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SPECIAL REPORT: CHIANTI

# DREAM OF ITALY

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## A Day in Chianti: Food, Wine and Shopping

Although *Chianti* covers a rather large wine-producing region reaching all the way out to Pisa, my favorite stretch is along the main road 222 from Florence to Siena. The breathtaking scenery looks like a rich patchwork quilt with hills covered in olive orchards sprouting silver and green leaves, woods filled with chestnut and oak trees, vineyards filled with *San Giovese* grapes turning rich red in the fall and long elegant cypress trees cutting into the skyline. It is said, "Tuscans do not have to go to Paradise, they have created it here on earth." Hop in and I'll take you on a perfect day trip through the Chianti I love.

Leaving from Florence's *Porta Romana*, we head out toward Chianti following the SS2 road to *Greve/Ferrone*. Feeling



hungry? Want a snack? Then we must stop at the *Forno Marconi*, in *Ferrone*, one of Chianti's best bread makers. Marconi also serves coffee, sweets and sandwiches. The best bread they have is called *guanciale*, a naturally leavened loaf which is the size and shape of a pillow for which it is named. It's perfect for sandwiches and toasting over an open fire to make *fettunta*, the Tuscan name for *bruschetta*. During the September wine festival, Marconi sells *schiacchiata con l'uva*, a very rich and dark grape bread made only once a year.

Leaving *Ferrone*, the road continues through the land of *terracotta*. In this area, we find some of the finest factories and studios in Tuscany making clay bricks, roof tiles and large pots

*continued on page 2*

## Walking in CHIANTI Resembles a Floating Cocktail Party



Loven hoofprints were about the last thing I expected to see in Tuscany. But there they were, dozens of them, neatly stamped in the soft mud surrounding a puddle on a dirt road here in deepest *Chianti*.

"Devils?" I wondered.



"Worse," replied Tracee, a guide for *Backroads*, the adventure travel company. "Wild boars. If you surprise them, they might charge you."

In my extensive time in Tuscany, now rapidly approaching 24 hours, I had already been sucker-punched by its vineyards, cypress-lined roads, tufts of bright-yellow broom and restored stone villas that had me daydreaming of early retirement. As far as I could ascertain, the only thing remotely dangerous about the place was choosing a mediocre vintage of *Chianti Classico*.

And about the only thing I knew about wild boars, or *cinghiale*, is that they can be transformed into delicious sausages. But it turns out that in their presausage state, boars can be as aggressive as a hungover truck driver on the *autostrada*. With their tusks, these 200-pound beasts look like a Tasmanian devil crossed with an exceptionally unattractive pig. Get caught between a female and her brood, and it's anyone's guess as to who becomes sausage first. Who knew that terror lurked in the rolling hills of Chianti?

I was here for a good walk with *Backroads*, and I had a week to spare. So, apparently, do other Americans, because *Backroads* runs about a dozen

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Chianti is 65 square miles of rolling hills and vineyards.

## A Day in Chianti *continued from page 1*

called *orci*, where families used to store their freshly pressed olive oil. To visit a kiln (*fornaci*), we follow the signs to *Impruneta*, and then turn onto *Via Delle Fonte*. We can buy some terracotta at *Artenova*, which sells over 400 objects including *Medici* vases, panels depicting the Madonna and statues of animals.

On the last Sunday in September, Impruneta holds the oldest wine festival in Chianti, which began in 1926. The town's four neighborhoods decorate floats in red and white grapes. Another great time to visit this town is on October 18th, when a huge community dinner is held at the church in honor of Impruneta's patron saint, San Luca.

### Strada in Chianti

After leaving through the main square of Impruneta and turning right on road 222, we arrive on the crest of the hills which will bring us into the heart of Chianti. If we're in the mood for an early lunch, then we must stop at *Ristorante Padellina* in the town of *Strada in Chianti*. This is a temple to *Dante Alighieri* and Tuscan cuisine! *Alvaro*, your host, is a Dante fan and will recite poetry at the drop of the hat. His brother, chef *Rolando Parenti*, makes wonderful *ribollita*, *pappardelle al sugo di Conigliolo*, *penne sul gallo*, and *peposo alla fornacina*. Their fabulous wine list includes 150 local selections. A favorite with locals, Padellina overlooks the valley and in nice weather



there is a rooftop terrace for outside dining.

### A grappa stop-a

One of the more fascinating stops on this road is *Distillerie Bonollo* located in *Greti*. Using the copper tanks that his uncle sent him from their larger factory in the north, *Luigi Bellentani* continues the family tradition distilling grape skins into a magic potion known as *grappa*. If we call ahead for reservations, we can stop for a tasting and tour. The tour follows the distilling process from the crushing room to the aging hall. Warning: We may get drunk just from breathing!



Besides grappa, they also make many other liqueurs; one of my favorites is

## THE DETAILS

### Ferrone:

Macelleria Falorni  
Piazza Matteotti, 69  
(39) 055 853029

### Impruneta:

Artenova Ceramiche  
Artistiche di Leonardo Parisi  
Via Delle Fonte, 76  
(39) 055 2011060  
[www.terracotta-artenova.com](http://www.terracotta-artenova.com)

### Strada in Chianti:

Ristorante da Padellina  
Corso del Popolo, 54  
(39) 055 858388  
Closed Thursday.

### Greti:

Distillerie Bonollo  
(39) 055 854243  
[www.bonollo.com](http://www.bonollo.com)

### Greve in Chianti:

Galleria Civetta  
Piazza Matteotti, 42  
(39) 055853557  
[www.galleriacivetta.it](http://www.galleriacivetta.it)

Nerbone di Greve  
Piazza Matteotti, 22  
(39) 055-853-3-08  
Closed Tuesday.  
Also open between lunch and dinner in the summer.

Castello di Verrazzano  
(39) 055 854243  
[www.verrazzano.com](http://www.verrazzano.com)

Le Cantine di Greve in Chianti  
Piazza delle Cantine, 2  
Open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. during the summer.

### Panzano in Chianti:

Carlo Fagiani  
Via G.da Verrazzano, 17  
(39) 055 852239

Oltre il Giardino  
Piazza Bucciarelli, 42  
(39) 055 852828  
Closed Monday.

Enoteca Baldi  
Piazza Bucciarelli, 25  
(39) 055 852843  
Open everyday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Il Vinaio  
Via Santa Maria, 22  
(39) 055 852603  
Closed Tuesday.

### Castellina in Chianti:

Al Gallopapa  
Via delle volte, 14/16  
(39) 0577 742939  
[www.gallopapa.com](http://www.gallopapa.com)  
Dinner only.  
Reservations a must!

Antica Delizia  
Via Fiorentina, 3  
(39) 0577 741 337  
Closed Tuesday.

PEP Ceramics  
Via Trento è Trieste, 12  
(39) 0577 740738  
[www.pepbizzarrie.it](http://www.pepbizzarrie.it)

*Pane del giorno, vino dell'anno, con amici di una vita!* Bread

*nocino*, made from green walnuts. It is a wonderful *digestivo* for sipping after dinner, or pouring on ice cream. The distillery also has a museum and library which includes everything from various grappa stills to bottles seized from the Austrians in 1918.

## Greve in Chianti

Our next stop is *Greve*, the heart of the Chianti wine region. Greve in Chianti is a wonderful place to visit at almost any time of the year, but especially during the spring and fall. The lovely *piazza*, featuring a statue of local-born explorer *Giovanni di Verrazzano*, is probably one of the most photographed in Chianti. Covered *loggias* protect the town's charming little shops and wine bars.

Shopping is indeed a must in Greve. For hand embroidered items, we can visit *Grazia Giachi Ricami* in *Piazza Matteotti*. For an enticing mix of watercolors, modern ceramics and antique art, we must visit *Khosrow Salehi's* gallery, *Galleria Civetta*. Salehi, a Persian architect, came to Italy to study in 1985. He ended up falling in love with the country and staying.

If all of that shopping has us hungry, we should have lunch at *Nerbone*. The original restaurant is in Florence's *Mercato Centrale* and the Greve branch has replicated the menu, including the boiled beef sandwiches, *panini con bollito*. We should get the *salsa verde* and the *salsa piccante* to go along with our sandwiches. One is made with parsley, garlic and oil, the other is chili sauce. Let's finish lunch with *Carlo Sensi's* fabulous cakes including a to-die-for upside down orange cake.

No visit to this town is complete without tasting some wine. We will stop at

*Cantine di Greve in Chianti*, near the COOP grocery store. This wine lover's dream doles out over 100 wines in one ounce samplings. All of the wines are available for purchase.



Another excellent place for wine tasting is *Castello di Verrazzano*, just outside of town. This is where the aforementioned Verrazzano was born. If his name sounds familiar, that's because New York City's Verrazzano Narrows Bridge carries his name and was built with several stones from the family castle. While this is one of Chianti's more commercial wineries, attracting thousands of visitors a year, the beautiful grounds, professional tour guides and excellent wine make it well worth a visit. A big party is held in honor of Verrazzano Day on April 17th.

We can get directions to *Montefioralle*, the tiny hill town above Greve. Beautifully maintained, this is a great place for photographers to go crazy. The Italian navigator *Amerigo Vespucci* lived here and his house has a big V on the front.

## Panzano in Chianti

Most people drive by the tiny town of *Panzano* on the way to Chianti Classico's three villages, *Radda*, *Castellina* and *Gaiole*. What a mistake! Panzano is home to some of Chianti's human treasures, including *Dario Cecchini* (see article on page 11). There's also *Carlo Fagiani*, who creates exquisite custom made shoes which are usually ready within just a week. A stop at his workshop is a must.

We may have already eaten and had plenty to drink, but it's worth reviewing the dining and imbibing opportunities in Panzano. The town overlooks the *Conca d'Oro*, the Golden Valley, home to some of Chianti's best wine

producers. The wine bar at *Enoteca Baldi* offers these wines by the glass as well as simple meals.



For a larger meal and a beautiful view, we could stop at another one, *Oltre il Giardino*, owned by *Paolo Baldini*, the head of the sommeliers association.

Up the hill, *Il Vinaio* offers a small terrace overlooking the valley. I love their *panini corretti*, heated sandwiches with a touch of grappa or *Vin Santo*, what a kick! Here, we can taste the fabulous wines produced by *Fattoria La Massa di Giampaolo Motta*, including the excellent *Giorgio Primo*. This winery has just broken away from the



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of the day, wine of the year, with friends of a lifetime!

Chianti Consorzio and the back of their wine bottles has a chicken, being spit roasted! This is a play on the *Gallo Nero*, the black rooster that is the symbol of *Chianti Classico*.

## The Castle Region

As we leave Panzano, we enter the Chianti Classico region, also known as the castle region since the original castles dating from the 12th century are still standing. *Castellina*, *Radda* and *Gaiole* were the beginnings of the *Clante League*, named for a noble Etruscan family, representing the main villages.

We'll end our day in one of these towns, Castellina in Chianti. The car free roads are great for strolling, and it is a great place for shopping. We'll look for *Duccio Fontani* in front of *Palazzo Squarcialupi* or in the fabulous wine and gift shop next door to the hotel. He sells wonderful organic herbs that he grows, harvests, and packages in easy-to-pack glass jars. Duccio began his organic garden



### Market Days

CASTELLINA – Saturday  
GAIOLE – 2nd Monday of the month  
GREVE – Saturday (morning)  
IMPRUNETA – Saturday  
PANZANO – Sunday  
RADDA – 4th Monday of the month (afternoon)  
STRADA – Tuesday (morning)

after years of working in wineries. He wanted to be his own boss, and get back to the land his grandfather had abandoned to work in Siena.



How about dinner at *Gallopapa*, now boasting its first Michelin star? *Tiziano* and *Fabio* have made their old

medieval cantina-turned-restaurant into one of the most fun and most romantic places in Chianti. Hidden away on *Via delle Volte* in the back passageways of the city, we must follow the signs under the archways. The locals dine late at this restaurant and are known to break into song and party until the early morning hours!

After dinner, we could stop at *Antica Delizie*, one of Chianti's best *gelaterias*. Their motto, "our ice cream, your pleasure," says it all. Although they offer plenty of wonderful flavors, the chocolate with *peperoncino* might be the best. On our way to get ice cream, we might stop at a ceramics store called *PEP*, selling colorful Van Gogh-inspired pieces, far different from the usual reproductions of medieval patterns.

We've come to the end of our fantasy road trip. It's impossible to truly experience even the best of Chianti in a day or even a week. Each turn on the *Strada del Vino* leads to yet another incredible view and another great meal. To enjoy Chianti, you will need a lifetime! ♦

—Judy Witts Francini

*Judy Witts Francini is an American-born chef, Italian life coach and food writer who has lived in Italy since 1984. She runs Divina Cucina, a cooking school based in Florence. Her Web site [www.divinacucina.com](http://www.divinacucina.com) has more recommendations for eating in Chianti.*

## Come Home to Chianti

Strict regulations prevent new construction in much of Chianti. For the most part, the only building allowed must be based on an existing structure such as an old villa or barn. Once inhabited by the formidable *Strozzi* family of Florence, *Castello San Donato in Perano*, about eight minutes outside of *Radda* in the direction of *Gaiole*, falls into the castle category. The owner of *Fattoria Vignale* (see article on page 5) purchased the 890 acre property (including 183 acres of

prize-winning vineyards) and is now converting the hilltop castle and outlying buildings into a small number of luxury apartments and houses designed to appeal to buyers looking for a second home in Chianti. There are also plans to turn part of the castle into a very small and exclusive hotel.



The 13 apartments, ranging in size from 625 to 1700 square feet, and three independent homes are small by American standards. But it is the American-style services that the new Castello San Donato in Perano offers that makes it so appealing. New residents will have access to a pool, sauna, gardens and gourmet restaurant (that will deliver

food to your home). The staff will provide maintenance, upkeep and even rental services when owners are not in residence. All of the units should be available for occupancy in the spring of 2005. Apartments start at 220,000€ and prices for the houses range from 600,000 to 820,000€. For more information, contact Piccini & Partners at (39) 055 6531229 or [giorgio.piccini@italian-network.it](mailto:giorgio.piccini@italian-network.it)

# Favorite Places in...

While *Radda* and *San Gimignano* have long since been discovered by tourists, it's easy to understand why. These well-preserved towns exude charm and history around every corner. The tiny, walled city of Radda, filled with shops and restaurants, makes an excellent base for touring Chianti. San Gimignano's skyline of towers and wealth of frescoes make it a must-see.

## Radda in Chianti

**Stay:** If you only have a few days in the region or don't want to rent a villa, book a room at the elegant, yet cozy *Relais Fattoria Vignale* housed in an 18th century villa. The 4-star property boasts 37 rooms, three suites with terraces and fireplaces, a heated swimming pool and terrific views. With a location right in town, it's easy to walk to dinner or shopping. Doubles start at 170€ and suites start at 365€ per room, per night, including breakfast. Via Pianigiani, 9; (39) 0577 738300; [www.vignale.it](http://www.vignale.it)

**Eat:** Just down the street from the hotel is Vignale's restaurant. (There's also a *trattoria* attached to the hotel.) Housed in an old mill, *Ristorante Vignale* offers intimate dining with well spaced tables and solid local specialties. An excellent choice for the first course is *gnudi* (12€), the cheese and herb mixture usually found inside *ravioli*. The second course offerings, which average 20€, include stewed wild boar and rack of lamb. Closed Thursday. Via XX Settembre, 23; (39) 0577 738094

**Shop:** For an authentic and unique piece of true Italian art, visit *Decorì Nel Tempo*. For 20 years, *David Matassini* has been creating decorative panels depicting medieval Chianti using the 15th century technique of wall painting called *marmorino*. Each panel is made with a layer of sand, topped by a layer of plaster and then hand painted using pastes of lime putty, marble powder and natural colorings that produce the effects of translucent marble. The final step of the labor intensive process is a polishing of bee's wax. The results are incredible and incredibly expensive with the smallest hanging panels priced over 400€. Matassini has a number of American clients who commission him to copy Renaissance paintings they have admired in museums and books. *Nel Tempo* sells equally stunning ceramics, lamps and furniture. Lab. Viale G. Matteotti, 1; (39) 0577 738158; [www.decorineltempo.it](http://www.decorineltempo.it)

**Eat again:** Two women run *Ristorante al Chiasso dei Portici*, which serves modern twists on Tuscan cuisine in a minimalist, yet elegant atmosphere. The menu includes a few variations of flan; mushroom (*sformativo di funghi*) as a starter and cinnamon for dessert. A three-course dinner costs about 30€ plus wine. The restaurant accepts cash only. Offers patio dining. Closed Tuesday. Chiasso dei Portici, 1; (39) 0577 738774

## San Gimignano

**Eat:** Hidden along a quiet, narrow street, *Ristorante Dorando'* is like a culinary time travel machine. Its creative dishes are based on Tuscan Renaissance recipes. A typical meal might start with a tartlet of asparagus, artichokes and fried quail egg on a salad of shallots in salt. This might be followed by a *primi piatti* of green *pici*, thick pasta made with mint and served with a walnut sauce, and a second course of guinea hen with herbs in crisp puff pastry. Medieval cooks had to be inventive in preserving their food and salt and puff pastry were two useful tools. *Dorando'* offers an excellent local wine list (try the *Ca' del Vispo* 2003 *Vernaccia di San Gimignano*) and plentiful desserts like hazelnut parfait and warm apple pudding. Reservations are a must! Closed Monday. Vicolo dell'Oro, 2; (39) 0577 941862

**Shop:** Artist *Valentina Gamberucci* vividly captures the colors and light of Tuscany's landscape in her watercolors. She sells a wide variety of original paintings and affordable prints (perfect for gifts!) at *Piccolo Atelier*, the store she runs with her husband. Open daily from March to November as well as a few days near the holidays. Via del Castello, 9; (39) 0577 940948

**Visit:** While the fine architecture and stunning landscape of San Gimignano seem to paint a beautiful picture of medieval life, the town's *Museo della Tortura* (Museum of Torture) serves as a stark reminder that things weren't really so rosy back then. A variety of original torture instruments including breast-rippers and racks are on display. Admission is 8€ for adults. Via del Castello, 1; (39) 0577 942243

**Eat again:** The 12-year-old *Gelateria di Piazza* is one of the most famous ice cream shops in all of Italy. Award-winning master ice cream maker *Sergio Dondoli* uses seasonal ingredients to create some unusual flavors. There's *vernaccia*, flavored with a regional white wine, and *dolceamaro*, a mixture of herbs, chocolate and coffee. Dondoli is probably best known for *zafferano pinolo*, a blend of saffron and pine nuts. Piazza della Cisterna, 4; (39) 0577 942244

1 euro = \$1.20 at press time

lly defined wine-producing area in 1716.

Then we walked. Now a walking trip is a lot like a floating cocktail then someone else has a stone in their shoe, so you don't hear the end of

of these six-day walks through Chianti country each year. In a land that's a byword for languorous days, it is Tuscany for the time-pressed.

Our motley group was picked up on a June afternoon at *Santa Maria Novella*, Florence's exquisitely seedy train station. Here, tired Fascist architecture greets rich Americans attired in spandex dutifully avoiding pickpockets. There were 15 of us, ranging in age from 38 to 75. Among us were academics recently sprung from the classroom, a pair of bankers, a guy who owned a handful of KFCs and a number of people in their 50s who no longer did much of anything but enjoy themselves regularly on trips like these, their profitable livelihoods a distant memory to be glossed over during cocktails. We were a well-heeled, well-tanned and well-traveled bunch who had vigorously shopped for Gore-Tex and would drop close to three grand for six densely packed days in Chianti.

Our guides, the aforementioned Tracee and the equally bright-eyed Erin, were lively and alert twentysomethings with the vigor, curiosity and unflinching politeness you need for this kind of job. None of us would have been up to their work.

Our taste of Chianti, a compact piece of real estate between Florence and Siena, would involve rural walks and explorations of towns like *Castellina in Chianti*, *Radda in Chianti* and *Gaiole in*

*Chianti*. Our final walk would bring us to the promised splendor of *San Gimignano*.

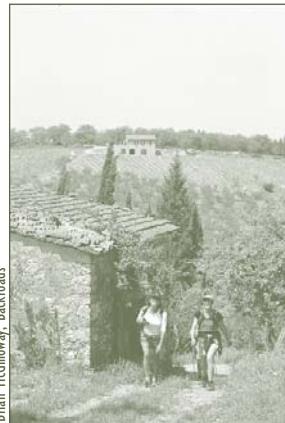


Jeff Cantarutti, Backroads

After driving for 90 minutes southeast from Florence, we were deposited in Castellina in Chianti for a warm-up hike of less than four miles. This was calculated not for sweat but for stretching muscles and breaking the ice with a bunch of strangers in new boots. We were plunged

into the brand-name Tuscan countryside of vineyards, rolling hills and stone farmhouses. The walk took us past fields of wildflowers like the *purple Mediterranean pea*, the *pink convolvulus* and *fodder vetch* that made it appear as if confetti had been strewn in the tall grass. The weather this early June week was ideal, warm 70s by day, balmy 50s by night.

The party line is that the Chianti countryside looks like the backdrop of a Renaissance painting. That was true enough, often enough. But obviously, there are modern aspects to this countryside that we weren't destined to see, like noisy bottling plants that send those fermented grapes all over the world and humdrum towns that are not living postcards awaiting tourist visits. Our seamless walk had been as carefully planned as a military campaign by the brains at Backroads.



Brian McMilloway, Backroads

As we walked up a stony path, we could spy the spires of *Pietrafitta* peeking over the trees. It looked and felt remarkably rural, with the sound of *Pietrafitta's* church bells wafting on the wind, waist-high grass on either side of the ridge. It was perfect pastoral bliss all the way to the *Hotel Vescine*, our home for the next two nights.

This hotel near Radda in Chianti is a stage set of stone buildings linked by brick walkways overlooking the round, wooded hills. During our stay, the staff seemed to materialize out of those hills. Polite and helpful, I never once heard or saw them coming or going. The buildings, of ivy-covered stone with tiled roofs, were surrounded by roses and olive trees in what amounted to our own little Tuscan village. Dinner at the hotel's restaurant was less than stellar, but we more than made up for it with most everything else we ate.

The second day set the pace. The guides handed out printed directions, of the turn-left-at-the-fountain-after-one-mile variety. In six days of walking, no one ended up in Sicily.

The guides gave a "route rap," describing the difficulty of the day's walk, the sights we'd see and places they encouraged us to linger. They laid out snacks that we could stash in our day packs, from bananas to PowerBars. And there was a foot clinic for the newly wounded, where moleskin and bandages were artfully applied

Chianti wines age in 4 to 7 years. Good vintage



party. You begin a conversation and then someone else joins you and the anecdote about their philandering ex-husband until after lunch.

to feet unaccustomed to anything more strenuous than a brake pedal.

Today would be a day of “ups and downs,” said Tracee. Rolling hills, in other words. And not too different from any other day in that regard. Today’s walk was close to ten miles, though there was a shorter option less than two-thirds that length. With the exception of one 14-mile day, succeeding days’ walks were six or seven miles.

Then we walked. Now a walking trip is a lot like a floating cocktail party. You begin a conversation and then someone else joins you and then someone else has a stone in their shoe, so you don’t hear the end of the anecdote about their philandering ex-husband until after lunch.

Or you can walk alone. I often did, because I like to walk alone. The better to hear the cuckoo. I had only heard the mechanical version, which is close. But the real one pays no heed to what o’clock it may be.



Or you can walk alone. I often did, because I like to walk alone. The better to hear the cuckoo. I had only heard the mechanical version, which is close. But the real one pays no heed to what o’clock it may be.

Chianti is best seen from a two-footed approach. It’s not just the pace but the fact that those famed Tuscan hills are laced with a network of gravel roads



that meander through oak forests and wheat fields, past impeccably restored villas and tumbledown ruins awaiting the touch of Frances Mayes. And this being Italy, they weren’t put through by some Florentine developer with a renegade bulldozer a few weeks ago. Many date back to Roman times. As to why they’re not paved, well, why should they be?

You wouldn’t see any of this in a car or on a bicycle. As far as I’m concerned, forget any trip to Tuscany that employs two wheels. A bike requires you to keep one nervous eye on the photogenic landscape, the other on semi-articulated trucks, loose gravel shoulders and teens on whining *Vespas* who seem inclined to nudge you off the road.

And the walking was aided by the use of lightweight telescopic walking sticks that Backroads provides. Useful going uphill, they saved our knees on the

descent, even if we did resemble a small army of *Pinocchios*.

The discovery of the cloven hooves spooked us, and we started talking loudly, as you would in Wyoming bear country, to let them know you’re approaching. But the day’s picnic made us forget wild animals. We feasted on young and middle-aged *pecorino*; *fagioli*, the Tuscan white beans, served with oil-packed tuna; deeply flavorful sun-dried tomatoes; fragrant artichoke hearts; that boar sausage; a salad of impeccably fresh tomatoes, *arugula* and basil; and an array of Tuscan flat breads.

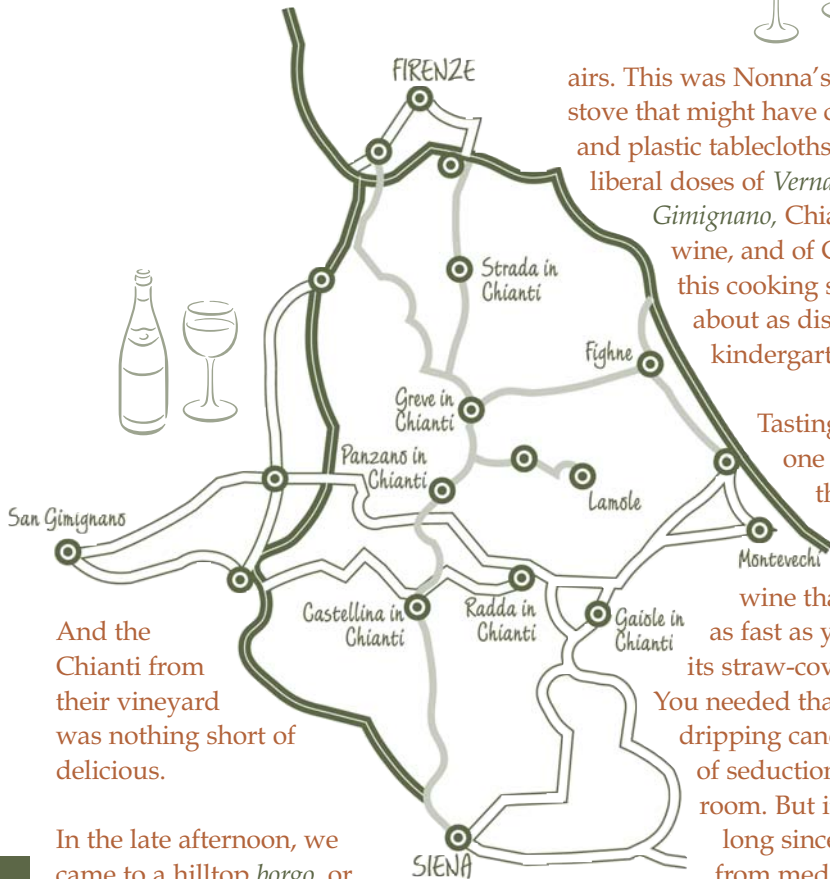
The setting was the arbor of a homey villa called *Le Patrene*, owned by *Pietro Basile* and his American wife, Cindy. I had expected to find hundreds of Americans and Brits in identically restored villas in Chianti, furiously composing their memoirs of restoring these same villas. Not here, fortunately. Their villa had casually displayed 15th- and 16th-century paintings and sculptures, while a soccer match buzzed on

a TV with lousy reception. Now this was real life under the Tuscan sun.

*continued on page 8*

s in order: 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999. Avoid 2002.

# Walking in Chianti *continued from page 7*



And the Chianti from their vineyard was nothing short of delicious.

In the late afternoon, we came to a hilltop *borgo*, or hamlet, called *Poggio San Polo*. Here was *Podere Le Rose*, a cooking school inside a rambling family home. For the next six hours, *Paola Bevilacqua de' Mari* taught us to make pasta and turn it into *tagliatelle* with *porcini* and *ravioli* with sage. Under her tutelage, we roasted and stuffed peppers with arborio rice and resuscitated that culinary cliché, beloved by devotees of Olive Garden, the humble *tiramisu*. But this "school" had none of your Sub-Zero

airs. This was Nonna's kitchen, with a stove that might have come from Sears and plastic tablecloths. Fueled by liberal doses of *Vernaccia di San Gimignano*, Chianti's white wine, and of Chianti Classico, this cooking school was about as disciplined as kindergarten.

Tasting Chianti was one of the joys of this trip. It is fondly remembered as the wine that you emptied as fast as you could from its straw-covered bottle: You needed that bottle to hold a dripping candle for purposes of seduction in your dorm room. But it's a wine that's long since been rescued from mediocrity and there

have been a run of stellar years of late, including 1997 and 1999. And good Chianti is ridiculously cheap.

We moved on and spent two nights near Gaiole in Chianti, at *Albergo l'Ultimo Mulino*, where I had a large room that overlooked the outdoor pool. That pool was ice-cold and numbingly refreshing after our 14-mile day of walking. Dinner was stunning, with *ravioli* of spinach and ricotta

followed by roasted pork in *Vin Santo*. It was made even more spectacular by a 1997 *Rocca di Montegrossi Geremia*.

On our final full day, we were driven to the town of *Colle di Val d'Elsa* and commenced a seven-mile walk to San Gimignano. Early on, we came to the crest of a hill and had the killer view of the trip. A few miles away were the 14 stone towers of San Gimignano on the horizon,

the foreground a crazy quilt of wheat fields and cypress and poppies. If there had been archangels on the wing, it would have been only slightly improved.

Our view changed by the time we got to San Gimignano and found the narrow streets thronged with bossy groups of German tourists doing their best to eat every last spoonful of gelato in town. But around 5 p.m. there was a great sucking sound as the Teutonic hordes went through the city gates and back to their tour buses.

By 6 p.m. we had retaken the streets and the locals seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. Early the next morning, we toured this town that had once boasted 72 towers, practically a medieval Manhattan. And there is much to see here, including the allegorical frescoes in the *Museo Civico* that look like a pastiche of the talents of Hieronymus Bosch and Larry Flynt.

It was shortly after the daily German invasion had begun that I finally saw a wild boar. He was not on a rampage, chasing panicked Bavarians as they dropped their dripping gelato and ran for their buses. The poor, dusty thing had been stuffed years ago and was now wheeled out every morning by a butcher whose shop was festooned with *cinghiale* sausage. Like my six-day stroll through Chianti, he was Tuscany tamed. ♦



— Everett Potter

*Everett Potter writes a syndicated column that's distributed by The New York Times Syndicate and is a columnist for USA Weekend. A contributing editor to Ski and a columnist for Diversion, his work also appears in Endless Vacation, Conde Nast Traveller UK and Outside. This article originally appeared in Forbes FYI.*

## THE DETAILS

Backroads' *Walking Tuscany* allows guests to stay at trip runs in May, June, three-star hotels and dine in family-run trattorie for September and October 2005. Participants may select a *Premier Inn Trip* in which guests stay in luxury hotels and dine in Michelin-starred restaurants. The cost is \$3,198 per person based on double occupancy. The *Casual Inn* version of the trip

allows guests to stay at three-star hotels and dine in family-run trattorie for \$2398 per person based on double occupancy. The routes, activities, leaders and equipment are the same for both versions of this trip. *For more information call (800) GO-ACTIVE or visit [www.backroads.com](http://www.backroads.com)*

45,000 people live in Chianti and about



# Lessons from a Villa Rental Tale

Pack patience and a sense of humor. That's my best advice for renting a villa in Italy, based on a lovely yet unpredictable week at a villa outside Radda in Chianti, courtesy of my friend Nancy at *Italy My Dream*.

She let me choose the villa I wanted to visit along with a fellow travel writer. Italy My Dream's accurate and detailed description stated that *Casa Petra Alexa* was 10 minutes from Radda in Chianti (I wanted to be near a town, but not in one); had three bedrooms and four bathrooms (perfect for additional guests so we wouldn't crowd each other) and (another must for me) had a pool that was "four feet in depth all over — a good place for cooling off rather than for expert swimming."

### The Details

**Casa Petra Alexa**  
Lecchi in Chianti  
Sleeps six.

**Rates:** \$1,820 to \$2,860 per week, depending on the season.

Available through Italy My Dream  
at (866) 687-7700 or  
[www.italymydream.com](http://www.italymydream.com)

One Saturday in May, after bumping along an uneven dirt road (very common in Chianti), we arrived at the immaculately landscaped Petra Alexa. The owner's daughter *Petra* enthusiastically greeted us and gave us a quick tour of the house, pointing out the linens and towels, the useful wall safe in the master bedroom, the private terrace outside one of the bedrooms.

Petra wrote down a few suggestions for restaurants and her cell phone number if we had any problems. When I asked about a phone, she said that the house didn't have one. I promptly kicked myself for not asking beforehand. I brought a laptop to do work and wouldn't be able to use it, plus I just discovered that many cell phones don't get reception in Chianti. I would have to drive 10 minutes to Radda to make dinner reservations or call home.

We were impressed with the size (the master bedroom could sleep an entire family) and cleanliness of the house as well as the quality of the showers (hot with excellent water pressure). Only

after returning from dinner that first night did things seem less than perfect when one of the toilets did not flush. We checked the others and they flushed. And so two travel writers who had a little too much wine and who have watched too many home

improvement shows attempted to fix an Italian toilet with improvised tools. It didn't work and the problem escalated. The other toilets suddenly would flush and then not flush at random. We spent the night laughing at our

predicament and trying to decipher the demons of the toilets.

It wasn't so funny though when although the villa company's service person answered our call promptly on Sunday, the problem wasn't fixed until Tuesday! It turns out the groundskeeper didn't have a key to the house and wasn't able to get in since we were out Monday. When we



let him in on Tuesday, he quickly discovered the problem. The valve for cold water was never turned on. That explains the steaming hot showers!

After long days touring Chianti's charming towns and vineyards, we

would happily return to Petra Alexa, a place that easily felt like home. Two of our friends joined us and we spent late evenings talking in front of the fireplace in the living room. We all had our own bedrooms and slept soundly in the deep quiet and cool air of the countryside. Since screens and air conditioning are virtually unheard of in Italian homes, the master bedroom provided an innovative way to get fresh air — small fans built into the glass of the sliding door.

The only other problem we encountered here were unwanted visitors — a few scorpions. I had never seen any before, but my friend who once lived in Texas wasn't alarmed as she found them in her home all the time. The male member of our group relished the opportunity to protect the women by "slaying the beasts" (who were all of an inch long) with the bottom of his shoe. We still call him, "scorpion killer."



## Quick Tips for a Chianti Visit

- Get a detailed local map as soon as you arrive.
- Don't count on your cell phone getting reception.
- Figure that it will take you twice as long as you expect to get anywhere and you will get lost!
- Always make a reservation for dinner.
- Want a chef to cook dinner at your villa? Try [www.corsano.net](http://www.corsano.net) or [www.chiantichef.com](http://www.chiantichef.com)

Staying in a villa in Italy is an incredible chance to really



live like the locals but as in any new place, it is best to expect the

unexpected. And make sure to spend some time enjoying the house. We were so busy touring Chianti, we didn't even make it into the pool! ♦

a million visitors come here each year.

# Cooking at Capovento



We were running late for our 4 p.m. cooking class, when we pulled into *Villa di Capovento*, perched on a secluded Chianti hillside. A few days earlier, an Italian friend raved about a woman named Daniela and told us about the new cooking classes she was running a few times a month. We asked her to sign us up.

As we parked and began remarking about the sweeping vistas in front of us, *Daniele Vanucci* approached and introduced himself as the husband of the chef. He led us to a small yet immaculate kitchen in the back of the villa-turned-hotel. We met the other students (we were a total of six) as well as *Daniela*, our teacher, her assistant *Simona* and *Giulio*, Daniele and Daniela's son who runs the operation.

Chef Daniela handed us small recipe booklets and pens so we could follow along and make notes. She explained that she chose dishes she thought we could easily replicate at home. On the menu: stuffed cherry tomatoes; rice with red chicory and gorgonzola cheese; rolled turkey with sage and bacon; and millefoglie with strawberries. We would later have all of the dishes for dinner.

Although there wasn't room for hands-on participation, Daniela made the lesson interactive — passing around ingredients for us to smell and touch, holding up the bowls so we could clearly see what she was doing and discussing the benefits and drawbacks of alternative methods and ingredients. All the while, Daniele stood to the side and aptly translated Daniela's instructions from Italian to English.

We tasted each dish as it was finished. The easy-to-make stuffed tomatoes

were a big hit and we all vowed to serve them at our next gathering or cocktail party. Daniela demonstrated three out of the four dishes. Simona stepped in to show us how to make her excellent recipe for rolled turkey.



## The Details:

### Villa di Capovento alla Badiola di Vanucci Giulio

Castellina in Chianti  
(39) 577 740755  
[www.capovento.it](http://www.capovento.it)

**Rates:** There are a total of six rooms and suites. Rooms are 49 to 65€ per person, per day and 309 to 430€ per person, per week (includes a welcome dinner). Suites range from 315 to 615€ per person, per week. Daily breakfast included.

**Cooking:** The class along with dinner and wine costs 135€ per person. Book through Francesca at Fine Italian Rentals at [info@fineitalianrentals.com](mailto:info@fineitalianrentals.com)



Daniela made sure to emphasize the presentation of the food. In the case of the millefoglie, she instructed us to pat the rolled out dough with two forks in order to prevent bubbles during baking. Daniela also recommended

using store-bought strawberry syrup as a garnishment due to its strong color and consistency.

When the class was finished (we drank wine and cappuccinos as we learned), Daniele took us for a tour of Capovento's lovely grounds. Daniela's family owned Capovento and his family owned an adjoining property. They met here when they were young and moved to Florence, where he was from, when they married.

The couple and their two sons moved here three years ago to restore the villa. While Giulio runs the hotel, their other son manages the award-winning olive oil produced here and now sold in New York City. Capovento is frequented by mostly German visitors since word hasn't gotten out about it (and what a bargain it is!) elsewhere.

It's easy to see why some might want to keep Capovento a secret. The villa is cozy and charming. Guests could spend the day just looking out over the valley. At night, Daniele says you can see the lights of both Florence and Siena. The entire setting evokes a feeling of complete serenity.

Over a delicious dinner with plenty of local wine, Daniele said that the family hopes to expand the villa in order to have room for hands on cooking classes. While cooking at Capovento isn't meant to be a grand gourmet experience, it offers an excellent opportunity to pick up some practical cooking skills and interact with a warm local family. And those views... ♦

### RECIPES FROM CAPOVENTO

We don't have room to reprint Daniela's recipes here but we would love to share them. E-mail [kathy@dreamofitaly.com](mailto:kathy@dreamofitaly.com) or call 877-OF-ITALY to have them sent to you.

“Flavor is what I miss whenever I leave Italy and wh

# The Renaissance Man: Alive, Well and Butchering in Panzano

It's just before noon on a sunny late spring Sunday, and the narrow, hilly street outside the door of *Antica*

*Macelleria Cecchini* (which loosely translates as "Cecchini's Old-Style Butcher Shop") is packed with cars and motorcycles, the latter because of a flyer on the shop door announcing an afternoon road rally. The leader of the pack?

*Dario Cecchini*, the shop's owner and Italy's most famous—and versatile—

butcher. Trying to get a glimpse of Dario inside his savory-smelling shop is nearly impossible given the crush of people either waiting to buy delicacies like *bistecca Fiorentina* and pork roasts stuffed with local herbs, or standing in little groups drinking wine and nibbling bites of Cecchini's signature meatloaf (which resembles your mother's meatloaf the way *coq au vin* at a Lyonnais bistro resembles your mother's baked chicken). The wine is Cecchini's own, made at his family's vineyard and bottled in the kitschy, straw-covered bottles that have made his native Chianti a household name.

Besides meat, motorcycles, and wine, Cecchini—who entered university with plans of a veterinary degree but left to take over the family business when his father died—reverses his national bard *Dante Alighieri*. The second, lower room of the *Antica Macelleria Cecchini* is crowded with glass-fronted book-

shelves containing a portion of his Dante library. However, it also contains what Cecchini tells me is "my shrine,"



Jim Talbot



Bethanne Kelly Patrick



Jim Talbot

an aged, time-darkened butcher block that was his grandfather's workplace. How does he combine the two? By having painstakingly researched, collected, and adapted medieval and Renaissance recipes for modern use.

Things have certainly changed—although Cecchini's recipe methods echo those used by his grandfather and butchers before him, his tools and workplace are state-of-the-art, including a carnivore's dream of a meat-locker at the end of the upper room. As the tall and natty (even in his blood-spattered apron!) Cecchini poses sporting a mock scowl (he can much more often be found grinning broadly as he greets a regular), his energetic workers field orders for marinated, skewered beef that he calls "sushi" and tubs of spiced lard that he calls

"butter." When he can, Cecchini comes out from behind the counter to meet old and new friends alike, many of them from the larger world of foodies. On this particular Sunday, artisanal English cheesemaker Randolph Hodges of Neal's Dairy Yard and

Roberta Dowling, director of the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts, are among those who have come to see Cecchini, a leader in the "Slow Food" movement.

Cecchini has strong opinions on everything about food, from where one should have lunch in this small town to which magazines are "serious" about food writing.

Despite his wild success, with international attention from the likes of *Gourmet*, *Saveur* and *The New York Times*, Cecchini has kept his operation simple. Besides cuts of meat and poultry, the only other items for sale are jars of *Profumo del Chianti*, a gorgeous mix of spices and herbs that is labeled "Open and breathe deeply in case of sudden attack of nostalgia," and *Mostarda Mediterranea*, a glistening orange-y red condiment that was developed by *Judy Witts Francini*, who once worked for the butcher, and compliments almost any of Cecchini's offerings.

Perhaps one of the reasons Dario Cecchini keeps things simple is so that he can do exactly as he will today: close up shop in early afternoon at the traditional *siesta* hour and head out with his leather-clad fellow cycle enthusiasts for their ride. There will never be a Cecchini franchise—and for that, we should all be grateful. However, if you find your mouth watering after reading this—or if you're already a fan and wondering how to get your next fix of *Profumo del Chianti*, head to [www.formaggiokitchen.com](http://www.formaggiokitchen.com) and also pick up some *Mostarda Mediterranea*. ♦

—Bethanne Kelly Patrick

## The Details: Antico Macelleria Cecchini

Via XX Luglio, 11  
Panzano  
(39) 055 852020  
Closed on Sunday afternoon  
and Wednesday.

...at I seek as soon as I come back." —David Leavitt



# Cane e Gatto

## Will Have You Barking and Purring

“I think this was the best meal of my life,” Lorraine announces, putting down her fork for the final time. This lawyer from Washington, D.C. seems surprised yet sure of her statement. One by one, the rest of us think for a moment (going over the Michelin-starred restaurants we have visited and the pricey expense account meals we have eaten) and agree — definitely one of the best, if not the best meal we had ever had.

guest with an orchid before retreating to the kitchen to whip up some magic with wife *Sonia*. What we came to experience can only be called magic.

Their daughter, who is also the waitress, gives the women in our party innovative metal hooks to hang our bags from the table. Pouring a complimentary glass of *Prosecco*, she explains that there is a fixed menu of five courses for 55€ per person (not including wine). She will ask us after each course if we want the next one or if any of us are too full and might, for example, want to skip the soup before the pasta course.

The dream meal begins with a plate for each of us of *antipasti*: *prosciutto* with melon; honey drizzled on *Pecorino* cheese; startlingly fresh *mozzarella* and tomato; chicken liver pate; and finally, quiche with a cheese sauce. “I think I’m going to like Tuscany,” announces Al, the only male member of our group, who just arrived that day.

A light, yet flavorful potato and leek soup comes next. The pasta course is *gnocchi* with pesto and tomato sauce. But forget everything you think you know about *gnocchi*. These particular pieces of pasta have a soft and light consistency and simply melt like butter on your tongue. We savor each and every one of them. “This food is prepared with love,” remarks Bethanne. We laugh and clink our wine glasses toasting the chefs.

The main course is a colorful plate of meat and veal interspersed with

asparagus and zucchini. We eat quietly. Although the conversation is flowing, we don’t want to distract our senses with much noise. The mix of beef, spices and vegetables taste as good as they smell.

After a leisurely break — there is absolutely no reason to rush — dessert, another mixed plate of colors, consistencies and flavors, arrives. The waitress pours a complimentary glass of *Vin Santo*, the Tuscan dessert wine. We will each enjoy *biscotti* (which we will dip into the wine), a luscious piece of *tiramisu* and a *semifreddo* (ice cream) made with fresh strawberries.

Forget *Mario Batali* or *Jacques Pepin*, Paolo and Sonia are our culinary superstars. We’re the last customers to leave and Al insists we take pictures with the chefs to mark this momentous meal. They happily oblige as they are as nice as their food is spectacular. ♦



Bethanne Kelly Patrick



Bethanne Kelly Patrick



### The Details

#### Cane e Gatto

Via Pagliaresi, 6

Siena

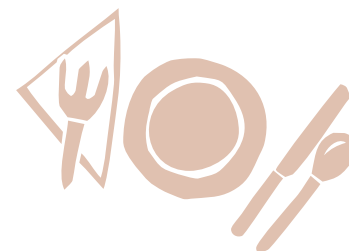
(39) 0577 287545

Open for dinner only. Closed Thursday.

Closed November 16–30, 2004.

Reservations highly recommended.

The cozy art-filled dining room, which feels more like a private home than a restaurant, has seats for just 20 patrons at glass-topped brass tables. Owner *Paolo Senni* welcomes each female



1 euro = \$1.20 at press time

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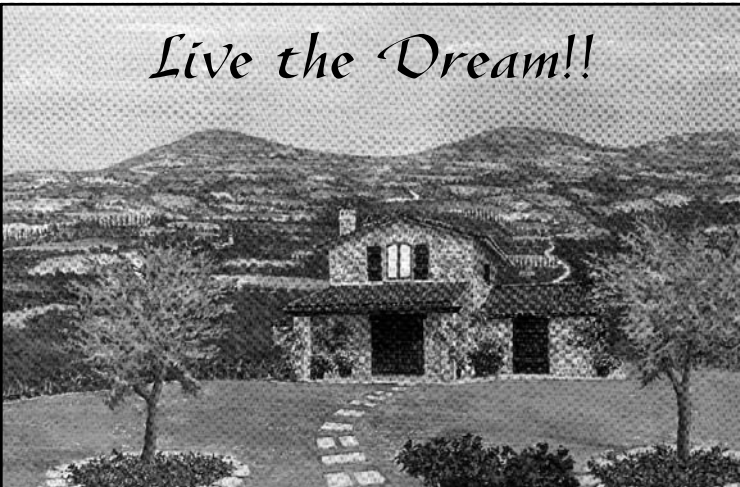
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