

# Under the Etruscan Sun

Along Tuscany's Etruscan coast, you'll find a community passionate about preserving its culinary traditions and cultural heritage, says **Lisa Kjellsson**

**F**ew regions epitomise the Italian *gioia di vivere* – joy of living – like Tuscany, with its famous wineries and food culture. Tens of millions of international visitors flock here annually, many oenophiles among them making a beeline for Chianti and Brunello di Montalcino. Lately though, the Etruscan coast has firmly established itself on the viticulture map with wines such as Sassicaia, produced in the area of Bolgheri. Equally, there is much more to Tuscan cuisine than *bistecca alla fiorentina*.

## FOLLOW THE TRAIL

In fact, to discover some of Tuscany's finest food and wine experiences, simply follow the Etruscan Coast Wine and Olive Oil Trail. Spanning more than 150 kilometres along the Tyrrhenian coast and Elba Island in the provinces of Livorno and Pisa, it joins up the wineries and olive oil mills found near the coastline. Along the way, you'll pass medieval villages, archaeological sites, geothermal baths, and the region's best beach towns.



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San Vincenzo has a Blue Flag-awarded beach



Deborah Corsi runs La Perla di Mare

Image by Laura Ilyeraci

**EXPLORE THE COAST AND MORE**

One of them is San Vincenzo, right in the middle of the Etruscan coast, where the cobalt-coloured sea meets a long stretch of Blue Flag-awarded golden sand beach. Spend an afternoon at restaurant La Perla di Mare's own beach club, where you can rent parasol-covered sun beds and a cabana. As the sun sets, take a seat on the terrace and feast

Giosuè Carducci, to San Guido, home to the Sassicaia winery. While it isn't open to the public, you can sample many of its vintages – alongside labels from most of Bolgheri's other 60-odd wineries – at the estate's Osteria Enoteca San Guido. As a counterpoint to the grandeur of Sassicaia, visit a small-scale biodynamic winery, where the grapes are grown organically and harvested by hand.



Viale dei Cipressi spans five kilometres



The 14th-century fortress tower in Populonia

Image by Alessandro Moggi

on chef Deborah Corsi's gourmet pescatarian creations, such as seafood risotto with ricotta and sea urchin mousse, followed by the signature 'blue sea pearl' white chocolate dessert.

Not far from San Vincenzo is the sprawling Archaeological Park of Baratti and Populonia, an open-air museum dedicated to the Etruscan civilisation. Strolling around its acropolis and ongoing digs of homes and temples, you get a glimpse of this once great culture. Having boned up on pre-Roman history, continue uphill to the walled village of Populonia, built on the ruins of the ancient settlement, and climb the 14th-century fortress tower to enjoy sweeping views of the Gulf of Baratti.

**LOCAL FOOD AND WINE**

By now you'll know that, at their peak, around the 7th century BC, the Etruscans ran a flourishing maritime wine trade. To explore the region's modern-day viticulture, drive along the five-kilometre Viale dei Cipressi, immortalised in a poem by

Named after the former mill it is housed in, Mulini di Segalari is run by retired architect Marina Tinacci Mannelli and her husband, oenologist Emilio Monechi, who owns the wine bar Le Volpi e l'Uva near Ponte Vecchio in Florence. "Bored of the bureaucracy" of her former profession, Marina planted a vineyard in the forest and set up the biodynamic production from scratch. She makes five wines, including a red Bolgheri DOC – "but for Europeans", meaning it's aged in big French oak barrels rather than the smaller American oak barriques. "We like our wine to taste natural, of fruits of the forest, not flavoured with aromas like vanilla or coconut, that have nothing to do with wine," she explains.

Marina's earthy ethos is shared by Podere Arduino, a regenerative farm with two on-site restaurants: the al fresco Bolgheri Green, and the bijoux Osteria Ancestrale. Here, the



The town of Bolgheri is surrounded by vineyards



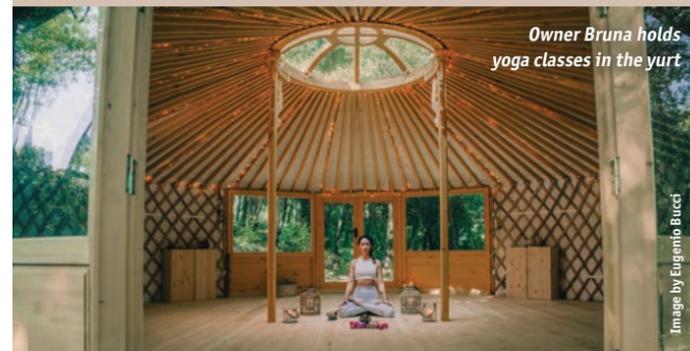
Image by Obaifida Travel

La Gualda Vecchia looks out over Val di Cornia



Image by La Gualda Vecchia

One of the two cosy rental apartments



Owner Bruna holds yoga classes in the yurt

Image by Eugenio Bucchi



Image by La Gualda Vecchia

Showers with a view: the secluded spa area overlooks the valley

*Retreat to a hilltop haven*

Nestled between the Metalliferous Hills and the Etruscan coast, just over an hour's drive from Pisa and a few kilometres from the sea, you'll find the medieval village of Monteverdi Marittimo. Founded by Benedictine monks in 754 AD and surrounded by rolling hills and green valleys, geothermal baths and vineyards, it's a picturesque part of Tuscany that still feels relatively quiet compared with the region's most famous tourism hotspots.

One of its hidden gems is a restored 16th-century farmhouse, repurposed to include two self-catering holiday lets. Its name, La Gualda Vecchia, means 'the old forest' – fitting, given its woodland surroundings. The hilltop house looks out over Val di Cornia, and sits in a sprawling garden inspired by ancient mythology. The first thing you notice are three red-painted doors standing tall among the labyrinthine flowerbeds like colourful monoliths in the greenery. They reference the Greek myth of Ariadne's thread, a tale of navigating your way through the maze of life and emerging stronger and wiser.

You'll certainly feel invigorated by a stay at this rustic-chic retreat immersed in a verdant wonderland where you can start your day practising sun salutations in the candle-lit yurt, and spend lazy afternoons napping in a hammock.

Best of all, tucked away in a secluded area of the garden with panoramic valley views, is an open-air spa with a wood-fired sauna, hot tub and outdoor showers. What better way to cool down in the midst of summer than with a soak in the hydromassage tub and a glass of rosé as you dry off on a sun lounger? Equally, imagine a more perfect ending to a day of sightseeing than decompressing in the sauna. Regardless of the season, this oasis is one of the property's highlights.

So what of the accommodation itself? Both apartments – adjacent to each other and to the owners' home – are thoughtfully designed and decorated, retaining original features like fireplaces and exposed stone walls. Leccio has one bedroom, whereas Quercia has two; both have an additional sofa bed and are kitted out with everything you need.

Should you feel inspired to cook, you can help yourself to freshly picked vegetables from the garden, or use the pizza oven or barbecue and dine al fresco to the sound of cicadas. Breakfast is served on the front porch – you can pre-order what you like (do try the scrambled eggs). The owners, Bruna Carvalho and Daniel Bosshard, are two of the loveliest people you'll ever meet and are always on hand should you need anything. If you enjoy yoga, book a session in the yurt with Bruna, a wonderfully attentive teacher whose soothing voice will have you dozing off during Savasana.

Essentially, La Gualda Vecchia is the perfect base from which to go out and explore the Etruscan coast, with as many – or as few – activities as you like on the agenda.

**INFORMATION**

➤ **LA GUALDA VECCHIA**  
Via Castagnetana 55,  
Monteverdi Marittimo, Pisa  
☎ +39 349 596 58 55  
www.lagualdavecchia.it

La Gualda Vecchia welcomes guests all year round. Low season: November to February, one-bed Leccio apartment €120 per night; two-bed Quercia apartment €195 per night (minimum stay of two nights). High season: mid-June to mid-September, one-bed Leccio apartment €225 per night; two-bed Quercia apartment €355 per night (minimum stay of three nights).

**GETTING THERE**

➤ **BY PLANE**  
Your best option is to fly to Pisa Galileo Galilei Airport, about 75 minutes' drive (90km) away, and hire a car at the airport. [www.pisa-airport.it](http://www.pisa-airport.it)

## Find out more

**THE ETRUSCAN COAST WINE AND OLIVE OIL TRAIL**  
[www.visittuscany.com/en/itineraries/etruscan-coast-wine-olive-oil-trail](http://www.visittuscany.com/en/itineraries/etruscan-coast-wine-olive-oil-trail)

### WINE TASTING

**OSTERIA ENOTECA SAN GUIDO**  
 Località San Guido, 50 – 57022 Bolgheri  
[www.enotecasanguido.com](http://www.enotecasanguido.com)

**MULINI DI SEGALARI**  
 Località Felciaiano, 115a  
 57022 Castagneto Carducci  
[www.mulinidisegalari.it](http://www.mulinidisegalari.it)

### WHERE TO EAT

**ENOTECA CASTAGNETANA**  
 Via Guglielmo Marconi, 18  
 57022 Castagneto Carducci  
[www.enotecacastagnetana.it](http://www.enotecacastagnetana.it)

**PODERE ARDUINO**  
 Località Magazzino,  
 57022 Castagneto Carducci  
[www.poderearduino.com](http://www.poderearduino.com)



### OLIVE OIL TASTING

**TENUTA ELEONORA DI TOLEDO**  
 Via di Bandita, 6/D  
 57021 Campiglia Marittima  
[www.tenutaeleonoraditoledo.it](http://www.tenutaeleonoraditoledo.it)

### THERMAL POOLS

**LA CERRETA TERME**  
 Via della Cerreta, 7 – 57020 Sassetta  
[www.lacerretaterme.it](http://www.lacerretaterme.it)



### OIL AND WATER

Of course the Etruscan trail is as much about olive oil as it is about wine, and you mustn't miss out on the pure indulgence that is a tasting at Tenuta Eleonora di Toledo. Learning about the production process from owner Lara Landi, and sampling the extra-virgin varieties drizzled over strawberries, pear and pecorino, will turn you into a converted olive oil snob, promising never to buy another cheap supermarket blend.

Having eaten and drunk your way along a stretch of the coast, take inspiration from the ancient Etruscans and seek out the region's thermal baths for some relaxation. The pools at La Cerreta Terme in Sassetta are set amid lush woodlands, and their mineral-rich water will soon have you feeling rejuvenated. By the end of your Etruscan escape, you will have had a taste of a soulful way of living, in tune with nature and truly guided by joy.



organic produce is magicked into vegetarian *alta cucina* by chef Fabrizio Bartoli and paired with local wines like Mulini di Segalari's rosé and Caiarossa Bianco. The dishes on the 12-course tasting menu are almost too pretty to eat, and you'll reminisce about the beetroot, thyme and peach-filled tortello, jellied cherry

tomatoes spiced with sambal, and grilled zucchini (courgettes) with burrata-filled flowers for a long time to come. Wondering where to enjoy the best pasta, and scenery? Order the *picci*, a rustic spaghetti cooked in tomato sauce with *aglione*, at hole-in-the-wall wine shop and eatery Enoteca Castagnetana, in the medieval village of Castagneto Carducci. The valley views from its terrace stretch all the way to the sea. And there is one more Tuscan delicacy you simply must try: wild boar. The flavoursome meat can be enjoyed in a variety of ways – as a tartare, smoked on focaccia, or in a classic *papparadelle al cinghiale*. Chef Christian Esposito at Bolgheri Bistrot pairs them with silky reds like Il Seggio Bolgheri DOC by Poggio al Tesoro.

Be sure to sample the local olive oil



## How we brought our vision to life

Like the plot of countless rom-coms, many of us daydream of moving to an idyllic region of Italy and transforming a dilapidated old house into a beautiful home. Before they found their Tuscan farmhouse, this was a dream Daniel Bosshard and Bruna Carvalho had been nurturing for years. Prior to the pandemic, the Swiss-Italian couple was based in Rome and juggled busy careers with bringing up their two children. Whenever they had a spare moment, they scoured rural property listings. Initially, the plan was simply to find a holiday home, but the dream evolved into a complete lifestyle change. "We realised we wanted to spend more time together as a family, enjoying simple pleasures like hiking in nature," says Bruna. "So we decided to move to the country."

For a long time, their search revolved mainly around central Italy. "In our ignorance, Tuscany was the Val d'Orcia – too orderly, too explored for our taste," she explains. "But then we looked in areas further towards the coast, and when we went to see this house, I knew instantly that it was our place. I felt it had good energy." This was despite the fact that the property had been abandoned for a decade and was in a state of complete disrepair. The overgrown farmland looked nothing like the beautifully landscaped garden that now surrounds La Gualda Vecchia.

Having completed the purchase in July 2020, the couple wasted no time in starting the renovation, living on site while the house was split into three apartments. "It was challenging, especially in the beginning when there were cement bags everywhere and we had no heating," says Daniel. "We didn't have a huge budget either, but reused materials wherever possible and sourced the rest from local suppliers and artisans." With sustainability in mind, the house is solar powered in the summer and the heating is wood-fired, utilising waste from the eight hectares of surrounding woodland. "When we arrived here, we didn't even know how to light a fire," admits Bruna. "We've had to learn how to live in the countryside, and how to care for it."

They have also found a real sense of community. "In Italy, like in England, we have a great tradition of landscaped gardens, places perfect for bringing people together, which I have always loved doing," says Bruna. "The garden lets us promote arts and culture while boosting biodiversity." The couple enlisted the help of landscape architect Caterina Angela Contu, who creates 'emotional gardens', designed to inspire deep emotions and enchant the soul, explains Bruna. "Ours is based on the four classical elements in ancient Greek philosophy: water, fire, earth and air." It's certainly a feast for the senses. Filled with succulents, irises, giant agapanthus enveloped in feathery pampas grasses, and maple, jacaranda and ornamental cherry trees, it's a joy to explore. There are no straight lines, but plenty of delightful surprises – a seating area with wrought-iron tables and chairs and even an antique chandelier suspended from a tree; ceramic butterfly sculptures; and an amphitheatre for live music performances. "We love a bossanova band," says Bruna, who grew up in Brazil. Stepping outside the fenced garden, a footpath winds its way through the forest. Even here, among the oaks and cork trees, there are curated art spaces, with benches made of fallen tree trunks.

La Gualda Vecchia's owners have an unmistakable zest for life, and inspiring willingness to take a leap of faith to take their dream a reality. "You have to believe in your vision and trust your intuition," says Bruna. "Sometimes it's best not to overthink things," adds Daniel.

So is the project now complete? They both laugh. "Never!" Unsurprisingly, this creative couple has heaps of new ideas in mind for the future. For now though, they are happy to enjoy the beautiful haven they have created for themselves and their guests. ■

