

# Slow Food in Tuscany with Local Flavor and Character



These days a traveler to Italy does not have to depend on American or English guidebooks to eat well. Thanks to the Slow Food organization their guide, “Osterie & Locande d'Italia: A Guide to Traditional Places to Eat and Stay in Italy”, which has been directing Italians to restaurants, where the chefs depend upon local organic farmers for their produce, has been translated into English.

The Slow Food movement begun in 1986 in Italy has spread worldwide since the day Carolo Petrini saw a McDonald's opened in Rome's Piazza di Spagna and determined to fight back by creating a revolutionary movement with food as its weapon of choice: Slow Food would be its slogan and its organizers would find and encourage small producers to challenge the fast food industries encircling the globe. By supporting a re-invigoration of local agriculture, the industrialized world's benumbed palates would be “restored” by “real food” grown by farmer-artisans familiar with traditional notions of crop biodiversity and culinary traditions in Italy and abroad.

The Slow Food guide has since 2004 “contributed to the revival of tradition of regional gastronomy in Italy and the proliferation of eating places that particularly reflect local flavor and character,” according to its editors. It also lists places to stay, particularly, though not exclusively, farms (agritourism) and guest houses “that capture a sense of good old fashioned hospitality.”



We decided to test four of their listings: Two in the overly touristic cities of Florence and Siena where scores of fast food pizzerias and “tourist menu” restaurants tempt the hungry and unwary traveler; and two in less congested but beautiful parts of Tuscany.

## **Florence**

Fabio Picchi created his now famous “Il Cibreo” twenty years ago and it soon became one of the best

restaurants in Italy. Since then he has created an empire! While “Il Cibreo” is quite expensive and the café next door provides only light snacks, in the past few years Picchi has opened two new places on the same street: the “Osteria Il Cibreo,” a low cost alternative to sampling Picchi’s cooking; and a unique buffet–restaurant–theatre called the “Teatro del Sale.”

The “Osteria,” which takes no reservations (or credit cards) and can be mobbed in high season, was relatively quiet at lunch time when we entered into this cool haven escaping the brazier of Florence’s streets in July. A small and cozy room furnished with antique tables and a 19th century counter, it was occupied by two groups of Florentine businessmen.

The two waiters, unusually attentive (and both fluent in English) took our order for polenta with herbs, a flan of ricotta and potatoes, a traditional passata al pomodoro (bread and tomato soup), vitello tonnato (veal in tuna sauce) and cod alla livornese (with tomatoes and garlic) served with an excellent and unusual beet and green bean salad. The array of deserts, made by Picchi’s son Duccio – his other son Giulio works behind the scenes in the administration of Picchi’s “empire” – was exceptional: a bitter–sweet chocolate–coffee flavored flourless cake, a cheesecake with bitter orange marmelade, a panna cotta (an Italian version of a crème brulee) with strawberries.

The menu was both wide–ranging and traditional, with each dish exceptionally well prepared. Most impressive of all was the fact that the cost of the meal was only one half of that of the restaurant “Il Cibreo,” and ran, with a glass of wine (Vino Nobile di Montepulciano) no more than \$30 a person.

Next day we paid a visit to Picchi’s “Teatro del Sale,” where his wife, the actress Maria Cassi would entertain the diners with a brilliant one–woman show in which she assumed the role of several comic characters. Though the performance was in Italian and most of the audience was also Italian, English speaking diners who wished to skip that part of the evening had time to do so while tables and chairs were being arranged to accommodate the audience in front of the stage.

The dinner itself was also a performance, served buffet–style from a huge glassed–in kitchen from which the cooks could observe the crowd of diners as they rushed and elbowed their way to the huge buffet table of antipasti when each new dish was brought out. Once the antipasti were served, Picchi himself appeared at a small open window to announce theatrically the service of pasta, meat, and desert. As Picchi served portions of hot dishes, diners, lined up like communicants in front of a priest, then returned to their respective tables to eat what was on their plate and wait for the next round! This was theatre on and off the stage, an experience not to be missed—and a bargain consisting of a huge selection of antipasti, pastas, risottos, meat and fish dishes and desert at only \$30 a person.

## **Siena**

Well off the congestion of the beautiful Piazza del Campo, we walked down a steep and quiet side street to find the “Ristorante Grotta S. Caterina da Bagoga.” “Bagoga” is the chef’s nickname from the years when he was a jockey, Pierino Fagnani in the Siena Palio, the famous yearly horse race around the

Piazza del Campo. After an injury he determined to dedicate himself to his other great passion, cooking. From 1973, his restaurant, much frequented by the Sienese, has served the specialties of the region and was a logical entry into the Slow Food guide.

Bagoga, an ebullient and delightful host who emerges frequently out of the kitchen to talk to his customers and to his son, the sommelier, is a great source of information on the culinary history of Tuscany and of Italy as a whole. Our meal was by far the best we've had in the 28 years of visiting the city. It began with a flan of cheese and truffles, accompanied by a glass of Castello di Pomino, an exceptional white wine from pinot bianco grapes imported from Burgundy in the 19th century by an ancestor of the wine producing Frescobaldi family. Gnocchi with truffles, papardelle (wide ribbons of home made pasta) with spicy wild boar sauce, were the best we had ever tasted. The meat course, accompanied by a Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, was based on a Renaissance recipe, "Gallo Indiano," (turkey or chicken cooked "in the Indian style") made with a sauce flavored with the spices used in the traditional sweet cake of Siena, the panforte.

The desert was also unusual and delicious: A rice pudding to which whipped cream, egg whites, raisins, and nuts were added, the whole drenched in fresh berries. Everything had been bought from the farmers in the surrounding countryside. For \$35 we ate like Sienese nobles!



## **Radicondoli**

Far from the tourist hordes, tucked away in an ancient oak forest, on the road leading away from a small spa located in the hills between Siena and the Tuscan coast, is a jewel of a rustic restaurant called "Podere Porcignano." Marilena Grosso, the genial and talented cook, presides over the kitchen aided by her daughters and her son. The beamed dining room is furnished in the traditional somber Tuscan way with heavy oak tables and a huge fireplace at one end. In summer a pergola provides shade for diners wishing to eat outside. The cuisine is simple but rich with the flavors of the surrounding countryside. There are two menus to choose from (although one can also eat a la carte). One is vegetarian and the other includes meat dishes. The first costs \$30; the second, \$35. Both include the local wine in the price of the meal.

We sampled an assortment of local salamis and prosciutti, crostini (toasts) topped with olive or onion spread, frittate (egg omelets) filled with mushrooms and local herbs, home made pastas –papardelle with wild boar, ravioli of spinach with nut sauce, lasagne with wild greens, boar with polenta, roast pork with herbs from the kitchen garden, and the famed bistecca alla fiorentina as well as veal roast with porcini

mushrooms, picked in the forest surrounding the restaurant. For desert we were served the traditional panna cotta with wild berries as well as biscotti with vin santo – a sweet wine made locally.

In addition to the restaurant there is a small shop in which Marilena's production of jams, sauces, and dried herbs can be purchased at very reasonable prices. For those who wish to stay longer to sample Marilena's cooking and relax in the lovely countryside there is an agritourist residence a few kilometers away with a swimming pool and a riding stable, "Podere Querceti," also managed by Marilena.

## **Greve in Chianti**

Though the Chianti is one of the most widely visited areas of Tuscany, even in the middle of July one can drive through the spectacular countryside like an explorer in a yet undiscovered territory. This certainly appears to be the case as one reaches the remote "Locanda Borgo Antico," 13 kilometers outside of the crowded town of Greve. The locanda is part of a tiny hamlet which appears to be "lost" amid the woods and vineyards of this enchanting area of the world.



Lucolena, the hamlet, is located on a chestnut covered hillside. The "Locanda Borgo Antico," which also rents rooms, has been created out of several adjacent houses and the restaurant boasts a wide and shaded terrace overlooking the surrounding hills. Our charming and garrulous host, Stefano Fissi, is quick to tell you about the array of dishes prepared by his wife Patrizia. He is also proud of the fact that the Slow Food guide has awarded him with its highest accolade (true also of Florence's Il Cibreo trattoria), the much sought after snail symbol to indicate the cuisine's quality as well as its uses of local produce.

As a result Fissi has created what he calls a Slow Food menu which changes weekly, at the fixed price of \$35. The simple dishes consisted of an antipasto of fettunta (toasted bread rubbed with garlic and anointed with local olive oil), followed by home made pasta with meat sauce. Roast pork flavored with rosemary and accompanied by roast potatoes was quite delicious. The whole meal as well as the unusual desert, salami di cioccolato, cookie dough rolled to resemble a salami, were described by Fissi as examples of local cuisine or cucina povera – the cooking of the poor. While the menu produced few surprises, there was also a substantial and elaborate a la carte menu to choose from with many temptations: papardelle with duck, spelt soup, deep fried vegetables, wild boar in spicy sauce, roast pork with beans, oven-baked pecorino or scamorza cheeses. There is also a wide-ranging wine list of Chianti vintages as well as an excellent house wine.

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