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DREAM OF ITALY[®]

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Ascoli Piceno

TOWERS,
TRAVERTINE
and OLIVES

STUNNING NEW PLACES TO STAY ■ ARIA: MODERN DINING IN NAPLES

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Editor's Note



Throughout this strange time in the world, I've always felt that Italy is poised for another Renaissance, a re-birth. I'm thrilled to report that despite the state of things, in this past year, a number of new hotels and accommodations have opened their doors.

My friend Jane Fullerton Lemons rounds up nine new places to stay in this issue. I have to admit I have my eye on a few of them to visit on my next trip. Umbrian gem *Castello di Reschio* is one of Italy's new hot luxury properties and I spotted Instagram posts from both Gwyneth Paltrow and Kate Hudson on their visits there this summer. Plus, Jane explores the new choices in Venice, Florence and Rome, including some very affordable options.

I have yet to personally visit *Ascoli Piceno* in *Le Marche* but so many of my friends recommend it, including Valerie Fortney, who penned the article in this issue. You may remember reading a family story and mouthwatering recipe for the town's famous *olive all'ascolana* (stuffed and fried olives) in the June/July 2019 issue. Many come here for the fried food but also for the towers. In its heyday, *Ascoli* had hundreds of imposing travertine towers, and there are about 50 left today.

Bella Napoli always has so many layers to peel back, and my friend and *Campania* expert Danielle Oteri has found another one with the new modern fine-dining restaurant *Aria*. Even seasoned foodies will revel in the sophisticated menu, which goes beyond traditional Neapolitan food and presents an artfully crafted menu. The chef, *Paolo Barrale*, mixes his native Italian cuisine with his love for Japanese food to create inventive fusion dishes alongside Italian classics. Another reason to visit Naples!

I always welcome your feedback and ideas.

Email me at kathy@dreamofitaly.com

Kathy McCabe

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With Renaissance *palazzi*, art-festooned churches, more towers than *San Gimignano* and a *piazza* heralded as one of Italy's most beautiful, *Ascoli Piceno* lacks nothing, except for crowds. The provincial city in southern *Le Marche* may be little-known, but its travertine splendor and aura of elegance make a big, eye-popping first impression.

ASCOLI PICENO

TOWERS, TRAVERTINE

and OLIVES

by Valerie Fortney

The well-preserved *centro storico* is classy, but also loved and lived-in by its residents—a playground, workspace, open air museum, marketplace and gathering spot all at once. *Ascoli Piceno* sits just a few miles from the *Abruzzo* border, along the ancient Roman road *Via Salaria*, and is cradled in a valley between the *Tronto* River and *Castellana* stream, making it easy to get around on foot or bike. Or take the easy route to hit the highlights by hopping aboard the *trenino* tram tour that chugs around the old town for a quick overview.

MORE ANCIENT THAN ROME

The *Ascolani* proudly proclaim to anyone who will listen that *Ascoli e più antica di Roma*—*Ascoli* is more ancient than Rome. They're right, of course. The city and surrounding area had a thriving civilization populated by the *Piceni* people, who controlled much of what is now *Le Marche* and northern *Abruzzo* from the 11th to the third centuries BC, long before Rome was founded. It was the Romans, however, who gave the city its first dose of prosperity and much of its current street plan.

The core of the *centro storico* still lines up with the original Roman grid-like streets, but there is enough influence from the Middle Ages to offer lots of intriguing narrow alleyways to delight the senses as you wander around. (You can also pick out Roman inscriptions in the medieval buildings, as the Romans scavenged the blocks and columns from the Roman amphitheater, *teatro* and forum.)

The entire city is built in travertine stone, giving *Ascoli Piceno* such a uniform and stately appearance that it looks downright refined. Grandiose palaces and civic buildings, Romanesque churches and looming towers were all constructed in the stone. Those towers were all the rage in the Middle Ages.

Ascoli is called the “city of a hundred towers,” though in its prime the skyline positively bristled like a stone forest with 200 skyward-reaching towers. That was, until 1242 when Frederick II ordered half of them to be cut down. Others were turned into bell towers or shortened, or incorporated into surrounded buildings, so about 50 are discernible today. The most impressive are found in the northwestern part of the old town.

The entire city is delightful to wander, with lots of details to take in. Here are some of the highlights:



Piazza del Popolo

LA BELLISSIMA PIAZZA DEL POPOLO

Start your visit to *Ascoli* off with a bang in the magnificent *Piazza del Popolo* and you'll easily see why even Italian visitors stop in their tracks and gasp. The Renaissance square is equally dazzling in the sunlight and moonlight, as each plays differently on the smooth, shiny travertine and colonnades. It's also the heart of *Ascoli's* nightly *passaggiata*, and is the town's greatest gathering spot. It's the scene of the raucous *Carnevale* festivities, a monthly antiques market, summer concerts and open-air operas.

The impressive *Palazzo dei Capitani* dominates the west end, frequently hosting art exhibits or special events. Dash inside to see the lovely three-tiered courtyard of *loggias*. Next to the entrance is a door leading down to Roman ruins below.

The *piazza's* appearance remains unchanged from the Renaissance era, with the distinct exception of *Caffè Meletti*, originally built as a post office in 1880. It remains the city's most popular and posh place to meet for drinks. The house specialty is their *Meletti anisetta*, a great after-dinner liqueur or a “corrective” in coffee. All the fixtures and seating are original, installed when *Silvio Meletti* opened the café in 1903.



Valerie Fortney returned to her roots in the region of *Basilicata* where she is a freelance writer and professional genealogist. She's the author of the book *52 Things to Do in Basilicata*. For more on Valerie and her work, visit www.mybellabasilicata.com



Non Senza Fatiga (Not Without Fatigue)

The monumental church of *San Francesco* flanks the *piazza's* north side, giving the square a stately skyline of two towering belfries and dome. Started in 1258, the massive church wasn't finished until 1549, and if you look closely you can see slight color variations in the stone indicating the different periods of construction. The elaborate Gothic entrance bears elegantly carved travertine; some looks delicate and lace-like, and other pieces are solid roaring lions or graceful columns. The interior is austere, but the stained-glass windows tell tales, including some that portray recent events, like the Nazi occupation during World War II.

The church has two anomalies. Near the main door are quirky columns that look like organ pipes. They're the "singing columns," worn smooth from generations of *Ascolani* who make them chime by hitting them with their hands; give it a try. Another is under the *loggia*, a tablet that bears the exact dimensions for all the tiles and bricks used in constructing the church, a handy template erected in 1569 for future repairs.

A ROAD OF PALAZZI

Corso Mazzini slices through town from west to east and is littered with loads of splashy Renaissance-era palaces, some sedate and some festooned with adornments. Take a stroll to see the styles and the details. Some of the most grandiose are in the eastern flank of the street, where carved angels, and decorative windows and portals, are the norm.

Palazzo Malaspina is one of the most impressive, built by a powerful wool merchant family. Stand across the street and look up at the *loggia* above, where the pillars are carved to resemble tree trunks. Another anomaly: The carved notch in the cornerstone is reputed to have been

the owner's punishment for murder. (He surely learned his lesson from that stiff penalty!)

THE TALKING WALLS

A unique feature around here are the "walls that speak," so be on the lookout for the inscriptions as you meander the medieval streets. There are dozens of mottoes and maxims engraved above the doorways, a fad here in the Middle Ages, with some in Latin and some in vernacular. A few are whimsical, while others are ironic or exude pearls of wisdom. For example: "It is difficult to be liked by many." And, "Not without fatigue." Another: "Sit not on the stoop."

PIAZZA ARRINGO

More sedate than *Piazza del Popolo* but no less used and enjoyed, its focal point is the dominating *Duomo* and next-door temple-like octagonal Baptistry. The Roman forum was located here, and like that ancient space, *Piazza Arringo* still serves the city's religious, political, cultural and commercial functions. Flanking the south side is the *Palazzo dell'Aringo*, the town hall, while two beloved fountains playfully spurt water in front of it, where young and old alike take turns drinking from the bronze seahorses.

The *palazzo* is home to a fine art museum, while the arch next to the cathedral leads to the Diocesan Museum with sacred art. Across the *piazza* is the Archeology Museum, well worth a look for the Piceni and Roman artifacts, including marvelous mosaics.

The cathedral's austere façade doesn't prepare you for the artistic splendor within, so step inside and feast your eyes on the resplendent, vibrant frescoes; scalloped bays; and lines of columns, each capped with a differently carved capital. The side chapel, *Cappella del Santo Sacramento*, holds a glorious polyptych by Venetian painter *Carlo Crivelli*, in its original frame and setting, a masterpiece that still inspires the *Ascolani*. You see, the costumes for *La Quintana* are authentically tailored using *Crivelli's* renderings of period dress.



La Quintana

La Quintana (www.quintanadiascoli.it) is an annual *Palio* event that pits the six *sestiere* of Ascoli against each other for bragging rights and the prized *Palio* drape. They compete in archery, flag throwing and more, but it all culminates in the rousing joust, a high-energy beloved horse race, which is preceded by an opulent parade in period costumes by representatives of each district. Plan your visit in July or August to see it.

Do go downstairs to the crypt with its forest of columns and Roman ruins, along with a memorial to *Sant'Emidio*, who is the city's patron saint and protector against destructive earthquakes.

THE CITY GATES

Ascoli Piceno retains many of its ancient gates intact, each different and beautiful in its own way. The entry points to the city from each direction would have been closed at night and in times of peril. *Porta Gemina* and *Porta Romana* nest next to each other on the western side of the old town, the ancient Roman gate and the “newer” medieval one. Parts of the walls were destroyed to make room for cars, but they're still lovely. Just inside the walls to the right are the remains of the Roman theater.

Porta Tufila is along the *Tronto* on the north side, maybe the most decorative with its triple-arcade *loggia* above the single archway below, and is especially pretty at night. The southern gate, *Porta Catara*, is no more, but the bridge that fed through it was actually an aqueduct, the upper part of which was destroyed by the Germans in WWII. Look down below the bridge road surface and you can see the aqueduct arches. *Porta Solestà* is at the beginning of the *Ponte Romano* bridge leading across the river and the oldest gate. The bridge, incidentally, was built by Emperor Augustus and hides a secret passageway inside.



Ponte Romano

CROSS THE BRIDGE

The ancient bridge *Ponte Romano* (also called *Ponte Augusteo*) was the only one not bombed by the retreating German forces during WWII. Pass under the *Solestà* Gate and venture across the bridge to gaze back across on one of the best views of medieval *Ascoli Piceno* and its towers.

The panoramic vantage point gives you the ancient gate, several of the stone towers and beyond the city, *Colle San Marco*, the hill that skirts the border with *Abruzzo*. On the *Solestà* side of the bridge is the old *lavatoio*, the antique washing basins; this particular one is also said to have been the spring where patron saint *Emidio* baptized many converts.

TWIN TOWERS AND MORE

A pair of medieval towers is naturally dubbed “*le torri gemelle*” or the twin towers, so head to *Piazza Sant'Agostino* to view the duo of medieval skyscrapers,

WHERE TO STAY

Albergo Sant'Emidio offers the perfect location on a quiet lane just three steps off the *Piazza Arringo* in the heart of Ascoli—close to everything but tranquil and restful. All 21 rooms have fluffy towels, comfortable beds and air conditioning with muted but pretty décor. Some rooms come with terraces, and some have jet tubs to soothe the sore muscles after walking around town. Rates for a double room start at 65€ a night, with breakfast. (39) 0736 258626; www.albergosantemidio.it

In the medieval streets of town mingled among the towers, the **Hotel Residenza Cento Torri** is a four-star property in a beautifully renovated building with one of those pared-down towers. It's a quieter part of town but an easy walk to everything and rooms are beautifully appointed with wood floors, wood-beamed ceilings and period charm. You can also enjoy all the modern comforts and amenities you want, including a pillow menu and air conditioning. There's also parking, and the next-door *residenza* offers apartments in a more modern building for those wanting more space and kitchens. Rates for a double room start at 89€ per night, with breakfast. (39) 0736 255123; www.centotorri.com

that are among the easiest to find—and photograph. One leans noticeably. While you're here, pop inside the Church of *Sant'Agostino*, which holds the beloved *Madonna della Pace* (Madonna of Peace), a much-venerated 14th-century painting of a breastfeeding Mary that has continually mediated peaceful resolutions among factions and families through the centuries.

The street is conveniently called *Via delle Torri*, so walk down it towards the river until it ends and veer left onto *Via dei Soderini*, where you will see the tallest towers in town. Called the *Ercolani Tower*, it's the most intriguing, too, as together with the attached *Palazzo Longobardo*, they form a fine and unaltered example of how the wealthy constructed their homes and accompanying status-symbol towers.

It's one of the best-preserved examples of medieval architecture in the province. Note the interesting triangles



Ascoli olives



Fritto misto



Marini coffee with whipped cream

above the doors, which some say were Templar symbols (others hold they were just to disperse the weight). Across the street is another tower.

A stroll through this district yields lots of pretty corners and details, and some of those cut-down towers, if you keep your eyes open.

CAFÉ SCENE

This place is teeming with cool cafés that will make you want to sit and people watch while enjoying a glass of local *vino* or a *caffè* and pastry. The grand dame is deco-styled *Caffè Meletti*, which is a must at least once for coffee, aperitif or an after-dinner *anisetta*. Besides the frescoed *portico*, elegant arches and luscious interior, at *Meletti* even the bathrooms are special, as they contain Roman ruins encased below the glass vanity sinks!

But there are trendy contemporary-styled wine bars on both *piazas*, and homey old-timers, too, like *Bar Centrale*, a stalwart that still attracts the elderly gents for a game of *scopa*, and a daily round of regulars for their morning *caffè* and evening beer or *vino*. Around the corner is *Caffè Sestili*, an historic local that has been restyled but still serves pretty pastries, a good selection of teas, wine with nice tidbits and light lunches.

Facing *Piazza Roma*, the unassuming sign just says “Bar,” but step inside the *Latteria Marini* and indulge in a decadent dollop of whipped cream on a thick, fudgy hot chocolate or *caffè Viennese*. Known for their dairy goods, another treat is a *maritozzi*, a sweet roll filled with whipped cream. If your taste runs to chocolate, then get thee to *Yoghi* on *Piazza Arringo*, where the *gelati* and homemade candies are chocolate heaven.

ASCOLI OLIVES AND FRITTO MISTO

What's not to love about a giant olive that is stuffed with meat and deep-fried? The premise of *olive all'ascolana* sounds like a strange, not-very-Italian specialty, but it is the beloved contribution of *Ascoli Piceno* to the culinary world. They use the *ascolana* variety of olives, grown in the hills outside the city, hand-carve the fruit from the pit, then wrap it around a mix of savory meats.

They're definitely addictive, and the kick-off to every celebration in *Ascoli*, from birthdays to baptisms and every holiday of the year. Give them a taste. They go alongside the other fried fare, such as the *cremini* custard that is battered. Strange but good. They also serve up a *fritto misto*, or mixed fry, as a main dish that pairs meat like lamb chops with zucchini and artichokes, all fried, of course. The city hosts an annual summer festival dedicated to *fritto misto* that brings in hungry foodies from all over the world. If you want to make your own, find a family recipe in the June/July 2019 issue of *Dream of Italy*.

It is easy to stop at the *piazza*-side stand in *Piazza Arringo*, but as their *olive* (oh-LEE-vay) are made in a factory, I recommend moving on and getting a cone of them at the hole-in-the-wall shop in *Piazza del Popolo*, called *180 Gradi*. Another good choice is *Siamo Fritti* (*Piazza Simonetti*, 87), a cute wine bar and (what else?!) fried food paradise, just around the corner from *Piazza del Popolo*. Every restaurant in town serves them up, too.

These highlights barely scratch the surface of the *bellezze* and attractions here. Spend a few days and you will surely be hooked on awesome *Ascoli Piceno*. 🍷

9 NEW PLACES TO STAY IN ITALY

by Jane Fullerton Lemons

As we return to Italy, those looking for new hotel and villa experiences have some exciting Instagram-worthy options, from traditional Italian luxury to quirky urban retreats to restored family homes. These new offerings—from Piedmont in the north to *Puglia* in the south, from Rome to Florence to Venice—provide accommodations and hospitality at all price points. They come with a range of amenities from truffle hunting and horse riding to delicious dining and beach access. Check out these nine new properties welcoming guests.



BORGIO DI SOTTO

Nestled in the tiny Tuscan village of *Montefollonico* is *Borgio di Sotto*, a three-story 12th-century townhouse thoughtfully and sustainably restored by the family that has owned it for over a century. This was a five-year labor of love spearheaded by Lourée Maya and her husband, *Niccolo Pieranni*, whose family has lived there for generations. Family members and local artisans carried out the work, incorporating repurposed vintage wood, bricks and tile. The bed linens and curtains were handmade by *Niccolo's* grandmother.

Sustainability defines *Borgio di Sotto's* restoration and operation, focused on energy usage, water conservation and waste reduction.

Lourée brought her expertise as founder of *Kynder*, a travel platform that focuses on kind, eco-conscious hospitality.

The home, featuring stone walls and timber beams, can be booked for up to eight guests or split into separate accommodations. A Tuscan local organic breakfast is served on the first morning, with enough to last for the duration of the stay.

Rates for a room start at 125€ per night, with a two-night minimum. The entire house can be reserved from 275€ per night. (39) 39 338 4299820;

www.borgodisotto.com

CA' DI DIO

Ca' di Dio, at the entrance of Venice's *Arsenale* neighborhood, is a five-star hotel celebrating this city of contrasts with a timeless aesthetic that's both historic and modern. Set within a complex dating from the 13th century, famed architect and designer *Patricia Urquiola* drew inspiration



CURRENCY EXCHANGE: 1€ = \$1.18 at press time

from the Venice of hidden brick-lined alleys as well as the Venice of noble marble-filled palaces.

The location allows guests to stay in the contemporary art district, site of the *Venice Biennale*, with its prestigious international art and architecture exhibitions. And it's within easy walking distance to attractions such as *Piazza San Marco*.



Ca' di Dio features 66 rooms and suites, many with views of the Venetian lagoon and the Church of *San Giorgio Maggiore*. The décor include *Murano* glass lamps, marble-clad bathrooms and subtle color schemes. The hotel includes internal courtyards, two restaurants, a bar, a fully equipped gym and a tranquil reading hall.

Rates for a deluxe room start at 380€ and for suites at 1,690€, with breakfast. (39) 041 0980238;

www.vretreats.com/ca-di-dio



THE HOXTON ROME

The Hoxton Rome has opened in *Parioli*, the chic neighborhood within walking distance of *Villa Borghese*, as the latest location for the British hotel chain known for affordable hospitality with a clubby neighborhood vibe.

Retaining the dusty pink façade of the renovated '70s building it occupies, the hotel become popular with expats as a gathering spot for drinks, making it a good choice for travelers familiar with Rome who want to stay in a new-to-them neighborhood.

The 192 nonsmoking rooms are inspired by mid-century design and classic Italian cinema. Each is slightly different, with timber-wall paneling, parquet floors and statement headboards. Some rooms feature a terrace or *Murano* glass chandeliers salvaged during the restoration.



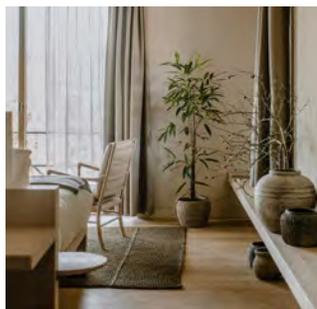
The signature Hoxton lobby is bright and open with a sweeping curved coffee bar, local marble and *terrazzo* and outdoor terrace. It's home to *Cugino*, an all-day café and bar run in collaboration with the delicious and popular local bakery *Marigold*. At the second restaurant, *The Beverly*, chef *Sara Levi* oversees a farm-to-table ethos with a West Coast American spirit.

Rates range from 129 to 309€ per night. (39) 06 94502700; www.thehoxton.com/rome



CASA DI LANGA

Overlooking 100 acres of working vineyards and rolling hills in Piedmont, *Casa di Langa* is an eco-friendly five-star hotel celebrating the prized food and wine of *Le Langhe*, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. With sweeping vistas of the Alps, this sustainable luxury hotel prides itself on energy, water, waste and biodiversity practices.



Drawing inspiration from the property's hazelnut orchard, vegetable garden and vineyard views, the 39 earth-toned rooms reflect a natural aesthetic with oak, *terra cotta*, stone, leather and glass. Each room features a private terrace and a spa-like

bathroom with rain shower. The hotel also includes the eco-luxury *Leløse Spa*, a heated infinity pool and a gym.

Guests can hunt the area's famous white truffles with specially trained *Lagotto* dogs and tour the hotel's world-class art collection. Or they can attend wine school to earn a Wine and Spirits Education Trust certification at the only hotel accredited in Italy. Given the location in Piedmont, birthplace of the Slow Food Movement, chef *Manuel Bouchard* emphasizes sustainable agriculture and "km zero" ingredients from the surrounding land.

Spring and summer rates start at 445€ for a classic room, including breakfast, parking and access to the spa's jacuzzi, sauna and gym. (39) 0173 520520;

www.casadilanga.com



CASTELLO DI RESCHIO

The hot Italian destination for celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, Anthony Hopkins, Kate Hudson and Robert Downey Jr. this summer was a 1,000-year-old castle that has been painstakingly transformed into the 36-room *Hotel Castello di Reschio* and with grounds that are home to nine renovated farmhouse rentals. Renowned architect *Count Benedikt Bolza* purchased the property, living there with his family before overseeing the design-driven restoration that relied on local builders, artisans and source materials.

All individually decorated rooms and most suites are inside the castle, overlooking the garden courtyard and rolling hills. Six suites are just outside the castle ramparts in the former vestry, while one suite is in the castle tower with a private roof garden, open-air tub and 360-degree views. Scattered throughout the 3,750-acre property are



the nine individual villas for rent, each with a pool and three to six bedrooms. The grounds are comprised of gardens, farmland, vineyards, stables, a lake and tennis courts.

The hotel's outdoor infinity pool lies flush with the surrounding grounds, while the castle's ancient wine cellars have been transformed into a Roman-style spa with an indoor saltwater pool. The property includes two bars and two restaurants that showcase vegetables, olive oil, honey and truffles sourced from the grounds. The pool bar is in the former watchtower.

Rates start at 760€ for a room and 1,010€ for a suite, including breakfast. (39) 075 844362; www.reschio.com



DIMORA PALANCA

In a restored 18th-century villa in Florence, *Dimora Palanca* brings together the best of classic architecture and contemporary design in its art-inspired, five-star accommodations.

As a home base for artists and adventurers since the 1800s, the boutique hotel is perfectly situated minutes from the central train station, *Santa Maria Novella*, and adjacent to the main tram line, giving modern travelers easy access to the city.

Architect *Stefano Viviani* and artist *Paolo Dovichi* collaborated on the renovation, where the 18 rooms and suites are bathed in soothing earth tones and steeped in innovative art. Throughout the four floors are historic frescoes, parquet floors and original stucco alongside contemporary art by *Dovichi*.

Tucked between the villa and its original orangery is a secluded garden, creating a tranquil oasis for a morning coffee or an afternoon spritz.



Rates for a double room start at 350€ for the low season and 590€ for the high season, including breakfast. (39) 055 0317816; www.dimorapalanca.com



IL TORNABUONI

For those seeking a room with a view in Florence, *Il Tornabuoni* offers suites overlooking some of the city's most iconic sights, including the *Duomo*, the *Ponte Vecchio* and the *Arno River*.

The five-star hotel sits inside the 12th-century *Palazzo Minerbetti* along *Via Tornabuoni*, the fashion street famous for its exclusive boutiques showcasing Italy's most familiar designer brands.

Il Tornabuoni is an unabashed tribute to the Renaissance. The 62 rooms and suites, across five floors, are dressed in a jewel-toned palette including vibrant teal, sunny yellow and energetic vermillion. They feature custom-designed wallpaper and lush fabrics. Notably, most rooms include two double beds. The hotel also offers a fitness center.



The hotel boasts several dining options. *Il Magnifico Restaurant & Bistrot*, on the ground floor, highlights Tuscan traditions and local ingredients under the direction of Executive Chef *Massimiliano Mandozzi*.

Heading upstairs, the emerald-toned *Lucie* restaurant is located on the fourth floor. It opens to *The Butterfly Terrace*, a rooftop bar with views of the city skyline. In addition, there is the *Il Magnifico Café & Champagne Bar* along with *The Cave* wine cellar.

Rates start at 340€ for a classic room, including breakfast. (39) 055 212645; www.iltornabuonihotel.it



MAMA SHELTER ROME

The quirky French hotel chain Mama Shelter has opened its first location in Italy, *Mama Roma*, just minutes away from the Vatican in Rome's upscale *Prati* neighborhood. The chain's characteristic witty design and energetic spirit are on display throughout the urban refuge, from the mosaic floors to the ceiling artwork by French artist *Benilloys*.

Located in the art nouveau district along the Tiber's right bank, *Mama Roma* caters to both travelers and locals with its accessible hospitality and affordable prices. It offers modular meeting rooms, including some with foosball tables, arcade games and sound systems.

The hotel comprises 217 rooms in three sizes, some with balconies. All come with luxury linens, organic toiletries, smart TVs and free movies. The hotel's signature masks of characters such as Spider-Man and Darth Vader hang on bedside lampshades. *Mama Roma* also has a spa, an indoor pool, a sauna, a steam room and a gym.

Dining options include the *Giardino d'Inverno* and a pizzeria with an island bar where DJs regularly play sets. The rooftop bar, with a private solarium, provides sweeping views of St. Peter's Basilica.

Rates start at 119€, including breakfast. (39) 06 94538900; www.mamashelter.com/roma

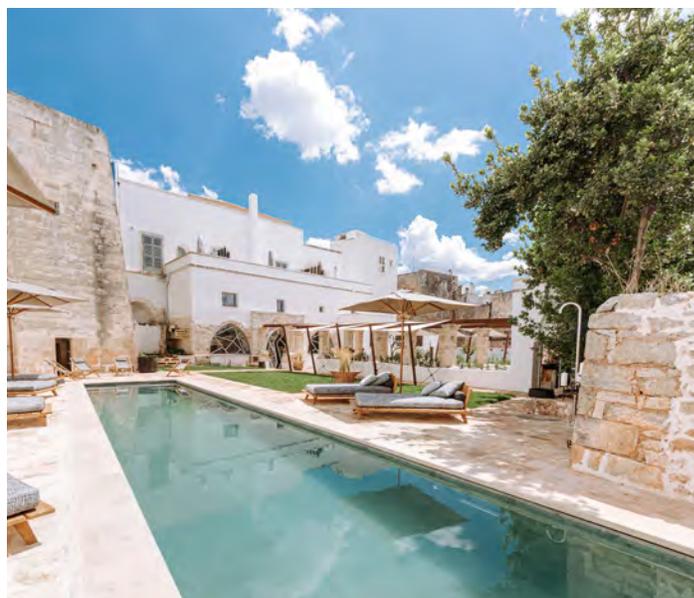


PARAGON 700

Paragon 700 stands out as the striking red hotel in the "white city" of *Ostuni*, perched on a hill in the city center overlooking the Adriatic in southern Italy's *Puglia* region.

The 18th-century *Palazzo Rosso*—the red palace—has been renovated to house the quirky boutique hotel and spa.

The red carriage doors open to eclectic interiors featuring *majolica* tiles, Roman-style columns and original frescoes. The 11 individually decorated rooms and suites feature custom-made headboards, sunken bathtubs and parquet floors. The ambience reflects the professional design and personal travels of owners *Pascale Lauber* and *Ulrike Bauschke*, with a multicultural mix of objects from



art shows and antique fairs around the world.

The hotel emphasizes sustainability and wellness. The *palazzo's* ancient water cistern has been transformed into a spa. The seasonal outdoor pool is the only one in *Ostuni*, while the private garden is the largest in town. Guests can enjoy the nearby sandy beaches at Paragon 700's beach club.

Chef *Giacomo Simone* features local and seasonal cuisine at Restaurant 700, where an old olive press holds court as a dining table. Lounge Bar 700, where carved wooden monkeys stand guard at either end of the bar, offers cocktails inspired by iconic films.

Rates start at 300€ per room with breakfast. (39) 0831 369219; www.paragon700.com



Jane Fullerton Lemons, an award-winning journalist, is currently at work on the forthcoming guidebook, *Soaking Up the Tuscan Sun: The Insider's Guide to Cortona*.

Aria

MODERN DINING IN NAPLES

By Danielle Oteri

While it's no secret that Naples is one of Italy's best food destinations, most set their plans around discovering the best pizza, seafood and *ragù*. *Aria*, a new fine-dining restaurant, offers a luxurious fever dream that could only exist in this city of contradictions.

Located on the corner of *Via Loggia dei Pisani*, it takes me a minute to notice the elegant gold placard in the glorious chaos of *Napoli*. Dancing quote marks are the first hint that everything to come beyond *Aria*'s doors will be both precise and surprising.

The first step inside the door lands me in the reception area that immediately dampens the buzz of the city. The host greets us, then our table captain arrives to give us a tour of the space. The dining rooms make me feel like I have box seats to a culinary opera. (*Teatro San Carlo*, the world's oldest continuously functioning opera house, is a short walk away.) I also imagine that I'm in the dining room of a

patrician in *Pompeii*, if modern design could be transported back to the first century on the Vesuvian coast.

After we're greeted and given a tour of the restaurant and the kitchen where not a toothpick is out of place, I'm seated in a sumptuous leather chair with a privileged view of the dining room. Given how obvious it is that every detail has been considered and resolved, I surrender myself to the kitchen and choose the complete tasting menu with wine and cocktail pairings.

Created by chef *Paolo Barrale*, *Aria*'s philosophy is rooted in *Campania*'s traditions, but then expressed in the most modern ways. *Barrale* comes from *Marennà*,



the Michelin-starred restaurant at *Feudi di San Gregorio* winery in nearby *Irpinia*. He brings with him *Mario Stellato* as sous chef. *Barrale* envisioned *Aria* as a stage for a completely new concept of cuisine, which, like Naples, is irreverent, sacred, profane, poor, rich, amusing and amazing. *Aria* tells this story, but with levity and humor. *Spiritoso* is the word I think to describe it—playful—in a very Neapolitan way.

An early course is a tiny bunch of escarole, spattered with crushed walnuts and positioned at the end of a long bowl designed for you to scoop the escarole through a small puddle of soy mayonnaise. The humble escarole, so delicately tied together at the bottom, speaks to the heart of Neapolitans (and anyone from the Neapolitan diaspora) while the soy mayonnaise nods at Japanese cuisine, the one foreign cuisine that proud and stubborn Neapolitans love and respect.

Soon after, a bread course includes crackers made with *strutto*

Aria
 Via Loggia dei Pisani, 2
 Naples
 (39) 081 8430195
 www.ariarestaurant.it
 A dinner for two averages
 180€ with wine.



Focaccia with lardo

(lard), and in the shape of a pig. With it comes a cushion of *focaccia* draped with veils of cured *lardo*, and butter made with milk from a breed of cow raised in organic pastures in *Campania*. Next, I'm served a *crudo* of hamachi, followed by a long-simmered veal, compacted, breaded and deep fried. None of these things seem to follow or match, except they do, brilliantly, because that's what happens when creativity meets skill at the highest levels.

Barrale's own admiration for Japanese cuisine appears in "ramen *alla norma*" pasta (also an ode to his native Sicily) with eggplant broth and small white cubes of *ricotta* made with almond milk. I start giggling when the table captain tells me what we're about to have next,

because I've never experienced anything comparable. The food, the wine and cocktail interludes, and the warm and uber-capable staff are making me fall even harder for Naples.

I fully bliss out and forget much of what happened after a dish of *risotto* and oysters. Instead of the starch holding the rice together, it's the juice of the oysters, kissed with lemon. It tastes like a love letter from the sea.

The most *spiritoso* bite comes with dessert and an homage to the nearby *Cimitero delle Fontanelle*. A tiny skull, polished and then filled with a pineapple cream, tells the story of Neapolitan women who adopt the skulls that become unearthed in the cemetery in hopes that they'll impart winning lottery numbers. It could only happen in Naples.



Ramen alla norma

There are other fine-dining restaurants in Naples, but *Aria* is a singular dining experience that should be immediately added to any foodie bucket list. Yes, Naples is *pizza frita* and laundry-draped alleys, but it is also the capital of southern Italy, a cultured city that isn't ashamed of its rougher edges, but is nonetheless tired of an excessive focus on them. *Aria* will no doubt turn the heads of the most seasoned and sophisticated travelers. 🌿



Danielle Oteri is an art history lecturer, writer and co-founder of Feast On History tours in South Italy and Arthur Avenue Food Tours in the Bronx, NY. For more information, visit www.feastonhistory.com

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