



More than a country of mountains, valleys and frontiers, Italy is a state of mind.

When in Italy I probably consume more wine and pasta than I should. But I sleep well (maybe the wine helps), and time seems to

pass in a dream of verdant afternoons and hazy sunsets.

Returning to Italy over the years I've learned to tune out the drumbeat of American rhythms. I seek out smaller towns—Siena, Perugia, Lucca—or linger through explorations of a great city like Rome.

Walking the country lanes near Florence I've sensed a uniquely Italian spirit seep into me. Was I seeing the "real Italy" or merely imagining? It didn't matter. What counted was the pleasure of beholding something of an Old World with fresh eyes.



Gateway to natural living.



Villa Buonvisi in springtime.

Lately I've experienced a new kind of Italian adventure—a weeklong stay at Buonvisi Estate, a family-run complex of villas in the Tuscan hills near Lucca.

My hosts were Joseph and Gianna Dini, who bought the 300 acre property twenty years ago and since have been busy renovating the villas (the oldest goes back a thousand years), rearing two sons and harvesting the vineyards and olive groves.

Now they're putting the final touches on Villa Buonvisi, built during the Renaissance as a focal point of the wooded estate. With ten bedrooms, the magnificent manor house will be ready to receive guests—family reunions, wedding parties, business groups or other gatherings—in the spring of 2008.

Besides enjoying the idyllic pleasures of a rural villa, I reflect upon the importance of *people* in our travels. As tourists in Italy we often miss the human dimension. Language barriers come into play. Aside from an occasional brush with waiters or clerks we may have little opportunity to know individual Italians.

With the Dinis at Buonvisi, such deficiency evaporates in a soft Tuscan breeze.



The dining room at Villa Buonvisi.

The moment I arrive (it happens to be cocktail hour) Joe Dini pours me *achiodino* of Campari mixed with his own white wine.

"You may drink as many of these as you like," he smiles. "My wines contain no sulfates. They are hangover proof!" Since Joe offers his guests free run into the wine cellar, this claim will stand up to a thorough testing over the coming days.

At dinner Gianna offers little comments about each course as it is placed before our assemblage of fifteen guests.

First a farro soup ("this type of farro grows only around Lucca; it was a staple of the Roman legions"). Farro has a velvety texture akin to barley and is delicious in soups and salads. Next comes another local creation, a type of large tortellini, called *tordelli*, filled with ground beef and herbs. Then *coniglio ripieno al forno* (stuffed roasted rabbit). After the main course we get *lollo*, a green salad dressed with vinegar and estate olive oil. This lettuce is called *lollo* because it reminds Italians of Gina Lollobrigida's

hair. Finally a cake topped with cherries that had been picked in the front yard a few hours earlier.



Joe Dini and friend—the porchetta dinner.

So it went during the week. Unobtrusively dispensing a rich store of regional lore, the Dinis take you into their home and their world. They suggest local day-trips: to the sea at Forte di Marmi, where they have a private beach tent for their guests; to the Cinque Terre, five ancient towns reachable only by ferry boat and footpath; to the quarries near Pietrasanta, where Michelangelo once came for his marble; into nearby Lucca or Pisa for sight-seeing, restaurants and shopping.

Alternately one may hike around the estate or just lounge by the pool. Strolling through the vineyards one may come across a wild boar. At poolside one may be urged by Rufus, the Dini's German shepherd, to play fetch with his tennis ball. Do not throw his tennis ball into the pool. Also do not throw it into the vineyard, where by chance Rufus may come upon a wild boar. We do not want Rufus skirmishing with sharp-tusked *cinghiale*.



There are three pools on the estate.



Reception area at Villa Buonvisi.

Joe Dini was born into a farm family from the hills above Lucca. In the years after World War II he grew up in Ottawa and Boston, then spent decades in the Middle East. He is hardly the typical Italian, who tends to remain close to the hearthside. Ironically, in his forties he decided to return to Lucca and farming. He bought the Buonvisi estate and set out to improve the property, renovating the

buildings, and cultivating and producing his own wine and olive oil. He is proud of his white and red wines but perhaps even more of his organically grown olives

"This modest volume of oil we produce among local growers is true premium grade, fruity and full of nutrients", he avers. "Most of what the big companies label 'extra virgin' is nothing of the kind.

"Who really checks it? After all, this is Italy!"

In Joe Dini we have the red-blooded Italian—in love with his homeland and contemptuous of it in the same breath!

By mid-week Joe has decided that I am not the sort to patronize chic boutiques or thermal baths. So he takes me on morning rounds of his favorite butcher shops. Now I understand why Italian breakfast is merely coffee and small rolls. Once we enter the neighborhood *macellerie* it's time to fill up on free samples of mortadella and provalone.



A food shop in Lucca.



Chef Giuseppe in the kitchen at Villa Buonvisi.

I ask one butcher if he makes *porchetta*. Interpreting my curiosity as an element of desire, Joe orders one on the spot. *Porchetta* is no small affair—a 10-15 lb. pork belly seasoned with salt, pepper, garlic, and wild fennel, then rolled up and trussed with string. The next day it will be roasted for five hours and served up with potatoes at an outdoor dinner party for twenty. I try to tell the other guests, who are busy heaping their plates, that I'd merely uttered a magic phrase. "Do you make *porchetta*?"

It turns out to be a splendid week. I make friends with an Italian original and his gracious wife. I savor wonderful food at Buonvisi and even manage to try a few local restaurants, including a delightful spot called A Bimbotto run by an American woman from Akron, Ohio who married an Italian before winding up in Tuscany.

One evening the Dinis even bring in a *pizzaiolo*, a pizza maker, who offers to teach us how to make Neapolitan pies. After a few passes at the dough we defer to his expertise and are rewarded with a dozen freshly baked 12" disks—from simple Margheritas (tomatoes,

mozzarella, and garlic) to those topped with prosciutto, salami and seasonal vegetables. Dessert? A chocolate pizza.

Of course some guests at the Buonvisi Estate have priorities that do not include pig roasts.

Bagni di Pisa, the nearby natural spa resort, offers thermal waters and therapeutic treatments once favored by the Etruscans and Romans. The Puccini festival each summer offers tribute to a native son with lavish productions of his operas. The rich cultural offerings of Lucca and Pisa are just minutes away; even Florence is less than an hour distant by car or train.

In addition to Villa Buonvisi, the estate offers next door villa rentals at Villa del Barbaro and Villa Cardinale. Each air-conditioned villa sleeps 9-10 and has its own pool. Villa Buonvisi itself is being outfitted with a theatre, gym, and billiard table on the upper levels. It comes fully staffed with cook, gardener, and housekeeper.



Upstairs Salon, above.

The Sitting Area. below.





BEDROOM SUITES





Buonvisi Estate and a number of villas in western Europe can be booked through Doorways, Ltd. Kit Burns, president and founder of Doorways, has been serving an American clientele since 1994. She particularly enjoys introducing her clients to personalized, quality European experiences at reasonable prices.

For information go to www.villavacations.com or phone 800-261-4460.

— Feature by Jerry Nemanic, [Jetsetters Magazine](#) European Editor.