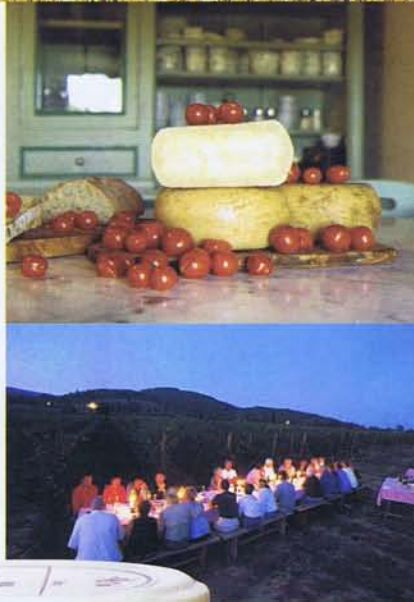




# The gallivanting GOURMET

*SUDIPIGOTT* satisfies her craving for globetrotting and gastronomy with three fantastic experiential foodie breaks

**N**o longer satisfied with merely eating exceptionally on holidays, the seasoned foodie traveller is at the vanguard of a trend towards experiential gourmet breaks. Reflecting a deepening interest in the provenance and production of ingredients we enjoy, there's a growing appetite for connecting with the people and places at source – be it a cacao plantation in the Caribbean, a biodynamic farming estate in Tuscany or a smokery in deepest Suffolk. A touch dilettante perhaps, guests experience hands-on participating in harvesting and production without forgoing the pleasures of luxury accommodation, plus plenty of time for relaxation, pampering and, most importantly, tasting, cooking and memorably good eating too. ■



## THE ULTIMATE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE **LA VIALLA, TUSCANY**

It's a heady experience in the very best and most delicious sense staying at La Vialla. It's a true one-off – a passionately run fattoria (food and wine estate) in Tuscany close to Arezzo whose owners the Lo Franco family – a trio of brothers – are charmingly evangelical about their commitment to bio-dynamic organic sustainable farming, so much so that they feature in a new United Nations Environmental Programme film previewed at last year's Copenhagen Climate Change Summit. The brothers want guests to truly understand what makes their way of farming so special

(albeit often eccentric). Proof is in the outstanding taste – from the unfiltered extra virgin olive oil to the hand-rolled biscuits cooked on a wood-fired oven fuelled by the estate's oak and even the simplest tomato sauce cooked at low temperature to best maintain the optimum zingy freshness. They believe the best way to do this is to encourage guests to get involved themselves.

Visit during the summer months and be taken through the process of making both pecorino and – from the whey – ricotta from the milk of La Vialla's own sheep. Help pick everything from asparagus and aubergine to red peppers and see how differently their sauces, pestos, marmalades etc are prepared to ensure they truly taste home-cooked (this is endorsement indeed, as I'd normally recoil from any prepared jarred sauce).

Come autumn, La Vialla's guests clamour to help with the wine harvest – their award-winning wines include rose spumante





and wonderful vin santo. This is especially enticing when it means participating in a bucolic wine-pickers lunch on long trestle tables set up within the vineyards. Feasting on La Vialla antipasti, huge bowls of enervating chicken cacciatore and homemade tortes washed down with copious wine, was truly memorable.

Similarly, in early November, visitors may join the olive harvest and learn exactly how the olive oil is produced at the farmhouse where the brothers spent their childhood family holidays.

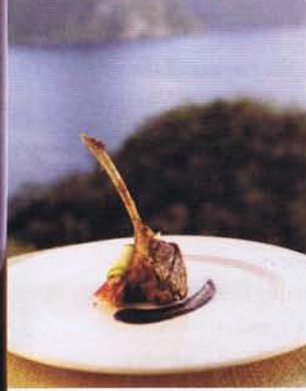
Guests stay in one of 23 wonderfully characterful mid-18th century farmhouses well scattered throughout the estate and all enjoying idyllic views of rolling Tuscan countryside and forest. They have been tastefully restored with their original beams, working fireplaces in the kitchens, stylish country antiques, beautiful linen and strictly no TVs. Instead guests spend time walking, riding, swimming in the natural lake, cooking and enjoying sociable meals in the estate's mostly al fresco restaurant (using produce only from La Vialla and neighbouring artisan farmers).

This is impeccable foodie escapism and may well inspire long-term re-prioritising of gastro-values, made easier as all La Vialla's produce, except their bread, is available by mail-order, astonishingly with no delivery charges, though in keeping with their carbon neutral philosophy neighbours are encouraged to order together.

*From €80 per person per night in a four-bedroom farmhouse; +39 (0) 575 430 020; lavialla.it*



**CHOCOHOLIC**  
For true chocolate lovers, a stay at Jade Mountain will provide the perfect ingredients



Pods and tasting for the first time the extraordinary lychee-like fresh cacao pulp. I then moved onto the whole process of drying (literally turning the beans by foot and hand in the open air), roasting (it's easy to see why so many large-scale chocolate companies over-roast for speed) and winnowing.

Then came conching (shell-like granite rollers gently heat and mix the chocolate mass to make the particles smooth and better flavoured – the longer the conch the more sensual and melting sensation in the mouth. I finished with the delicate art of tempering (further careful heating and cooling to produce shiny rather than dull chocolate with a sharp snap).

Although the emphasis at Jade Plantation is on a 'get away from it all' sanctuary, there are mountain bike trails, watersports, beaches and visits to the market at Soufriere too. Like many guests, I found it difficult to leave my aptly called 'sanctuary' suite. All are different yet

each have the fourth wall entirely absent to blend into the landscape and open onto a private fibre optic-lit infinity pool and dazzling views of the twin Piton peaks and the turquoise Caribbean Sea. All best savoured with plentiful Emerald Estate chocolate to hand.

*Kuoni offers seven nights bed & breakfast at Jade Mountain from £3,876 based on two sharing; kuoni.co.uk. jademountainstlucia.com*



**MAMMA MIA**  
A stay at La Vialla is truly memorable, not only for its picture-postcard setting, but for its ethos on food production and farming, not to mention the most delicious feasting

## REAL DEAL CHOCOLATE JADE MOUNTAIN, ST LUCIA

As a consummate fine chocolate aficionado, the opportunity to immerse myself in the whole bean-to-bar chocolate-making experience on a Caribbean island whilst staying in an ultra-sophisticated hotel built by its architect-hotelier owner, proved irresistible.

Proprietor of Jade Mountain (and Anse Chastenet, too) Nick Troubetzkoy has lived on St Lucia since the 1970s and has evidently developed a lifelong passion for the island and its people. This is idiosyncratically reflected in his insistence that every suite was hand-built and furnished by local craftsman with respect for environmental correctness and that the island's cacao production on their Emerald Estate deserved to be restored and expanded.

As cacao harvesting – presently on a modest scale – takes place year round, guests can always participate in any and every stage of the making of finished chocolate. I tried everything starting with harvesting the cacao

