

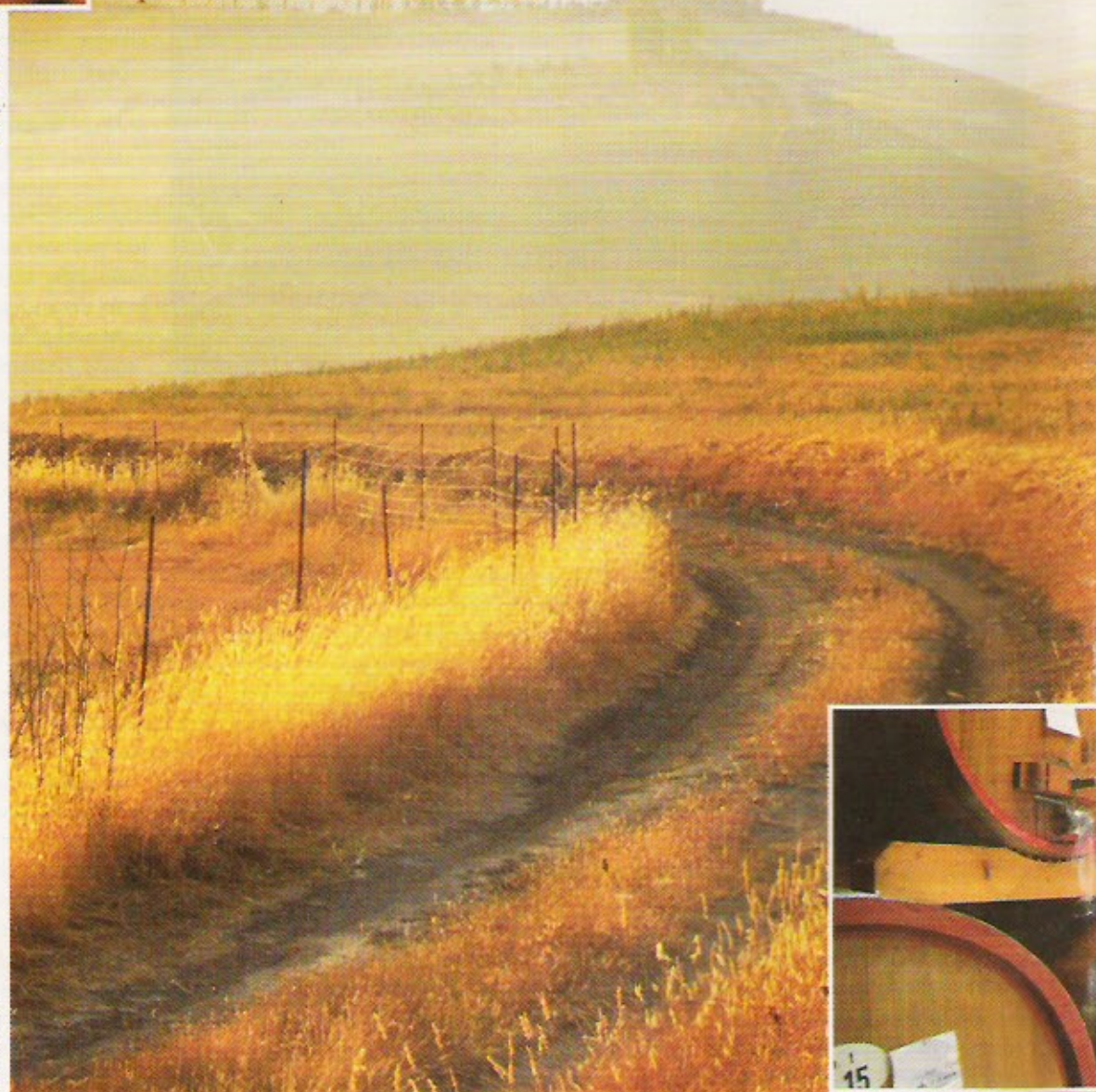
A TASTE OF TUSCANY

by Tom Crosby



Vine-ripened tomatoes can always be found in local, open-air markets.

Wearing maroon aprons, eight of us huddled eagerly about the marble counter as Guilietta Giovannoni, the owner of a charming 12th-century Tuscan farmhouse in whose kitchen we were standing, began the process of preparing, with our participation, a quintessential Italian dinner.



Charming and picturesque hills are typical of the old world countryside.

It would be 90 minutes of fun before we sat down to savor the results of our hands-on, group cooking experience with new-found friends—instant friendship being helped along by a wine decanter continuously refilled by Guilietta with wine she produces annually from grapevines surrounding her villa.

My wife, daughter and her college Ultimate Frisbee teammate were enjoying one of the benefits of exploring the Tuscany region of Italy as part of a unique travel experience that blends scheduled activities and independent adventure.

AAA Vacations, through a partnership with Avanti, arranged our rental car, accommodations in the 14-room, 18th-century Villa Fattoria Valle, reservations for our hands-on cooking experience and a wine-tasting tour another day, maps of local areas and an evening meal in a garden surrounded by stately cypress trees.

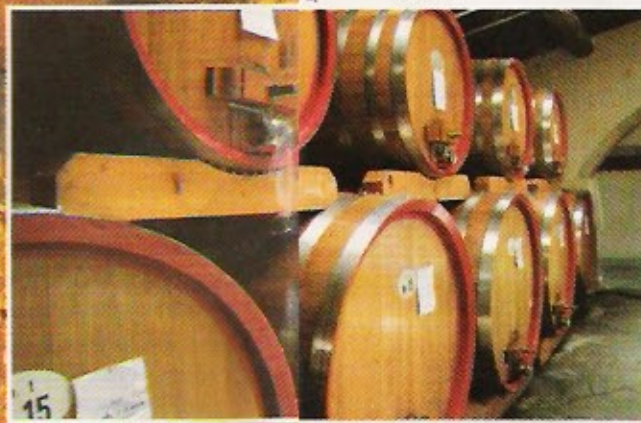
It was a perfect combination of freedom and obligation.

Villa Fagiolari

Giovannoni, 58, owns the Villa Fagiolari in Panzano, a five-bedroom farmhouse on a 24-acre estate near Tuscany's town of Greve. Originally constructed in the 1200s, the farmhouse opened for overnight guests and Italian cooking classes in 1996 after a renovation and expansion.

Our kitchen camaraderie began almost immediately. A honeymooning couple from Toronto and a pair of doctors from New Orleans were guests at the Villa.

Chianti ferments in a Tuscan wine cellar. The pigments leech out of the grape skins and add color to the wine.



First we chopped apples, broke eggs, mixed batter and put into the oven to bake an apple cake that would be ready three hours later—in time for dessert.

A 30-ounce pork roll wrapped in string was poked in four places and the holes filled with pepper, salt and a garlic glove, eventually ending up in a large pot where it was browned in olive oil, then slow cooked in pre-heated milk for about an hour.

Vegetable preparation included slicing sweet peppers, celery, carrots, onions and huge, succulent red tomatoes rarely duplicated in American gardens. Key seasoning ingredients were again salt, pepper, olive oil and garlic cloves.

Pastas

Two pastas were prepared from scratch and cycled numerous times through a hand-cranked pasta machine to get a perfect consistency for our spaghetti and fettuccini. The pesto sauce included basil leaves, pine nuts, pecorino, Parmesan cheese and again, garlic, olive oil, salt and pepper.



Bruschetta... lightly toasted bread rubbed while hot with a clove of garlic, topped with olive oil and freshly sliced tomatoes.

Our final preparation was our appetizer—bruschetta. Lightly toasted bread rubbed while hot with a clove of garlic, sprinkled with salt and pepper and covered with olive oil was topped with freshly sliced tomatoes with seeds removed and crushed garlic.

"It was a lot more fun than I imagined," said Dr. Marie Vencre, 26. "We got to meet new people and Guilietta is a patient and wonderful cook."

"While the meal was a simple one—nothing complicated—it was delicious and a superior experience," said Kathy Crosby, 61.

The honeymoon couple raved: "I never expected anything like this," said new bride Christina Doering, 30. "I was pleasantly and happily surprised. I'll remember this for the rest of my life."

And Guilietta said her guests are usually happy when they arrive. It doesn't take them long to begin communicating but it's more difficult for the Italians than the Americans.

Wine Tasting

Our wine tasting was at the Dievole Winery in the Tuscan hill country eight miles north of Siena (where bareback horse races are held in the square twice a year), and sits on a 411-hectare estate jointly owned by 16 families, each working their generations-old vineyard.

Each family has its own vintner, and since the area has been producing wine for more than 900 years, the wines are unique. Once a monastery, Dievole now also functions as a resort, with two swimming pools and two buildings with rooms and suites (Casa Olivo and Residenza Colombaio).

Dievole bottles up to 700,000 wines a year and visitors can taste a variety of reds and whites and also visit the estate's chapel, with three wine bottles perched on the altar, including one with a seal dated 1080.