

TUSCAN TREASURE: VINO NOBILE DI MONTEPULCIANO

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A VILLA *to* REMEMBER

In Tuscany, a family has turned a 17th century farmhouse into a five-star bed and breakfast that's surrounded by beautiful vineyards and gardens. A well-stocked wine cellar goes nicely with cooking classes, giving guests a true escape from the trappings of a busy life.

Story and Photos by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Signor Nicola was four years old the first time he visited San Gimignano, an idyllic hill town in Tuscany. Also known as the Town of Fine Towers, it's encircled by 13th century walls.

"I tugged at my mom's skirt and told her I wanted to get married here," says Nicola, who is now 44 years old with salt-and-pepper hair and crystal-blue eyes. Today, Tuscany is his second home, a fact that happened quite by chance.

In 1998, Nicola, whose family has been in the wine business for four generations, was in Seattle working with a distributor who expressed his love for Tuscany and said he wanted to buy a vineyard there.

"As I gave him a hand looking for properties, my dream to have a villa and vineyard in Tuscany that I could call my own soared," he says.

One weekend, Nicola was cruising through Tuscany on his motorcycle and ended up in Montepulciano.

"It was my first time to the medieval town, and its magic stole my heart. During that visit, I went to see my supplier, Signore Giorgio. I told him I was looking for a vineyard property and he replied, 'Why don't you buy my cousin's property—it's for sale and it's the best property in Montepulciano.' I called my father immediately and told him that Giorgio's cousin's property was for sale. My father was interested too, so my parents came to Tuscany and went to see the property. It was love at first sight," says Nicola.

They organized a family reunion and discussed the potential purchase. "My mom said,



Signor Nicola and his family kept the integrity of the 17th century farmhouse they bought and renovated in Tuscany.

NATIVE SOIL



The farmhouse offers views of the surrounding vineyards.

‘Absolutely no way!’ My father, said, ‘I think we should do it.’ And we bought the property,” he says. The family undertook renovations, respecting the original 17th-century structure, but adding all the modern comforts. Today, it is a five-star bed and breakfast.

“With our wine experience, we began giving wine tours and tastings. It was a dream come true,” he says.

Nicola gazes over the vineyard fondly. “It was a perfect match because my father makes red wine in Verona, so finding a vineyard in Tuscany where we could make white wine gave us a great opportunity,” he says.

Nicola explains that in this part of Tuscany, there are two towns: Montalcino and Montepulciano, and they both have the same sangiovese rosso grape. In Montalcino, they make Brunello, and in Montepulciano, they make the Nobile.

“The Nobile is the more gentle and feminine version of a Brunello. It’s softer on the palate and doesn’t require five or so years of aging. The wine appellation of

Montepulciano includes the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano DOCG with grape varieties: 85 percent prugnolo gentile and 15 percent mammolo (both clones of sangiovese grape). Our wines are Vino Nobile di Montepulciano Riserva DOCG and Rosso Toscana IGT Tignolo,” he says.

Signor Nicola’s property also boasts an extensive wine cellar that keeps the bottles well protected from light, vibrations and changes of temperature—very important conditions for keeping the wine perfect.

The property, a bed and breakfast inn with wonderful wine, seemed like the perfect place for conducting cooking classes. Nicola and his father, Signore Terenzio, agreed.

Since my first visit, Signore Terenzio has been welcoming our Cooking Vacations’ guests with his warm Veronese accent. He leads the wine tours and tastings while his wife, Mara, teaches our guests how to cook Tuscan cuisine. She also includes her signature salame freddo—cold chocolate salame made with chocolate, biscotti and liqueur.

“It’s not Tuscan, it’s Veronese, but everyone

loves it,” she says. She also makes traditional cantucci, an old time recipe for biscotti made by Tuscans who did not have money to buy pastries. They’re made with flour, eggs, a little sugar and almonds. The biscotti are twice baked, making them hard, so Tuscans soak them in vin santo.

Vin santo is a “holy” wine made in Tuscany. It ferments or ages for a minimum of three years (some producers age it up to 10 years) in small oak barrels called caratelli. Vin santo goes through a natural oxidation process that transforms the sugar into a unique flavor. Farmers would take their break under an olive tree and dip their cantucci in the vin santo. The sugar gave them energy to carry on the day’s work. It’s part of the Tuscan farmers’ heritage.

Tuscan food also has a rich heritage. “The cuisine in Tuscany dates back to the Middle Ages,” Nicola says. “Although tasty and flavorful, it’s very simple and uses only a few ingredients. If an Italian recipe has more than a few ingredients, we think someone is trying to cover something up,” he says.



"The key to cooking Italian is using fresh ingredients and high quality products. Our cooking tour program is the Villa O, and it includes hands-on cooking classes where we make pici, a traditional Tuscan pasta. It's a big pasta, so you have to roll each strand out one by one; they're thick and uneven which is perfect for the sauce, because the sauce needs to stick to it," he says.

A famous recipe that his mother, Mara, makes is ribollita, a hearty re-boiled soup. It's traditionally made on Monday, and as the week continues, she adds the leftovers of each day to the existing soup. As the soup is re-boiled, the flavors blend to a thick and rich consistency. When Sunday arrives, the ribollita is layered with flavors.

"The foods that we make in the cooking classes are the foods that we eat at our table."

Signore Nicola's eyes widen as he explains, "My favorite food in Montepulciano is the fiorentina, the big T-bone cut of meat. I am a big meat eater and the fiorentina pairs well with Vino Nobile, so it's the best match ever, because it cuts through all the fat of the meat and ends nicely on the palate," he says.

Tuscan secondi (main courses) include scottiglia. Traditionally, farmers left the less popular cuts of meat to one side for themselves, as the prime cuts were to be sold to the rich landlords. The meats, usually beef, lamb, chicken and pork, were first seared in an earthenware pot, then braised for hours in a tomato sauce with vegetables and spices. The slow-cooking method tenderizes the meats and transforms them into a delicious Tuscan stew.

Another popular secondo is scaloppine al limone, cutlets of chicken sautéed in a creamy butter and wine sauce accompanied by sides such as truffled zucchini; endive, raisins and pine nuts, and roasted red peppers with capers. This cuisine is based on centuries of food history, Nicola says. The Tuscans always survived with what nature provided, he adds.

"We are passionate wine makers and passionate farmers too," Nicola says. "My father and I continue to

farm the land, rotating the north face with corn, wheat, soy and sunflowers, alternating through the years. I love it when we plant the beautiful sunflowers," he says.

The property reflects the love the family has for it. On the south side is the vineyard with perfectly manicured sangiovese rosso grapes. In the northwest and northeast are 500 olive trees, some of which are more than 100 years old.

"We make our olive oil with leccino, moraiolo, casaliva, pendolino varieties—blending makes a rich and excellent tasting oil," Nicola says. They also have fruit and nut trees, and blackberries and aromatic grapes grown on a pergola trellis around the house.

"When I am here, I love to work outside, pruning, cutting and keeping the property cured [preserved]. I love to be in my garden where we grow eggplant, tomatoes, pumpkins, beans—a little bit of everything. My wife, Francesca, grows fields of saffron and lavender," Nicola says.

He opens a bottle of Nobile, smells the cork, pours, swirls, sniffs and sips. "If you don't lose yourself in the beautiful hills of Tuscany, it's like eating Tuscan ribs and not licking your fingers."

The villa is just a short one-quarter mile away from the medieval village of Montepulciano. The drive curves along a narrow road lined with cypress trees that stand tall. Inside the walls of Montepulciano is a poetic town lined with worn-out cobblestones, hidden courtyards, the smell of salty pecorino and the earthy scent of wine barrels. From my suite at the villa, I can see the ancient village, a UNESCO World Heritage site, as butter yellow sunflowers, their faces turned to the sun, sway in the breeze.

For more information on the Villa O cooking tours go to www.Cooking-Vacations.com

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Left: Leaves on the grapevines change color in the fall. **Center:** The pool keeps guests cool in the summer. **Right:** Grapes are placed in bins during a traditional grape harvest in Tuscany.

Recipes

Cold Chocolate Salame

- 3 ounces of butter
- 8 tablespoons of granulated sugar
- 1 large egg, plus 1 yolk
- 4 tablespoons of bitter cocoa
- Juice and grated zest of half a lemon
- 1 tablespoon of liqueur, such as Amaretto, Sambuca or rum
- 4 ounces of dry biscotti, almond or amaretti

Bring the butter to room temperature, about two hours. When the butter is soft, place in a bowl, add the sugar and beat together until mixed well. Keep stirring while you add the egg, and the yolk.

Add the cocoa, lemon zest, lemon juice and liqueur. Add the crumbled biscotti and mix well. With a spoon, place the mixture on a sheet of parchment paper (or aluminum foil) and roll it up in the shape of a salame. Place in the freezer and leave for a couple of hours. When ready to serve, remove from the freezer, cut in thick slices and you can garnish with fruit or a swirl of whipped cream, if desired.

Makes 4 servings.

Note: When using raw eggs in a recipe, select a pasteurized variety and make sure they have not passed the expiration date on the carton.

Endive with Pine Nuts & Raisins

- 4 heads endive
- 5 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- ½ cup pine nuts
- ½ cup raisins
- Sea salt and black pepper, to taste

Cut each head of endive lengthways into 6 to 8 pieces. Heat the oil in a large pan, add the pine nuts and raisins and stir for about 1 minute. When the pine nuts become brown, arrange the endive in the pan and cook it, turning every so often, until it becomes soft and slightly brown. Add salt and pepper to taste, then turn off the heat and cover the pan. Serve hot or at room temperature.

Makes 4 servings.

Chicken Livers on Toast

Traditional crostini in Tuscany are served at the start of almost every meal. In Montepulciano, the kidneys of the chicken are also used.

- ½ pound chicken livers
- 2 to 4 chicken kidneys, if using
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and left whole
- 6 bay leaves
- ⅛ teaspoon sea salt
- ⅛ teaspoon black pepper

- ½ cup white wine
- ½ cup vegetable broth
- 1 tablespoon capers, rinsed
- 5 anchovies, in oil
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling on the toast
- 1 loaf country-style bread, sliced

Remove any fat and connective tissue from the chicken livers. Slice the livers and the kidneys in large pieces and set aside.

Warm the olive oil in a pan, add the garlic cloves, bay leaves, livers, kidneys, sea salt and pepper. Stirring frequently, cook over a high heat for about 5 minutes.

Add the white wine and cook over high heat until the wine evaporates. Add the broth and lower the heat to medium and keep cooking for 5 minutes more. Remove from heat.

Discard the bay leaves and pass the remaining mixture through a vegetable mill until you obtain a cream. Finely chop the capers and anchovies, then add them to the liver mixture. Add a tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil to a pan and cook the mixture again over a low heat, stirring constantly until the ingredients are well blended and smooth. Place in a bowl and allow to cool.

Toast the bread slices on the grill or in the oven until golden. Remove the bread and, while it is still hot, drizzle with a little olive oil and spread with the chicken liver mixture.

Makes 4 servings.

Tuscan Cutlets with Lemon Sauce

- 4 chicken breasts, sliced in half lengthwise
- ¾ cup all purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 5 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil
- ½ cup white wine
- ½ cup water
- ½ cup fresh parsley, chopped
- Sea salt, to taste
- 1 large egg, beaten
- Juice of ½ lemon

Flour the chicken by gently pressing the slices into the flour with your hands. Heat the butter and the oil in a large pan over a high heat. Add the floured chicken breasts and turn the slices until both sides are cooked golden brown.

Add the wine to the pan. When the wine has evaporated, turn to low heat, cover the pan with a lid, and continue cooking for 5 more minutes. Transfer chicken to a serving dish, leaving the sauce in the pan. Raise the heat and add the water, chopped parsley and sea salt, then stir for 1 minute. Stir in the beaten egg and lemon juice.

Turn off the heat and keep stirring for a minute or two. Pour the sauce over the chicken breasts and serve at room temperature.

Makes 4 servings.

Frico

- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 4 medium potatoes, thinly sliced
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1 pound grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese or aged pecorino

Melt the butter in a frying pan. Add the onions and fry until lightly golden brown. Add the potatoes and continue cooking, stirring, for a few minutes. Add the chicken stock and cook the potatoes on medium until they are soft and the chicken stock is absorbed. Add the grated cheese over the top. When the cheese has melted and become crispy at the edges, carefully flip the frico over to brown the other side. Cook until golden brown and serve warm.

Makes 4 servings.

Bruschetta

Called also *panunto* or *fettunta*, this is a favorite *spuntino*, snack, and appetizer for all Tuscans. As the olive oil harvest arrives in November and the olives start to be pressed, Tuscan olive farmers host friendly contests pouring their extra virgin olive oil alongside Tuscan roadsides from Luca to Grosseto and every town in between, inviting passersby to taste a slice.

- 1 country-style loaf of bread
- 1 clove garlic, peeled
- Extra virgin olive oil, to taste
- Sea salt, to taste

Slice the bread. In Tuscany, bread is always unsalted. Toast the slices on the grill or in the oven until they become golden. Remove the bread, and, while it is still hot, rub one side of the slice with garlic. Sprinkle with sea salt and drizzle abundantly with extra virgin olive oil. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

Truffled Zucchini

- 5 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled but left whole
- 1 small onion, sliced
- 6 medium zucchini, sliced
- Sea salt, to taste
- ½ cup parsley, finely chopped

In a large pan, heat the extra virgin olive oil. Add the garlic and sliced onion and cook until brown. Discard the garlic, then add the zucchini and sea salt to taste. Cook over high heat for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring often, until the zucchini is brown. Turn off the heat and add the parsley. Serve tepid.

Makes 4 servings.



Cold Chocolate Salame