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Cozy Fall and Winter Farm Visits in Tuscany's Province of Siena



By Judy Edelhoff

"Real farmers and real farms" is the slogan that Gioia Milana, president of Terranostra Agriturismo e Ambiente, is championing for farm visits and lodging in the Province of Siena in Tuscany. Their farmers' association urges you to visit the Tuscany that you don't know and to get to know the people that work its land.

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Panoramic landscape. Photo courtesy of Poderi Arcangelo

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Photos, from top: At Poderi Arcangelo, Sandra and her children watch while Mamma makes pasta (photo: J. Edelhoff); Pasta with wild boar sauce, Poderi Arcangelo

olive harvest, which means bruschetta drenched in fresh oil and bottles to buy to bring home. Marvelous and varied landscapes form the countryside backdrop, from sloping vineyards to the undulating waves of the *crete* (clay hills).

The rural community of Capezzano near San Gimignano is the setting for Poderi Arcangelo (www.poderiarcangelo.it, €70-120). Rooms are spacious, very modern, and furnished with flair. Sandra Mora, the lively owner and hostess has plenty of good suggestions for touring and knows the area well. Poderi Arcangelo has a small winery and makes olive oil. Keep the swimming pool in mind for summer excursions. If it's not too busy, do ask Mamma for a pasta demonstration. Better yet, enjoy it at dinner with wild boar or tomato sauce!

We followed Sandra's suggestion to explore the nearby town of Certaldo, once home to Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), author of the bawdy medieval epic, *Decameron*. Literary buffs can tour his house, one of the town's more prominent. Certaldo has Artesia, a lovely ceramic shop in Palazzo Giannozzi with potters at work and reasonable prices. Next-door at work in her studio was artist Silvia Borgogni, who has lovely prints and paintings including a series designed according to her own bawdy take on medieval frescoes that she found in the town of Massa Marittima.

Now that the grapes are fermenting after the recent harvest, attention turns to olives that are ripening for the picking around Siena. What could be better than to stay in the midst of a fabulous landscape and see where olive oil and other wonderful flavors originate? We passed through the land of wine, wheat, and oil in the Province of Siena with memories of marvelous landscapes, hearty flavors, and artistic jewels in small towns.

"Agriturismo," a contraction for "agricultural tourism," puts you into the world of farm life and gives you the pleasure of meeting locals whom ordinary travelers often don't meet. Terranostra has a membership of roughly 10% of the agriturismi in the area, which they self-select and rate for quality. Generally guests participate as much or as little as they please in farm activities. Most offer breakfast and some serve dinner. Fewer offer lunch because it breaks up the farm workday to cater to guests, although some do.

The marvelous small castle, Grancia di Spedaletto, is run by a charming young woman who makes gorgeous sweets for breakfast. Mamma cooks the evening dinner. They welcome guests to pick olives. Book early though. Grancia di Spedaletto has no swimming pool so it loses summer business to other agriturismi, but it was fully booked when we passed by in late October. The charm of the castle and the owners attract regular clientele and the curious traveler. Rooms are lovely.



Fabulous Chianina steak, pasta with wild boar sauce and other delights await at Podere Canapaccia (Via

Enjoy the natural cycle of the seasons. Taste the bounty that each season brings forth. Now we are into
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Cassia 2, tel 0577 834 547, (www.poderecanapaccia.com). The treat here is their Brunello, with its signature hint of blackberries that at only €20 a bottle (on the premises) is a very affordable splurge. Until recent years, none of Podere Canapaccia wine made it to market because they drank it all! Fortunately, things have changed slightly, but not much—little of their wine leaves the province, much less Tuscany. A quality traditional Tuscan meal here, which in this season will feature game (that hunters often barter for wine), is not to be missed. Podere Canapaccia has rooms, too, and a pool.

Two gracious sisters, Marialisa and Letizia, run the winery founded by their father Vincenzo. **Agriturismo Cesani Vincenzo** (Loc. Pancole, 82/d, San Gimignano, tel/fax 0577 955084, www.agriturismo-cesani.it). They have a lovely tasting room for their wines. Particularly good is their Vernaccia, a wine that Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) could have sipped as he was writing *Divine Comedy*, perhaps to cool himself off while tackling *Inferno*. This white wine is made from a grape, Vernaccia di San Gimignano, which is unique to the area around San Gimignano, the Tuscan town famous for its many towers. Cesani Vernaccia is priced right, only €5 at the winery/about €8 in local wine shops. Fruity, fresh, and with a hint of apple, the wine leaves a slight almond aftertaste. Cesani is now experimenting with a red wine made from 100% Ciliegiole grapes—an unusual opportunity to taste this grape that usually is only used to blend wines. Initial results are surprisingly good. Cesani also has olive groves and makes a lovely olive oil. They also grow the crocus that yields saffron. Buy some bottles of this pungent, aromatic spice in its thread-like form that is much better than the powder variety. Their guest rooms are each decorated in a different color scheme. Arise to a lovely breakfast with home-baked goods. From here, in the township of Pancole, plan easy hops to San Gimignano and Certaldo.

Podere Fontanelle (Podere Spinarello 43, Monticchiello di Pienza, www.agriturismovadorcia.it) has gracious, spacious rooms with wood beam ceilings, antique furnishings, oriental carpets, and stained glass lamps. Some have whirlpool tubs. This spot is best for the independent traveler (most are American), who after an excellent breakfast takes the key and is off on his own. Staff is not on the premises at night or during

most of the day, although the family serves meals at their nearby Il Casato.

The Province of Siena offers wonderful farm bounty to enjoy. Il Ciliegio (www.ilciliegio.com) in Monteriggioni makes wine (note especially the red devilishly good Infernaccio and Vin Santo) and olive oil with gregarious Luca eager to explain all in fluent English. Apicoltura La Melina located outside Montalcino makes delicious honey. The local commercial pasta from L'Antica Rocca is organic. Saffron, the precious spice, grows especially around San Quirico d'Orcia and was gathered within the past few weeks; look for the thin red threads in tiny bottles. San Gimignano even has gelato made from saffron rich with pine nuts and eggs in Gelateria di Piazza (Piazza della Cisterna). We made a quick stop at hospitable Fratelli Vagnoni (www.fratellivagnoni.com), and will make a future stop to sample wines and olive oil. Poggio Pilella makes olive oil in Bagno a Sorra near unspoiled Chiusi Lake; you can book a professional tasting here, so that you understand why good olive oil is so precious (and how bad the average supermarket olive oil can be). Poggio Pilella also rents beautifully furnished apartments, by the week during high season or now also for the weekend. Look for fresh cheese in the beautiful hilltop position of Agriturismo Vergelle, run by a Sardinian family that moved to Tuscany. The Fanciulli family makes organic olive oil and has some 10,000 olive trees. They rely mostly on locals to pick olives, noting that since many young people do not want to pick olives, their most faithful olive pickers are well into their 80s! They make various oils and grow at least nine or more types of olives. They also are ready to launch a red wine, very nice in quality.

Don't be put off by fall or winter weather. During the day you have plenty of hilltop towns to visit. Most famous is the tower town of San Gimignano. The provincial capital city, Siena, can keep you busy for days. Be sure to explore Certaldo and Pienza during the months of November and December when the towns for once have more tourists than locals.

Judy Edelhoff's articles have been published in *International Herald Tribune's Italy Daily* and *Hartford Courant*, as well as in travel guides *Fodor's Florence, Tuscany and Umbria*, *DK Eyewitness Guide to Naples & the Amalfi Coast*, *DK Eyewitness Guide to Sicily*, *Moon Guide to Italy*, and *Moon Guide to Rome*. She is currently working on Southern Italy for a major publisher. judylicinaroma@yahoo.it.