

# FINANCIAL TIMES

## Meals on hills

On a tour of Tuscany, Nicholas Lander heads for the high ground and reaps some excellent culinary rewards

Saturday night and Sunday morning are very different affairs in Bagno Vignoni, a small hilltop town 50 kilometres south-east of Siena. Judging from the drawing of the town – renowned for its hot water spring – in the 14th century that illustrated the menu of the Osteria del Leone, it has changed very little over the centuries, apart from an influx of tourists and cars.

As we left the Osteria after dinner at 11pm we decided to walk under the stars towards the viewpoint over the rolling countryside. The narrow channel of warm, sulphurous spring water that cuts through the rocky platform leading to the cliff edge was lined by scores of Italians sitting in the dark to take advantage, at last, of some cooler night air.

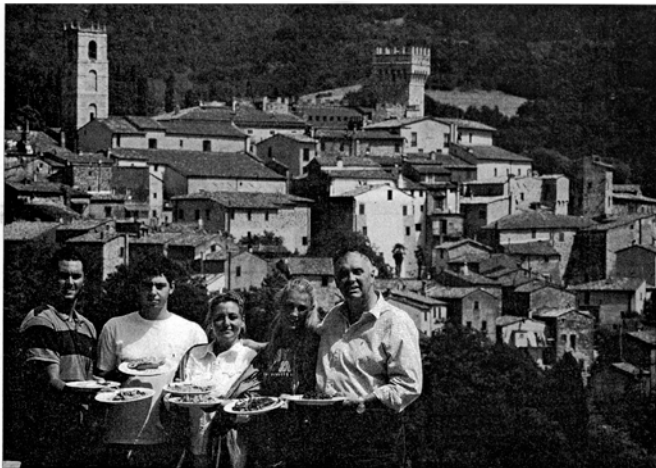
The following day at 9.30am we joined the regulars who pay the €12 admission charge to the pool and gardens next to the Hotel Posta. Marucci in order to wallow in the hot springs for an hour and a half. It was then that I realised my first mistake of this tour across rugged and isolated southern Tuscany, where it seemed impossible to reconcile the 35°C temperatures with the road signs warning of the ice, fog and snow that

comes in November along with the harvest of wine, truffles and chestnuts.

My mistake was not having gone into the hot springs before eating at the Osteria: my immersion produced an appetite of immense proportions that would have helped me fully do justice to what the kitchen has to offer.

The menu is – as in all the best Italian trattoria – a very simple affair with half a dozen choices at each of the three courses (antipasti, primi and secondi piatti). Furthermore, it has not deviated from its traditional offerings. Fish is rare, as it would have been difficult to source or well past its sell-by date should it ever have arrived at such a hilltop redoubt. Even in wealthier and more cosmopolitan Florence, I was told, salt cod and squid sautéed with spinach were the only fish dishes likely to feature regularly.

But there are other attractions: among the antipasti, a mousse of ricotta and courgettes with gutsy pesto, and a pungent tomato soup thickened with bread, stood out. For meat-lovers there is the bistecca Fiorentina; a fricassee of rabbit with diced almonds, thin slices of roast pork with rocket and pecorino, or trippa (tripe) Fiorentina, which even as enthusiastic a follower of



Family fare: as served by the Baralidos in San Casciano del Bagni

Massimo Sestini/Grazia Neri

this dish as myself could not face on such a hot night.

That was despite sitting at one of the 10 outside tables in the Osteria's charming garden, where the wind had picked up. We were surrounded by ancient walls of at least six different textures and eras, creating a rustic setting that any modern urban restaurateur would pay an interior

designer a small fortune to replicate.

The design of Ristorante Daniela in San Casciano del Bagni, another hilltop town with a thermal spring, is cool in both senses of the word. Its two stone arched rooms provide an inviting welcome from the heat of the day while its simple interior is a tribute to a collaboration between Tricia Guild,

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The four pages of Daniela's monthly menu and wine list could not be simpler, more attractive or more mouth-watering. This is the kind of place where you only manage to decide what to order when the waitress is standing in front of your table, pen and pad in hand.

We passed, reluctantly, on the pasta with summer truffles and the tortelli stuffed with pigeon and ordered a wild mixed salad with deep-fried anchovies and pine nuts, with the copious house antipasti which included some delicious cep mushrooms. And it was just too difficult to ignore a dish of this sliced of baked pecorino served on a purée of the first of the summer's truffles.

These distinctively flavoured truffles appeared again atop green gnocchi with Savoy cabbage alongside a rabbit dish recommended by the waitress. The rabbit had been stuffed with diced potatoes and herbs and then roasted before being sliced and served with a simple solitary bay leaf. It was delicious.

Finally, we stopped off at Quattro Gigli (The Four Lilies), a hotel, restaurant and wine shop in Montopoli near Pisa. It has been run by the Puccioni family since 1930 and boasts an extensive, inexpensive wine list and an attractive terrace lined with lemon trees.

We walked past two elderly women watching TV in the lobby, sat next to an Italian discussing shipping engineering equipment to Islamabad with a Pakistani busi-

nessman and saw two young Japanese chefs working under the supervision of an Italian mama. For all this exotica, from the kitchen came some very authentic Tuscan food. Generous antipasti; excellent pici (short spaghetti) with black squid ink; and, because we were close to the coast, some mixed fried fish with the renowned cipolle onions from Certaldo.

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More columns at [www.ft.com/lander](http://www.ft.com/lander)

## Tuscan treats

**Osteria del Leone**  
Via dei Mulini 3,  
Bagno Vignoni;  
[www.lione.co.uk](http://www.lione.co.uk)  
**Ristorante Daniela**  
Piazza Matteotti 6,  
San Casciano del Bagni;  
[www.settequercie.it](http://www.settequercie.it)  
**Il Pellicano**  
Porto Ecote, Monte  
Argentario;  
[www.pellicanohotel.com](http://www.pellicanohotel.com)  
This exclusive hotel has a second, less expensive restaurant and now welcomes non-residents.  
**Villa Bordonì**  
Via San Cresci 31/32,  
Greve in Chianti;  
[www.villabordonì.com](http://www.villabordonì.com)  
A 10-room hotel with wonderful views, good food and wine ideal as a base for exploring wine country.  
**Quattro Gigli**  
Piazza Michele da Montopoli,  
2, Montopoli in Val d'Arno,  
[www.quattrogigli.it](http://www.quattrogigli.it)