

[Link to the article](#)

Southern comfort in Tuscany

Unesco World Heritage-listed Val d'Orcia, in south Tuscany, is alive with new hotels and restaurants, reports Aoife O'Riordain



Tuscan scenes: the rolling landscapes of Val d'Orcia (Picture: Getty)

[Aoife O'Riordain](#)

Published: 21 August 2013

Updated: 15:41, 21 August 2013

With its rolling, fertile landscape punctuated by plumes of cypress trees, vineyard-draped hills and towns and cities groaning under the weight of their architectural jewels, Tuscany has an enduring appeal that begs to be revisited time and again.

The Unesco World Heritage-listed Val d'Orcia, in Tuscany's southern reaches, is one of its less populated and unspoilt corners and is also the backdrop for several new openings.

The early pioneers of this stark yet dramatic landscape dominated by the imposing peak of Monte Amiata were Antonio and Iris Origo, who breathed life into the sprawling La Foce estate in the 1920s. A thriving working farm as well as being home to a cluster of rental properties and a B&B, one of La Foce's main attractions is the spectacular garden designed by British architect and designer Cecil Pinsent.

Its latest venture is the Ristorante Dopolavoro, which reopened earlier this year. Originally built in 1939 as a social hub for the farm workers of this vast estate, inside it offers utilitarian country chic with enamel pendant lights, wooden tables and grainy black and white photos of life on the estate. Outside there is a large sun-soaked terrace and bocce court.

The menu offers simple yet high quality Tuscan classics with homemade pasta and wild boar sauce or tagliata of Chianina beef with rocket and parmesan. It doesn't get more farm-to-table than vegetables from the garden across the road and oil from La Foce's olive groves.

A 30-minute dusty bump up a mountain from La Foce is another new retreat that opened last year. To get to Monteverdi you must persevere along an unpaved road to the village of Castiglioncello del Trinoro, which clings to a ridge with bird's eye views of the fabulous mosaic of Tuscany unfolding below. Guests are rewarded for their efforts. Monteverdi has more of a feel of a luxury inn and its seven rooms and three villas bought and restored by American lawyer Michael Cioffi are scattered throughout the village, where only a handful of residents remain.

Ilaria Miani, the go-to decorator of choice for well-heeled Romans, was tasked with the interior design and the look is a rustic but sophisticated twist on traditional Tuscan décor. Monteverdi's Oreade restaurant only opened in July. Chef Paolo Coluccio, who trained at London's Locanda Locatelli, mans the stoves and takes his culinary cues from the local markets and produce.

This includes lavender risotto using blooms harvested from Monteverdi's enchanting terraced gardens, slow-cooked lamb shoulder and the classic Roman dish of pasta cacio e pepe — a moreish sauce made from local Pecorino cheese and pepper.

Pienza, one of the area's most charming towns, has also just earned itself a new bolthole, the La Bandita Townhouse. A sibling to the well-established La Bandita in the surrounding countryside, it is set behind a discreet entrance on the town's main pedestrianised thoroughfare. A converted convent, it has just 12 contemporary-chic bedrooms repurposed from the nuns' cells with exposed walls and parquet floors. There is also a small, enclosed medieval garden and Townhouse Caffè restaurant.



Charming town: the picturesque town of Pienza, home to La Bandita Townhouse. Despite opening just five years ago, the Relais Borgo Santo Pietro is becoming one of Tuscany's classic places to stay, perched in a bucolic corner of the Murlo half an hour south of Siena.

Gazing down on the appropriately named Valle de Serena, it's the sort of Tuscan hideaway you long to discover, albeit an expensive one.

Once a stopping-off point for pilgrims on their way to Rome, the 13th borgo was bought by its Danish owners almost 12 years ago in a ruinous state of repair — a lengthy restoration followed. There are just 15 luxurious rooms and suites, which adds to the general feeling of relaxed seclusion that says more house party than hotel.

It's all so atmospheric that it's not really a surprise to learn the villa provided the inspiration for the setting of Titania Hardy's fictional novel *House of the Wind*, some of which the author penned while staying at the hotel.

The bedrooms in the main villa are done in luscious velvets and silk brocades in a rich, yet subdued palette with four-poster beds, gilded furniture and hand-painted murals.

I checked into one of four new rooms unveiled last year — a short but fragrant stroll from the main house. The look here has a slightly lighter touch: less Renaissance, more romance with pale stone floors, crystal chandeliers and billowing natural linen curtains.

There are vistas of the valley from the infinity edge swimming pool but another star attraction is the garden — a perfectly tended 13-acre expanse with a fragrant rose garden, pergolas tumbling with wisteria, lavender beds, orchards and fruit and vegetable gardens that provide many of the raw ingredients for the kitchen.



Rural retreats: the shaded pool at Borgo Santo Pietro © Andrea Jones This being Italy, food is high on the agenda and there are few prettier spots to indulge than Valle de Serena restaurant's al fresco dining room set under an arcaded loggia. Chef Stefano Santo's tasting menu comes under two guises; traditional and innovative. The latter offers flavours such as duck ravioli, red prawns and tarragon extract available as a lengthy tasting menu with a procession of small dishes — worth experiencing once. Breakfast is served by way of a glorious spread in the large Tuscan kitchen, with a vast communal table, open range and flagstone floors.

All the bread, pastries, honey and jams are homemade, while The Treehouse bar next to the pool has a more rustic slant with pizzas and pastas.

Nearby lie the ghostly remains of the Abbey of San Galgano nearby.

Alternatively, you can spend an informative couple of hours learning the nuances of pairing Italian wine with food in the cellar. There's also a quirky one-room spa housed in the borgo's 800-year-old former bakehouse.

Therapist Tracey Mallalieu expertly administered my massage using products from Florence's renowned centuries-old Officina Profumo Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella.

Borgo Santo Pietro attracts more than its fair share of honeymooners — certainly come dinner time, anyone not sitting with a shiny wedding band quietly sipping their prosecco might feel a little out of place. In spite of the picture-perfect looks, the hotel is also surprisingly child-friendly.

There's a playground tucked into the gardens, pizza-making classes and plenty of space for running around without disturbing the peace.

This being a discreet kind of place, they are pretty tight-lipped about any A-list visitors. But as I checked out I spied glowing comments in the guestbook from Brett Graham of Notting Hill's The Ledbury, which probably tells you all you need to know when it comes to where a two-Michelin starred chef spends his downtime.

DETAILS: TUSCANY

Ryanair flies from Stansted to Pisa, returns from £58, ryanair.com

La Bandita TownHouse, doubles from €195 B&B, labanditatownhouse.com

Relais Borgo Santo Pietro, doubles from €395 B&B, borgosantopietro.com

Ristorante Dopolavoro La Foce, dopolavorolafoce.it

Monteverdi, doubles from €325 B&B, monteverdituscany.com