

Italy: best local food is down on the farm



Eating lunch alfresco at Fattoria La Violla farm, near Arezzo in Tuscany

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Italy's agriturismo stays are all about the meals, great company, the art of making pasta - and laid-back languor

In the al fresco kitchen at Tenuta Seliano we're about to learn how to make pasta, my son's favourite food since he could mouth the word. First we have to shoo away a pack of rumbustious dogs who rule the roost at this *agriturismo*. This working farm near Paestum in Campania is one of southern Italy's finest, where rustic three-course dinners are the main attraction. There are cookery lessons too. It's incredible value at less than £300 each for the week.

Dogs dispatched, we get down to business, lining up at long wooden trestle tables where two of Seliano's cooks, Eugenia and Erminia, show us how to start from scratch, using plain flour, semolina, eggs, salt and either boiling or cold water. We work the dough, shape it into long, thin sausages and roll it out with the mother of all rolling

pins. It's hard work; easier are cavatelli, small and shell-shaped. Predictably, the children master the technique far quicker than I do. Their reward is to make hundreds for dinner for the guests.

Agriturismo dishes are based on fresh farm produce and the communal meals, washed down with apparently unlimited quantities of the local red, and are the highlight of our week's stay. There's always a pasta course, but as this is buffalo mozzarella country the real star of the show appears in every shape and form as part of the antipasti, along with buffalo bresaola, deep-fried courgette flowers and onion frittata. Buffalo milk makes it into the puddings, in a toothsome ricotta and pear tart and a cassata cake. There are other treats too, such as light, crisp doughnuts made with mashed potato and figs in red wine.

The 800-strong buffalo herd produce milk that is turned into *Mozzarella di Bufala Campana* (DOP) at the Barlotti dairy in Paestum. Unlike the squishy mass-produced stuff made from cow's milk, this cheese is lovingly cut and massaged by hand into prime condition.

Ettore Bellelli, whose family owns Tenuta Seliano, tells us that storing his cheese in the fridge would "murder" it. In the winter it needs 20 minutes or so in warm water to perk it up. Fresh and springy, the cheese should be eaten the day it's made.

We feel a certain sense of achievement in having Ettore take us on this tour at all, since tracking down the Bellellis — the brothers Massimino and Ettore and their mother, Baroness Cecilia Bellelli Baratta — has become something of a sport. Exuding aristocratic languor, Tenuta Seliano has to be the most laid-back place in which I've ever stayed, and it is decidedly not for those looking for attentive service. The estate, which dates to the 1800s and runs to more than 200 acres, opened as an *agriturismo* in 1991, its stone buildings converted into rooms, cottages and dining rooms around a large garden and pool. Guests are left to their own devices. But more than once we find newcomers who haven't been shown the ropes wandering around clueless. The Bellellis are perfectly amiable and happy to help, but we have been slightly unlucky in that our stay coincides with that of the American food writer Arthur Schwartz, who is leading a posse of New Yorkers on a culinary tour and this keeps them busy. The delightful Arthur turns out to be a walking encyclopaedia and gives us his list of must-see sights.

No 1, and a manageable stroll away, are the Doric temples of Paestum, a major archaeological site that wasn't overrun. The peaceful rural setting, complete with basking butterflies and lizards, is so idyllic that I half expect Shelley to come skipping around the corner. After lunch at another happy discovery — the rather lovely Nettuno restaurant overlooking the site — we walk down to the beach, which forms part of the coastline chosen by the Allies for Operation Avalanche, their invasion of mainland Italy, in September 1943. Among the shops selling seaside tat there's still a tiny, locked-up military base. Seliano is also an excellent base for exploring the area by train. We attempt to visit the medieval botanical gardens of Salerno, but are thwarted by their arcane opening hours. The astonishing marble crypt of the city's cathedral which claims the relics of St Matthew is a cracking substitute. We also love Agropoli, an easygoing resort on the coast dominated by a 16th-century castle, and make the obligatory trip to Pompeii to join the hordes gawping at casts of 2,000-year-old

corpses.

But what the children enjoy most is running around the grounds of Seliano with the pack of dogs while we flop by the pool and dream about dinner. Marble-sized? Fist-sized? Smoked? Plaited? Squashed and fried? There's so much to fantasise about down on a mozzarella farm.

Need to know

A week's B&B at Tenuta Seliano starts at £226pp, based on a family of four sharing a room, or from £294pp, half board, with Long Travel (01694 722193, long-travel.co.uk). Flights with easyJet (easyjet.com) to Naples cost extra. Car hire from £205 a week.

Five of the top Italian farm stays

Fattoria La Vialla, Arezzo, Tuscany

With the highest organic credentials, the Vialla farm and wine estate has been built up over 30 years by three generations of the Lo Franco family, who are passionate about natural food production. Piece by piece they have bought up neglected adjoining farms, revitalising them to produce wine, olive oil, sheep's cheese, pasta and vegetables for sale in the estate shop and by mail order, and converting the farm buildings into self-catering accommodation with rustic furnishings and mod cons. The 30 stone properties, scattered around the estate, sleep 2-10, and prices start at €378 a week. Guests can join in the grape and olive harvests and visit the flour mill, dairy, bakery and kitchens where pasta sauces are made. One evening each week everyone staying is invited to dinner, a feast that is served on long tables out in the open air. Details: 00 39 0575 430020, lavialla.it.

Monteverde, La Spezia, Liguria

The pretty pink-washed farmhouse with terraced gardens (above) looks over the vineyards that produce the estate's Colli di Luni DOC wine. Set in seven hectares (which also produce fruit, vegetables, eggs and jams for self-catering guests), it is 6km from the rugged Cinque Terre coast. Go in late autumn and you can join in the olive harvest. There are nine apartments converted from two old farmsteads. Rates are from €250 for a three-night stay for two people. Details: 00 39 0187 674727, www.agriturismomonteverde.it.

Baglio Fontanasalsa, Trapani, Sicily

This family farmhouse, surrounded by olive groves, has been restored to create nine en suite rooms named after different varieties of olives. Some of the rooms look on to the central *baglio* (courtyard), where breakfast is served, and others lead out on to an orange grove. There is a tasting room to sample the farm's wines and award-winning olive oils, both of which are offered in the restaurant. It is perfectly positioned for visits to Trapani and archaeological sites and is 2km from the beach; you can take a hydrofoil to the Egardi Islands. The cost is from £84 a night for B&B in a double room (from £128 HB) with Real Holidays (020-7359 3938, realholidays.co.uk).

L'Orto, Matera, Basilicata

In the little-visited deep south in the “arch” of the boot of Italy, L'Orto (which means kitchen garden) grows artichokes, aubergines, tomatoes and peppers. Work up an appetite for dinner in the restaurant (or cook your own from farm produce) by cycling or walking to picturesque villages and archaeological sites. A week's self-catering is from £986 for two sharing a one-bedroom apartment including car hire, one dinner and two days' cycle hire with route notes (Inntravel (01653 617000, inntravel.co.uk).

Fattoria Barbiolla Nuova, San Miniato, Tuscany

It is a ten-minute drive on bumpy tracks from the start of the estate to the self-catering apartments in three converted farmhouses. Wild boar and deer roam the forest that supplies white truffles to the River Café in West London. Go in autumn and you join a truffle hunt. There are pasta-making demonstrations and bread-making lessons offered too. Foraging for fruit and herbs is encouraged, and other organic food can be bought from the farm shop. Florence, Siena and Pisa are all about 60km away for day trips — if you can drag yourself away from the estate. Rates start at £70 a night for a self-catering apartment sleeping two, booked through i-escape.com.

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