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Food & Drink

Slow business

Cookery course
Natalie Whittle savours an immersion in the gastronomy of Tuscany

The lid of the pan rattles gently on the stove-top, jiggling with the fragrant steam of the ragù. Pink peppercorns, juniper berries, cloves, laurel and bay leaves commingle with the meat, and fill the kitchen air alluringly. Chef Roberto Bruno deftly flips up the wooden spoon he has tucked into the lid handle to check inside the pot. It's not ready. With this dish, the slower the heat, the better the ragù.

The meat in this ragù is capriolo, or venison, but as this is Tuscany, it might equally be cinghiale, or wild boar, which roams the nearby woodlands of the Val d'Orcia, hovering up almost everything that's edible, from nuts and grapes to olives. (They are hunted from November to January but wind up in shop jars of ragù year round.)

This southern corner of Tuscany is not just boar country. It's also home to an old Tuscan pig breed – cinghiale sene – so named for the "belt" of white bristles around its front haunches. It became endangered in the 1970s but has since been revived, and makes for nutty-flavoured hams, hanging plentifully from deli ceilings in Pienza, along side salty wheels of pecorino.

Castiglione del Trinoro, the village where chef Roberto works at the Oreade restaurant attached to Hotel Monteverdi, has itself enjoyed a revival in recent years. On a map of Tuscany it certainly looks well positioned, near the middle of nowhere, to stay quietly recessed in an older, slower Italian life. To reach it from Termini station in Rome (there are quicker routes), I take a train north to Chiusi, from where a hairpin drive winds up to Castiglione's narrow, dirt-track streets, first established in the 14th century.

Hotel Monteverdi took root here in 2006, when Michael Cioffi, a Cincinnati lawyer who had fallen for Tuscany Renaissance idylls, started



Clockwise from top: the view from the cafe-entoteca at Castiglione del Trinoro; local salami and cheese; head chef Giancarlo Bodoni

Women barter over cheese and old men sit in the clichéd tableaus of 'dolce far niente'

buying and renovating apartments, opening an *albergo diffuso* – a hotel with a number of buildings scattered around the village. Monteverdi now comprises 10 rooms and three villas, and though its luxury march had an uneasy local welcome at first, it has brought employment, hiring 20 people in the past two years.

This year it is launched with its own "cooking academy", a five-day immersion into the food and drink of the area, through cookery lessons for Tuscan dishes, restaurant and vineyard visits, and dinners at Oreade. Practical instruction will take place in the Mura Antiche villa

– the largest and grandest of the three in the village – which overlooks the Val d'Orcia. The valley was made a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2004 and, from the skirts of the village, it rolls out in a broad, impressive vista, with lines of cypresses marking discreet villas. Chef Roberto, who works under head chef Giancarlo Bodoni, gave me a quick taster of the course. Together we make the ragù and the local pasta speciality, *pici*. First (good) olive oil in a pan, then carrot, onion and celery, minced in a

moist legume. The meat, marinated overnight with herbs and spices, joins too, and is left to dry out on a medium heat, until just sticking to the pan. It's then deglazed with a long, half-bottle jug of red wine, and left to simmer with lobes of hot water, a dash of tomato concentrate and the pink peppercorns.

The *pici* are harder. White flour, from a local organic mill, is mixed with an egg (not essential, but Roberto recommends it) and a little water to form a loosely worked dough that's wrapped and rested in the fridge for 10 minutes. We then pinch off walnut-size pieces and roll them under our fingers into spindly lengths – the *pici* – also known as *pinci* in Montalcino and *ambrietti* in Umbria. They sit in a tray of rice flour to take shape (it doesn't stick to the surface of the pasta, so it helps to separate each strand). The *pici* rest again in the fridge till dinner, when the ragù is at last ready after simmering for an hour or so. With the excellent wines bought direct from the winemakers, such as Tenuta Valdipiatta or Mité Brunello, it makes for a simple and easily replicable dinner.

In the morning light, Monteverdi's village empire is subtly marked: there is a little wooden plaque outside reception, and a breakfast bar-cum-entoca that replaced a *sale e olio* (salt and oil) stand. The exterior – crumbling stone, terracotta roofs and heavy wooden doors – are

untouched (though fashionably reimagined inside). In summer a high-end American wedding planner brings chic nuptials to the tiny Sant'Andrea church, and a film festival – led by frequent guest, film director Wes Anderson – is rumoured for next year.

Food itself is a permanent spectacle. In nearby Sarteano, the weekly street market traders slice through huge, crisp buns of *rustic panettone*, confectioners ply hot, fresh *pistachio* and caramel into slabs of chewy brittle, and chestnuts are flame-roasted and rolled in red wine. The women barter over cheese and old men sit in the clichéd tableaux of *dolce far niente*, sipping wine. Unlike the ragù, you simply can't recreate these scenes at home.

The writer was a guest of the hotel. The Monteverdi Cooking Academy takes place between April 2-7 2015, and October 26-31 2015. For details, visit monteverdituscany.com.

Tasty not tipsy

Jancis Robinson
Wine

Vine-growers in the southern hemisphere are grappling with their earliest vintage ever, just one more effect of climate change. For us wine drinkers, the most striking effect has been the rise in alcohol levels. Hotter summers have played a key part in boosting average percentages of alcohol from roughly 12-12.5 in the 1980s to 13.5-14.5 today.

Growers have observed to their dismay that grapes have been accumulating the sugars that ferment into alcohol much faster than they have been accumulating all the interesting elements that result in a wine's flavour, colour and tannins – the phenolics. Who wants to drink a wine that can offer little other than alcohol? Some Australian producers have reacted by simply picking grapes earlier and bottling wines with lower alcohols and higher acidities – but there can be a shortage of flavour.

A more popular ploy, particularly in warmer regions, has been to keep grapes much longer on the vine while the phenolics catch up, even waiting until they start shrivelling into raisins. Then add it to a common practice for grapes ripened under an unhelpful sun – and the wine is subject to arguably intrusive techniques to reduce the alcohol.

Not all growers are happy with this. Some have been experimenting with cunningly timed irrigation that pushes phenolic ripening closer to sugar ripening. But wine regions afflicted by this problem tend to be short of water, so this hardly seems a long-term solution. Others believe adding water to the finished wine makes more sense than adding water to vines.

Michel Chapoutier of the Rhône Valley, for example, has stated that, in hot vintages, many a Châteauneuf-du-Pape could be improved by judicious "humidification". The Chileans, concerned about increasingly potent grape musts, have recently altered their wine regulations to allow up to 7 per cent water to be added (although winemakers can be sent to jail for doing so in Argentina). Adding water, within limits, has long been allowed in California, and is permitted in Australia, "as an aid to mixing an additive". It does with the aim of making a better-balanced wine, I have no objection.

It seems more sensible than expensive techniques such as the spinning cone and reverse osmosis, which are practised for Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon, for example – though the especially cold and wet 2011 vintages resulted in wines that were much less ripe than usual.

I recently met a newcomer to the Napa Valley with other ideas about how to solve the ripening problem. Philippe Bascaille arrived at Francis Ford Coppola's historic Inglenook winery from Bordeaux's Château Margaux in 2011. After observing the two more

normal, succeeding vintages, he believes that better-balanced wine would result if the vines could be persuaded to ripen earlier. To that end, he has changed the pruning schedule completely. Napa growers generally prune later than their French counterparts, in February and March, to minimise the risk of frost blighting young buds and to halt the spread of vine trunk diseases. But Bascaille, who has presumably been given a blank cheque by Coppola, insists, "I don't see this thinking that we have to ensure the health of the vines. The focus should be the quality of the wine".

After trials with the 2013 and 2014 harvests, all his vines are being pruned from December and he has every confidence they will ripen, with good phenolics, in late August or September, much earlier than his neighbours. "I'm convinced that day length is very

Low in alcohol, high in flavour

I firmly recommend all of these wines, which happen to be lower in alcohol than they taste.

- White
- Sweeter German Rieslings (7-9%)
- Vinho Verde (9-11%)
- Jancis Peizer 2013 Rousserte de Bugey (12%). Vine Trail Q tasted only the 2012
- Enrich Schönleber, Mineral Riesling Premier Cru 2012 Chablis (12%). ERB a dozen in bond. Lay & Wheeler
- Samuel Billaud, Monte de Tornerre Premier Cru 2012 Chablis (12%). ERB a dozen in bond. Lay & Wheeler
- Pinot
- Circumstance, Cape Coral Mourvèdre Rose 2014 Stellenbosch (12.5%). ERB 10 John. EW's Cabernet Wines, £10.99 Surp-couk
- Red
- Sigal Torres, Reserva del Pueblo País 2013 Maule (12%) EW's The Wine Society, £17.50 Noel Young
- Nones, Centre Limits Chisalt 2014 Itata (13%), £15.99 Noel Young
- De Martino, Gallesio Cinsault 2014 Itata (13%) EW's The Wine Society
- Alpha Estate, Xenonovio Hedgehog Vineyard 2010 Amynson (13.5%) EW's Maltby & Green and other independent
- Ciro Sur, 20 Barrels Cabernet Sauvignon 2011 Maipo (13.5%) EW's The Wine Society

important. There's a big difference between September and October. Two weeks' ripening in October, when it can be very cold between 7pm and noon, really doesn't change a lot.

Some locals are sceptical of this dramatic break with accepted practice but I was very impressed by the top 2013 red from Inglenook – Rubicon, a wine with great poise and unusual energy that was shaped by considerably earlier picking.

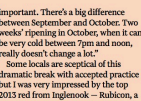
Another Napa Valley Cabernet that has long managed to walk the tightrope between power and elegance is Corton. Its maker, Cathy Corton, reckons the age of the vines and picking earlier than most holds the key – a bit like her neighbours at Spottswoode. The Novak matriarchs who run Spottswoode note that a break in the Mayacamas Mountains ensures a cooling breeze from the Pacific, which helps too.

Lou Kapsayson poached on the State Lane vineyard when it came up for sale at the turn of the century after years of buying its produce as Bertrig Private Reserve Cabernet. Before replanting, he got a specialist to interpret all of Napa's satellite data on the exact angles of sunshine and the direction of winds off the San Pablo Bay, before working out the optimum orientation of his vine rows. The aim, says the expatriate Hungarian, was to "protect them from sunburn, dehydration, excessive sugar build-up resulting in out-of-balance ripening between sugars and phenolics, and to prevent rain and stewed plum flavours as well as to control alcohol levels in the finished wine".

He refuses to divulge how much this cost, but says it was "the best money I ever spent". The results are certainly impressive Cabernets that are muscular without being browbeating. Like Coppola, he has Bordeaux first-growth expertise, in consultant Denis Malbec, formerly of Château Latour.

But for many growers the word over what makes balanced wine is balanced vines, which tends to mean old vines, dry farmed. And those who have adopted hydroponic viticulture – the barnyard-sounding, hands-on nurturing of vines according to phases of the moon – report that vines ripen well-balanced grapes earlier and more completely than their conventionally farmed neighbours. Perhaps this is the answer.

Jancis Robinson will be speaking at the FT Weekend Oxford Literary Festival on March 25 at 4pm, oxfordliteraryfestival.org



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