



A fine day out on the terraced garden of Villa San Michele

NOT MANY PEOPLE TAKE THEIR FOOD AND WINE QUITE AS SERIOUSLY as the Italians, and my husband John and I were about to explore just how serious by planning a road trip in Italy, during the first leg of our two-month sojourn in Europe this summer.

This gastronomic road trip had fallen into place around a number of circumstances. John, myself and our one-year-old son Kyan were in Italy for two separate weddings during the early summer, one in Castle Odescalchi by Lake Bracciano near Rome, and one on Lago Maggiore in the Italian Lake District. And in between, we decided to travel through Tuscany – Italy’s key gourmet region.

We started out in Florence and made our way through Tuscany towards Rome, with stops along the way to taste fine wine and Italian cuisine and to stay at idyllic borgos in the Tuscan countryside. Here are some of our favourite restaurants, hotels and experiences.

A TUSCAN Adventure

Touring Tuscany has always been on the bucket list of **Elaine Kim**, who realised her wish on a gastronomic journey with her husband this summer.

PHOTOS: JOHN AND ELAINE KIM



Work Of Art
The facade of Villa San Michele is designed by Michelangelo.

Life Is Beautiful
Clockwise from top: The courtyard of Enoteca Pinchiorri; the view of Santa Maria Novella from JK Place Florence; the Master Room Elaine stayed in at JK Place.



JK PLACE FLORENCE

JK Place is an understated, elegant hotel, perfectly situated in the centre of Florence, on the renowned Piazza Santa Maria Novella. The hotel's canopied alfresco area with a perfect vista of the piazza was populated by stylish young Italians sporting large black sunglasses, sipping espressos in la dolce vita fashion.

We were warmly welcomed by the manager, who invited us to help ourselves to the spread of antipasti, tortes and iced tea laid out in the hall, then plucked an iron key from a wall in the library – no check-in process here – and ushered us up the elevator to our room.

I loved the interior décor of JK Place, marked by Florentine architect Michele Bonan's uncanny ability to blend classical and modern into an understated, sophisticated style. Panelled walls and moulded fireplaces in a palette of soft creams, greys, white and black, sleek furniture with luxurious silk cushions, dark wood floors, and a scattering of objects, framed sketches and artsy coffee table books come together to create a cosy yet luxurious ambience. You feel like you're staying in the home of a very stylish friend.

Our room was decked out in the same tasteful style. We were put up in the Master Room, which had a huge canopied four-poster bed, a sitting area by an elegant fireplace and a spacious white marble bathroom. When we pulled apart the heavy damask curtains, the French windows had a view onto the piazza and the church that gives the square its name.

VILLA SAN MICHELE

Perched on a hilltop in Fiesole, on the outskirts of Florence, Villa San Michele is a former monastery that Orient-Express Hotels has brought back to life as a romantic luxury retreat. The 15th century façade designed by Michaelangelo remains, as does the beautiful tranquility of the terraced gardens with its lemon trees, and the spectacular vistas over Florence. When you threw open the French doors of the suite in which we stayed, leading to its small private garden, you were greeted by a gorgeous view over the city.

On one of our first evenings there, our friends Mark and Tiara Shaw were in Bologna for a film festival and they drove down to Fiesole for dinner with us at the hotel's Loggia Restaurant. There must be few places lovelier to dine at than here. Beautifully tables laid with shiny Christofle tableware line up alongside the stone balustrades of this 16th century alfresco terrace, with pillar lamps and candles casting a warm glow across the space. Between the ancient stone pillars of the terrace's soaring archways is a gorgeous view across the hillside of poplars, and beyond that, the city of Florence, glowing in the sunset and then glittering at nightfall with twinkling lights.

Delicious, unfussy Tuscan dishes by Chef Attilio di Fabrizio, well-paired wines, good company, and the divine setting made for a thoroughly enjoyable meal, and Mark and Tiara lingered until past eleven before setting off on their drive back to Bologna.

With the excellent dining to be found there, you might become inspired to try your hand at the delicious Tuscan cuisine yourself, and Villa San Michele offers the delightful option of attending a cookery course in their School of Cookery. The hotel converted a greenhouse in the garden into a cosy sunlit classroom where guests can have hands-on lessons in cooking and wine pairing.

I spent one lovely morning under the tutelage of chef de cuisine Attilio di Fabrizio learning to prepare traditional Tuscan panzanella, Fiesole style potato dumplings with (freshly picked from the garden) tomato and basil and, finally, tiramisu. And the fact that I could proudly present a decent Italian meal to my husband for lunch that day is a testament to what an excellent teacher I had.

I spent one lovely morning under the tutelage of chef de cuisine Attilio di Fabrizio."

ENOTECA PINCHIORRI

We had a reservation at this restaurant heaped with prestigious accolades: three Michelin stars, the "top fine-dining restaurant in Florence", the "best wine cellar in the world", (also, unfortunately, a dubious distinction of being wickedly expensive) – so expectations for dinner were running high. Indeed, Enoteca Pinchiorri, helmed by the legendary couple Giorgio Pinchiorri and his French chef wife Annie Feolde, definitely held its own.

We stepped into the beautiful pillared entranceway of the renaissance Palazzo, and three waiters swept in to lead us to our table on the second floor. To illustrate their exemplary service: When I asked merely for a cup of warm water for my baby Kyan, it arrived on a polished silver tray with a bowl of perfectly sliced lemons and three silver pots of different varieties of fresh honey.

John went for the eight-course degustation, and I, the five. The cuisine was not out-of-this-world inventive, but traditionally delicious with a unique touch to each prettily plated dish to make the restaurant stand out among any other Italian establishment – ravioli with a taleggio filling that just melts in your mouth, a scampi risotto that is just the right amount of creamy. And after a succession of exquisite desserts of cassatas and meringues, out comes a petit fours trolley with chocolates and other treats.

The enoteca's fabled wine list was indeed quite astonishing. We flipped the tome open to one page dedicated to Romanée-Conti and La Tache, with about 40 different vintages to choose from, starting from 1971. And at the end of dinner, patrons are invited to descend to the 120,000-bottle cellar for a tour, and to marvel at the array of dazzling vintages from top vineyards around the world.

TENUTA DI CASTIGLIONI

One of the most memorable lunches of our stay was with the ever-hospitable Marchese Leonardo de Frescobaldi, who hosted us at his family's historical country estate, Tenuta di Castiglioni. Castiglioni lies high up in the hills outside Florence, and sitting in perfectly-placed wicker chairs on the lawn offers breathtaking views of the rolling Tuscan countryside.

The Marchese invited us into his sitting room for a flute of Frescobaldi spumante and cheese before lunch, and we marveled at the amount of history to be found in his beautiful home – Frescobaldi family tree tapestries dating from 1200, Renaissance portraits of the



Wines of Romanée-Conti in Enoteca Pinchiorri's cellar



Tiara Shaw joining Elaine for dinner at Loggia Restaurant



The dessert trolley at Enoteca Pinchiorri





Country Delights
Clockwise from top left: A book on the Frescobaldi family at Tenuta di Castiglioni; it is common to see tall cypress trees flanking country roads; and verdant Tuscan fields.

Marchese's ancestors, classical furniture that had been part of the house for centuries.

The Frescobaldis have been a prominent Florentine family since the middle ages, and making Tuscan wine since 1308. Today, Marchese Leonardo continues the family's tradition as president of the family's wine-producing company Marchesi de Frescobaldi, and he took us into Castiglioni's cellars for a little private tasting. (We would later also get a taste of Ornellaia, that famous Super Tuscan which was born out of a joint venture between Marchesi de Frescobaldi and Robert Mondavi Wineries.) Over the course of the cellar visit and lunch, we got to sip on a variety of wines from Frescobaldi's many estates in Tuscany, including the Chianti Rufina Riserva Nipozzano, a lovely rich Sangiovese full of flavours of dark fruit and chocolate and spices.

Marchese Leonardo had arranged for a simple home-cooked meal for lunch and it was absolutely delicious. There was a platter of parma prosciutto, salami, parmigiano reggiano and fresh tomato bruschetta drizzled with Frescobaldi Laudemio olive oil to start, a delightful main course of home-made pasta and freshly-baked raspberry and apricot pies for dessert. Throughout which the endearingly warm Marchese Leonardo shared fascinating stories, and engaged us in cheerful conversation.

Chatting with the endearing Marchese Leonardo de Frescobaldi

Surprise in the strawberry at Arnolfo Ristorante

Masseto barrels at Tenuta dell'Ornellaia

THE VINEYARDS OF BOLGHERI

During our stay in Florence, we arranged to take a road trip down the Maremma coast to visit Bolgheri, home to the famous Super Tuscans Sassicaia and Ornellaia.

Our first stop was Tenuta San Guido, where in the 1940s the Marquis Mario Incisa della Rocchetta decided to plant some Bordeaux varietals on his family estate in Sassicaia. When in the 1960s, the unknown Cabernet Sauvignon-based Sassicaia went on to triumph over French Medoc and Californian classics in blind tastings, the world sat up and took notice of Italian wines, which until then had a reputation of being cheap and cheerful plonk.

Sassicaia also contributed to the realisation that wines made outside the DOCG criteria (non-Sangiovese-based) and in previously unknown areas outside Chianti, could be truly exceptional – leading to the new classification of Italian fine wine coined by Robert Parker: Super Tuscans. Since then, Sassicaia has maintained its position as one of the most sought-after wines in the world, and was even granted its own appellation (simply the Sassicaia DOC) in 1994.

The winery was surprisingly simple, and we sat around a wooden table, surrounded by stainless steel tanks of wine to taste Tenuta San Guido's

offerings, including their Le Difese and Barrua blends, but of course the highlight was the Sassicaia. We tasted the 2009 vintage, which was rich and elegant with a long finish (and which we later noted was declared as "fantastic" and awarded 98 points by James Suckling).

On that high note, we made our way down the road to Tenuta dell'Ornellaia. Comparatively, this was a sprawling estate. You could easily mistake the entrance lobby of the winery for an art gallery: in 2009 the vintners launched a programme called Vendemmia d'Artista, commissioning an internationally renowned artist each year to create a piece of art to encapsulate and commemorate each new vintage of Ornellaia, hence the stunning display of paintings and sculptures.

We were greeted by the chief winemaker, French and German-born Axel Heinz, who led us to a private tasting room to sample his art. We tried the Le Volte and Le Serre Nuove, and of course the 2009 Ornellaia, a vintage Axel

mentioned he was particularly proud of because of a season that was cool then turned hot, requiring extra painstaking care during harvest. Very aromatic, and powerful yet elegant, we could see why Axel was very pleased with his resulting yield.

I asked if we might be lucky enough to get a sip of Masseto, their 100 per cent Merlot, which oenologists have compared to Chateau Petrus. Axel Heinz reminded me apologetically that the small quantity of Masseto (about 30,000 bottles) produced and the high demand for this rare premium Merlot (despite a €600 price tag for a bottle) meant that the Masseto is quickly snapped up and becomes very hard to find almost upon release.

ARNOLFO RISTORANTE

Colle di Val d'Elsa is a charming little town perched on the Tuscan hill over the Elsa river valley, with medieval buildings lining cobbled streets. The Arnolfo Ristorante is tucked in a 16th century palazzo on one of the town's narrow streets, and stepping into this quaint and beautiful restaurant, we felt like we had stumbled upon a little treasure of a place.

Arnolfo is run by the Trovato brothers – Gaetano in the kitchen and Giovanni front of house. As we stepped in, an effervescent Giovanni came to welcome us, and promptly swept up our delighted baby Kyan and swung him in the air. He led us through the elegant dining room decorated with Baccarat chandeliers and splashes of contemporary art, and showed us our table by a tall arched window. The restaurant is perched on a hillside, and we had a gorgeous view of the Tuscan valley before us.

On summer evenings, guests are also invited to dine alfresco on Arnolfo's terrace to enjoy the panoramic landscape.

And oh! The food! Gaetano Trovato prepares contemporary Tuscan cuisine made with organic produce from the hills of Siena and crustaceans from the Tyrrhenian sea, with a menu that changes seasonally. We chose the

The Frescobaldis have been a prominent Florentine family since the middle ages, and making Tuscan wine since 1308."



L'Andana is Alain Ducasse's resort in the heart of the Tuscan Maremma."



Elaine and John's terrace suite at Castiglion del Bosco

eight-course 30th anniversary Essence gourmet menu and the food is sophisticated and exquisite. It started off with a wonderful amuse bouche platter of bite-sized creations – a foie gras terrine triangle, a savoury cheese parfait on shortcrust pastry among others. The foie gras with scampi and strawberries was absolutely delicious, the

combination of melt-in-your-mouth goose liver and strawberry sorbet being so perfect I couldn't believe no other chef had put them together before. Just as memorable was the langoustine on a pool of green peas, floating next to caviar on a bed of burrata foam. We savoured course after delicious course leading to equally impressive desserts, including a wonderful pastry creation of strawberries, almonds and Sichuan pepper.

This would be remembered as one of our favourite meals of the trip, and well-deserving of its two Michelin stars and Relais & Chateau accolades. And while you might expect an ambience of hushed stuffiness in a restaurant with food of this caliber, Gaetano and Giovanni's hospitality made us feel like we were dining with a warm Italian famiglia instead.

CASTIGLION DEL BOSCO

After driving through the scenic Val d'Orcia towards Montalcino, we pulled up at the entrance of Castiglion del Bosco; the wrought iron gates lead not just to a hotel, but an entire medieval village, a borgo that Massimo Ferragamo (son of Salvatore) has converted into a luxury resort, winery and golf course.

We were staying in a terrace suite located in one of the buildings in the borgo. The large main door opens to a stone entrance hallway and sitting room, with an inviting sofa by the large fireplace, surrounded by paneled walls and bookshelves lined with coffee-table books and leather-bound classics. A doorway leads to the bedroom, just as beautifully furnished with the same attention to detail- silk cushions placed on classic club-chairs, a bed with the softest linen against a striped upholstered headboard, ochre damask curtains hanging from wrought iron rails. And adjacent is a large walk-in wardrobe and spacious stone bathroom with rain shower, soaking tub, and Ferragamo amenities on the marble vanity.

French doors in the sitting room and bedroom open up to a large terrace with a view of the lavender and bluebell-covered countryside. In the morning we'd sit at the dining table for an alfresco breakfast; in the afternoon recline on the sun-loungers with a book; and in the evening have a glass of wine on the outdoor sofa.

There are two restaurants on the estate. We liked dinner at Campo del Drago, where you can sit on the terrace overlooking rolling hills and valleys, or dine indoors in the warm lit glasshouse, enjoying regional Tuscan fine-dining. We preferred the rustic-chic Osteria la Canonica at lunchtime, for a casual, light lunch on the sun-drenched terrace. We'd have crunchy organic vegetables from the estate's kitchen gardens to start (which were astonishingly tasty just dipped



in olive oil with a pinch of salt), then some fresh pasta, and finally treat ourselves to dessert from a trolley laden with mouthwatering cakes, tortes and flans.

Between meals, there's plenty to keep guests occupied at this sprawling 4,000-acre estate. There's a world-class 18-hole golf course, a Daniela Steiner Care Suite Spa with a hammam and hydrotherapy pools, a stable of handsome Maremma horses for guests to take onto picturesque riding trails, hiking trails that meander past streams, waterfalls and hidden historical sites, and a heated infinity pool set on the crest of a hill with a spectacular view of the valley.

On an afternoon trip to Montalcino, we visited the 14th century Fortress of Montalcino, which had a fabulous little wine shop inside – so in one sweet stop you can do some historical sightseeing and get a taste of what Montalcino is most famous for – Brunello! The Enoteca La Fortezza is a treasure trove of Tuscan wines, and we ended up tasting 11 different Brunellos and couldn't leave without taking with us a bottle of 2006 Casanova di Neri Tenuta Nuova.

Castiglion del Bosco is a working wine estate as well, and a visit to the winery gives an idea of how much Massimo Ferragamo is hoping to take wine-making in Castiglion del Bosco (an art practiced there for centuries) to greater heights with modern winemaking techniques in a state-of-the-art winery. In a glass room cantilevered above the cellar, we had a tasting of their wines including their most representative wine Brunello di Montalcino, and Campo del Drago, their top-of-the-range Sangiovese. We also decided to bring home with us a magnum of their Brunello di Montalcino Riserva "Millecento", one of 1100 bottles produced only in an exceptional vintage – each with its own serial number – to be aged and opened when Kyan (who was very keen to have a taste of the wines himself) turns 10!



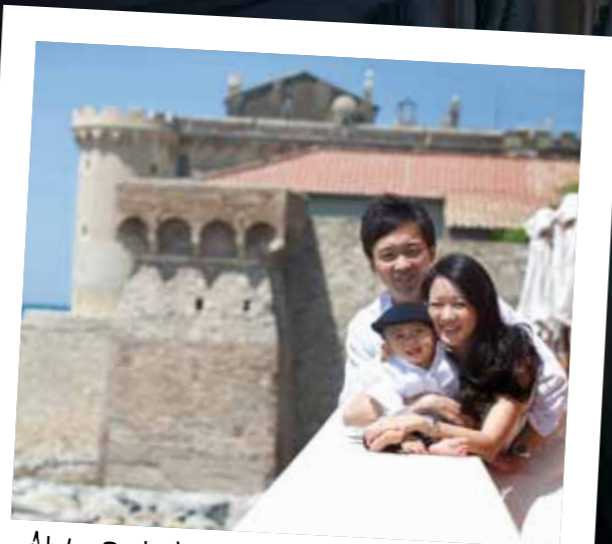
Yummy molten lava chocolate cake at L'Andana resort's La Villa restaurant



L'ANDANA

Less than a two-hour drive away from Castiglion del Bosco is L'Andana, Alain Ducasse's resort in the heart of the Tuscan Maremma. We pulled up to a lofty wrought iron gate and a long gravel driveway flanked by rows of tall cypress trees on either side – a grand entrance leading to the Tenuta la Badiola estate.

We were led through a bright, sunlit, conservatory-like lobby prettily furnished in an eclectic style with Tuscan and French influences. There are just 33 rooms and suites in L'Andana, and ours was a mezzanine, with a bedroom and fireplace below and a cosy sitting room above. What we loved best about the room was the huge



At La Posta Vecchia by the Ladispoli Sea with Prince Orsini's castle in the background

J. Paul Getty bought La Posta Vecchia in the 1960s and lovingly restored it. Today, it is an intimate five-star hotel.”

mosaic bath-shower the size of a small plunge pool, and reminiscent of a Roman bath. Kyan adored his bath times here, splashing around with us in the soothingly hot bathwater.

For a bath sybarite like myself, there was an even lovelier treat awaiting in the hotel's Espa spa – a black stone Vitality Pool under a vaulted ceiling, with mineral-rich water heated to 37 degrees, as well as slate-floored thermal rooms, a hammam and a thalassotherapy pool. John and I took turns indulging in divine treatments, and in accordance to the spa's philosophy of providing complete wellbeing by including the pleasure of eating good food, each treatment would end with a gourmet dessert – a fine lavender tart, or pannacotta with soya milk and seasonal fruits, for example – as well as an infusion of herbs such as verbena, sage or wattle.

The food is sure to be a highlight in an establishment helmed by world-famous Alain Ducasse, a chef with 23 restaurants and 21 Michelin stars under his belt. The dining room of L'Andana's La Villa Restaurant is a homely, intimate space overlooking a swimming pool surrounded by cypresses and lit up in glowing turquoise at night. The menu features Tuscan dishes (with a subtle French influence) created with an emphasis on authenticity, seasonality and simplicity. This ethos showed in dishes we ordered like the simple but delicious ravioli with burrata and ratatouille, the succulent Bistecca alla Fiorentina lightly poured over with just gravy and sprigs of rosemary, Ducasse's classic cookpot of gratinated seasonal vegetables, or a dessert of unfussy molten chocolate lava cake done to perfection.

In the mornings, you help yourself to the delightful spread in L'Andana's rustic, cosy kitchen – fresh brioche and currant buns fresh from the cast-iron oven, cold cuts and cheeses, and homemade jams in big white honey pots.

Fresh Experiences

Clockwise from top left: A simple but tasty ravioli with burrata and ratatouille at La Villa; the indoor swimming pool of La Posta Vecchia; La Posta Vecchia overlooks the Ladispoli Sea; and the elegantly ornate interiors of La Posta Vecchia.

So we spent our days at L'Andana, starting and ending the day with good food, and doing very little in between except bathing, relaxing and enjoying the peaceful seclusion of this historical lodge.

LA POSTA VECCHIA

La Posta Vecchia was built in 1640 by Prince Orsini – who owned the castle next door – to host visiting friends and aristocrats; and the villa has been welcoming guests into its timeless beautiful grounds since. J. Paul Getty bought the villa in the 1960s and lovingly restored it, adding antique furniture, splendid artwork and objects collected from royal homes. Today it is an intimate, unique five-star hotel, and our last

accommodation on our road-trip from Florence to Rome.

The villa sits on an area known as Alsium in Roman times, which was a seaside resort for emperors in the days of Caesar and Pompeius. To think we were sharing the same spectacular views of the sea as the emperors did all those centuries ago! La Posta Vecchia is perched literally on the edge of the sea, so when we opened the arched windows of our bedroom, the soft sea breeze would blow gently in and looking down we would see the waves lapping against the stone embankments of the villa's foundations.

We enjoyed the sea from our room, from the Roman bath-like heated indoor pool, from the elegant one-Michelin-starred Caesar Restaurant,

from the tables on the beautiful open terrace, from a hammock in the manicured Italian garden.

The sights and sounds of Rome and the Vatican were just a 20-minute drive from the hotel, but seemed a world away. It was a pleasure returning to La Posta Vecchia after a busy day of sightseeing, just as the Roman emperors must have loved escaping from frenetic Rome to this seaside retreat all that time ago.

We had stayed at so many wonderful places on this journey across Tuscany from Florence to Rome, but La Posta Vecchia proved to be a special and memorable final destination for this leg of a trip full of gourmet food, fine wine and many other little luxuries of life that Italy has to offer. ■



RESOURCES

- JK Place Florence www.jkplace.com
- Villa San Michele www.villasanmichele.com
- Arnolfo Ristorante www.arnolfo.com
- Castiglion del Bosco www.castigliondelbosco.com
- L'Andana www.lhw.com;
- tel: 1800 737-9955
- La Posta Vecchia www.relaischateaux.com;
- tel: 1800 733-2460