



TRAVEL Going off track **THOSE WHO GO OFF THE BEATEN TRACK, WRITE FOR US.**

Vino, Vita, Vaccino

A CYCLING TRIP IN TUSCANY MARKED BY WINE, THE GOOD LIFE AND MEAT

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The great Italian tenor, Luciano Pavarotti, once rightfully declared “one of the very best things about life is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is we are doing and devote our attention to eating.” Of course, going by his size, he stopped far too often. But Italian food is like that — so tasty and fulfilling that it makes you plan your next meal while you’re halfway through one. On a recent trip to the region of Tuscany where gluttony is almost a virtue and men swoon before porcini and ravioli as readily as they would to Monica Bellucci or Carla Bruni, I wanted to practice what Pavarotti preached. The best way to do this was to indulge heartily in food and then balance it out by using a bicycle as transport. At Chianciano Terme, an ancient spa town in the Province of Siena, about 90km southeast of Florence, I meet my guide Andrea Batelli. We soon get talking or rather gesturing since he doesn’t speak English and I, Italian, but we pantomime a plan to meet up and go cycling the next day. What followed was a trip of the best food finds.



LAGO MONTEPULCIANO TRUFFLES

Early next morning, we pedal towards Lago (lake) Montepulciano, 13 km east of Chianciano Terme. The lake is the last remnant of a swamp that spread over Val di Chiana (Chiana Valley, between Siena and Arezzo provinces) until the 17th century. Ricardo, a fisherman, takes us around the lake pointing out purple herons and cobalt blue kingfishers. The latter seem to have all the luck, he says, pointing to his empty basket. We come by a B&B housed with red tiles and mustard coloured stone walls. The proprietress waves to us. She has just returned from a walk with a basket full of truffles. Andrea and I instantly decide to eat there. Amongst the delectable four-course lunch is Gnocchi Ripieni ai funghi porcini e scaglie di tartufo — tricky on the tongue to pronounce, but sublimely tasty. It consists of dumplings made from flour, eggs and boiled potatoes, stuffed with porcini mushrooms. The white sauce is made with cream and flavoured with Tuscan truffle oil. The master stroke is the truffle shavings sprinkled on it.

MONTEPULCIANO CHIANTI WINE

Honey-coloured houses and bright red roofs, Montepulciano in southern Tuscany offers a beautiful view of the val di Chiana. We huff and puff up the steep slopes to Piazza Grande. A few steps away lies the entrance to the wine cellars of Ricci, below the elegant Renaissance palace Palazzo Ricci. In operation since the 15th century, these cellars hold barrels of red and white wine and the region’s famed Chianti. Thirsty, we gulp the tasting portions rather than follow the sip-and-spit routine. We taste the famous Chianti Colli Senesi 2011 which is ruby red with violet hues and a flavour that is intense and very fresh with distinct fruity notes. We also taste the Briareo Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Riserva 2006 — the most famous wine of Montepulciano made with Sangiovese and Canaiolo Nero grapes aged for a year each in French oak and Slavonian oak casks.



PIENZA PICI

Helped by gravity and woozy with wine, we breeze down the slopes from Montepulciano scattering a group of tourists, who rush to the pavement for safety. Our next stop is Pienza — 14 km over undulating roads that seem even more so thanks to wine. Pienza is often called the pilot of Renaissance town planning. In 1459, Pope Pius II redid this village that was also, his birthplace. Today Piazza Pio II, the centre of the town, is a UNESCO world heritage site. We wander through but are distracted by the heavenly aroma of freshly baked pizza. We drop the sightseeing plan and follow the waft that leads us to La Bucca de Enea, a small all-day eatery run by Antonio and Gabriella. Since it’s known for its wild boar Pici, we go for it. Pici is fat hand-rolled spaghetti served with a sauce, in this case wild boar sauce.

CHIANCIANO TERME EWE’S CHEESE

It is a further 17km back to Chianciano Terme, through the Val d’Orcia. En route, we stop at a cheese factory called Dairy Contignano which holds the distinction of making the best pecorino cheese in Italy, made from ewe’s milk. Later, for dinner, Andrea and I head to Il Buco, popular among locals. The maître d’ is the grandfather and when he hears what we intend to eat, he solemnly decants the Chianti as it goes perfectly well with the Bistecca alla Fiorentina. A T-bone cut of steak from the region’s popular Chianina breed of cattle, the steak Florence style is a local delicacy. Each cow (vaccino) weighs a tonne, so the T-bone cut is 1.4kg. It is a delicious endeavour to finish it because the meat, marbled with fat, is known for its taste and tenderness and it pairs superbly with Chianti and is traditionally served with a bowl of fagioli — Tuscan white beans.



THE LOGISTICS

The Active Holiday Company, that I used, (www.activeholidaycompany.com) offer self-guided and guided trips around Tuscany with route maps, 24-hour emergency service and baggage transfer. You can also do this trip by car. Take the train to Chiusi, the closest station (www.trenitalia.com) and then hire a car locally for a day or two. Good deals at www.expedia.com. www.guidaambientale.it also offers guided cycling trips around Val d’Orcia.

VISIT

Hotel Villa Ricci, Chianciano Terme: www.hotelvillaricci.it
Ricci wine cellar, Montepulciano: www.der Ricci.it
Diary Contignano: www.invetrina.info/caseificiovaldorcia/
Il Buco, Chianciano Terme: www.mangiareasiena.it/ristoranti/hostaria-il-buco/
Terme di Chianciano, a spa: www.termechianciano.it/

