

TRAVEL

Los Angeles Times



ROBERT DURELL/Los Angeles Times

WEEKEND ESCAPE

A honeymooners' splurge at a deluxe resort hideaway, Timberhill Ranch, tucked in the hills of Sonoma County. L5

FALL DESTINATIONS

Ripe Time for Tuscany

Savoring the seasonal bounty of Chianti country, where the fruits of the harvest show up in classic wines and deliciously simple cuisine



NANCY SPILLER

Grape expectations: Vineyard yield at medieval village of Radda in Chianti, where Etruscans produced wines in 800 BC.



NANCY SPILLER

Local fare: Considering the many mushroom choices at Radda's weekly farmer's market.

By NANCY SPILLER

CASTELLINA IN CHIANTI, Italy—Fall in the region of Tuscany is a time of gracious fecundity, when vineyards are heavy with black fruit, plump figs fall from the trees and the forests are filled with porcini mushrooms the size of throw pillows. Honeyed light falls on scarlet-berried bushes and on paths littered with chestnuts glistening like polished lumps of mahogany.

From the vine-covered deck of our rented 300-year-old house deep in the woods of the Chianti area of Tuscany, we can hear the faint sound of sheep's bells and the soft pop-pop of hunters' rifles as they bag *cinghiale* (wild boar) for the grill. It's harvest time here in Chianti—when man meets nature in unequaled harmony in the rolling, ribbed landscape of vineyards, olive orchards and oak preserve, and in the simple yet highly evolved cuisine of the Tuscan table.

Our first trip to the fertile wine-growing area between



SUSAN LAPIDES

Black rooster: Chianti symbol.

Florence and Siena was in October two years before. Having tired of the big cities, my husband, Tom, and I had driven north from Siena until we turned down a dirt road and discovered Vescine, an idyllic hillside hotel between the medieval fortress villages of Radda in Chianti and Castellina in Chianti. We stayed blissfully put, unable to think of a reason to wander. The countryside was happily lacking in must-see museums or killer cathedrals, offering instead the simple luxuries of air pure enough to bottle, quiet more perfect than any painting and peach sunsets that lacked only an archangel and heavenly choir.

Also discovered on that trip was the undeniable high that comes from eating food and drinking wine born of the same soil. It's a state of gastronomic grace hard to come by today when most food has been "FedExed" to your plate.

Credit Chianti's agricultural variety to soil cultivated for about 3,000 years, first by the Etruscans and then the

Please see CHIANTI, L14



Destination: Italy

CHIANTI

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Romans. Local farmers know what the stuff can do. As a result, Tuscan cuisine is primarily based on fine ingredients eaten at their freshest. "It is spare home cooking," Waverley Root says in his classic book "The Food of Italy," "hearty and healthy, subtle in its deliberate eschewing of sophistication, which is perhaps the highest sophistication of all."

To experience this again, we made another October trip, but this time we rented a three-bedroom stone house called Casa Pratese, about two miles from Castellina. For \$600 a week (\$1,200 in high season, roughly June through September), it came with a lichen-covered tile roof, casual garden of feathery-leaved cosmos flowers and potted geraniums, and a fig tree taller than the house and heavy with fruit. Inside were beamed ceilings, tile floors, wood-shuttered windows and a fireplace in the corner of the modest but well-equipped kitchen. No microwave or dishwasher here, but more importantly, a good bread knife, cheese grater and wine opener.

Mornings at Casa Pratese began with sunlight coming through the bedroom window, stove-top espresso, a glass of juice squeezed from blood oranges, *prosciutto di Parma* wrapped around fresh figs from our tree, toasted bread—either *ciabatta* (made without salt so that it will stay fresh for a week, and it does) or *schiazzetta panamense*, a peppery raisin bread from nearby Panzano, topped with jam.

The daily garden tour was accompanied by the resident outdoor cats, our vacation pets, including the kitten I dubbed *Piccola Macchina*, "little car," for its enthusiasm and boundless high-octane energy. Whenever we pulled up in our Fiat Sport it ran and jumped inside, mewing happily, tail as straight as a radio antenna. When I took a nap in the garden after an alfresco lunch beneath the trees, *Piccola Macchina* curled up at my feet.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the nearby village of Castellina was fought over by both Florence and Siena as a strategic outpost linking the Arno and Elsa river valleys. The walls surrounding the center castle were built by the Florentines during their rule in the 15th century. The Siense ran the place from 1478 until their fall in 1555.

Castellina looks much the same as it did then. Houses were built into the defensive walls, where laundry now flaps in the breeze, and pocket gardens of vegetables and geraniums are tucked behind iron fences. Ancient rivalries remain, however. The natives proudly proclaim their local dialect as Florentine and *not* Siense.

My husband was content to spend our two weeks acting like the landed gentry, but I wanted to get closer to the local



Farm and famiglia: Staked rows of vines at Castellare Winery near Castellina; splendor of ripe fruit, scarlet leaves, right.

cultura. I wanted a job in the vineyards working the crush.

If, as an old saying goes, the region of Tuscany was "baptized" in wine, then the Chianti area is the holy font. The Etruscans cultivated wine grapes here from about 800 BC. The name Chianti came in the late 14th century when a local group of barons christened the region *Lega del Chianti* with the black cockerel (a young rooster), as its symbol. By the 17th century the poet and naturalist Francesco Redi was rhapsodizing about the red wine of Chianti, calling it "majestic and imperious. . . . [It]

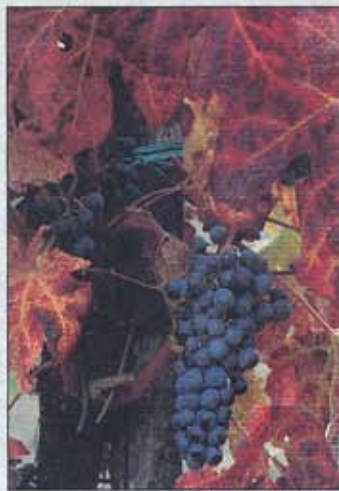
passes through my heart and chases away . . . every worry and grief."

At the Castellare Winery, where I presented a letter of introduction written by no less than Castellina's former mayor, Marcello Cappelletti, I was told by Deborah, the young multilingual woman from marketing, that without legal working papers the best they could do is let me watch.

The following Monday morning Deborah showed me their modern, sterile facilities, where grapes are crushed by machine and siphoned into stainless steel tanks for the first fermentation. In the barrel fermenting



Village view: Pedestrian-only main street, Via Ferruccio, with its deli and wine shop, in the town of Castellina in Chianti, two miles from the author's rented stone cottage.



Photos by NANCY SPILLER

had a surprising amount of time to blend grapes after coming here in the mid-1800s to hide his pretty bride from the rakes of Florence.

Today's Chianti is primarily red *sangiovese* grapes, for body and flavor; a softening percentage of red *canaiolo* grapes; along with perhaps a touch of white *malvasia* and/or *trebbiano* grapes. Since the last half of this century, the area between Florence and Siena, the Chianti district, has been designated the sole area legally allowed to label its wine *Chianti Classico*. And today, to further guarantee quality, a *DOCG* (*denominazione di origine controllata garantita*) label can be applied only to wines approved by a panel of *Chianti Classico* Consortium judges.

The bottom line for us was that we never had a bad bottle of wine, even our landlady's home brew, several bottles of which came with our house. We sampled a wide variety of wines, including at least one of the pricey "Super Tuscans," as they're called, but our favorite was a *vino da tavola*, *Pian del Ciampolo* from Radda's renowned Monte Vertine winery, ordered off the list at Florence's restaurant *Cibréo*. It was excellent, a blend of 85% *sangiovese* grapes and 15% *canaiolo*, moderately priced—a wine that rarely makes it past the Italian border.

With the wine's popularity, production in the Chianti area has soared and everyone, except tourists, seems to be involved in its making. The fields are filled with workers, their boots heavy with mud, buckets and clippers in hand, swinging down the rows, laughing, talking, loading the small trailers until they are hump-backed with purple fruit. Parking lots and

room, where the cool air smells of apples and damp oak, low-tech traditions prevail.

In the fields, we walked past rows of vines where the grapes looked sugared in limestone dust from the road. "They don't rinse the grapes before they crush them," Deborah explained with a good-natured look of disgust. "Dust, bugs, everything goes in. Once you see how wine is made, you may not want to drink it."

Chianti's robust style has less to do with bugs and dust than it does with the efforts of "Iron Baron" Bettino Ricasoli. One of the first premiers of the newly united Italy, he



Destination: Italy



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GUIDEBOOK

Harvest Time in Chianti

Getting there: You can fly into Milan or Rome, then drive or take the train to Chianti, a five- to six-hour trip from either direction. Alitalia flies nonstop from LAX to both cities. For closer access to Chianti, Alitalia, Lufthansa and Air France offer connecting service only (involving a change of planes) from LAX to Florence. Lowest round-trip fares begin at \$1,230.

One-way train fare Milan-Florence and Rome-Florence is \$57 first class, \$40 second.

House rentals: We used Tuscan Enterprises (P.O. Box 34, Via delle Mura 22-24, 53011 Castellina in Chianti, Siena, Italy; telephone 011-39-577-740623, e-mail tuscancan@siemadnet.it). A free color catalog lists lodgings throughout Tuscany and Umbria, from apartments for one to villas for 10, renting for \$400-\$3,000 a week. We worked through the firm's Southern California agents: Nick and Geri D'Antoni, Villas d'Italia, 5578 Vista Del Amigo, Anaheim, CA 92807; tel. and fax (714) 998-2179.

Among other agencies: In Italy, 1028 S. Alfred St., Los Angeles, CA 90035; tel. (323) 655-9221, fax (323) 655-3350, Internet <http://www.initaly.com>.

Rentals in Italy, 1742 Calle Corva, Camarillo, CA 93010, tel. (800) 726-6702, fax (805) 482-7976, Internet <http://www.rentvillax.com>.

For more information: Italian Government Tourist Board, 12400 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 550, Los Angeles, CA 90025; tel. (310) 820-0098, fax (310) 820-6357.

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roadsides are abuzz with bees and fragrant with the crush's thick, fermenting, plum-colored residue.

Like the hillside vines, Chianti family roots date back centuries. The ancestors of Castellina's former mayor and current shoe store owner, Marcello Cappelletti, were political exiles from the neighboring region of Umbria. But after 500 years, no one remembers the ideological underpinnings of the exodus. World War II is a closer memory. Cappelletti, who was an adolescent when Allied and Nazi forces passed through town, pointed to the pockmarks he said were left by Nazi bullets on the medieval stone doorway across from his shop. A bomb killed civilians hiding in a section of the castle now housing a pizza parlor, and the father of Cappelletti's wife, Paola, was killed by a bomb while home on leave from the Italian army.

In spite of these past horrors, or maybe because of them, life here has a sense of prosaic splendor visitors can only glimpse: a string of mushrooms drying in a side garden during a sunny spell between rain showers. The old men sitting in front of the *farmacia* each morning, Castellina's version of the "Today Show," talking animatedly with passing friends. An afternoon in the cafe when a gaggle of young men draw close to the television set to watch the cross-country car racing show.

It takes more than a few days for nonnatives to get used to the idea of shops and offices closing down in the afternoon for a leisurely lunch. Cappelletti's daughter-in-law, Claire, is from Chicago and after some 20 years in Italy, she said with a laugh, "I still can't get anything done."

Neither could we, until we found the Supermarket, 20 minutes away in the industrialized city of Poggibonsi. It irreverently stays open throughout the day and offers quality products at convenient hours. We bought huge chunks of *parmigiano reggiano*, wonderful bread, an *etto* (3½-ounce portion) of this and a *fetta* (slice) of that and truffle-flavored olive oil capable of eliciting a swoon. We used the oil to sauté fresh porcini from Florence's farmers market to top ravioli from Castellina's weekly market.

Dinner out in Italy can be as frustrating as trying to find a store open in the afternoon. In the evening, restaurant reservations usually are required. Our love of adventure and Casa Pratese's lack of a telephone made such planning a chore. The solution was to drop in at lunchtime, when reservations typically aren't needed.

Thus we wandered into the hillside restaurant at Badia a Coltibuono (Abbey of the Good Harvest), near the village of Gaiole in Chianti. The restaurant, a converted stable, has an outdoor dining terrace overlooking forested mountains. The adjacent 11th century abbey houses the cooking school of Lorenza de' Medici, where I'd fantasized about taking a course until I discovered the cost: \$4,500 for five



Raking it in: Vineyard workers atop trailer full of grapes in the Chianti district, the only area legally allowed to label its wine Chianti Classico.

SUSAN LAPIDES



NANCY SPILLER

Chianti cocoon: Casa Pratese, the duplex in which author rented one 2-story unit.

days of instruction. A more reasonable indulgence was the restaurant's *cinghiale in dolceforte*, wild boar in sweet and sour chocolate sauce, an Italian version of Mexico's *mole*.

At another of our dinner destinations, the restaurant Osteria alla Piazza, set amid vineyards in the tiny hamlet of La Piazza between Radda and Castellina, heads turned as the intoxicating perfume of

truffle filled the room and the waiter delivered a plate of fresh pasta topped with a little butter, cheese and a generous shower of fresh black truffle shavings. It brought to mind the line from the movie "Big Night" in which a deliriously pleased diner tells the chef his food is so good "I could kneel you!"

Truffles also were on the menu at Il Vignale, the restaurant in Radda where

Faustus, the Umbrian-born and Castellina-raised chef enjoys inventing dishes according to the season's offerings. There we had the ultimate comfort food: an appetizer of coddled egg in cream with fresh black truffle.

I was beginning to view Italy through fungi-colored glasses. In Volterra, a few hours west of Castellina, the famous Etruscan museum with its world's largest collection of alabaster funerary urns couldn't hold a candle to the Italian Fungi Society's annual fall display just across the piazza. Several hundred fresh-picked specimens of mushrooms and fungus in shades from black to purple to red to orange, in sizes from monstrous and mottled to petite and polka-dotted, were laid out and labeled in order of the specimen's edibility: *commestibile* (edible), *toxico* (toxic) or *morte* (deadly).

The drive back to Casa Pratese from Florence our next to last night in Italy was through a torrential rainstorm. Thunder clapped overhead and lightning illuminated glimpses of hillside castles, white as the bones of civilization captured in an X-ray.

When it came time to pack for home, I resisted the temptation to tuck Piccola Macchina into my bag. There was no question that the Supermarket truffle oil was coming with us. The now empty bottle no longer elicits a swoon but conjures instead visions of a stone house, vineyards and the simple pleasures that can only be found at harvest time in Chianti.

Spiller is a Glendale-based freelance writer.