



Paciano, Italy:

"un villaggio ideale"

By Cheryl A. Yasis

It's a dream come true. For years now I have dreamed of staying at a beautiful villa in the Italian countryside to experience the distinctive cultural and social character of central Italy, learn the art of fine Italian cooking and, of course, shop for artwork, ceramics, authentic Italian leather goods, and some of the finest wines in the world. While Umbria lives in the shadow of its more renowned neighbor, Tuscany, the small hill town of Paciano—named one of the top 10 *un villaggio ideale* by the European Union for its idyllic setting and quality of life—is a quaint fortified

town on high ground common in this region of central Italy. With its silvery olive trees and small vineyards that hug the green hillsides outside the town's fortified walls, Paciano is home to less than 900 villagers, three delicious 'slow food' restaurants, a lively outdoor bar, and a friendly *tobacchi* shop where we walked each morning to drink cappuccino, eat fresh pastries, and mingle with the locals who graciously accepted our combination of English, German, and hand gestures in lieu of proper Italian language skills. Nestled up this hilltop within *il cuor verde d'Italia* or "The Green Heart of Italy" is the Fontanaro, a farmhouse owned by Lucia and Sandro Pinelli—and the Italian experience I have always dreamed of.

Thirty years ago the Pinelli's, natives of Rome with an affinity for the Umbrian countryside, bought the 1893 farmhouse just a short walk from the town's watering hole, a place where villagers used to line up with tin cans anxious to quench their thirst with the town's cool, mineral-rich water. Back then, the

farmhouse was little more than an abandoned ramshackle building on the hillside. The couple named the property *Fontanaro* meaning “fountain” after finding the name on an ancient map of the area. “After living in Africa for 10 years, this is my little Africa”, shared Sandro, who lived in Zambia before returning to work in Rome. Each weekend, Sandro and Lucia traveled less than two hours to Paciano with their two children to enjoy the fresh air and escape the frenzied life of Rome. As the years passed, the Pinelli’s planted over 2,000 olive trees to produce their own organic extra virgin olive oil, established a vineyard, and started bee colonies to produce organic honey on their 40 hilly hectares. Friends and family frequently visited to share weekend dinners where Lucia served fresh food and Sandro, a certified master in wine tasting, selected the perfect wines to compliment the dinners which were offered in their large outdoor greenhouse converted to a beautiful dining area.

The Pinelli’s soon realized that they enjoyed hosting guests and

eventually added two luxury cottages to the farmhouse as well as two cozy cottages adjacent to the main house. “Hosting visitors looking for a genuine Italian experience became a natural evolution to our hosting friends and family over the years”, explained Lucia, who gives Italian cooking classes and takes pride in tailoring escapes to each family’s interest. The Fontanaro’s well-designed gardens and villas are a reflection of Lucia’s real estate background, keen interest in master gardening and mastery of slow food cooking with ultra-fresh ingredients.



Slow food, a grassroots movement that began in Italy to protest the spread of fast food chains, promotes use of local and traditional food products and is nothing new to Umbria where fresh food has been a tradition for hundreds of years.

With Lucia's help we also made day trips to Cortona, Assisi, Florence, the main ceramic shopping area of Deruta and the Italian luxury brand outlet all within a reasonable distance from the villa. Lucia made restaurant recommendations at each location ensuring that we would always have tasty, fresh local cuisine with good service.

But, our favorite memory will always be the day we stayed at the villa. My mother-in-law and I took Italian cooking lessons with Lucia in her two kitchens where she teaches the art of Umbrian cooking, the differences in olive oils and balsamic vinegars and offers wine tasting sessions to guests. Together we made a delicious Umbrian-style pizza in the outdoor bread oven as an appetizer for the kids. I had intended that the kids help in the kitchen but they enjoyed watching Marino, a friendly old man with leathery skin and a ready smile who helps Lucia and Sandro tend their gardens and harvest honey from the beehives. He drove the infamous three-wheel cargo tricycle that is comical to Americans but so practical for the

rugged Italian countryside with its narrow pathways and steep hillsides. My boys freely roamed the orchards playing with Ettore, the Pinelli's dog, and wandered amongst the olive trees, wisteria, roses, vegetable and herb gardens while Anna—known locally as the pasta queen—helped my mother-in-law make homemade pici, a thick hand-rolled pasta. Lucia and I picked fresh herbs from the garden to create an aglione sauce and pesto as well as a herb mixture for the slow cooked beef filet.



That night our family enjoyed one of the freshest and best meals I have ever tasted complimented by various Italian wines from Sandro's private wine cellar. It was a meal that we had all contributed to: at one point my husband arrived with his father, his uncle and my daughter who

gladly donned aprons and helped us to roll pici with the pasta queen.

As you can imagine, the week passed too quickly and I cannot imagine not returning to central Italy and the Pinelli's warm hospitality in Paciano. There was so much more to explore: Lake Trasimeno, the cities of Perugia, Gubbio, the vibrant local markets, even golf, horse riding and lazy afternoons by the pool. But our life in Düsseldorf was calling and our van was already overflowing with artwork from Cortona, wines from Tuscany, ceramics from Deruta, and the leather goods that I was so anxious to acquire as mementos of our travels. More importantly, we had many, many pictures, recipes and memories from our time at the villa with Lucia and Sandro. It was *la dolce vita* and the perfect end to my dream Italian holiday.

Cheryl Yasis is a member of the American Women's Club Düsseldorf and will return to the U.S. in summer 2009 after living almost four years in Europe. More information about The Fontanaro can be found at www.fontanaro.it.