



# The Simple Life

BY SHARRI WHITING DE MASI

Experience the sights, sounds, and flavors of an Italian farm at an *agriturismo*.



OPPOSITE: Tuscany's vegetables are revered by chefs worldwide, whether they're grilled, sautéed, or simmered in a soup, courtesy of Sharri Whiting De Masi. THIS PAGE: The privately owned medieval Tuscan village of Il Borro welcomes parties of up to 20 guests.





THIS PAGE: Lunch is served on a terrace overlooking Lama di Luna's olive, cherry, and almond groves. OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Il Borro's medieval village lies in the center of the triangle formed by Arezzo, Florence, and Siena; Lama di Luna's large library offers a sitting area and a massive corner hearth.



AGRITURISMI ARE ITALIAN WORKING FARMS TURNED INTO VACATION SPOTS.

There is a saying in Italian that sums up my idea of a vacation: *DOLCE FARNIENTE*, the sweetness of doing nothing. Trust me, this delicious concept can be addictive. My personal recommendation, honed over many years of perfecting my own *FARNIENTE* skills, is an Italian agricultural holiday, the perfect prescription for the overstressed, overscheduled, and overworked.

Spending time at an Italian farm before moving on to Rome or Florence vaporizes jet lag, re-tunes body and mind, and helps the tongue remember what real food is supposed to taste like. (Don't worry about weight gain—you'll walk it off; plus, your body will sing an aria when honest mozzarella or ricotta hits your mouth.)

What's the concept here?

*Agriturismo* (*agriturismo* is singular), or working farms turned into vacation spots, were Italy's answer to bringing Italians back to properties they had abandoned during difficult economic times in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s; many people left the provinces to work in Switzerland and France and gained a knowledge of food and wine, as well as an understanding of other cultures. In 1985, a law was passed regulating agricultural tourism (*Agri* – farm and *turismo* – tourism), offering tax incentives to Italians who embarked upon this new kind of hospitality.

*Agriturismo* can range from very simple to ultra-elegant, with the common denominator that it is a working farm offering

hospitality, with the majority of food products served to guests either grown on the property or obtained locally. Many such properties are surrounded by olive groves, vineyards, or pastures stocked with cows and sheep (who may end up on the dinner table in some form). Often guests may observe or participate in the production process or attend cooking classes; always, they are served food traditional to the area, whether they are in Umbria, Puglia, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, or any of Italy's 16 other regions.

Because they are in the countryside, *agriturismi* are great embarkation points for hiking or biking excursions, as well as independent driving visits to some of Italy's most important medieval towns, such as Assisi and Orvieto, or historic cities worth visiting, such as Modena, Lucca, or Ravenna. They are ideal for wine vacations, as many are located along wine routes and are wine producers themselves.

Italy is full of *agriturismi*—the legislation has been fine-tuned, but it remains one of the best and most affordable concepts for tourism around. Regardless of the level of service, rates for







THIS PAGE: Lama di Luna's guest rooms were once home to the farm's tenant farmers. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Lama di Luna aims to be environmentally friendly and is powered by 48 solar panels, courtesy of Sharri Whiting De Masi; centuries-old olive trees in Puglia produce olive oil that is ideal served with vegetables, green salads, and fish, courtesy of Sharri Whiting De Masi; visitors to an Italian agriturismo indulge in fresh, home-made authentic Italian; Deruta, in Umbria, is famous for its ceramics, a tradition dating back to the Etruscan period, courtesy of Sharri Whiting De Masi.

stays at agriturismi generally include either the option of breakfast only, or breakfast and one additional meal. Sometimes there is a menu, sometimes not—it doesn't matter, the food will be fresh, simple, and excellent, while the *vinì della casa* (house wines) will invariably be cheap and good. The following are a few of our favorites.

Get back to nature at **Relais Campiome** ([www.campiome.it](http://www.campiome.it)) just outside Brisighella in Emilia Romagna, one of Italy's best regions for food. Both a winery and a bed-and-breakfast accommodation, Campiome, built in 1301, is run by young winemaker Filippo Manetti. The five rooms aren't large, but every detail has been considered, from the 14th-century doors to the Philippe Starck bathrooms. There are Filippo's wines and oils to taste, and several culinary events to enjoy throughout the year. Campiome will organize day trips to Faenza and Ravenna, where food for the soul is the focus, as well as olive oil and wine excursions. A pool will be installed in 2008.

In Tuscany, near Florence, the Ferragamo family estate, **Il Borro** ([www.ilborro.com](http://www.ilborro.com)), is about 20,000 acres of vineyards, pastures, olive groves, and restored farmhouses, a magnificent villa, and an entire medieval village, which has been turned into apartments. For a full-service rustic experience, the four-bedroom independent farmhouse, called Chiocci Alto, and its

two-bedroom dependence are good choices for a family or a group of friends looking for a more up-market (and expensive) agriturismo vacation. Situated on the estate's high ground, the homes have beautiful views and their own private pool. Chiocci Alto has two kitchens, WiFi, Turkish bath, and comes with a staff and chef. The dependence next door has a single room downstairs and a double bedroom upstairs and is good for extended family, friends, or nanny and the children. Activities include horseback riding, balloon flights, cooking classes, and a driving range for hitting golf balls.

Umbria is well known for its agriturismi because the region is centrally located, so day trips as far as Rome or Florence are possible. There are also many well-preserved medieval hill towns to visit, such as Todi, Montefalco, Spoleto, Perugia, Orvieto, Assisi, and others.

Rita and Sergio Marini's **Borgo La Torre** ([www.borgola torre.com](http://www.borgola torre.com)) is a prime example of Umbrian medieval architecture, modernized gracefully and right smack in the middle of the rich truffle area near Foligno. Truffle hunts can be organized with veteran hunter Dino Meniconi and his loyal dog, Lola, and the truffles are whipped up into a sumptuous lunch served in the dining room. Activities include horseback riding or hiking in the hills surrounding the agriturismo, which is 3,000

## PIETRO PETRONI CALLS HIS 500-ACRE LAMA DI LUNA A *BIOMASSERIA* BECAUSE THE AGRITURISMO AIMS TO BE ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE.





feet above sea level, with spectacular views in every direction and fresh mountain air. Spoleto, one of Umbria's most beautiful towns, is close by, as is Assisi.

**La Ghirlanda** ([www.laghirlanda.it](http://www.laghirlanda.it)), an old family hunting lodge owned by Riccardo and Amalja Pongelli, is located between Todi and Montefalco along the Sagrantino wine route. A more hotel-like agriturismo, it has 12 bedrooms (three with fireplaces) and grand staircases; yet, the location is very rural, with panoramic views, especially from the pool, and the distant rumble of tractors in the fields. There is mountain biking, horseback riding, and walking in the hills around the agriturismo, and local wine producers offer tastings in cantinas in the surrounding area. La Ghirlanda has a cook for its guests, who may eat there or try one of the excellent *ristoranti* nearby. For a family, there is an independent cottage available.

Hosted by the friendly Trippetta family, **Casale dei Frontini** ([www.casaledeifrontini.it](http://www.casaledeifrontini.it)), with its wonderful view of nearby Todi, is the quintessential agriturismo: five simple, comfortable rooms and three apartments in a restored convent (c.1700), great local food, rambling gardens, and a pool. Lunch and dinners are served on the veranda in summer or in the old olive mill—the *signora* does not have a menu, but no matter what she serves, the food is terrific. The restaurant is open to the public with prior reservations. Casale dei Frontini opened more than 10 years ago, when the agriturismo concept was still emerging, and offers an experience of real life in central Italy. Taste wines along the Sagrantino or Cantico wine routes from here; a marked walking trail begins at the entrance to the property.

In Puglia, one of southern Italy's hotspots, Pietro Petroni calls his 500-acre **Lama di Luna** ([www.lamadiluna.com](http://www.lamadiluna.com)) a *biomasseria*

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> CONTINUED ON PAGE 70.



THIS PAGE: The history of Relais Campium, in Emilia Romagna, dates back to 1301. OPPOSITE: The vibrant colors of Umbria in autumn, courtesy of Sharri Whiting De Masi.

## Where to Eat

It goes without saying that if you stay in an agriturismo you won't be eating fast food. These restaurants help keep the Slow Food mood intact:

**Trattoria di Strada Casale** Traditional country *ristorante* between Brisighella and Faenza (Emilia Romagna) with a good seasonal menu and a flair for the sophisticated. Near Relais Campium. Via Statale 22, Tel +39 054688054.

**Osteria del Borro** Located on the Il Borro estate, this traditional *osteria* offers a wonderful selection of local specialties and wines. Near Loro Ciuffenna. Arezzo, Tuscany, Tel +39 0559771155, [info@osteriadelborro.it](mailto:info@osteriadelborro.it).

**L'Antico Forziere** The Rodella brothers offer scrumptious, beautifully presented food, some of the best in Umbria. An easy drive from La Ghirlanda or Casale dei Frontini, this agriturismo also offers rooms. Via della Rocca 2, Casalini di Deruta, Umbria, Tel +39 0759724314, [info@anticoforziere.it](mailto:info@anticoforziere.it).

**Il Re Beve** A castle setting for an excellent restaurant, south of Todi. Piazza Corsini 1, Casigliano, Acquasparta, Umbria, Tel +39 0744943428, [info@castellodicasigliano.com](mailto:info@castellodicasigliano.com), [www.castellodicasigliano.com](http://www.castellodicasigliano.com).

**Trattoria Antichi Sapori** Pietro Zito's tiny restaurant is easily reachable from Lama di Luna and has a menu chock-full of divine Puglian specialties. Piazza S. Isidoro 9, Montegrosso near Andria, Puglia, reservations at Tel +39 0883569529.

**Le Comari di Farfa** To ease the transition from country to city, stop off at Francesca Pingi's agri-restaurant for lunch or dinner on the way to or from Rome. The Pingi's award-winning olive oils flavor Francesca's memorable meals. Near the famous Abbey of Farfa, at Castelnuovo di Farfa (Rieti, Lazio), reservations at Tel +39 076536385 or [f.pingi@tiscali.it](mailto:f.pingi@tiscali.it).



## LIDIA BASTIANICH, OF THE PUBLIC TELEVISION SERIES *LIDIA'S ITALIAN-AMERICAN KITCHEN*, HAS COME TWICE TO COOK AT LAMA DI LUNA.

because the agriturismo aims to be environmentally responsible. (Masseria is the Puglian word for farm.) An 18th-century building for *coloni* and *mazzadri* (farmers and sharecroppers), it has 44 chimneys. The 20 spacious double rooms, each with fireplace, open into a broad center courtyard and, before 1910, each room slept an entire family of up to 10 people. A bio-swimming pool will be opened in spring 2009, while two larger suites were added in 2008, one with hydro-massage and Turkish bath, and the other for families. Lidia Matticchio Bastianich, of the public television series *Lidia's Italian-American Kitchen*, has come twice to cook at Lama di Luna, where guests have the first right for tables in the restaurant. ET

## Other Food & Wine Experiences

Tasting wines along Italy's **wine routes** (*strade dell vino*) is a must; every region produces wine and there are dozens of wine routes. Most agriturismi make their own wine and have information available for other wineries in a particular area. Some of Italy's designated wine routes:

*Strada del Sangiovese*, running between Faenza, Brisighella, and other small towns in Emilia Romagna ([www.stradadelsangiovese.it](http://www.stradadelsangiovese.it)).

*Strada del Sagrantino*, the area surrounding Montefalco, Umbria, produces the DOCG red Sagrantino di Montefalco (<http://english.stradadelsagrantino.it>).

*Strada dei Vini dei Castelli Romani* includes the area outside Rome, the only European capital in a grand cru wine area ([www.stradadeivinideicastellirromani.com](http://www.stradadeivinideicastellirromani.com)).

**Truffle hunts** in Umbria take place almost all year. Jennifer Menconi, an American living in Foligno, organizes hunts with her father-in-law, Dino, and his dog, Lola. After a morning trekking the forests, the group is served a truffle lunch at Borgo La Torre. +39 3297199124

**Tasting olive oils** in Emilia Romagna. The first Denomination of Protected Origin (DOP)-designated olive oil came from Brisighella near Relais Campiome. Terra di Brisighella ([www.brisighello.net](http://www.brisighello.net), [info@brisighello.net](mailto:info@brisighello.net)) offers oil tastings, which include four or five varieties and qualities, including "ice oil," which is made from olives picked after the first frost. The town of Montefalco in Umbria (home of Sangrantino wine) is also an excellent place to taste oils.

What is olive oil without its partner, **balsamic vinegar**? On the west side of Emilia Romagna is Modena, the capital of *aceto balsamico*. A tasting with Lara Bompana at Acetaia Bompana ([www.bompana.com](http://www.bompana.com), [info@bompana.com](mailto:info@bompana.com)) is an education in flavor.

## Where to Shop

**The Mall** near Florence is the best place to pick up designer bargains, plus have a nice lunch. Just down the road Dolce & Gabbana have their factory store, as does Trussardi. Via Europe 8, Leccio, [www.themall.it](http://www.themall.it).

**Brunello Cucinelli** The hottest brand of cashmere in the U.S. is made in the little town of Solomeo, located in Umbria near Lake Trasimeno,

with a wonderful factory store. Piazza Alberto Della Chiesa 6, Solomeo, Umbria, Tel +39 0755294855, [www.brunellolocucinelli.it](http://www.brunellolocucinelli.it).

**Tessitura Pardi** Beautifully merchandised linens for dining room, bedroom, or kitchen. Across from the San Francesco Museum in Montefalco, Umbria, +39 074299754, [www.tessiturapardi.com](http://www.tessiturapardi.com).

**Majolica Originale Deruta** Deruta has been a ceramics town since the 14th century. Take home or order custom-made dishes, lamps, tables, and much more at prices about one third of similar pieces sold in major U.S. cities. Via Tiberina Sud 330 Deruta, Umbria, [www.derutaitaly.com](http://www.derutaitaly.com).

**Bottega d'Arte Ceramica Gatti** One of 60 ceramics workshops in Faenza, Emilia Romagna, this studio, founded in 1928, offers contemporary pieces. Via Pompignoli 4, Tel +39 0546634301, [www.ceramicagatti.it](http://www.ceramicagatti.it).

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