



Giuseppe Pollio

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SPECIAL REPORT: CHARMING CHIANTI

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WHO TO MEET ALONG THE Chianti Wine Road

Steeped in true Tuscan culture and history, the *Chianti* wine

road is nestled within the rustic and beautiful countryside between Florence and *Siena* and the only place where Chianti and *Chianti Classico* wines are produced. Along with some of the most incredible wines, you'll discover local farmers and families that produce *Vin Santo* wine, olive oil, pecorino cheese, as well as artisan ceramic makers and many other local gems.

Each place you stop, you will meet people with a true passion for preserving the long-standing traditions and culture of the Tuscan way of

living. Here are four of our favorite locals.



Giuseppe Pollio

Starting from Florence, follow the *Chiantigiana* (SR 222) to discover *Radda in Chianti*. Dating back to the 9th century, this is one of the oldest of the walled villages in the area. Stop into *Casa Chianti Classico* to meet *Giuseppe Pollio* and learn about his passion for preserving the history and art of wine making in the area.

Giuseppe spent the first part of his career working in molecular biology research, studying rare diseases for

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Davide Taviani, Flickr

SURPRISING BAGNO A RIPOLI

“SLOWED TO A SPEED FOR OBSERVING, JACOBY’S FIRST HARD LOOK AT ITALY EXCITED HIM SO PROFOUNDLY HIS TEETH BEGAN TO CHATTER. IT SEEMED SURREAL — SO CASUALLY SPECTACULAR.”

— *Cucina Tipica: An Italian Adventure* by Andrew Cotto (that’s me!!)



This is the reaction the protagonist in my latest novel has upon first sight of Italy. Like me, he was in his early 30s at the time; and like me, such an experience changed his life: We both decided to live in Italy (me for a year, somewhere down the road; him forever, immediately).

That’s where such similarities between our stories end though, as — thanks to the freedom of fiction — Jacoby’s “adventure” is far more compelling than mine (not that I didn’t have the time of my life), with far more at stake, but there is one other major aspect of Italy that we share: The setting of our story in the hills south of Florence in a charming commune called *Bagno a Ripoli*.

Never heard of it? Me neither. I found it on the internet and kept checking to make sure it was accurate: a smattering of villages in the hills south of Florence; technically, the tip of *Chianti* country.

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The black rooster is the symbol of *Chianti Classico*.

almost 30 years. At the same time, he was cultivating his passion for the traditional food and wine culture in Italy and around the world, engaging with the Slow Food movement and eventually becoming sommelier and wine writer.

When he heard about the possibility of managing the *Casa Chianti Classico*, housed in an ancient Franciscan monastery belonging to the *Consorzio Chianti Classico*, the association of all the wine producers of the area, something told him that this was a new chapter in his life he wanted to pursue.

Pollio was fascinated by the structure of the ancient monastery, with its austere beauty and the signs of centuries of history among the beautiful walls and rooms. It's a unique place exactly in the middle of the Chianti territory, one of the best locations to be immersed in the traditional ways of wine making from the region. Along with business partner *Alessandro Boletti*, he realized a dream that had been years in the making.

Giuseppe's face lights up with a giant smile and bright eyes as soon as you meet him. Giuseppe is fluent in English. Each visitor entering Casa

Chianti Classico is greeted with warmth and treated as an old friend, because conviviality and wine are closely associated. Pollio says he wants "people to feel a part of the local culture and literally taste it."

Drop in during the day to taste the wines from among the best wine producers from the Chianti territory in a quiet and relaxing environment, surrounded by natural beauty. Stay and explore the old monastery with its peaceful spaces to enjoy your glass of wine as you wander around.

Learn about Chianti wine production in the sensory museum, and enjoy a beautiful lunch of local hand-crafted pasta, cheese, olive oil and other local food and wine in the quaint osteria.

This venue also hosts art exhibits (pictures, paintings or sculpture from local artists) and music events, which are the perfect complement to the Tuscan art of wine and food.

To meet Giuseppe and experience Casa Chianti Classico, find out more at www.casachianticlassico.it



Casa Chianti Classico



Garden



Grotta dei Frati



Terrace

Romano Rampini

On your way from Radda in Chianti toward *Gaiole in Chianti* is Rampini Ceramics. You might miss it if you're not looking. Look for an old Tuscan farm house amongst the vineyards, olive groves and forests of *Villa Vistarenni* about two miles south of Radda in Chianti. Rampini has a studio and workshop with a large display of patterns and designs from which you can create a custom order or purchase a beautiful treasure to take home with you. Here you will have a chance to meet *Romano Rampini*, who will greet you as if you are family.

Romano's father *Giuseppe Rampini* founded

Rampini Ceramics in the early 1980s. Born in *Gubbio* in 1923, he learned the art famous from that area — producing ceramics in the Renaissance tradition. He later moved his family to live in the Chianti region, where he purchased an abandoned farmhouse on the Vistarenni property near Radda in Chianti. Basic restoration created a modest studio to paint ceramics and fire them in a small kiln.

The business continued to grow with Romano working alongside his father as an artist. Now, the business is being cared for by Romano and his sister *Tiziana*. Romano says the "vine" pattern is one of the most popular. "Since the Etruscan and Roman times, grapes have been featured as a symbol of the culture and history of Italy. This still holds true today," he adds.

Another significant design is the



Romano Rampini

Via Chiantigiana runs through

poppy design. During the Tuscan spring, fields of wild poppies create carpets and waves of intense red colors. With another reference to the passion of the people in

Chianti, the delicate petals seem to burst forth in a blaze of scarlet to wave jauntily in the

fresh spring air, as if to celebrate the end of winter and the start of the growing season so important to the farmers in the area. The Renaissance leaf and peacock is a historic design originally created for the Medici family of Florence.



To meet Romano and learn more about Rampini Ceramics, visit www.rampiniceramics.com

Lorenzo Vanni

As you continue along the wine road another 10 miles or so, you'll discover *San Gusmè* — a tiny village situated just on the southern border of the region of Chianti Classico. The village dates back to the 14th century and has a historic church that is dedicated to *San Cosma* and *Damiano*. *San Gusmè* was recently featured in *Forbes* as "one of three unforgettable, under-the-radar towns in Italy."

Once you arrive in *San Gusmè*, you will understand why. The horizon opens up in front of you as you can see in the distance the towers of Siena. As you walk through the doors of the walled village, you instantly feel as if you are back in time.



Sheryl Ness

Door of San Gusmè

Here, you will meet *Lorenzo Vanni*. Look for a handsome, very tall man in his sixties with eyes that instantly make you feel as if you've met before. He might be in his garden, just outside the village or tending to visitors at *Borgo San Gusmè* in Piazza della Macinella, 6, inside the village in a tucked-away square.

Lorenzo and his family have lived in the area for four generations. His father and grandfather made their living here as blacksmiths and key makers. Lorenzo will say that visiting *San Gusmè* may seem like it could be a quick visit because of its small size. However, the difference is all in knowing its deep and rich history, with the walls, the Church of Cosma and Damiano as well as the Church of the Holy Annunciation with its few but important works of art. Then there are the old traditions, the village festivals, the rural farming culture, and of course, the wine and food.

The area has many restaurants where you can sample typical local and Italian dishes. From simple trattorias to high-level restaurants, even one with Michelin stars. Of note is *La Bottega del 30* where chef *Helene Stoquèle* has held a Michelin star for 20 years.

Lorenzo has a deep understanding of the way the wines produced here take on the terroir from a land rich in sandstone, galestro and alberese that release precious mineral elements, and are able to generate wines of great quality. Around *San Gusmè* there are beautiful vineyards such as *Tenuta di Arceno* that surround and caress the landscape like a beautiful wave. Lorenzo speaks of the history of the vines and the land.

"These were originally planned and designed by peasants and sharecroppers who for centuries have designed a unique and inimitable landscape, stealing space from the Tuscan woodlands, creating stone terraces to cultivate vines even in the steep terrain," he notes.



Sheryl Ness

Vines around San Gusmè

Lorenzo's passion for preserving history and sharing the Tuscan culture *continued on page 8*

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“AND THEREIN LIES THE SECRET TO BAGNO A RIPOLI: IT’S A LOCATION NOT A DESTINATION. SURE, AS DESCRIBED, IT’S LOVELY AND QUIANT AND ALL THAT, BUT THERE ARE NO HORDES DESCENDING, NO LINES EXTENDING, NO TOUR GROUPS JAMMING THE STREETS AND SQUARES.”

The best place for rent, at a ludicrously reasonable price, was a refurbished barn behind a villa and aside an olive grove just above the tiny village of *Antella*.

As a cynical New Yorker, convinced that “Too good to be true” applied first and foremost to real estate, I went to check it out for myself (research, people; research), and I could not believe what I found.

If the stylish yet rustic barn was a hidden gem, the surrounding area was a treasure chest. The Firenze Sud exit off the Autostrada is the last before entering Florence proper from the south, though it feels like entering the rural countryside of an ancient Italian landscape: Cypress trees bordering roads winding through shimmering olive groves and rows of vines with Renaissance villas in the distance.

Nestled among the gentle splendor are quaint villages with requisite necessities and local ambiance. The only reminder that Florence lay next door was upon breaching a ridge on the high road to reveal the magnificent city just below, like a circular pool of terracotta and towers and domes. You could put the car in neutral and glide, if uninterrupted, well across the city line.

What threw me the most was the

proximity to Florence. Where were all the tourists who jammed her serpentine streets and regal lanes? The masses who stood in line for museums and churches and restaurants?

How could a place

Sure, as described, it’s lovely and quaint and all that, but there are no hordes descending, no lines extending, no tour groups jamming the streets and squares. The villages of Bagno a Ripoli are prosaic by Italian standards; many elongated as opposed to centered around a *piazza*.

Yeah, there are some *Medici* villas in the area and churches with frescoes that are worth a look, some stunning vistas atop the hills, terrific wineries and sources of local *produtti*, but the culture and views of Italy elsewhere are

understandably more popular with visitors. And therein lies our secret (shhhh!).

The most symbolic (and sacred) sight in the area is just beyond the south-western auspices of Bagno a Ripoli, the *Florence American Cemetery* off the Siena-Firenze (S2) highway, where American soldiers, named and unnamed, who gave their lives to liberate the central peninsula from the Nazis in World War II, are honored for eternity.

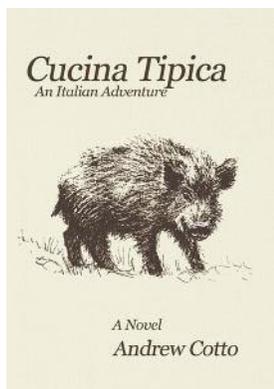
It’s a stunning and stoic layout of manicured grounds marked with symmetrical rows of marble headstones. A spreading and elegant memorial atop the gravesite features open courtyards and a chapel; the names of those Americans missing are inscribed on tablets along with major



Barn Andrew rented



Florence American Cemetery



A Novel
Andrew Cotto



Andrew Cotto

this picturesque and convenient be absolutely unfettered by the tourists who not only clogged the city of Florence to the immediate north but also the byways and villages and gastronomic riches of the famous wine country due south?

And therein lies the secret to Bagno a Ripoli: It’s a location not a destination.

Monte San Michele is Chianti’s

operational maps detailing American achievement in the region.

It's appropriate that before the liberation of Florence, the Allied soldiers used Bagno a Ripoli as a secure staging ground with easy access to the city. For those of us in the peaceful and blessed aftermath, interested in an unfettered experience and an ideal location, the area provides a perfect opportunity to not only lay cultural siege upon



Road to Florence
Romagna.

Florence but also the immediate environs of *Chianti* country.

And thanks to the major highways that run through Bagno a Ripoli, easy trips can be made all over Tuscany and even into *Umbria* and *Emilia-*

In my novel, Jacoby is brought to these hills in search of his heritage that stemmed from a love affair during

wartime between an American soldier and a Florentine heiress. I came to Bagno a Ripoli simply looking for a reasonably priced place to stay that allowed for immersion in the Italian experience. I found it. So can you (one more time: shhhhh!).

—Andrew Cotto

Andrew Cotto is a regular contributor to The New York Times and the award-winning author of three novels. His latest, Cucina Tipica: An Italian Adventure, is set in the unfettered hills south of Florence. For more information, visit www.andrewcotto.com

THE DETAILS

WHERE TO STAY

There are villas, hotels, residencies, agriturismi, and places to Airbnb or just B&B all around, but it makes most sense to stay as close to the highway as possible.

Villa Medicea di Lilliano

Via Lilliano e Meoli, 82
Grassina
(39) 055 642602
www.medicivilla.com

Rates: The La Torre villas range in price from 140€ to 570€ per night, depending on season. The entire *La Corte villa* (five bedrooms) ranges from 700€ to 950€ per night. Three-night minimum.

This is a former Medici pheasant-hunting outpost in the hills between *Grassina* and *Antella*. The original villa is now owned and occupied seasonally by the family matriarch of the *Malenchini* family who make an extraordinary Chianti as well as a noteworthy Super Tuscan. The stunning grounds are also available for events. Read more in the June/July 2018 issue of *Dream of Italy*.

Agriturismo Circugnano

Via Lappeggi, 3
Grassina
(39) 335 5606771
www.agriturismocircugnano.it

Rates: High-season rates start at 110€ per night.

This quaint property and *fattoria* is down the road and around the bend from the Villa Medicea. It's run by a lovely family who offer an antiquated experience with meals upon request among the verdant topography and rustic environs of an active olive and grape farm.

Residence Centanni

Via di Centanni, 8
Bagno a Ripoli
(39) 639 70482
www.residence-centanni.it

Rates: High-season rates begin under 100€ for a minimum of two nights. Breakfast can be included at an additional charge.

The farmhouses have been converted into apartments. This expansive property features a renowned ristorante, shimmering olive groves, golf course, and spa facilities.

WHERE TO EAT

There's no destination eatery in the commune, but a lot of solid options for Tuscan "Cucina Tipica."

Trattoria La Gorgotta

Via Vicchio E Paterno, 19
Bagno a Ripoli
(39) 055 631444
www.trattorialagorgotta.com

This beloved local eatery high in the hills overlooks the commune from its sweeping, *al-fresco* terrace; inside is a Renaissance tavern offering classic Tuscan fare made by the same family for over 50 years. The winding ride up on narrow roads is half the fun.

Nuovo Ranch

Via Bencista' Gorioli, 13
Bagno a Ripoli
(39) 055 699045
www.nuovoranch.it

Way up in the hills of San Donato is a family-style, open lodge perfumed by flaming wood that grills meats and chars thin-crust pizzas. The vast menu is deep with pastas and antipasti from both the *terra* (land) and *mare* (sea).

Trattoria Antico Forno

Via di S. Romolo, 118
Villamagna
(39) 055 633583
www.trattoriaanticoforno.it

In the tiny village of *Villamagna*, this charming eatery offers hearty home-made pasta, fried and grilled meats (and other more adventurous parts of animals) and all the Tuscan staples.

Also, for provisions and lounging, the village of *Antella* has a traditional square and the best places to find a supermarket and all the small shops needed for local products. There's also *Staccia Burata*, a funky eatery off the piazza as well as a friendly *enoteca*, *Bangerang Vino*, on the piazza for wine/beer and small plates.



highest point at 2,930 feet.

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Editor's note: The first time I ever visited Chianti was with Judy Witts Francini in 2004 and I felt so lucky to first experience this magical patch of land with a true insider.

Judy is a native Californian who has been living in Italy since 1984. In her home in Chianti, she celebrates her love of travel and passion for cooking via her Divina Cucina blog (www.divinacucina.com), her unique tours and her Taste Chianti app. Judy's mission is to show clients how the real Italians live. (And you may remember her from the Florence episode of our PBS series — Judy taught cooking in the city for many years.)

Judy creates custom itineraries for her clients and acts as a friendly face and font of wisdom for everyone looking to get the most out of their time here. Her magnetic personality lights up any conversation and our associate editor Danielle Abbazia chatted with her about the latest and greatest in Chianti.

DOI: What is still undiscovered in Chianti?

JWF: Undiscovered is so weird because so many people just do the same thing all the time. To me, I've been here 35 years now. When I first came there was not a lot out there and there was no internet, right? You had to read a book! I keep reading on Facebook, "OMG this is undiscovered!" And I'm like, "I did this 30 years ago!" It's generational. Every 10 years people don't know what someone did 10 years ago. Butcher *Dario Cecchini*, I worked with him in 1998 for two years, now he's gonna be on Chef's Table! (Dario was in the Tuscan

episode of our PBS series.) It's like OMG Dario just got discovered and he is going to be so famous! And I'm like get over it. Now he's been discovered?! It's crazy. A lot of the undiscovered things are the other butchers who are doing things.

DOI: The next generation?

JWF: Not even! There is a guy in *San Miniato* named *Sergio Falaschi* who is 4th generation also. He is famous in his area and opened a new meat-cutting room in his old work room. Sergio's son *Andrea* works with him, and his mom, *Lina*, is the cook and they're doing lunch and dinner at *RetroBottega* (www.sergiofalaschi.com; (39) 057 143190). A lot of the guys who raise the *Cinte Senese* pigs are opening restaurants. My friend Ray and his lovely partner *Anna Rita* do a tasting at their farm in *Castellina in Chianti* where

tourism. A lot of people want to spend more time in nature so there's a lot of hiking, walking, electronic bike riding. I recommend my clients to try *Toscana Ebike Tours* (www.toscanaebike.com) in *Montespertoli*. I've found more artisans now, too, that are opening up their businesses like weavers and ceramic artists. There's a ceramic shop called *Artesia Ceramica* (www.artesiaceramica.it) that has DIY ceramics workshops.



Judy



Tuscan-style ceramics

DOI: What do people usually do in Chianti. Do they stay for a week? Do people generally stay in hotels?

JWF: Well, I always prefer staying somewhere where someone will give you ideas on stuff to do. People will stay on a winery or in a bed and breakfast. Often wineries will do barbecues, pizza nights, wine tastings, cooking nights for people staying there and as soon as

you meet a local person, you have access to information. I was talking to one of my clients on a market tour, and she was telling me that she weaves and works with yarns and fabrics. Immediately I gave her the names of yarn shops and fabric museums in the area. Staying on these properties, you have a family to help you. They know who does the wine tours, who does bike tours, who runs hot air balloon tours.



Retrobottega



Cinte Senese

they raise pigs (www.cintasenese.blogspot.com; (39) 348 354 5201).

DOI: Is there anything that is brand new in Chianti? Any trends you're seeing?

JWF: There are so many possibilities. A lot of people now are doing bike tours or vespa tours, tours in a horse carriage... Alternative, in-depth

More than 100 million peo

IN CHIANTI

One of my favorite B&Bs is *Fattoria Poggio Alloro* (www.fattoriapoggioalloro.com), which overlooks *San Gimignano* and a working farm run by a lovely family. Another favorite place to stay is in *Radda in Chianti* and called *Hotel San Niccolo* (www.hotelsanniccolo.com). There's even a spa in town you can visit.

DOI: Do you have any fun ideas for spots to see or experiences to have?

JWF: We have a fun alpaca farm called *La Valle degli Alpaca* (www.lavalledeglialpaca.com). A lot of people want to go to a farm where there are animals. There are alpacas around, some companies take them hiking with you! There are so many outdoor things and they're adding on more and more. We also have Dr. Nora at *Chianti Cashmere*



Alpacas

(www.chianticashmere.com) — she has a farm, she lets you interact with her goats and has beautiful products for sale. (Nora and her goats were big stars in the Tuscany episode of our PBS series.)

When I first came here I started teaching cooking classes in 1988 and everybody thought I was crazy. And now, everybody and their dog is teaching cooking! It's great because you have more contact with the people. When people go back home,

the best thing that they did on their trips always remains the contact they have with the people.

Market tours, cooking classes, to be in someone's kitchen, and experience where you are spending the day with somebody is really a



Toscana Ebike

rare opportunity. Maybe you can't do an entire week of these activities, but if you do this sort of thing at the beginning of the trip, having that first contact with somebody is your best investment in a trip!

DOI: Sure, then you can get inspiration for the rest of your trip too, right?

JWF: Definitely! You are with them for three to five hours so you have access to those people for so much information. They send you where *they* love to go!

DOI: How else can people cultivate relationships with local people and get the inside scoop?

JWF: Go out to breakfast! You could do a big American breakfast in your Airbnb, but going to a coffee bar every day, once for a coffee, once for a sandwich... when they see you more than once they love to see you and are so happy to see you each time. I know it's cheaper for a family to eat at home,



but it's wonderful to make these connections with people at the local coffee shops.

DOI: What's something you'd tell visitors not to miss?

JWF: I always suggest going to a market day. There's a huge one in *Siena*, one in my little village *Certaldo*. The weekly market days are when you see how a city lives, local food products, kitchen gadgets, tablecloths, napkins and towels... Fun local shopping really adds to your experience. Even hitting a grocery store for some treats to take home. These things are not new, but there is more access to these events now, like new wine festivals, new oil festivals or *sagra*.

People don't think about these local events and parades when they are planning their trip, but being at a place on a special holiday is always a focal point of the trip. Another favorite activity of mine is dropping by *Il Canto di*



Il Canto di Baccio

Baccio (www.laspinosa.it/enotecacanto-baccio/) in the main square of *Barberino Valdelsa*. It's an *enoteca* and a great spot to sample the local wines and small plates.

1€ = \$1.13 at press time

ple visit Tuscany each year.

“AS YOU LOOK AROUND HIS SHOP, YOU WILL SEE THE ANTIQUE SEWING MACHINE THAT HE STILL USES ALONG WITH THE OLD CUTTING TABLE COVERED IN SCRAPS OF SILK AND WOOL THAT ALL HAVE A STORY BEHIND THEM.”

with others inspired him to restore part of his family home into a bed and breakfast where you can stay right in the heart of San Gusmè in one



Sheryl Ness

Borgo San Gusmè

of the most picturesque squares of the village. Choose from one of two beautiful apartments that each sleep four. Each one is preserved with antiques from his family and reflect the details of traditional Tuscan charm. The views from the windows will make you feel instantly as if you are living in a dream, with the vineyards and olive groves nestled into the rolling hills of the

Vezio Lusini

The next person to meet in San Gusme is *Vezio Lusini*. Vezio is now over 90 years old and still works in his little shop tucked away in the corner of *Piazza Castelli* in San Gusmè every day, except Sundays. You'll see a little sign "Sarto", which means tailor, just next to the old door. Vezio has a prestigious history, once working as a designer in Paris and Milan for Valentino. However, if you ask him what his most important work in life has been, his response will always be, "I love caring for and preserving the history of this village."

He has worked so hard as a tailor that his back is curved from bending over the sewing machine. If you walk into his shop, his eyes will light up as he greets you with open arms and immediately starts updating you on the local happenings. As you look around his shop, you will see the antique sewing machine that he still uses along with the old cutting table covered in scraps of silk and wool that all have a story behind them.

People still travel from all over the area to have him create designs for them. He makes custom dresses and suits and is also the primary

designer and creator of the traditional robes, drapes, and decorations for the religious processions and celebrations that take place within the village.

His pride is the ancient Church of the Holy Annunciation, which is from the 14th century. If you ask to see the church, Vezio is the one with the key. He will likely take you on a tour of a

lifetime, giving you all of the details of the church, the altarpiece, crypt and artwork with hundreds of years of history. Vezio is the caretaker of the church, watching over her like a beautiful treasure. He regularly cleans the floors and dusts the benches, gathers flowers for the church altar, and makes sure that it is ready for any festival or special ceremony.

When his shop is open, you will see that the glass doors have a light shining from within, and the shadow of Vezio working on a project in the background.

—Sheryl Ness

Sheryl Ness lived in the Chianti area for several years with her husband, Vincenzo who is a chef. She is the author of Love in a Tuscan Kitchen: Savoring Life Through the Romance, Recipes and Traditions of Italy available on Amazon in Kindle and softcover format.



Sheryl Ness

Vezio in his shop



Lorenzo Vanni

Lorenzo and Dani

checking on you each day, making sure you have what you need, and even inviting you to enjoy a glass of wine in their beautiful garden behind the village.

To meet Lorenzo, find out more at www.borgosangusme.com



Lorenzo Vanni

Interior of Church



There are five rivers that run through *Chianti*.