

# TRAVELAGE

## EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS WEST

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## A Taste of Tuscany

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Buonvisi Villa // (C) 2010 Doorways, Ltd.

In Italy, perhaps more than anywhere else, the best things in life are unhurried — and pizza making is no exception. A traditional, Neapolitan thin-crust pie may require less than two minutes in a sweltering, woodfired oven to reach crispy perfection, but the dough needs a good 16 to 18 hours' time beforehand to render it easy to digest. This technique ensures that it won't make clients feel like leaden diners.

The dough strategy is one of the many tips that pizzaiolo (master pizza chef) and teacher Angelo Petrone shares with our hungry, enthusiastic group during an al fresco pizza demonstration on an April evening at the family-run Buonvisi Estate near Lucca, Italy. Petrone's classes are a favorite among guests of the estate's villas, nestled on an idyllic hillside covered in olive groves and vineyards. Hands-on classes in the villa kitchens can also be arranged, but our group of more than a dozen is content to keep our paws on glasses of wine — made from grapes grown on the property — and piping-hot pizza slices. As we happily sip and sup, Petrone assembles one pie after another from the fresh ingredients laid out before us, regaling us with pizza lore and lessons (and aided in translation by one of the villa owner's kindly sons, Nik).

According to Petrone, tomatoes first made their way onto pizza in 19th-century Naples. A desperate, hungry citizen, or so the story goes, decided to test the commonly held belief that the red fruit — brought back from Peru by Columbus' crew — was actually poisonous. Fortunately, it was found to be not only safe, but quite tasty. Eventually, it was incorporated with other flavorful ingredients into sauce and onto an early form of pizza known as schiacciate.

As Petrone expertly prepares a marinara pizza with tomato sauce, oregano, oil and garlic, we learn that the name partially refers to its popularity among fisherman and sailors who feasted on this fragrant, inexpensive variety at an early pizzeria near the port of Naples. Soon, this food of the poor transcended class to become the food of the people. Queen Margherita Maria Teresa Giovanna di Savoia came to favor a pizza with toppings representing the red, white and green of the Italian flag (tomatoes, mozzarella and basil), expressly prepared for her and named in her honor back in 1889.

Next, we head inside to the dining room of the elegant main villa, Villa Buonvisi, where the additional pizzas are shared amid lively conversation and laughter. The icing on the cake, so to speak, arrives in the form of dessert pizza topped with chocolate-hazelnut Nutella spread. Petrone's theory about allowing time for dough to become easily digestible has proven true; collectively, we've managed to put away more than 50 pizzas throughout the course of the evening.

Nobody understands the virtue of patience better than Buonvisi owner Gianna Dini, who lives on site with two sons and a friendly German Shepherd named Rufus. After she and her late husband bought the vast property in 1990 — following three years of negotiations with the previous owners — the couple painstakingly restored the 16th-century main villa and the two

charming smaller villas, Villa Cardinale (named for former inhabitant Cardinal Buonvisi) and Villa del Barbaro. Villa Buonvisi is thought to be one of the oldest villas in the area and was originally owned by the Buonvisi family of silk merchants.

The villa's historic status brought with it restrictions on building modifications and requirements around the re-use of existing building materials, making the restoration process especially challenging. The results, however, are nothing short of stunning. High and sturdy wood-beam ceilings, a commanding facade, colorful murals and frescoes and generous rooms are some of the most striking original features. Gianna's impeccable taste is evident throughout, in the form of rich upholstery, antique furniture, unique art and custom decor carefully chosen by her.

Each of 10 bedrooms, spread across three levels, retains a singular character and, thanks to a renovation in the 1700s, its own ample marble bathroom. A large living room on the main level and a salon and music room on the second floor are comfortable places to congregate, as are the 22-seat dining room and the surrounding grounds and gardens. Villa Buonvisi is ideal for family reunions and destination weddings, given the spacious accommodations and storybook setting. (Villa Cardinale is also available to rent on its own or in combination with Villa Buonvisi for larger groups.)

While honoring history, the Dinis also brought the villa up to date with modern comforts and amenities to accommodate today's travelers: central air conditioning, Wi-Fi, a saltwater pool, a screening room and a billiards table.

Daily maid service and a welcome dinner, prepared by talented on-site chef Giuseppe, are included in the rental price of Villa Buonvisi, and concierge and driver services can be arranged for an additional charge. Chef service is also included in the rental cost, with the cost of food added if guests want lunch and/or dinner prepared during their stay. For lighter fare, the wonderful La Perla, a five-minute walk away, offers coffee, sandwiches, gelato and pastries almost too good looking to eat.

When it's time to venture off the property, the walled city of Lucca, approximately two miles away, makes for a memorable day trip. Shopping, dining and biking on the ancient city walls are a few of the options. Fans of opera will find no shortage of live music in Lucca, the home of Puccini. And Buonvisi's proximity to both Pisa and Florence makes these prime day-trip destinations as well. For sybarites in search of healing thermal waters or pampering body treatments, Bagni di Pisa Spa Resort is well worth an afternoon.

Closer to home, pizza-making and other cooking classes are always an option for villa guests. Off-site cooking classes with renowned chefs are another possibility. Then again, what better way to savor the unhurried pleasures of Tuscan villa life than lounging by the pool on a summer's day with a good book and no place to be?

### **The Details**

Buonvisi Estate  
800-261-4460  
[www.villavacations.com](http://www.villavacations.com)

The Buonvisi Estate villas (and many other villas throughout Italy, France and Spain) can be booked through Doorways, Ltd., for a 10 percent commission. Villa Buonvisi (\$28,600 per week in the high season) and Villa Cardinale (\$7,612 per week in the high season) are air-conditioned and feature private swimming pools. Prices are subject to currency adjustment.

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