



LA FOCE VAL D'ORCIA, TUSCANY

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LA FOCE VAL D'ORCIA

Tuscany, in most people's mind, evokes appealing images of a centuries-old civilization, a place where nature itself appears tamed and enhanced by the presence of man. In contrast, the Val d'Orcia comes as a shock to the stranger driving south from Chianciano toward the Via Cassia. The traveller suddenly reaches the top of a pass overlooking a wide valley below: this is La Foce. Everything that can be seen from here appears conceived on a larger scale, very different from any other place in Tuscany.

Even today, though no longer as bleak and infertile ("a lunar landscape, pale and inhuman") as it used to be when Antonio (an

Italian nobleman from Florence) and Iris Origo (an anglo-american writer grown up at Villa Medici, in Fiesole) first came to live here more than seventy years ago, the sheer breadth of the view is daunting. The wide and treeless valley is dominated on the horizon by the towering presence of Monte Amiata, a long-extinct volcano that rises in solitary majesty above the valley. Low clay hillocks, the crete senesi, on which little grows other than wild broom and prickly pear, ripple over the nearer ground. A winding road lined with small cypresses, their growth curbed by the wind and the hard, dry soil, zigzags up the hill to some abandoned farms. Under the sky the basic colours are gray and brown and olive green. Sparse farmhouses dot the landscape, a lonely medieval tower rises from the barren crete, a couple of large water reservoirs testify to efforts at land reclamation. Only in spring, when the fields are covered with bright green wheat and yellow broom lends colour to the crete, does the valley appear more hospitable.

In 1920s, when the Origos came to live here, they found the peasants living in appalling conditions, illiterate and superstitious. Their only social occasions were the village fairs, some of which were well known for miles around. The age-old organization that they found in place when they bought the estates of La Foce (in 1924) and Castelluccio, a medieval castle which is still part of La Foce (in 1934), was the mezzadria. It was a profit-sharing system by which the landowner kept the farmhouses in repair, and supplied the capital for the purchase of half of livestock, seed, machinery etc., while the tenant contributed, with the members of his family, the labor. When the crops were harvested, owner and tenants shared the profits in equal shares. In bad years it was the owner who bore the losses and lent the tenant what was needed. This institution continued basically unchanged until the political struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, which brought about the end of the mezzadria.

The main points of the Origos' plan to develop the Val d'Orcia were: set up an eight-year crop rotation; drain and build sustaining dams on the clay hills to prevent erosion; increase the arable land; rebuild the existing farms and the fattoria buildings and annexes; plant grapevines and olive trees; build new roads; build new farms; increase the livestock and create more pastures; suspend the cutting down of woods; increase facilities for education and medical care. Probably the most valuable and the most lasting work they carried out in those years was the construction of schools and kindergartens all over the valley. Both were very much needed, as more than 90 percent of the population was illiterate. They also built a small clinic at La Foce, the Ambulatorio Gianni Origo (named after their son, who died of tubercular meningitis in 1933 at the age of eight), with beds for emergencies or childbirth, and a little apartment for the resident nurse. Schools and hospitals were Iris's domain, while Antonio oversaw the improvements to the land and the houses.

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In the meantime, they were also building their own house and garden with the help of their English architect and friend, Cecil Pinsent. La Foce is certainly a mirror of their two very strong personalities. Their need to have an ultimate goal that would justify their own life, to leave their mark in this world, to pit their strength against innumerable odds, as well as their sense of adventure and the desire to help others, all this was felt by both of them and led to the making of La Foce. La Foce during the war years had become a completely self-contained little community, producing vegetables and fruit, milk and cheese, jam and honey, meat, oil, wine, wool, and even saffron from the wild yellow crocus. The events of 1943-44 suddenly shattered this happy life: several refugee children whose houses in Turin and Genoa had been bombed arrived at La Foce; as La Foce was taken over by the Germans as their headquarters, Iris and Antonio were forced to evacuate the estate together with all the children, walking at night through the woods to reach Montepulciano, where they were welcomed and taken in by friends. The improvements, the construction, in short the development they carried out and mostly their war experience, have been described in detail in Iris Origo's books, "War in Val d'Orcia" and "Images and Shadows", both recently republished and available in English. After Antonio's death in 1976, Benedetta and Donata (the two daughters born in 1940 and 1943) inherited the property, decided to sell about one-third of the land and divide the rest of the property between them. That third was bought in part by the Tuscan Region and put into the care of the Comunità Montana del Cetona (an off-shoot of the Ministry of Forestry) and in part by a cooperative formed by former peasants from La Foce, with the financial backing of a state organization that subsidized peasants turned small landowners. The cooperative, sadly, went bankrupt through mismanagement and lack of experience, and the land was handed over to another, older cooperative of Sardinian shepherds, who are still there.

Now the once-abandoned farmhouses have been renovated to be used as holiday homes, and the valley has recently become quite well known to lovers of Tuscany. In recent years, five communes in the valley have agreed to develop a park together, that will ensure that the valley is preserved in its present state and prevent the carrying out of such horrors as highways, factories, and new buildings, or the destruction of the crete, which, in spite of state protection, the small landowners still keep surreptitiously levelling in order to obtain more arable land. There is also a chamber music festival here in July, the Incontri in Terra di Siena, based at Castelluccio and run by Benedetta's son, Antonio Lysy, a professional cellist. Musicians of all nationalities come to live in our restored farmhouses and share with an appreciative public the music they have worked on together. Other cultural activities (contemporary art exhibitions and courses in garden history and planning) take place here during the rest of the year; La Foce's garden is open to the public on Wednesday afternoon. La Foce is now visited every year by thousands of people from all over the world, many with War in Val d'Orcia or Images and Shadows in their hands.

Images and Shadows, Part of a Life

Ed. Nonpareil Books

Iris Origo's legacy includes a string of books beloved equally by historians and biographers. Origo's mother, Lady Sybil Cuffe, married William Bayard Cutting in 1901, and when the family was not travelling to the far corners of the earth, Iris spent her youth in the ancestral estate on Long Island and in her grandfather's castle in Ireland. Her father died tragically when she was eight, and she continued her peripatetic life with her indefatigable mother and beloved governess. A woman who always knew her mind, in 1923 Origo bought La Foce, an entire valley, almost feudal in organization, in the Val d'Orcia of Tuscany. There for fifty years she worked tirelessly with her husband, improving the land and the lot of the peasants, saving endangered children from the brutal incursions of the Nazis, and writing history and memoirs that are still considered classics of the genre. She was at once a woman of action and introspection, of boundless curiosity and endearing innocence. She wrote beautifully, thoughtfully, and lucidly. As Raymond Mortimer observed, "A masterly biographer here recounts her own story, and in this biography she is at her best."

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War in Val D'Orcia: An Italian War Diary, 1943-1944

David R. Godine Publisher

Iris Origo records in diary entries the day-to-day heroism and fortitude of her family and workers on the estate La Foce during WWII. The family takes in children, escaped prisoners, soldiers, civilians and Jews all fleeing as the German army advances south toward their home, 100 miles north of Rome between Siena and lake Trasimene. Originally published in 1947, it's an engrossing chronicle that captures the immediacy of the war in Italy.

The Merchant of Prato: Francesco Di Marco Datini, 1335-1410

Ed. Nonpareil Books

A remarkable portrait of the 14th century Florentine merchant-banker, based on a huge cache of his letters and official documents that came to light in the 19th century. From his base in Prato, Datini expanded his trading empire to Pisa, Florence, Genoa and Barcelona with agencies in Valencia, Majorca and elsewhere. No dry catalog, Origo brings to life this extraordinary man, his business accomplishments and times in rich detail. The Dantini Palace remains in the old city center of Prato, a beautiful example of a late 14th century residence. Barbara Tuchman touts Origo's biography of the merchant "one of the great historical writings of the 20th century," high praise indeed.

Some of Iris Origo's books are sold at the office of La Foce. In Pienza the newsagent outside the main "Porta" of the old city wall on the right hand side has the largest selection of Iris Origo's books in all languages.

La Foce gardens the harmony between this garden and the surrounding nature makes La Foce an ideal example of Tuscany's architectural and cultural evolution in the 20th century. Conducted tours of the garden are held on Wednesday afternoon, every hour from 3 to 6 pm (April - September) and from 3 to 5 pm (October - March), starting from the La Foce office in the main courtyard. The entrance fee should be EUR 10 each. Guest staying at La Foce will be given a complimentary tour followed by refreshments on Monday afternoon in summer and Monday morning in winter.

Etruscan Necropolis on the Estate of La Foce if you take the road which leads from the office and the villa to Castelluccio and Belvedere, quite soon on the right hand side is a steep path which leads to an interesting archeological site on our estate. A series of tombs were found here. They are now exposed in the archeological museum of Chianciano Terme. Both are well worth a visit. Volunteer archeologists regularly continue their research and digging here. We are led to believe that Castelluccio was an Etruscan site. A path leads from Castelluccio past Belvedere along the crest of the hill towards east right up to the necropolis. This was the traditional Etruscan form of settlement.

How to reach the museum: near the old town centre in the street corner between Via Dante and Via 1° Maggio, opposite the municipal library "Villa Simoneschi" at the fork to Montepulciano.

Visit to the museum: (April - October) 10 am - 7 pm closed on Monday (November - March) Sat. and Sun. 10 am - 7 pm. Entrance fee: Adults EUR 4 , groups (min. 20 people) EUR 2,50.

Town Hall : 167 013588

Library : 0578 652510

Tourist office : 0578 63648

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The closest town is Chianciano at a distance of 5 km from the estate.

Food shops 8 am to 1 pm, 5 pm to 7:30 pm. In Chianciano on Wednesday afternoon most of the food shops are closed.

Supermarket at the exit Chiusi-Chianciano Terme of the highway A1. The supermarket is called "Centro Commerciale Etrusco" and is excellent despite its name! Opening hours are 9 am to 9 pm Tuesday to Saturday and 3 pm to 9 pm on Monday, shut on Sunday. A closer supermarket is CONAD in Montepulciano and COOP in Chianciano Terme.

Shopping on Sunday rather difficult in the area, but the restaurant L'Oasi just a few metres further down the road from La Foce has a "bar-cum-shop" where you can buy some basics.

Banks the closest banks are in Chianciano Terme, opening hours are 8:30 am to 1:20 pm Monday to Friday. They also have ATM machines and money exchange.

Post Office again the closest PO is in Chianciano. You can't miss it, it is on the main square "Piazza Italia" in the modern part of Chianciano. Open from 8.30 am - 6.30 pm

Foreign papers foreign newspapers and magazines are available in Chianciano.

Internet the next internet point is in Chianciano.

Trains the nearest and most convenient train station is Chiusi, which lies on the main Florence-Rome line with trains coming from both directions by the hour.

Car rentals in Chiusi, on the square opposite the train station, you will find a Herzt office.

Address: Piazza Dante 22, Telephone: 0578 227993, Fax: 0578 224191

Hours of Operation: Mo-Fr 0900-1300 1500-1900, Sa 0900-1300, Su on req

Doctor/Pharmacy in case of an emergency please call 118.

Doctor at Chianciano Dr. Massimo Maccari 0578 31355

Pharmacy in Chianciano Terme, Piazza Italia 057862422

Hospital outside of Montepulciano

Markets

All villages and towns have a market once a week which usually lasts from 9 am to 1 pm. Markets are excellent for buying fruit and vegetable as well as cheese. They also have endless stalls with clothes, household ware and sometimes second hand clothes which can be fun.

Chianciano Terme on Wednesdays, drive right through the new part of the town towards the "centro storico" and park before the large door leading into the old part. The market is to the right hand side of the street. This is the largest and best market in the area.

Chiusi, Tuesday in town (old part), and Chiusi Scalo (the new part close to the railway station) every Monday.

Cetona, Saturday

Montalcino, Friday

Montepulciano, Thursday

Pienza, Friday

S. Quirico d'Orcia, 1st and 4th Tuesday of each month

Sarteano, Friday - small but nice market

Factory Outlets

The Mall - Via Europa 8, 50060 Leccio, Reggello - Firenze

Agnona, Bottega Veneta, Emanuel Ungaro, Ermenegildo Zegna, Giorgio Armani, Gucci, Hogan, La Perla, Loro Piana, Salvatore Ferragamo, Sergio Rossi, Yves Saint Laurent, Tod's & Valentino.

The Mall outlet centre shops opening hours: 10 am - 7 pm non-stop Monday-Saturday; 3 pm - 7 pm on Sunday.

Take the A1 highway direction Florence and exit at INCISA. From the exit follow the signs to Leccio - Reggello.

Phone: +39 055 8657 775, Fax: +39 055 8657 801

Dolce e Gabbana, Fendi, Celine, Leccio. Follow the same signs as for The Mall, but before getting there you'll see the signs to these outlets on your left.

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Prada - I Pellettieri d'Italia, Località Levanella, Montevarchi, Phone: +39 055 9789188. Take the A1 direction Florence and exit at VALDARNO. Follow the signs to Montevarchi first and then the ones to the road E69 which leads to Arezzo. The outlet is located in a very small locality called Levanella.

Outlet village Valdichiana, just 1 km. off the A1 highway direction Florence (exit "Valdichiana"), open everyday from 10 am until 8 pm

WINE AND FOOD

Wine

Tuscan wines are among the best in Italy. Their reputation is due mainly to the red wine which includes Chianti, an excellent wine produced in the Chianti area. It is ruby red and its alcohol content ranges from 12° to 14°. There are two D.O.C. classifications: Putto and Chianti Classico Gallo Nero, according to the zone of production. The wine district spreads from Montalbano to Florentine hills, from the Valdarno to the Siene hills. However, only the wines produced between Florence and Siena, from S.Casciano to Castelnuovo Berardenga have the prestigious Chianti Classico - Gallo Nero label. The many small, rustic Tuscan taverns offer a wide range of local Chianti wines in a simple setting. In many villages you can still find the local mescite, now unfortunately disappearing. Vineyards with olive groves characterize all the Tuscan landscape. The wine and the extra-virgin olive oil produced in the area from S.Casciano to Castelnuovo Berardenga are known throughout the world. Vino Nobile di Montepulciano is named after the town and the historic notion that the wine was available only for the tables of nobility. This was the very first DOCG in Italy. Unfortunately, its first vintage in 1983 was met with disappointing reviews. That and the fact that over 250,000 cases of this wine are now produced each year has somewhat diminished its noble aspect. Quality since that 1983 vintage has improved, however, and wines from the top producers are viewed as some of Italy's best. Vino Nobile di Montepulciano wines are made from 60 to 80 per cent Prugnolo (sangiovese), 10 to 20 percent canaiolo, and up to 20 percent of other varieties (although no more than 10 percent white). One of the other red varieties most often used is Mammolo, which adds the scent of violets to the bouquet. The wines of this DOCG must be aged for 2 years in oak or chestnut casks, 3 years for those labelled riserva. In 1989 a new doc -rosso di Montepulciano- was formed. No other Italian DOC has risen to such prominence as Brunello di Montalcino. This small Tuscan district around the hill town of Montalcino has become the darling of wine connoisseurs around the world. Here the Sangiovese Grosso yields wines with sensual aromas. The fragrances of licorice, smoke, violet, truffles, incense, and raspberries have all been found in these wines. By law Brunello must be aged a minimum of 3 ½ years in oak barrels.

Tuscan cuisine

Tuscan cooking can be traced directly to the country kitchen and for this reason is simple and natural. However, Tuscans often succeed at elevating the humblest country dish to something extraordinary. Basic to Tuscan cooking are green extra virgin olive oil, the white pinto bean, tomatoes, game, pork, chicken, beef, sheeps' milk cheeses and the traditional unsalted bread. Traditional Tuscan antipasti include "finocchiona", a flavourful bologna-like sausage flavoured with fennel; "bruschetta", toasted peasant bread spread with olive oil and garlic (it's excellent with fresh tomatoes too), and "crostini toscani", chicken liver paté served on peasant bread. Regional cheeses are "pecorino", a sheep milk cheese which becomes pleasantly pungent with age, and "caciotta", a tasty cheese made of the milk of the sheep, the cow, or a mixture of the two. Pasta and soups are usually hearty in Tuscany, and homemade fresh egg pasta is put to frequent use. "Pappardelle alla leper" is a classic Tuscan dish, consisting of a wide egg noodles in a rich sauce made from hare. "Ribollita" is a nourishing combination of beans and other vegetables, thickened with bread. "Pici" are very typical of this southern side of Tuscany; they are hand-rolled spaghetti (made with flour, water, salt and egg) which can be served with meat sauce, duck sauce, garlic and tomato sauce (this sauce is called "aglione") or bread crumbs.

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The fertile Tuscan soil, besides producing wine and oil, also yields wheat and reach forage for meat producing animals. The "bistecca alla fiorentina" is a regional specialty: a T-bone steak of tender beef from the Chiana valley, grilled over charcoal, seasoned with olive oil, salt and pepper and served rare unless you request it otherwise. "Pollo alla diavola" is a chicken which has been split, flattened and grilled over charcoal. "Arista alla fiorentina" is a loin of pork roasted with garlic and "agnello al forno" is lamb baked generally with garlic and rosemary, best accompanied by roast potatoes. Traditional desserts include "ricciarelli", moist almond cookies, "panforte", a rich fruitcake, "cantucci", crisp, dry almond cookies to be dipped in Vin Santo, a sweet wine. "Tiramisu" is common on many dessert menus, but here as everywhere else, inspect it first as not all tiramisus are created equal.

Copyright Marjorie Shaw's "Insider's Italy"

WINERIES

Wineries in Montalcino

Banfi - Visitors are always welcome to the Castello Banfi estate south of Montalcino, where a range of activities appeals to many interests. If you just drop in, you will find the enoteca open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., plus the same hours for the glass museum. The casual dining style "Taverna Banfi" is open for lunch between 12:30 and 3:00 pm Monday through Saturday, and winery tours are offered at 4 p.m. daily Monday through Friday, though in both cases it is best to make reservations three or four weeks ahead of time. Advance reservations are mandatory for dinner at the more formal "Ristorante Banfi". It is open for dinner only, Tuesday through Saturday from 7:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. Winery tours and restaurant service are available throughout the year except two weeks in mid-August when the estate closes for vacation. Tel. 0577 816041 - 0577 816001

Castel Giocondo - Frescobaldi - Contact Ms. Federica Merli (ph. 348 7303767 - 0577 84131). Guided tours Mon. - Fri. at around 11 a.m. They are quite flexible, but advanced reservation is required. Tour (vineyards + canteen) and tasting EUR 25 + VAT; Tour + light buffet lunch EUR 50 + VAT ; Tour + lunch EUR 100 + VAT.

Wineries in Montepulciano

Dei - Tel. 0578 716878. They produce an excellent Nobile di Montepulciano and don't miss the riserva "Santa Caterina". Tour + tasting of 3 wines EUR 15 per person. Call ahead for reservations.

Avignonesi - in 1974 the Falvo brothers, owners of the vineyards in the district of Cortona, took over the historical estate Avignonesi and refounded it investing greatly in viticulture, selecting the local varieties and introducing classical ones such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir. Today Avignonesi consists of four wine-producing estates, which totally comprise 225 hectares of open ground, 109 hectares of vineyards and 3 hectares of olive groves.

Fattoria Le Capezzine - (altitude 300 mt.): only a few kilometres from Montepulciano, close to the village of Valiano, on the way to Cortona, stands the old farm estate Le Capezzine. It is the heart of the company and it has been impeccably restored. It contains spacious cellars for vinification, cellars for ageing and storing, the vinsantaia, the frantoio (the olive oil mill), warehouses and offices. Guided tours and tasting upon request. Tel. 0578 724304.

Palazzo Massaini - is another estate where you can buy some good wine. The estate lies on the road between Montepulciano and Pienza. It is a big castle to be seen from the road, follow the signs.

Enoteca Osticcio - in Montalcino is a very nice informal place where you can sit and taste among a wide variety of Brunello, Nobile, Chianti, white wines, dessert wines and grappe along with selections of salamis, cheese, bruschetta, homemade cakes.

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Restaurants in the area - Top range

Three of Tuscany's best restaurants, written up in all the good guide-books, are in the nearer surroundings: **La Locanda dell'Amorosa**, Sinalunga. Beautiful setting, also a hotel and one of our favourite. The owner is a friend and founding member of our cultural association "Incontri in Terra di Siena", which organises chamber music concerts at the end of July. Closed Tuesday lunch and Monday. Tel. 0577 67721, approx. EUR 55 per person, all credit cards accepted.

Mondo X, La Frateria di Padre Eligio, Cetona. Antique monastery founded by Saint Francis in an exceptionally beautiful location. Now a rehabilitation center where young people are helped to find a new stability under the guidance of Father Eligio. They have created a microcosmos of care and respect which revolves around a famous restaurant. Everything you eat has been produced on the premises, the whole estate has been restored and is kept by the members of the commune. An experience not to be missed. Tasting menu at EUR 93 per person, all credit cards except Diner's. Closed on Tuesday for lunch, tel. 0578238015.

La Chiusa, Montefollonico. 8 Km. northwest of Montepulciano, a walled town with a frescoed parish church of the 13th century. La Chiusa has been acclaimed as one of the best restaurant in Southern Tuscany, where typical local cuisine is raised to transcendent heights, and there is an exhaustive wine list for those not satisfied with mere *Vino Nobile* from nearby. Many of the products are grown on the premises. Tel. 0577 669668, closed on Tuesday and in winter, approx. EUR 80 per head, all credit cards.

Also to be considered top range is

La Grotta, Montepulciano, next to the San Biagio church on the outskirts of the town. One of the most interesting restaurants in the area. Small choice of excellent dishes, ample wine list. Tables outside. Tasting menu at EUR 42 per person. Closed on Wednesday, for Christmas week and in January and February. Tel. 0578 757607, all credit cards.

Il Rosselino, Pienza, in the small square called Piazza di Spagna lies this charming and cosy restaurant, with a total of five tables. The owners of the restaurant are also the chefs and are extremely careful in reproducing the traditional Tuscan cuisine with some new flavours. Very good wine list. Credit cards accepted: the main ones. Cost per person: around EUR 35/40. Tel. 0578 749064. Closed on Thursday.

Le Logge del Vignola, Montepulciano, along the main road in the old part, across the post office. Excellent service for this small restaurant (9 tables). The owner changes menu every month and combines the old Tuscan flavours with a touch of modern taste. The result is superb. Excellent wine list. Non-smoking area. Average cost per person : EUR 40. They have a special light lunch menu at EUR 18 per person. Closed on Tuesday. All credit cards accepted. Tel. 0578 717290.

Restaurants in the area - Middle range

La Porta, Monticchiello, right at the entrance to this small medieval fortified village. A large cellar turned into a simple trattoria. Very good wine list and pecorino cheese. Home made "pici" served with duck sauce. Tables outside in a small terrace overlooking the valley. Closed on Thursday. Tel. 0578 755163. Around EUR 35 per person.

Da Fiorella, Pienza. A cozy place in the heart of Pienza. Angelo and his wife every morning gets the best products from the local farmers to prepare a tasty and delicious Tuscan menu with fresh home made pastas and the best local meat. Tel. 0578 749095. Closed on Wednesday. Credit cards: Visa / Mastercard. Average cost per person: EUR 30.

L'Oasi, right below the entrance to the estate of La Foce, a very normal trattoria with good food. In summer it is pleasant to sit outdoors. Average cost per person EUR 25. Attached to the restaurant is a bar and a sort of shop, where you can also buy some basics on Sunday. Playground for children, closed on Thursday. Tel. 3288623785.

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Patry, Chianciano Terme, Via G. di Vittorio n.80 (the parallel road to the main one leading to the old section. At the traffic light turn left, at the next stop turn right and continue for about 300 mt. The restaurant will be on your left). A very good restaurant and pizzeria with delicious fresh fish every day and original Tuscan recipes. Average cost per person: EUR 30. Closed on Monday. Tel. 0578 63014. Credit cards accepted.

Osteria Vecchia, Cetona, Via Cherubini, 11. Tel 0578 239040, closed on Tuesday. Just off the main square of Cetona, a pleasant trattoria with excellent wine list. Credit Cards: Visa, Carta Si, Diners, AE. Average cost per person EUR 30.

La Fontanella, San Casciano dei Bagni, tel. 0578 58300. Closed on Tuesday just in Winter time, never in Summer. Please book ahead. All Credit Cards. A very friendly couple has restored this place in San Casciano dei Bagni, very close to the spa centre, and turned into a charming restaurant with a small amount of guest rooms. One feels that a lot of care and attention is given to the running of the place. Try the home made cakes. Average cost per person EUR 30.

Daniela, San Casciano Bagni, Piazza Matteotti, 3. Tel. 0578 58041, no closure in July, August and September, otherwise closed on Wednesday. This village is a bit farer away from La Foce, but you could visit Cetona and then continue for lunch or dinner to San Casciano. This very charming restaurant is especially nice if you can sit outside on the square which has a wonderful view over the valley. The menu is simple, mainly home-made pasta, vegetables and ice-cream. Try the "menu della casa", so that you can taste soups, crostini and several pastas. Please book ahead. Credit cards accepted. Cost: around EUR 30 per person.

Cantina Il Borgo, Rocca d'Orcia. On the main square of the hamlet, 5 tables outside and a couple more inside. Their meat is excellent, a place to try the famous "fiorentina" steak, the Italian version of a T-bone steak. Do also try the fried vegetables. Closed on Monday; open just for dinner (Sat. and Sun. lunch and dinner). EUR 28 per person. Tel. 0577 887280. Credit cards: Visa, Mastercard.

La Locanda della Picca, Città della Pieve. Furnished with great care and modern taste, this lovely farmhouse just outside the village, turned into an inn with annexed restaurant serves creative but still traditional dishes and has a great wine selection. A good opportunity to visit the home town of the famous artist Perugino. Tel. 0578 299403. Closed on Tuesday and Wednesday for lunch. Average price per person EUR 35. All credit cards accepted except Diner's.

Il Loggiato, Bagno Vignoni, around the Roman bathtub, a simple place with tables outside. They serve cold cuts, crostini, marinated vegetables and the best white beans of the area. Open at lunch and dinner.

Latte di Luna, Pienza. Good local dishes; try the roasted pork. Average price: EUR 30 per head. Tel. 0578 748606, shut on Tuesday and about 3 weeks in July.

Osteria del Leone, Bagno Vignoni. Nice atmosphere, good food in the heart of this lovely village with Roman baths. Tel. 0577 887300. EUR 40 per person.

Zaira, Chiusi, in the old part (not the area near the railway station). Very good traditional food, no tables outside. Ask the owners to visit their beautiful wine cellars. Tel. 0578 820260.

La Solita Zuppa, in the old part of Chiusi, a very typical osteria especially well known for its soups. Closed on Tuesday. Tel. 0578 21006. Around EUR 40 per person.

La Taverna del Patriarca, between Chianciano Terme and Chiusi, Tel. 0578274407. Just off the highway at Chiusi, across the big cinema centre, on the ground floor of the 5-stars hotel Il Patriarca.. A lovely Tuscan trattoria owned by a young couple with great enthusiasm. Typical Tuscan dishes at a very reasonable price. EUR 25,00 per person. All credit cards accepted. For a more gourmet and fancy meal there's the restaurant on the first floor.

„La Botte Piena“ - Osteria in the historic centre of Montefollonico, Piazza, D. Cinughi 12, Phone: 0577669481. Closed on Wednesdays. Reservation recommended.

This list is certainly not exhaustive and one of the pleasures of travelling in Italy is "discovering" your own favourite restaurant, so should you find other restaurants in the area you would like to recommend, please mention them in the guest book you will find in your house. Thank you.

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Chiusi - is a favourite because of its unpretentious liveliness. Compared to Montepulciano it is uncontaminated by tourism. The main thing to see is the Duomo and the museum next door. On the square of the Duomo is a good newsagent who also sells a wider range of guide books on the area. I bought a reprint of D.H.Lawrence's "Etruscan Places" which I had been meaning to read for a long time. Several Etruscan settlements have been discovered around Chiusi and make an interesting introduction the Etruscan civilisation. Chiusi is well worth a walk round, make sure you don't miss the shady public parks and the view from the top of the city walls.

Montepulciano - of course.

Pienza - of course. The newsagent outside the main "Porta" of the old city on the right hand side has the largest selection of Iris Origo's books in all languages.

Sant'Anna in Camprena - half derelict monastery now completely restored on the road between Piensa and San Quirico d'Orcia. A very romantic setting which served as location for the film "The English Patient". In the refectory there is a fresco by the renaissance painter Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, otherwise known as Il Sodoma.

San Martino, Church In The Village Sarteano - Sarteano fits our picture of unspoilt Italian village. The main square has a nice bar where you can sit outside. On the square below, in the afternoon a different bar serves excellent take away pizza. The church San Martino, of romanic origin and rebuilt in the last century houses a fresco of the Annunciation by the Renaissance painter Beccafumi. Art historians say that its quality is given by the extreme freedom of colour and light effects. To reach Sarteano from Chiarentana continue on the gravel road towards south, drive up and past Castiglioncello and keep driving another more or less 6 km.

San Quirico D'Orcia - make sure you see the Horti Leonini, an early example of Renaissance gardens, as well as the western door in the city wall and the main basilica. San Quirico is a sleepy and untouristy place. Don't miss to see the Collegiata church. Definitely worth a visit.

La Foce Gardens - the harmony between this garden and the surrounding nature makes La Foce an ideal example of Tuscany's architectural and cultural evolution in the 20th century. Conducted tours of the garden are held on Wednesday afternoon, every hour from 3 to 7 pm (April - September) and from 3 to 5 pm (October - March), starting from the La Foce office in the main courtyard. Exclusively for La Foce guests there will be a private guided tour on Monday (at 11am in the cold season and at 5:30 pm in summertime) followed by a drink only if the villa won't be occupied.

The Hot Springs - Tuscany is famous for its hot springs, the most spectacular being Saturnia in the south west of the region. Close to La Foce is "Bagni San Filippo", which has a proper pool where you pay about EUR 10 for the whole day and EUR 6 as from 3 pm. The nicer part is above the public pool. The water has carved natural pools into the rock in the middle of the woods. The water here is less warm, because the hot water has been deviated into the public pool, but it is clean and crystal clear. It contains sulphur and is beneficial to arthritis, rheumatism and skin diseases. Your skin will feel wonderfully soft afterwards. To reach Bagni San Filippo as you leave the estate, proceed on the tarmac road downhill. When you reach the Via Cassia, the main road along the valley, turn to the left and continue until you reach the signs for Bagni San Filippo on the right. You are obliged to drive around the village and as you descend a steep hill towards the centre, park your car where other cars are parked and follow the signposts.

Bagno Vignoni - a must because of the antique pool on the main square (which may not be used anymore, alas). If you want to take a swim in the hot springs, go to the public pool, next to the "Hotel Posta Marcucci".

Orvieto - only 40 minutes drive. Look it up in your guide. Frescoes by Luca Signorelli in the Duomo have been recently restored and opened to the public.

Sant'Antimo - is one of Tuscany's jewels. It is an abbey lying all by itself in a valley, completely built in a light beige coloured travertine stone. The inside is partly covered in alabaster of the same colour. I strongly recommend you visit Sant'Antimo. Drive to Montalcino, and as you reach the top of the hill, before driving into the old part of the town, turn sharp left (it is an U-turn) following the signs to Sant'Antimo.

LA FOCE

10/10

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Monticchiello - is a small village which is quite famous in Tuscany for a dialect theatre festival set up by the entire village population in the '70ies, which takes place every summer end of July/beginning of August. The village is worthwile a visit at other moments as well. Drive up the sand road to Montepulciano past Castelluccio and follow the signs. The view over the Orcia valley is stunning and makes the drive a feast for the eye. In Monticchiello, right next to the church, is a small shop which sells local linen (towels, bedspreads) and materials in pure linen as well as linen/cotton. They use traditional methods and patterns and the results are extremely attractive.

Ballooning In Tuscany - this is a unique experience to see the real, old Tuscany, as yet almost untouched by tourism. Robert Etherington, who lives in the village of Montisi, organizes morning flights (starting at about 6 am) which last more than an hour. Afterwards you will enjoy a champagne breakfast laid out in the fields where you land. The whole flight, from inflation to return to base, takes about three and a half hours. The ballooning season is approximately late Spring to early Autumn. To contact Mr. Etherington, call +39 0577 845211 or visit his web-site www.ballooningintuscany.com

ACTIVITIES

A tennis court, a playground for the smaller children and a trampoline are at Chiarentana, for all guests' use.

There are beautiful walks, both up into the oak and beech woods, and down into the crete senesi, the unique clay hillocks that characterize the Val d'Orcia landscape.

In late July an outstanding chamber music festival, Incontri in Terra di Siena, is held at the Castelluccio.

Benedetta Isidori can advise you on restaurants, shopping, and sight-seeing excursions. Some of the most beautiful Renaissance, Romanesque, Medieval and Etruscan sites are close by, and in summer digs for an Etruscan necropolis are ongoing in the field next to the La Foce villa.

On request

- * Private guided tours of secret, or less well-known, Tuscan treasures
- * Swimming in volcanic hot water pools
- * Wellness and beauty treatments
- * Riding on the Monte Amiata
- * Mountain biking through the woods and the crete senesi