



The picturesque Tuscan landscape

Made in Heaven and on Earth

By Dr Jenny Lim

I recently rented a small villa in southern Tuscany for a week and invited another couple to join us on a trip to the Val d'Orcia region and Rome. We picked up a rental car from Fiumicino Airport and drove straight to our abode, just outside the tiny hamlet of San Giovanni d'Asso, which is the centre of the white truffle universe in Italy.

Much homework was done prior to the trip, and we were armed with a Michelin Green guide, the Dorling Kindersley guide to Tuscan food, Frommer's *25 Great Drives in Tuscany & Umbria*, and printouts of driving itineraries and restaurant recommendations gleaned from the Internet.

The landscape of Val d'Orcia is part of the agricultural hinterland of Siena, developed in the 14th and 15th centuries to reflect an idealised model of good governance and, happily for us, to create an aesthetically pleasing picture. The countryside of southern Tuscany lives up to its reputation as being one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. The picturesque hill towns and magnificent churches are a testament to man's ability to rival nature, and the combination of breathtaking landscape and stunning architecture is a wondrous sight to behold.

Distances between hill towns appear short, but the roads are narrow and winding, and it takes longer than expected to get around. Luckily, it was not peak season and we did not have to battle too much traffic and crowds.

The town of Pienza makes the best pecorino (a family of hard Italian cheeses) in Tuscany, and is a beautiful place to explore for an hour or more.

It was a humble village until its most famous son, Enea Silvio de'Piccolomini, a well known poet, philosopher and politician, was elected Pope Pius II in 1458. A year later, Pius II hired Bernardo Rossellino to redesign the entire village as a model of classic Renaissance architecture, and the town has been restored and maintained to this day.

We had reservations for lunch at a nearby *agriturismo* (agritourism) farm that makes award winning sheep and goat cheeses. The simple meal of pasta with homegrown fresh tomatoes, herbs and olive oil, salad from the garden, a selection of in-house salami and other cured pork products and cheeses complemented with fresh honey, was one that even a hardcore carnivore like me could love. Flowering wild fennel growing freely on the farm contributes to the taste of the honey, charcuterie and cheeses made on the farm.

It is a perfect infusion of the natural landscape into the everyday meal and received two thumbs up from all.

After lunch, we drove through cypress lined roads to visit the smaller towns of Monticchiello and Montefollonico, before ending up in Montalcino, home of the mighty Brunello wine. Montalcino is an impressive fortress town perched high up on a hill surrounded by the ubiquitous vineyards and olive groves on its lower slopes and valley. Part of this well preserved, turreted fortress, built in 1361, has been converted to a wine bar and restaurant to showcase the wines of the region, and is a pleasant place to have a drink or a meal.

The next morning we went to San Quirico, a small hill town off the beaten path, which was holding their weekly market in the square. I had high expectations, but alas, was disappointed with the meagre selection of stalls, although I was very excited to see huge fresh porcini mushrooms for



Soaking our feet in drains filled with flowing spring water at Bagno Vignoni



Bagno Vignoni

sale. I was sorely tempted to buy some to cook for dinner but decided that carrying around fresh mushrooms with a full day of sightseeing ahead was foolishness.

We continued on to Montepulciano which is the largest and highest hill town in southern Tuscany. An uphill, winding, shop lined street leads to Montepulciano's main square, Piazza Grande. It is surrounded by beautiful palaces and churches and is one of the largest and most impressive in Tuscany. It was filmed recently in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, but even that did not save this movie from mediocrity. Montepulciano is also famous for its wine, and we enjoyed our visit to the wine cellars carved into tufa bedrock under the Renaissance palazzi, some dating back to the ancient Etruscan civilisation. Walking down several flights of steep steps from the palace courtyard leads you to towering brick vaults with giant barrels of wine. The stone walled, serpentine tunnel eventually leads you into daylight as you emerge in a wine tasting shop along the street.

Autumn is a fine time to visit for palatal pleasure, being the hunting season for truffles, porcini and wild boar. We had a memorable meal of fresh tagliatelle with shaved white truffles and pappardelle with cinghiale al sugo (wild boar) in Montepulciano. The fresh fennel side salad ordered by my backsliding vegetarian friend was enjoyable too.

Autumn is also when the grapes become ripe. Watching grape harvesting machines at work in the vineyards was fascinating. My friend Dan stole a few grapes left on the vine while we waited in the getaway car. They were surprisingly tasty, unlike my previous experiences eating wine grapes.

Bagno Vignoni is a lovely small spa town discovered by the Etruscans and Romans. In its main square is a large ancient pool fed by springs from nearby extinct Monte Amiata. The sulphurous water heated by volcanic rocks measures 60°C, and was used by notable people since medieval

times for its curative powers. The pool is no longer open for treatment. Surrounding the pool are restored stone walled buildings which have been converted to appealing restaurants and shops. A short walk away from the square lies Roman ruins with drains carved into the rocky ground, and filled with flowing spring water. After a day of walking, taking off our shoes and soaking our feet in warm mineral rich water was most soothing.

Unlike the smaller towns I have mentioned, Siena is a larger walled city, but it has not lost its medieval charm. Located in the Chianti region of Tuscany, Siena is a treasure trove of astounding art and architecture. It was an economic and military rival to its more powerful neighbour Florence during medieval times. It is worth spending two or even three days exploring this enchanting place with its plethora of piazzas, churches, museums and cafes, and soaking in the lively university town atmosphere.

There is a famous antiques fair one weekend a month in Arezzo and we headed there on a sunny but cool Saturday morning. Arezzo is not in the region of Val d'Orcia, but is further northeast. Five hundred colourful stalls and many visitors made it a lively place and more attractive than usual. We visited Giorgio Vasari's house, which was on my to-do list after reading about this Renaissance man who was an art critic, painter, writer, historian and architect. Meanwhile, Piero della Francesca's fresco cycle, *The History of the True Cross*, considered to be his greatest masterpiece, can be found in the church of San Francesco.

After two and a half hours, we left and had lunch at a restaurant in a Relais and Chateau boutique hotel on the way to Cortona. This former farm still makes its own wine and olive oil. We ordered the tasting menu and it was excellent. After lunch we continued to Cortona, which became popular after the book and movie versions of *Under the Tuscan Sun* were released, neither of which I had enjoyed. But it was worth a visit, especially since we were in the neighbourhood.

There are exquisite churches and monasteries dotting the southern Tuscan valleys and we visited a few of them. Abbey Sant'Antimo near Montalcino is one of the most beautiful Romanesque churches in Italy. The Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, also a large Benedictine monastery, has a late Gothic church, three 15th century cloisters decorated with frescoes, and recently restored library and dispensary. Abbey monks still make medicinal liqueurs from age old recipes, organic wine, olive oil, honey. Some of these can be tasted in a charming tasting cellar. We also visited the Church of San Biagio which stands alone at the base of Montepulciano and was an arresting sight to behold. Regretfully, we could not coincide our visits with the Gregorian chanting performed by resident monks in the churches, held once or sometimes twice daily.

Given our limited time, we did not manage to visit north Tuscany including Florence, San Gimignano and Pisa. So much to do, so little time! Tuscany is definitely worth taking time off from busy schedules, to explore beauty made in heaven and on earth, as well to experience sublime gustatory delights. **SMA**



Sant'Antimo Abbey



The view from the patio of our villa



Jenny Lim lives in North Florida where she works in the Urgent Care section of the Emergency Room. She is married to a commercial pilot. They have no kids.