

# how to spend it

## La via rustica (and top vintages) in Tuscany



WineChap, aka fine-wine blogger and consultant Tom Harrow, is midway through a glory tour of the Chianti and Montepulciano wineries

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Having collected family from the airport, the next stop was Castello di Casole (pictured), across the valley from Casole d'Elsa and a short hop from San Gimignano – the town famous for its folly towers (one of the earliest surviving examples of “keeping up with the Joneses”) – then often delightful Vernaccia, and the first (and not last) restaurant in Italy I found that closes for lunch. Castello di Casole, a boutique hotel that had only been open for three weeks, is the centrepiece of a sprawling 4,200-acre estate with a number of restored properties. It also boasts an award-winning game reserve, which was of particular interest as, with the Mugello F1 racetrack and Montalcino's vineyards nearby, it helped make C di C a perfect base for the boar-hunting, Ferrari-driving, Brunello-guzzling fantasy tour I was researching for a client.

On arrival, I was immediately given a large glass of prosecco and the Wi-Fi code (always great to see a hotel in tune with a writer's priorities). The US adapters in our room, the practice of having one's car “brought around”, and the fact that top New York outfit Italian Wine Merchants are the cellar partners for villa owners wishing to put together a wine collection in their new property, were all indicators of the estate's target demographic. Our room was capacious, as were the four-poster's pillows, like one be-skirted iceberg atop another; you could hide behind them. And you know it's time for a serious re-evaluation of priorities when the only complaint about your hotel room is that the cotton buds are slightly too hard – and not monogrammed. The textbook vista from the infinity pool could have been painted, and if it was slightly overcast during our stay, then, as I remarked to a friend crowing at London's heatwave, I'll take 24 degrees and a little cloud to keep my poolside drink chilled over 30 degrees mid-week stuck in his office.

C di C makes pleasant, unpretentious organic wines – Dodici, its signature red, is rounded and

supple – and its wine list would meet any connoisseur's approval: not big or grandiose, but offering a judicious choice of excellent producers intermingled with an interesting selection from lesser-known local vineyards. At the estate's Ristorante Tosca, an Ansonica (known as Inzolia in Sicily where the grape is more commonly found) produced at a nearby farm drank well with the lobster *panzanella*. (Some might see this as an aberration of Tuscany's signature peasant dish, but you could view it as a playful riff on the classic. Much like Grandma's Potato Gnocchi: "Dressed with coffee-scented veal cheek, and salty pinenut toffee." Just like *nonna* used to make – Marie-Antoinette's, at least.) Next door and facing on to the central courtyard, Pazzia Pizzeria offered more simple fare and also a selection of artisan Tuscan beers, including the full range from the Bruton micro-brewery up in Lucca, which I have long admired.

Next morning we joined clients for a visit to acclaimed winery Querciabella, all the way north in Greve, the gateway to the Chianti Classico region. The estate was one of Italy's first biodynamic wineries and is now also uniquely cruelty-free and vegan friendly, with no preparations involving cow horns. This is highly commendable, but only if the wines if are good, and Querciabella has never needed to sell its wines on the basis of an underlying philosophy – taste alone is more than sufficient – its '97 Riserva was the Chianti that opened my eyes to the potential of the wines from the region and remains a favourite. After a tour of the property, we began our tasting with the Batar '09 for breakfast. Tuscany's most complex and ambitious white wine, this barrel-fermented Pinot bianco-Chardonnay blend began life in 1988, the year Querciabella became organic. Normally my eyes roll at the combination of Tuscan heat and oak-influenced whites, with descriptors that are merely variants of "custardy" coming to the fore; but this is not the case with Batar, which shows a creaminess but complexity and no trace of wood dominating a plumb-line core of well-supported fruit and white stones. The 2009 Chianti has a sizable percentage of the cru Sangiovese normally destined for the Camartina (its Super Tuscan – it no longer makes a Riserva), and it shows – tasting Querciabella's wines makes the often ethereal concept of minerality much more accessible to communication. With no wine is this better exemplified than the Palafreno '08: 3,000 bottles only, 100 per cent Merlot, described by Cheval Blanc's technical director as flawless Merlot, but distinctively from the Chianti Classico hills.

Our next stop was lunch at legendary Fattoria La Vialla, all the way south in Castiglion Fibocchi, en route to Arezzo. This self-sufficient biodynamic estate offers visitors a refreshingly authentic experience, our meal's ingredients all grown, prepared, vinified or oinking within two miles and served at communal tables at the farm. This is NOT Tusconeyworld: Mauro our obliging host unapologetically corrected my reference to our pending accommodation as a villa. It was left unspoken that villas are for tourists; the houses on Fattoria La Vialla's estate are for guests, and they are not renovated so much as restored to working order. It's fashionable to shun the excesses of modernity for a simpler life, but Fattoria La Vialla really does provide a wholesome rusticity, a technological detox for the convenience generation: no gym, no Wi-Fi, no spa, no conferencing facilities, no distractions. There are two beautiful lakes, olive groves, forests, cycle routes and hoses for keeping the plants and infants happy. The day's provisions are collected from the farm shop each morning – cheese, meats, vegetables, sauces, jams, bread, pasta, wines, oils, vinegars, although there may be a short wait for the chickens to lay eggs. It went unused, but our fireplace had an arrangement of medieval ironwork that looked ideal for spit-roasting beasts over the flames and an axe in the hearth suitable for chopping up boars and logs.

We also squeezed in a visit to Montepulciano – nothing to do with the grape from neighbouring Umbria, across the mountains, but the region whose wines too often get overlooked in preference to their more familiar cousins Chianti and Brunello. Like them, Sangiovese (Prugnolo Gentile as the clonal variety is known here) dominates and we visited another favourite producer – Dei. Its Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Riserva "Bossona" 2006 is broad-shouldered but lithe and sinewy, leather and prunes balanced by violets and bitter cherries.

Although it makes wines in a more traditional style, the *Sancta Catharina* '09 highlights its Syrah component – spices and wild mint lift from the glass alongside some cream from the use of new barriques. I never tire of visiting the wine producers I am partial to, as one sees them through the fresh eyes of each new group of clients or friends. Also Dei is completing an incredible new state-of-the-art winery and amphitheatre, so Catherina, a talented musician, will have a more impressive arena in which to perform than at the piano in the front room of the family's villa.

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