



The Italian garden at Tuscany's Badia a Coltibuono wine resort.

Savoring Tuscany

At a vineyard and cooking school in the Chianti countryside, the opening of a wine resort makes a visit there even more divine. *By Elizabeth Helman Minchilli*

WITH MY ARMS elbow deep in a bowl of mashed potatoes and flour, I am in no position to take notes as Emanuela Stucchi-Prinetti tells me a bit about her family home and business. My fourteen-year-old daughter, Sophie, and I are halfway through our morning cooking lesson at Badia a Coltibuono and are just sorting through the mysteries of gnocchi making with chef Francesco Torre when Emanuela comes to join us for a mid-morning cappuccino in the family's kitchen.

Edited by *Melissa Biggs Bradley*

"My great-great-grandfather bought Coltibuono in 1846," explains Emanuela. "Although the estate had been making wine for hundreds of years, it was my father, Piero Stucchi-Prinetti, who modernized the winery in the late 1960s and began to bottle the best vintages of Chianti." While Coltibuono is now internationally known for its excellent, award-winning wines, I am soon to learn that there are many reasons to visit the 2,000-acre estate, which is located in the Chianti region of Tuscany.

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The walls of the lounge feature 11th-century frescoes.

One of the best reasons, it turns out, is that the family has recently opened what it is calling a “wine resort.” “My mother, Lorenza de Medici, has been welcoming guests to her cooking school here for about twenty years,” says Emanuela. “While her weeklong classes were a huge success, we wanted to open up Coltibuono to other visitors as well, expanding the experience to include everything that the estate has to offer.” Earlier this year they made the eight guest rooms available to all visitors, not just those taking classes, so anyone can now come and stay for just one night if they wish, or longer.

The nucleus of the resort is, of course, the ancient abbey of Coltibuono itself. A winding dirt road leads through a dense forest of firs and oaks to bring arriving visitors below the bastions of the abbey. Much of the Romanesque structure dates back to the 11th century, and the original bell tower of the abbey church still



Students prepare a meal at the cooking school.

rises majestically above the stone walls.

We arrive on a crystal-clear Sunday afternoon, when there are a handful of day-trippers from Florence (less than an hour away) visiting the church, which is open to the public. Sophie and I, however, are quickly ushered into the private sanctum of the family's residence within the abbey, passing through a massive wood door leading to the stone-paved enclosed courtyard. “Is this where they

live?” asks Sophie, who, like me, is awed by the size and grandeur of the family's home. “Yes,” I reply, “and so do we, for the next three days.”

We are truly made to feel at home. Despite the sense of history and magnificence that defines Coltibuono, the place is fresh, cozy and surprisingly homey. When I had heard that we were to stay in former monks' cells, I had prepared myself for spartan elegance. Instead, the rooms are bright and warm, furnished with a lush collection of family heirlooms and colorful fabrics. Large windows take in not only the views of the Chianti countryside but also the exquisite Italian-style formal garden, with its precise rows of box hedges, wisteria and flower beds.

On our first night we dine in the family's restaurant, which is located in the estate's former stables and is overseen by Emanuela's brother Paolo. When it opened thirty years ago, it was one of the first farm restaurants in the area. For the last three years the family has relied on the skills of Francesco Torre, who presents dishes that, while based on Tuscan ingredients and traditions, are creative as well. “I try to get as many ingredients locally as possible,” says Francesco, who has stopped by our table. “In fact, I picked the wild fennel and marjoram in this roast yesterday, in a field not far from here.” Even such seemingly simple dishes as poached pear and cheese are made unique by the fact that the Pecorino is from a neighbor's farm.

After dinner Emanuela and I linger over glasses of the family's grappa while Sophie runs outside with Emanuela's son Leonardo to feed scraps to the local fox that makes a nightly visit. “Things like that are what make Coltibuono so special,” says Emanuela. “*Coltibuono* means ‘good culture,’ both in terms of art and music and in terms of cultivating the fields. But in fact we are still surrounded by acres of forest. Foxes come to our door—can you believe it? It's hard



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to find this combination of the wild and the cultivated anywhere else in Tuscany."

And a stay at the wine resort means taking full advantage of both aspects of the estate. An early-morning hike takes me through the woods to the other side of the hills, with views out toward the Apennines. Back at breakfast the bounty of the family's orchard and other fruit plantings is laid out: marmalades and jams made from its blackberries, plums and even pomegranates. Several varieties of honey—wildflower, chestnut and thyme—are made on the estate.

Cooking lessons at Coltibuono are kept to no more than sixteen participants at a time, and on this visit the class consists of just my daughter and me. Our mornings are spent in the light-drenched kitch-

en overlooking the garden, learning the secrets to such Tuscan specialties as focaccia, semolina cake and roast suckling pig. Lorenza de Medici would gladly still conduct cooking classes, but Emanuela notes that she had to tell her mother to slow down. "After all, she is seventy-nine years old!" The classes are now in the competent hands of the restaurant's enthusiastic chef, who has decided to teach us how to make gnocchi on the first morning of our three-day session. "Just remember, you have to eat what you cook for lunch," jokes Francesco. Although our first few gnocchi are a bit misshapen, we quickly master whipping out little, fluffy nuggets, which we will douse with thyme-infused tomato sauce, and sheep's-milk-ricotta dumplings.

The estate's restaurant is located in the refurbished stables.





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After enjoying the fruits of our labors over a long and lazy lunch with plenty of wine, we are whisked away by Emanuela to explore the rest of the estate. Our first stop is the recently opened winery. Although we are in the heart of Chianti, and there are hundreds of other winemakers, Coltibuono stands out for several reasons. "We are one of the few estates that are 100 percent organic," explains Emanuela, as we head in her four-wheel drive between rows of vines. In lieu of using pesticides, herbicides and heavy plowing between the rows of vines to control pests and other blights, Coltibuono is carpeted with cut grass and wildflowers—a gentler and certainly more picturesque alternative.

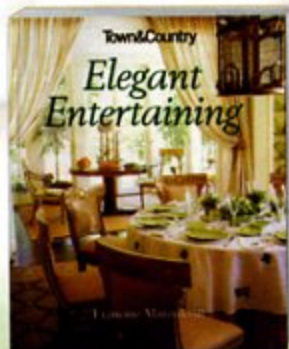
And then there is the winery itself. "In 1996, when we decided to modernize and build a new winery, we knew we wanted it to stand out, not only technologically but also aesthetically," Emanuela continues. Designed by architects Piero Sartogo and Natalie Grenon, the brick building is a surprising and beautifully stark modern element amid the timeless landscape. It's the perfect setting in which to sample the estate's wines. (Coltibuono produces about 800,000 bottles annually.) Its newest, *Cultus Boni*, is a mixture of the traditional Sangiovese with small percentages of Merlot, Cilieggiolo and Colorino.

Our other excursions include a visit to the olive press to try the estate's extra-virgin olive oils and a trip to a neighboring cheese maker, where the sheep's milk is transformed into ricotta and Pecorino.

Sad to say, our sojourn comes to an end. Originally, in order to lure Sophie to this former monastery where there would be no TV and a lot of wine tastings, I had to promise to take her to the nearby designer outlets, too. Yet, as we get into our car to leave, even Sophie wishes we could extend our "monastic" stay instead of shopping for shoes. *Rooms from \$180 per night. One-day cooking classes are \$185; three-day cooking course and room package from \$1,080; five-day package from \$3,000. 011-39-577-744-832; www.coltibuono.com.* ✘

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