

THE CHARM OF PIENZA



KNOWN AS “THE VILLAGE OF LOVE,” PIENZA INCLUDES
A WELL-STOCKED SHOP THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE BEST
FOOD AND WINE OF THE TUSCAN REGION.

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI



One of Pienza's scenic streets. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

AS POPE PIO II
ENVISIONED CENTURIES
AGO, ART AND BEAUTY
COME TOGETHER IN
PIENZA.

Welcome to Pienza, a charming medieval village and UNESCO World Heritage Site set in the heart of Tuscany. Even in winter, Pienza's beauty charms. Endless views of Val d'Orcia blend emerald cypresses with golden wheat fields stretching to the horizon.

Pienza was once called Corsignano and is the birthplace of Enea Silvio Piccolomini. Born in 1405, he was a diplomat, literati, prolific writer, and a man of arts and letters. He later became Pope Pio II and ruled the Papal States from August 19, 1458, until his death in 1464. He was a visionary who redesigned the village using the principles of Renaissance urban planning.

Francis of Assisi) was the patron saint of peace, who loved animals. The façade of the church is Gothic while the inside is adorned with precious 14th-century frescoes of Saint Francis's life, painted in earthy tones of the Sienese school. It is one of the few medieval buildings that remained untouched by Rossellino's plan, offering a glimpse into Pienza's past. The village also has a Via Condotti and Piazza di Spagna, as in Rome, due to their close ties.

There's an air of peace on this cold winter day as we walk through the streets of Pienza. Pope Pio II's vision of art and beauty is seen throughout, earning its nickname, "the village of love."



Above: Pecorini aged in wood ashes. Photo by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Right: The town square in Pienza. Photo by Nejdet Duzen/Shutterstock



Pope Pio II's Renaissance architecture and design is seen everywhere in Pienza, starting with the main pedestrian walkway, Corso Il Rossellino. It is lined with a sundry of artisan cheese, wine and butcher shops, and enotecce beckoning travelers to stop for a vino and sputtino.

A few steps ahead on the right, between Porta al Prato and Piazza Pio II, is the Church of San Francesco built in the XIV century. San Francesco (also known as Saint

I step inside my favorite food and wine shop on Corso Il Rossellino to sample artisan cheese made by the hands of the casari and warm up with a glass of Sangiovese Orcia Cardinali made by a small producer. Signora Maria, the shopkeeper, calls it, "the wine of the Cardinals."

I great signora Maria and she welcomes me with a smile and a sampling tray of Pecorino. One, Pecorino canestrato, is named after the basket it's aged in. It's dry with a stronger



Left: A walkway in Pienza.
Below: "Lover's Lane" street sign. Photos by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli



flavor than traditional Pecorinos.

Pecorino Nero is made for the farmers. They mix olive oil with charcoal instead of ash to create a thick covering around the cheese, which makes for a long maturation which creates an intense earthy flavor, a harder, crumbly texture that's perfect for grating, and a longer shelf life.

Pecorino has been around since the time of the Etruscans. Local shepherds still graze their flocks on the aromatic green grasses of the surrounding hills,

infusing the sheep's milk with delicate grassy flavors.

While Signora Maria explains the many types of Pecorino cheese, Sangiovese wine is poured into glasses.

This Tuscan bottega is a food emporium dream, and its wooden shelves are well-stocked with every Tuscan ingredient you could imagine. An oversize basket on the countertop is filled with fresh aglione, a sweet garlic and protagonist in Pici pasta. Loose and bagged dried lentils, chickpeas and cannellini beans, the

main ingredients in Tuscan soups, are displayed in endless varieties.

Tuscan Pici, tagliatelle and gigli pastas made with organic wheat, are stacked in sealed cello bags. Bottles of Tuscan white, rosé, red, and noble Vin Santo (the blessed dessert wine), local honey made by the neighboring beekeeper, farmers' salami with fennel, Porcino mushrooms and truffles and cantucci and morbiduccio (twice-baked Tuscan biscotti and soft Tuscan cookies), are for sale. There's a corner dedicated to fresh



Left: Aglione (garlic).
Right: Pecorino aged in walnut leaves.
Photos by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

truffles dried truffles truffl oil and truffl sea salt, too.

Maria makes her way around the shop while explaining the cheese and sharing her recipes for Pici pasta made with aglione.

"Pici all'aglione is only made with Tuscan aglione, a giant garlic grown in Val di Chiana. It grows to a large bulb and has a sweet, delicate flavor that's less pungent than common garlic because it doesn't contain allicin, which gives the strong scent and odor. I call it the kissing garlic," she says.

"Even if you take a bulb of aglione home to the Amalfi Coast and try to grow it, it will not grow like a Tuscan one," she adds. "Aglione must be grown in the unique Tuscan terroir of clay and limestone soils, sun-drenched slopes, and cooling breezes." I opt for the sliced dry one in sealed cello bags.

The shop also sells ancient flour made with wheat grown in the nearby fields and ground on cold stones by farmer Amedeo. He is not only a respected farmer but a great cook who makes pasta, too. His natural, slow drying process keeps the pasta firm, making it perfect to serve with ragù di cinghiale, wild boar sauce.

Another corner of the shop displays wine

bottles of prestigious Val d'Orcia DOC denomination, a designation that protects and promotes the character of the local wines produced in the fertile valley. The vintners produce Orcia, Orcia Riserva, Orcia Rosato, Orcia Bianco, Orcia Sangiovese, Orcia Sangiovese Riserva, and Vin Santo. Each wine reflects a winemaking tradition of the Etruscan era, shaped by the monks in the medieval monasteries and refined by Tuscan wine makers and their families who have worked these lands for generations.

The Sangiovese grape reigns supreme in the region. Alongside these DOC wines, Pienza's winemakers also produce IGT Toscana wines, which allow them to experiment with blends and varietals, adding innovation to tradition.

A cold winter day has been warmed by a few afternoon rays of Tuscan sun, Pecorino cheese and a vibrant rosso swirling in my glass. Shopping, conversing, and dipping cantucci in a golden Vin Santo is a celebration of Pienza's history, heritage, and winter's dolce vita.

Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli is founder and owner of Cooking Vacations Italy, which specializes in culinary tours, hands-on cooking classes and cultural adventures in Italy. www.cooking-vacations.com; (617) 247-4112.

Pienza was the birthplace of Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who became Pope Pio II, a visionary who redesigned the village using the principles of Renaissance urban planning.



RUSTIC TUSCAN SOUP

- 3** tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1** medium onion
- 2** cloves garlic
- 1** medium carrot, chopped
- 1** rib celery, chopped
- 2** medium potatoes, chopped
- 3/4** cup lentils
- 3/4** cup farro
- 8** cups vegetable broth
- 1** or 2 sprigs rosemary, depending on your taste
- Extra virgin olive oil, as needed
- Sea salt and black pepper to taste
- 1** loaf Tuscan bread, sliced

Wash and drain the grains and lentils. In a large saucepan, add the olive oil, then sauté the onion, garlic, carrot and celery. Add the potatoes, grains and lentils, stirring well.

Pour in the vegetable broth and simmer about 40 to 45 minutes. Season with sea salt and black pepper, to taste. Add rosemary as desired. Garnish with olive oil.

Serve with grilled Tuscan bread that has been brushed with a raw garlic and drizzled with extra virgin olive oil.

Makes 4 servings.