

THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

*SUITCASE's Food Editors
The Curious Pear journey
across Italy's wine country*



Words by MEG ABBOTT
Photos by ISSY CROKER

Before beginning our journey around the vineyards of Tuscany, Issy and I visited Rome. On our first night we found ourselves in a beautiful little trattoria in the working-class quarter of Testaccio. We ordered two plates of pasta and a bottle of house red in our dodgy Italian: "Rosso della casa, per favore..." The pasta came within minutes – two twisted piles of steaming pici dripping in silky butter and pepper sauce. The wine followed soon after. The cork popped, the waitress poured and we toasted to another week of adventure.

We took a sip and looked up at each other. It was fizzy. And warm. Was it supposed to be fizzy and warm? Or did we just not have the faintest idea how Italian wine should taste? We had no idea. So we did what any self-respecting Brit would do: we pretended to love it and drank the whole bottle.

Issy and I have been working in food for two years now, steadily eating our way around the world. And there is usually wine. But try as we might to discern the difference between a chenin and a chablis, or a grenache and a gamay, we usually find ourselves sipping mindlessly. For us, wine has come to represent comfort, fun and good conversation – but not very much more.

In an effort to learn about the ins and outs of wine (and with the hope of returning to London as noble sommeliers) we decided to embark upon a road trip across Tuscany. With the two of us opting to take turns drinking and driving, we planned to visit some of the most luxuriant vineyards in the world. Setting out into the rolling hills in our little white car, we felt exhilarated – and a little intimidated.

We were soon sampling ethereal blends with some of the most passionate and generous people we'd ever met, and quickly came to understand that good wine is not about technicalities and tricks; it comes down to patience and care for the land. Rather than a lofty command of wine lore, we returned home with profound respect for Tuscany, as well as a deep appreciation of its charms.

We visited in spring, when tiny buds were still waiting to flourish in the grape and olive fields. Each wine we tasted had evolved from months of growth and years of ageing, with nature given plenty of time to play its part. One producer told us: "In the cities, life is fast and wild. Out here, time stops mattering so much. The land is like a child. It must be nurtured and cared for slowly."

Tuscany is a place which values pleasure, where hearty meals stretch on for hours. Life is lived outdoors, in bustling piazzas or wide-open lands, and there is a gelateria in every town and village. Winemakers are inspired by this positive attitude, and are also, crucially, incredibly patient. Wandering cold and creaky cellars, tracing the edges of valleys of vines, listening to an expert narrate a wine's story, we realised they are rewarded with blends celebrating the land they love, the land they call home. And what a land it is.



AVIGNONESI

Day 1

Our journey began at the foot of a hill, gazing up at the ancient town of **Montepulciano**, with its scattering of buildings the colour of burnt butter. In a cloud of dust we tried to navigate our way up the tangle of roads – the kind you can never be sure are meant for vehicles. But we gave up, jammed the car into a tiny parking space, and decided to walk the rest of the way.

At **Osteria Acquacheta** we sat down for rabbit stew with olives accompanied by broad beans and ham, while cooks in floppy white hats hacked away at mounds of meat and bread. Ambling down the streets back to the car, we stopped to gaze at the sweeping view of the Tuscan countryside below.

We drove on in our car full of cantucci (sweet almond biscuits) towards **Avignonesi**, the first winery on our tour. The road leading up to the estate was lined with cypress trees, with deep green valleys on either side.

After being introduced to their resident guide, we wandered across to view the vineyards. She told us the winery started trialling biodynamic farming in 2009, and has been completely organic since 2014. The historical estate is one of the very largest in the area, with 200 hectares of verdant land and vines. Merlot and renowned sangiovese wines spring from these soils, rich

with the characteristics of the terrain. Our guide told us: “It is about observation of the land. Nature decides how the crop will grow. All we can do is care for it. And pray.”

“You must see one more thing,” she said. Crunching up a gravelly path, we arrived at a small cellar with a beamed roof. It was dark, with a faint sweet scent, and inside hundreds of oak casks stamped with red wax lay stacked on top of one another. This treasure chest was the ageing cellar of vin santo, the liquid gold for which Avignonesi has become famous. It takes 12 years of rigorous drying, steeping and fermenting in these barrels for this sweet wine to be bottled. It seemed like an awfully long time to wait for wine. But as it was poured like honey into our wide, hand-blown glasses, it all started to make sense. Deep, oaky flavours slipped down in warming drops. It was certainly worth waiting for.

By the time we returned to the car, the sun stealing through the clouds was as golden as the vin santo. We continued on our way, passing miles of farmland flecked with poppies. We spent a good leg of the journey chugging behind an old couple squashed onto a forest-green Piaggio built for one. We stopped in the quiet, pebbled town of **Sarteano**, where the walls dripped with wisteria and washing lines looped neighbouring windows



together, and joined a small gathering of locals on the steps for an espresso in the sun.

On rainy days in London, we sometimes dream about living in our own Italian village. We think of wandering down gravelled pathways, drinking spritz on a terrace overlooking the hills, the light pouring into rooms through fluttering curtains. So it was with joy that we arrived at **Monteverdi**, a boutique hotel spread across the historic Tuscan village of Castiglioncello del Trinoro.

Made up of three villas and 12 astonishingly beautiful rooms, this hotel-village includes two bars, a spa, a seasonal restaurant headed by chef Giancarla Bodoni and a lavender-framed pool overlooking the sprawling Val d’Orcia. The cobbled village was left deserted during the Seventies, when its residents left to seek jobs in less secluded parts of Italy. These days, only four locals remain. But Monteverdi has breathed new life into this piece of Tuscan history, celebrating the beauty of its past and priding itself on its use of local materials. Each room is unique with touches of elegance – from deep copper bathtubs and brushed linen sheets, to wide stone showers overlooking the landscape. ▶▶

*Rooms from £500
monteverdituscany.com*



Day 2

Lorenza Sebasti Pallanti greeted us in the cool, pastel entrance hall of the **Castello di Ama** winery, wearing an exquisitely tailored jacket. She led us into the living room of the main house, with Bach, her Jack Russell in tow, and began telling us about the estate she runs with her husband Marco. We had set off for the small region of **Chianti** that morning, hurtling through thick hills covered with oak trees and daisy-filled fields.

Castello di Ama began producing wine in the Seventies. It is spread over a little collection of stone villas encircled by vineyards. The estate was the first Tuscan producer of pure merlot, and is home to a beguiling collection of fine art. Works from some of the world's most prominent contemporary artists are displayed throughout the grounds, including a Louise Bourgeois fountain and an Anish Kapoor light installation inside the 17th-century Catholic chapel.

"Let's have a bite to eat," said Lorenza, leading us towards a table shaded by linen drapes. Plates of rich, crumbly meatballs – "like a mother's hug" – arrived, followed by pici cacio e pepe, a pasta dish accompanied by Tuscan tomatoes and fennel.

And then, of course, there was the wine. We tasted a few blends: the inky haiku, a mix of sangiovese, merlot and cabernet franc; the spicy and plump chianti classico, which tasted of cherries and dark chocolate. Lorenza poured each glass with a smile, drinking each one with the pleasure of someone tasting them for the first time.

We wandered back to the car and drove off past gardens of herbs and flowers, the grand estate shrinking behind us, as we made our way back past the imposing gates of nearby Siena. ▶▶





Day 3

We set off early on wide, straight roads towards the **Ornellaia** winery. (Along the way we made a pit stop at a garage, with an unnervingly well-stocked bar and porn collection, to knock back an espresso besides businessmen and truck drivers.) Our journey took us through valleys shaded by greenery, then up to open fields covered with yellow flowers, which rushed by like little paintbrush marks. Then all of a sudden the coast opened up before us, a glittering well of blue.

Ornellaia is tucked behind wrought-iron gates on a road striped with cypress trees. Our guide met us, and drove us down a pathway through the vineyards. Every patch of soil is different, she told us, each one harbouring a different breed of grape.

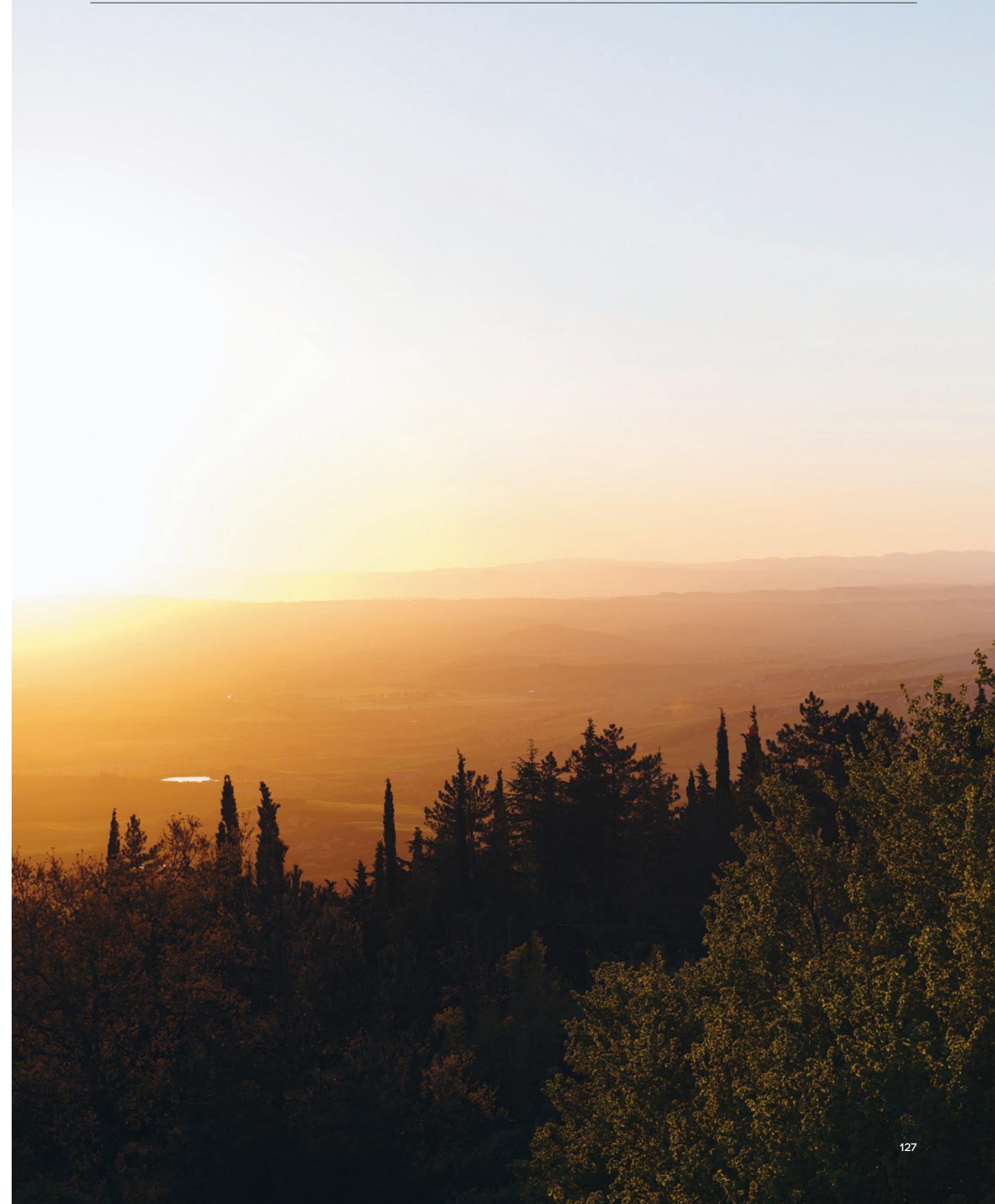
We arrived at a modern, glassy structure reminiscent of a Bond villain's hideout. This was Ornellaia's cellar, with its titanic stainless steel tanks where the estate's finest wines stand to deepen their flavour. Ornellaia's great vintages are named for their character and formed by the climate: 2006 is Exuberance, 2008 is Energy and 2011 is Infinity.

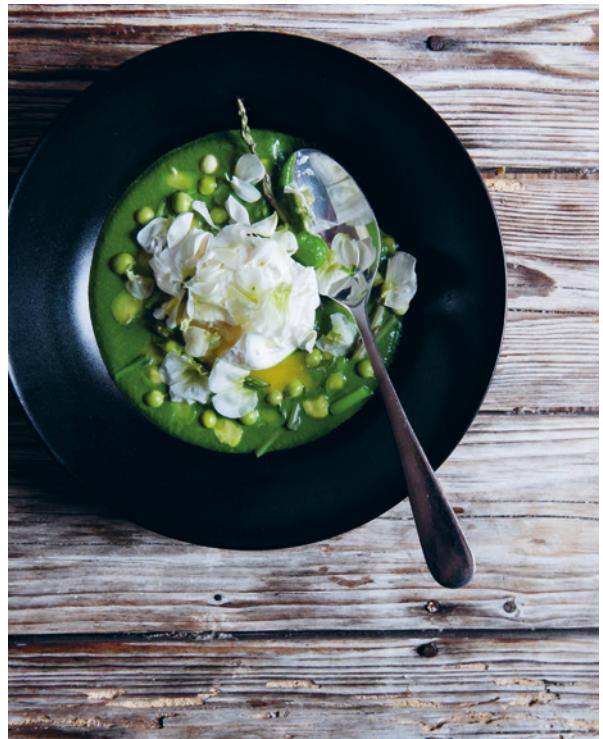
Most of the winery's employees are female. "It's quite a pink estate!" our guide says, laughing, as we lean over a bridged walkway to watch five ladies labelling bottles of wine before

packing them into wooden crates, laying them down with almost maternal care. "We think women work harder than men. And they are more careful."

We ambled back to the main estate, where a tasting table awaited us. We sampled an array of exquisite wines, each one fuller and more bewitching than the last. A silky *le volte* was followed by the balmy *le serre nuove*, and both were topped off with the 2011 variations in red – a wildly hot summer had gifted this blend its ripe and intense flavour. The sun streamed through the open doorway as we sipped and talked.

After leaving Ornellaia, we followed our noses a few miles north to Lucca, a city with the beauty of Florence and all the energy of a student town. It brims with fine leather shops, weathered tabacherias and bustling wine bars. Locals ping from street to street on bicycles, or walk their dogs past lemon-yellow mansions to meet a group of friends on the steps of its grand palaces and libraries. They eat slabs of pizza from **Pizzeria Itaca** or scoops of buttery pistachio ice cream from **Gelateria Santini Sergio**. We dipped into **Antica Bottega di Prospero**, a little shop selling sacks of dried beans, meat and Italian preserves. We planned to just look, but left with a giant wedge of pecorino and black truffles in hand. ▶▶





An aimless wander landed us in the main square, where a busker scratched out a tune as dust danced in the golden light. And before we knew it, it was time for dinner. We ate salt-crusted sea bream and pasta with shellfish at **Da Pasquale**, owned by a sommelier eager to ply each customer with the finest Tuscan reds.

A few more hours on the road led us to **Villa Lena**, our next home. This sprawling retreat appears like a mirage at the end of a long gravelled pathway, surrounded by miles of rolling woodland, olive groves and vineyards, with the Apennine Mountains looming in the distance. Steering away from the traditional hotel model, Villa Lena's owners have created a unique space where art, wellness, food and comfort combine.

Within Lena's 500 hectares of land, an organic vegetable garden overflows with sweet peas, melons, mint, onions and elderflower. All this fresh produce is turned into inventive dishes by resident chefs, who take over the kitchens for a few months at a time. The estate also has its own expansive biological vineyard, producing delicious red wine.

Lena's not-for-profit art foundation offers creatives the chance to live on the estate for two-month residencies, uniting a select group of poets, writers, painters, playwrights and florists. Gallerist and owner Lena Evstafieva told us: "We hope the artists here will not only be inspired by these beautiful surroundings, but also come together in a kind of creative cross-pollination."



Guests enjoy seasonal, locally sourced food at the dining room's communal tables. And at night, visitors congregate in the games room, around a piano or in front of a concert featuring one of the villa's resident musicians.

Villa Lena's rooms are painted white, with soaring, beamed ceilings. There are three swimming pools, and spacious apartments and houses spread out across the estate. Each one is decked in vintage furniture, with fabrics and artwork created by previous resident artists. An opulent, salmon-pink house is the heart of the establishment, and it brims with old-world Tuscan charm.

Our last morning in the countryside came around quickly, and before we knew it we were loading our car with olive oil and sweet wine to take home. The morning was hazy, veiling the landscape in a dusty light. We drove down the hill and swept onto the main road, joining a fleet of tiny Fiats.

As the hills rushed past for the final time, I thought back to that questionable first bottle of wine. I still can't be sure about those bubbles, but after this trip it will be impossible to enjoy wine without picturing Tuscany, a land of wild, dramatic landscapes, unyielding devotion to pleasure – and patience.

*Rooms from £100
villa-lena.it*



VEGETABLE GARDEN AT VILLA LENNA