



QUIRKY BUSINESS:

Men in aprons

BROTHERS BANDINO AND ANTONIO LO FRANCO GIVE JULIA MAROZZI A TASTE OF LA DOLCE VITA, THANKS TO THE DELICIOUS, BIO-DYNAMIC PRODUCE OF THEIR LA VIALLA ESTATE >



Above La Violla already has an enthusiastic following in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Holland. A well-received event at London's The Kitchen bodes well for British custom, too.

Men in aprons are a beautiful sight. Especially when they are Italian, and enthusiastically chopping, kneading, slicing, peeling and grating amid the piles of fresh ingredients, bottles and jars shipped over to London from their estate in Tuscany.

The two brothers, Bandino Lo Franco and Antonio Lo Franco, are up to their wrists in pasta, pepperoni, artichoke purée, olive pâté and Tuscan ham in The Kitchen, on New King's Road, giving a demonstration of cookery from their organic farm about 9 miles northwest of Arezzo.

La Violla, the family-run estate, follows the principles of bio-dynamic farming, where everything that can be used is used – from animal waste that becomes fertiliser to olive husks that become compost – with the aim of bringing a unified approach to the entire range of their agricultural enterprises. The largest organic farm in Tuscany, La Violla produces fruit, vegetables, cheese, olives and grapes which are uncontaminated by chemicals and grown or made in harmony with the natural rhythms of the seasons.

Everything is bio-dynamic, seasons are observed, crops picked when they are ready, nothing is chilled or frozen. Every year plants are moved around, so different crops are planted in rotation to improve soil nutrients and give the land time to breathe.

The estate is self-sufficient in energy, plants and animals, with produce being picked at the moment of prime natural ripeness. About 1,300 sheep roam the

estate, providing milk to make pecorino cheese, and even the solar panels used to capture the heat of the sun are landscaped so that they cannot intrude on the view.

This idyllic setting and thriving business started by accident in 1978 when the parents of Antonio and Bandino and their older brother Gianni, bought the first house, Cà dell'Oro, as a hobby. Father Piero had a textile business in Arezzo and had grown up on a farm, but after the 1960s, Italy saw a huge migration of people who lived in the country move into towns. With his wife Giuliana he bought the dilapidated and abandoned farm and land just northeast of Siena, southeast of Florence.

Then they started restoration. Bandino recalls: "Every weekend we went there as children and it was our first imprinting of life on the land. It was rather like where our family had lived years before. It was more of a hobby at the beginning."

"To cultivate the land and to restore the house was my father's passion. It was a getaway place, idyllic, a gathering point for family and friends. We would all be involved in the grape harvest. We would take the grapes inside and we would squash the grapes, all the children joined in; we made wine inside the house in a little cellar. It is a beautiful remembrance."

Now Cà dell'Oro is one of 23 houses on 30 plots of land which have become one single estate in the heart of 'Chiantishire'.

The neighbours were happy to help. Says Bandino: "The neighbours would work on the

farms themselves to keep it going because everybody was leaving the countryside. Everything was in a ramshackle state, they abandoned their homes."

By 1985 the family had enough olive oil production under way to wage an inter-generational competition over pressing the olives. Antonio and Bandino remember rushing out to harvest and crush the olives, with parents, grandparents and their great-grandmother all taking part, all of whom were avidly trying to do the most.

As more abandoned farmhouses came into the estate, the restoration gathered pace. "I am still today awesomely struck by the houses which were made generations before us," says Bandino.

"They changed according to the needs of the families. If there was a hill, they adapted to the landscape. We continued to restore until 2006, non-stop."

In time, the three sons all went to university to read economics. "We were aware of almost all the jobs on the farm," says Antonio. "We worked and studied all at the same time, while we were students. We did everything on the farm, bottling, picking, crushing grapes."

As the 1980s wore on, the development of agri-tourism in Italy took hold and soon all the houses were being let, mainly to visitors from Italy and Germany. Antonio says: "Our parents had a dream that this land could be revived again. But there were no people any more, nobody. So the way to save this land was by having guests in the houses."



IN 1992, GIANNI AND BANDINO DECIDED TO TAKE A TRANSLATOR, LOAD UP A RENAULT ESPACE, WITH NO SEATS AND A TRAILER FULL OF WINE AND CHEESE, AND DRIVE TO GERMANY.

Below La Vialla's success began as a result of agri-tourism, as houses on the estate were let to visitors. Today, the estate's organic, bio-diverse principles are reaping dividends across Europe.



Men in aprons *continued*

Now, guests book years in advance and from March to November the houses are all full. The development of the estate started slowly, with friends coming to visit and working with the brothers to produce "this and that". Giuliana started making more and more marmalade, for instance, but the family ended up eating far too much. They needed to get the produce out to local people.

They began to sell around the region and to deliver to homes, but people wouldn't buy the pasta and the pecorino and the sun-dried tomatoes "because everyone in Tuscany was growing their own produce, following the biodynamic process without even knowing the meaning of the word organic then! The family was ahead of the game in a sense...", says Antonio. So they drove to the local market and made up hampers when guests asked for produce and wine to take home, or for certain hard-to-find delicacies. As time wore on, guests asked for the items to be shipped direct to their homes.

In 1992, Gianni and Antonio decided to take a translator, load up a Renault Espace, with no seats and a trailer full of wine and cheese, and drive to Germany. Bandino says: "We didn't speak a word of German. Now we speak German. It was really funny because the people couldn't believe we came direct

from Italy. They invited us to dinner, lunch, to stay in their houses. They offered tips on how we could improve the network." They sold everything they brought, and their success was a spur to growth. They realised they had to become a bit more professional and use their enthusiasm to build the business. "Our clients lead us to the next step," says Bandino. "Part of our success is thanks to the enthusiasm of our clients."

In 1993, they rented a warehouse and took three vans. They called friends who were also students to drive the vans to Germany and to set up the operation. They stayed in the warehouse and made sure the goods got to the customers.

By 1999 they realised they had to reorganise as they had continued to grow. There were no warehouses any more; goods were sent straight to Germany through the post or DHL, destined to be there within a week. They now send produce to Switzerland, Austria and Holland as well, and started delivery to the UK in 2007. Their website now boasts the full product range and the deliveries are safe, swift and efficient, straight out of Tuscany.

There are 20,000 core customers in Germany, many of whom are known to the Lo Franco family and with whom they have

first-hand contact. Many of them have been on holiday to La Vialla and spread the word when they got home. It is to their German guests that the family owes much of its success, as their taste for fine Italian foodstuffs and wine has shown no signs of abating.

Now, the brothers are looking to expand their operation in the UK, where they intend to develop slowly and let the market dictate the pace. "Like a vine, we will grow slowly," says Antonio. "We are not in a hurry, everything we do takes time because it is natural."

Back in The Kitchen, their assistant Aldofina, who has come from Tuscany with the brothers for two days, is making fresh pasta – flour, eggs, water, salt, olive oil – and shredding it into half-inch strips before dunking it briefly into boiling water and then fishing it out. Nearby, their aged Pecorino is cut into small chunks on a large round plate and a huge leg of Tuscan ham is carved into thin slices. Crostini, rounds of home-made Tuscan bread baked in their oven and brought over that day from Castiglion Fibocchi, are covered with purées, pastes and pâtés, while jars of olives, bottles of oil, wine and sparkling rosé Prosecco are lined up on the cupboards and tables: Truly, a glimpse of la dolce vita in the heart of the capital **B**