A SIMPLE LIFE

The agriturismo is not an Italian invention. Farm holidays have existed since man has been going on holiday. In Tuscany the concept has been perfected, thanks to the awareness of how to preserve it. A trip to the countryside to visit hand-picked organic farms, almost too good to be true.

TEXT KIRSTEN WULF PHOTOS HARDY MUELLER



When Ulla Groman first came over the hill she saw a rolling landscape with vineyards, olive groves, woods and fields. “The sun was shining through the trees and I thought, this is where I want to be.” And then she found the farmhouse, sitting on a hill.

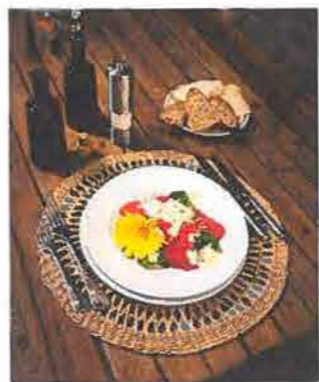
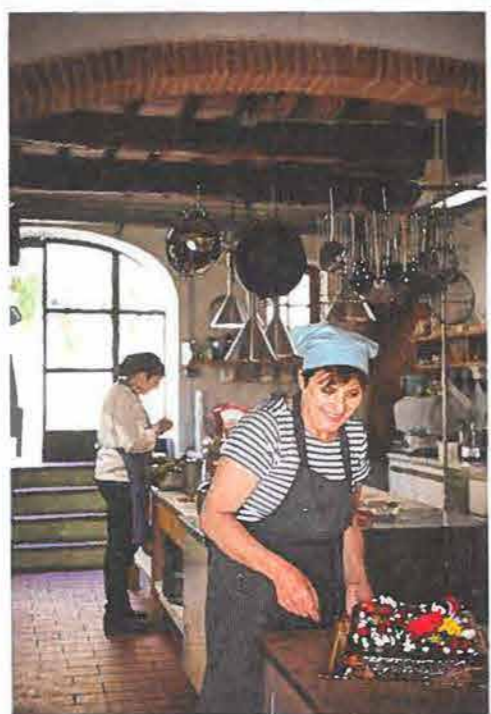
A year later, in summer 1981, Ulla and her husband Thierry Besançon moved, with little Thilo, the dog and the house plants, from Vechta to Figline Valdarno, in the valley of the River Arno between Arezzo and Florence, to this semi-tumbledown building. “It is already 43 years!” laughs Ulla, laying her straw hat on the table. We sit on the vine-covered terrace and talk about the 350-year-old property, which after having housed a religious order, an orphanage and a school, has become the Locanda Casanuova, frugally furnished, with comfortable and somewhat monastic-looking guest rooms, with a few carefully restored pieces of old furniture.

The beauty of simplicity is reflected in every corner of the house. You stroll through the gardens, pause in hidden alcoves between roses and rosemary. You meet other guests, smile, maybe exchange a few words about the wisteria, which falls like a shower of violet rain in front of the tomato-red house, about the humming and chirping all around you.

Actually, Ulla and Thierry had only been looking for a big house in Tuscany with plenty of room for guests, not vineyards, olive groves, woods and fields. But now they had the land, it was obvious that it had to be cultivated with organic methods. They were laughed at, of course, it was the 1980s, but “we were convinced that all those chemical substances couldn’t be a good thing.”

Now, the estate’s gardens, olive trees, fields and vineyards haven’t seen pesticides for decades and are full of life. The wine and olive oil from Locanda Casanuova are certified organic and the kitchen garden has apples, cherries, apricots, peaches, plums, delicious heirloom varieties, vegetables, salad leaves and herbs – the basic ingredients of the Locanda’s cuisine. The menu of the day is written on an old blackboard on the terrace. Today there is meat, organic but locally sourced. Carpaccio with salad from the kitchen garden, homemade pappardelle with duck ragout, and beef cheek braised in red wine with mashed potatoes.

When the first guests arrived from Germany, Ulla brought in women from the local area to cook. They prepared their mothers’ and grandmothers’ recipes, cucina povera, simple dishes and soups. Over time, Ulla has “rejuvenated” the dishes and Casanuova has developed its own Tuscan cuisine with hints of Sicily, out of love of citrus fruits. Now she has retired from the kitchen, but decides the menu every day. “We have to maintain our stamp, we no longer do grandmother-style cooking. But we don’t want to become too sophisticated either,” says Ulla, “there are no tiny little portions here.” In the meanwhile, the Casanova adven-

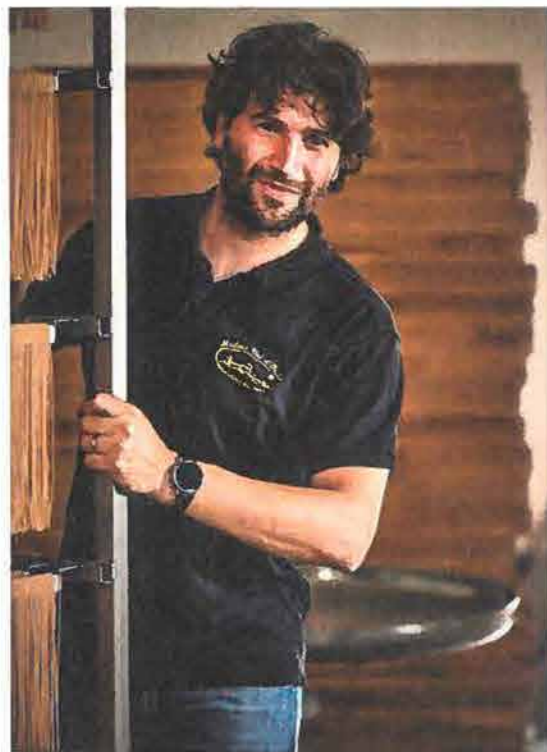


ture is entering the second generation. Their son Thilo, who studied agronomy, has taken over his father’s vineyards. With the first successes: Thilo’s “Alto-reggi” 2019 Sangiovese, as light as a feather, was recognised as a Slow Wine in the 2023 Slow Food guide. The label depicted a heron with peach-coloured plumage, tone on tone with the wine, that used to keep Thilo company as he worked in the vineyard. A sign of land that is alive.

“If the soil is alive, there are more insects, and more insects mean more birds, which are the best defence against insects.” Says René Schaack,

ornithologist and nature photographer, summing up one of the principles of biodynamics – thinking in cycles. I met him at Fattoria La Vialla, the largest Demeter-certified biodynamic farm in Italy. For three years he has been mapping birds at the Fattoria, approximately 60 kilometres northeast of Siena. He is enthusiastic about the many different and rare species that he has seen, all in a place where farming is going on. Creating a balance between plants, animals and human beings is precisely the aim of the three brothers, Antonio, Gianni and Bandino Lo Franco, who run La Vialla together as a family business. They want to pass on the land

– that they took over from the parents – to their children one day, still healthy and fertile. The success story of La Vialla began in 1978, when Piero and Giuliana Lo Franco bought a dilapidated farmhouse surrounded by green woodland, to spend weekends and holidays there with their friends and young sons. But they then discovered many other abandoned farmsteads in the vicinity that were being threatened to be swallowed up by the woods, victims of the rural exodus that began in the 1960s with the decline of “mezzadria”, which depopulated whole areas of countryside. Since the late Middle Ages, large



landowners had rented their land to farming families, together with a house, a piece of woodland, grapevines and olive trees, in exchange for half, “mezza”, of the yield. Gradually, the Lo Franco family bought other nearby farmhouses, began to renovate them for guests, cultivated their fields using biodynamic methods, and eventually decided to leave their jobs in the textile industry. When some of the German guests asked if they could have the good olive oil and wine, which they tasted during their summer holidays, in winter as well, they began selling directly. Vans were

loaded with crates full of products and the Lo Francos delivered wine and oil personally, all the way to the furthest inner courtyard of Berlin. That was the beginning of the direct sales and today nothing has changed: La Vialla's products are only available from La Vialla, in the farm shop or ordered by post, fax or online. The Fattoria has grown and now has 742 hectares of Demeter-certified vineyards, fields, olive groves, vegetable and fruit patches, as well as 1240 hectares of extensively managed woodland. There are also 600 chickens and 800 sheep that wander around

the fields where the vegetables have already been harvested, eating what is left over and at the same time fertilising the fields with their droppings. Those who spend their holidays in one of the 17 once-abandoned farmsteads are usually customers who want to know where the products come from, and see whether it really looks like the photos in the catalogues, which provoke a longing for Italy. Put simply: it is exactly like that.

The centre of the huge farm, where all visitors arrive, is the small square: Tuscan houses built of stone standing in a circle, with a country-style shop where you can taste and buy the Fattoria's wines and olive oils. Flour, pasta, biscuits, olives, vegetables “sott'olio”, jams, sauces, cheese – all Demeter-certified and produced at the Fattoria. Local production at its best.

A short cypress-lined path leads from the small square to the main farmhouse. Beneath the green foliage of the fig tree await long tables with red and white chequered tablecloths, bowls and trays full of antipasti, spicy green olives or black olives with orange, fresh and mature pecorino cheese, mini pizzas, various bruschettas – it's as if “Nonna” had opened her pantry. The sun goes slowly down behind the hills of the Valdarno as we all sit down to eat together around the long table. The only irritating thing is that nobody at the table speaks Italian.

The true feel of Tuscany is evident in the farmhouses scattered around the Fattoria's hills, all carefully renovated and furnished with simple rustic furniture. There are sturdy wooden tables on which the farming family may have once eaten. In front of the fireplace there is a basket of logs and instructions for lighting the fire. On our way to bed we encounter a centipede crossing the room. Well, that's nature and this is an organic farm where nothing

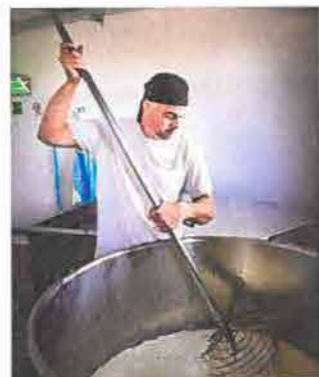


is killed with chemical products, and that is one of the reasons why we are here.

In the morning, when we open the door onto the lawn, summer floods in. It smells of thyme and mint. Workers talk and laugh in the field below the house. And someone is even singing! You can't get more Italian than that!

How about a panorama of the Val d'Orcia? We all know the cliché: houses on hills, sweeping landscapes, rows of slender cypress trees – but that really is what you see. In spring, the hills are resplendent with a fresh green, “in a few weeks everything will be yellow here,” says Amedeo Grappi, “when the wheat sways in the fields.” Little else grows in the heavy clay soil, but Amedeo points to a purple cloud shimmering amongst the green – flax in bloom for crop rotation in order to regenerate the soil. Amedeo's father, Luchino, used to plough with oxen when he was a boy, then mechanised agriculture came along, but Luchino opted for organic farming. No pesticides, no synthetic fertilisers, and everyone thought he was crazy. He grew ancient, robust varieties of wheat, with little gluten and tall stalks. Not very practical for harvesting, but on the ground, without light and air, many pests do not stand a chance.

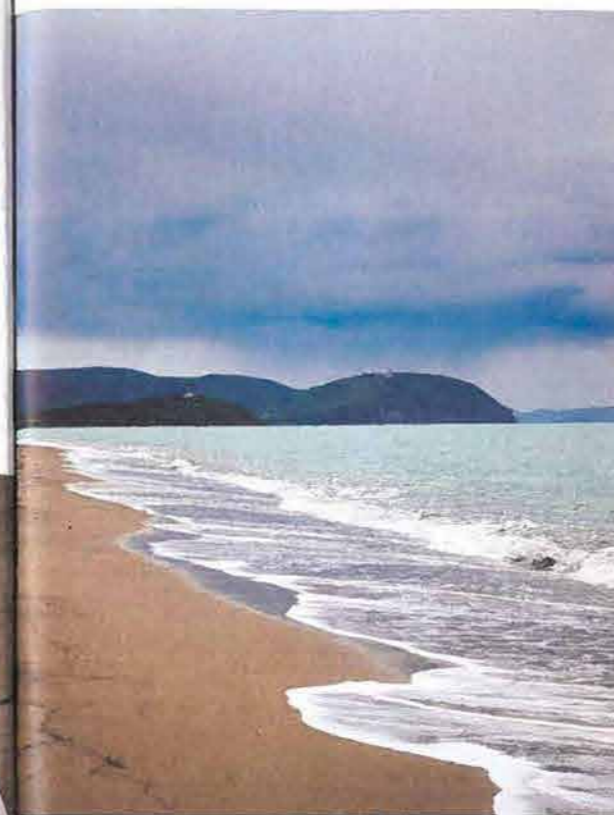
Amedeo has followed in his father's footsteps and gone beyond: in his mill he grinds organic wheat to produce top-quality, genuine pasta, made with water and flour, and dried very delicately. In his little Locanda at the Castello di Spedaletto, you can taste



his mouth-watering pici, a traditional thick kind of spaghetti.

Arriving at Il Cerreto. The avenue of cypress and pine trees runs straight up to the main house, a sober building centred around a massive square tower. Il Cerreto has belonged the Boni Brivio family, industrialists from Milan, since 1980. It was a conventional farm, with fields of sugar beets, 20,000 chickens and 200 cows, run by a manager with two or three employees. Until Carlo Boni Brivio, then a financial consultant in Milan, encountered the writings of Rudolf Steiner, the founder

of anthroposophy and biodynamic agriculture. Then everything changed. In 1998, the financial consultant moved from Milan to Tuscany with his wife Paola and the first three of what would later become five children, and began to completely transform Il Cerreto. The stables and storerooms, the tower and main house were transformed, the chickens and cows were sold, the guest rooms were furnished – no Tuscan farmhouse romanticism, but simple lines, elegant furnishings in high, light-filled rooms and suites. The agriturismo was ready to go. Then the reorganisation of agriculture began.



It took years to detoxify the soil and gradually reorganise production – according to the biodynamic philosophy, each farm is an independent organism that functions as a closed cycle: the organically-grown wheat is ground in the farm's own mill and the flour is transformed into pasta. The only fertiliser used is the farm's own manure, which is why there are once again 33 cows living at Il Cerreto, for whom there are 36 hectares of pasture for grazing, a milking plant, a dairy and four employees. Stir, watch, let it rest – Stefano Pascarelli takes the ladle out of the

stainless-steel bowl full of hot milk. Wait. Wait for what? For the whey to separate so that the cruds can be transformed into mozzarella. How long will it take? “Four hours. Maybe five, maybe three and a half.” Always take it slowly, that's the secret. In industrial mozzarella production they would have added a glass of citric acid to the milk, a shortcut that is not used for handmade mozzarella. “It's the milk that is in charge,” says Stefano, and the milk from the cows on Il Cerreto's organic farm is different every day, depending on which grass they choose from the meadow or the haystack. The

more colourful and richer the meadow, the tastier the milk and the cheese. Maria Probst awaits the mozzarella in the former chicken coop, which now houses the vegetarian restaurant: a bright room with wooden tables and bamboo chairs. A half-height glass wall offers a view of the kitchen, which the Michelin star chef took over a few months ago. Today is pizza night, four types are served, the mozzarella is excellent on each one of them, especially the four-cheeses and truffle, “soft and creamy, almost an erotic pizza.” Maria Probst, who began her career as a butcher, still likes to eat meat in her private life, but “the vegetarian and vegan trend has arrived, and the time is ripe to experiment it on a higher level.” She sees it as a creative challenge: “Every dish should make you say afterwards, “Wow that's good! I didn't even realise there was no fish or meat!”” With pasta, especially stuffed pasta, vegetarian variations are not a problem, such as cappellotti stuffed with smoked onion, cooked in the – still hot – ashes from the wood-fired oven. Things get a bit more complicated with main courses. “You can't always do aubergines. And we also only have them in August, we are tied to the seasons.” Maria Probst grumbles amiably. What can we say about here lentil waffles with chickpea purée? Or the artichokes in creamy potato sauce flavoured with orange, garden herbs and almonds, soaked in fresh milk for a fortnight until dense and soft, and then cooked au gratin with Parmigiano? If you ask Maria what is different about this radically local vegetarian cuisine, she ruffles her short hair and exclaims: “Everything!” Heritage grain flour is excellent, it has less gluten, “but how can you make decent bread with this stuff? Or raw sugar, it sweetens in a different way, the caramel doesn't turn out the same, the oil fries differently, and the vegetables in general – everything tastes completely different!”



In short: there's a lot to learn. Also for Nico Miyakawa and his wife Bianca Baratti. "Today we know more than we did a year ago," says Nico with a Zen smile. The couple took over the management of the La Bulichella winery and agriturismo a year ago, when they were in their early thirties. It is a family project, started in 1983 by Nico's Japanese grandfather, Hideyuki Miyakawa, and his Italian wine Marisa. All of their seven children are partners and live all over the world, but "La Bulichella remains the nest," says Nico, who himself lived in Japan and other countries for several years. He is one of the 17 grandchildren, no one pushed him to continue the family project. "It's a mixture of affection and responsibility, the desire to live in contact with nature and also to produce something, something with a high quality." Now the third generation is at work. In 1983, the founders did not have to think twice about organic farming – it was the only path to take. "Respect for others and for nature was important to them," says Bianca, "in Japanese culture everything has a soul, why would they poison their own land?" Naturally, when disease breaks out in the vineyard, it is difficult to cure. The focus of organic farming, therefore, concentrates on prevention, on healthy, living soil, on resistant plants and on "paying attention, you have to keep a close eye on how the vines are developing," says Nico. Then adding, "I have colleagues who have known every vine for years." Experience is passed on day after day. La Bulichella is not big: 17 hectares of vineyards in different locations, where mainly the Tuscan varieties Sangiovese and Vermentino ripen, as well as Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and some Petit Verdot. "Small enough to be able to work with the necessary care," underlines Nico, who presents his wine cellar paying great attention



to detail: All the various barrels, whose oak comes from different French forests, are adapted to the harvest every year and toasted differently. "We study the effect of each barrique on the respective wine. Every decision I make today will only be seen in the wine in a few years' time." There is one thing that can always be detected in La Bulichella's wines – the salty wind that blows through the Val di Cornia from the nearby sea.

A little further north, the hills of the Maremma plunge into the turquoise blue sea – this is Tuscany too. A mar-

vellous view from the hill on which the garden of the Costa Etrusca organic agriturismo sprawls. Below, just two kilometres away, the hotels of the resort town of San Vincenzo sparkle as if they came from another planet. Up here, the olive trees are surrounded by carpets of flowers, the lavender and rosemary bushes are sweet-scented, flowering shrubs surround the small, scattered houses. Everything grows untidily. This is how it should be, so that the plants support each other. Herbs are dried, some are mixed with coarse salt, lavender is put into little scented bags, myrtle is fermented to make a



GOODS & KITCHENS

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liqueur and the olive oil is used in the “Osteria Al Braciere”, the fattoria’s small restaurant.

In summer, you can sit under the boughs of the trees on the shady terrace. There are wonderfully prepared and creatively presented Tuscan dishes. For example, gnudi, green gnocchi made with ricotta and spinach. These two ingredients are often found in stuffed pasta, but in this recipe are served “naked”, without their pasta covering. Just the filling, which is in any

case what people like best, in this case with a cream of saffron and walnuts. Serena Malfatti, who took over the Costa Etrusca agriturismo from her father and now runs it with her daughter Veronica, loves the panorama. Perhaps the sea view allows thoughts to wander further and delve deeper. “I believe greatly in individual movements,” says Serena, “movements that originate from the individual consciousness. It is the only way to counter an economy that is based solely on cost-benefit

calculations.” Tuscany, a place that has been craved by Germans for half a century or more, is alive. And, for me, it has become a place of hope on this journey. The pioneers of organic farming were ridiculed in the 1980s. Now their children and grandchildren are taking the helm. These are projects that demonstrate how agriculture can work in a different way. “These internal revolutions are like seeds that slowly germinate and take root,” says Serena. “They will make themselves heard.” —