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La Dolce Vita

When it comes to the good life, **TUSCANY** offers an embarrassment of riches. Jessica Jonzen indulges in a gastronomic getaway



Whoever the first person was to think it would be a good idea to taste a truffle must have been ever so

slightly mad. Buried beneath linden, hazelnut and oak trees, they're hardly easy to spot; their pungent aroma can be quite alarming to the unaccustomed and they're not exactly visually pleasing either. And yet, that gastronomic pioneer was on to something, for truffles, I have discovered, are sublime.

If you've been put off by the cloying synthetic oil that's sloshed on to dishes in gastro pubs – as I was – think again. I'm

talking about a proper, expensive, white truffle which, shaved on to pasta, polenta and even ice cream, transforms the simplest of dishes into something elegant and indulgent.

I experienced my truffle epiphany in San Miniato, in the south-eastern hills of Tuscany, in the height of truffle-hunting season, which runs from October to December. Our group flew into Pisa and drove through the storied Tuscan landscape of open plains and rising hills, punctuated with ancient farm buildings and poplars, arriving half an hour later at the San Miniato estate.

We were introduced to Cesare Profeti, truffle hunter extraordinaire, who took us out with his highly trained dogs, as pigs have fallen out of favour for truffle hunts. Gina – a cross-bred hound with more than 10 years of training, led the way. We'd not been walking for more than a couple of minutes when she dashed to a spot just a few metres from the path and excitedly began to



A white truffle



Cesare Profeti and his dog, Gina, sniff for truffles

'Rock-star butcher Dario Cecchini has catered for Prince Charles, Elton John and Sting. That night I ended two years of near-vegetarianism.'



Photo: Simon
Borghese/Photo



dig. Moments later, Cesare proudly displayed a small, gnarled nugget of truffle and we were almost disappointed – weren't they supposed to be harder to find?

It turned out that they were. As we

walked through the glorious estate, past the fortress-like Medici-era home of its owner, we watched Gina determinedly trail the ground, searching for the elusive scent. After half an hour, she ran in to the depths of the woods and dug, almost manically, for a good five minutes or so. We looked on eagerly, expecting her to unearth a great hunk of white truffle. When her efforts yielded just a couple of unassuming pebble-sized tubers, it became clear why truffles



The pool at Il Borgo di Petroio

are so vastly expensive – this season commanding 4,000 Euros a kilo.

It was an exhilarating experience, and we were rewarded after our two-hour hunt with a truffle-themed feast at the nearby Locanda di Camugliano, a traditional restaurant in the estate's converted stables. Truffle fondue with fried polenta was followed by spaghetti with shaved truffle, fried

egg with truffle and squid ink, and vanilla ice cream with truffle and honey. It was a dizzying display of how versatile this ingredient can be.

While truffle hunting is an autumnal pursuit, Tuscany proves itself to be a year-round destination.

That evening, we roused ourselves from a stupor for more indulgence in the quiet town of Panzano in Chianti, where we met self-styled 'rock-star butcher' Dario Cecchini. As we stumbled, mole-like, from the darkness into the bright lights of his ancient shop, tumbler of Chianti were thrust into our hands and AC/DC's *Back in Black* was pumped at full blast through the speakers. The eighth generation of Cecchini butchers, Dario has been described by *The New York Times* as 'the world's most famous butcher', Jamie Oliver urges his followers to seek him out and he has catered for Prince Charles, Elton John and Sting.

Translated by his wife, he told us of his reverence for the animal and declared his motto

as 'to beef, or not to beef'. That night, I found myself ending two years of near-vegetarianism.

After a hair-raising journey by car round hair-pin bends, we were rewarded with the welcoming sight of Il Borgo di Petroio, a vast and elegant stone farmhouse set on an important 900-acre estate in the hills above Rufina, within easy reach of Florence. Lovingly and tastefully restored by its owners, this seven-bedroom retreat has a private pool and tennis court with mesmerising views out of shuttered windows across the Tuscan countryside.

Some members of our party rose at dawn to join professional hunters on a wild boar hunt, a regulated practice encouraged by the local government to manage the rising population. I preferred to take advantage of the lie-in before we set off for lunch, a guided tour and wine tasting at Castello Pomino, owned by the Frescobaldi family since the 15th century. We discovered some of the finest wines of the area and left laden with wine, olive oil and honey, which we were able to buy from the estate's shop.

If the trip hadn't been spoiling enough, there was another treat in store. The Michelin-starred chef Tom Aikens had joined us for the weekend and, together with local chef Francesco Marrucelli, cooked an Italian

feast for us that evening at Il Borgo di Petroio. Mushrooms with chestnut and wild boar ragu were followed by red wine-poached pears with spiced rice pudding, served in the vast but cosy villa, with the lights of Florence twinkling on the horizon.

Tuscany proved itself to have a year-round appeal, with an extraordinary larder and a hearty welcome. The area might be famed for its rustic culinary style, but that belies its extraordinary passion for quality and craft.

* **Tuscany Now & More**, tuscanynowandmore.com (020 7684 8884), offers seven nights at Il Borgo di Petroio from £4,372 to £7,819 per week, based on 14 people sharing. The villa rental specialists can provide private chefs and a bespoke concierge service. [easyjet](http://easyjet.com) flies daily from Gatwick to Pisa. [easyjet](http://easyjet.com)



Francesco Marrucelli and Tom Aikens preparing dinner