

***Cycling the Sentiero della Bonifica in the Valdichiana:
A new 62 km official cycling path from Arezzo to Chiusi in SE Tuscany
www.sentierodellabonifica.it 2012 www.johnseibelswalker.com***



This fabulous reclaimed centuries old pathway, now used only for cyclists and pedestrians, is located along the master canal system of the Valdichiana (Chiana Valley). The Valdichiana is perhaps best known in America for its ancient prized breed of huge white Chianina cows that Tuscans now raise for beef delicacies like true bistecca alla fiorentina, which is grilled up rare and served with a wedge of lemon. The canal system was most fully developed from the Renaissance onwards ~ especially in the 18th C due to an agreement between Pope Pius VI and Tuscan Grand Duke Pietro Leopold which rendered this very important valley from rather perilous and unproductive swampland over the centuries to the very important agricultural valley that it has been ever since. Along the way, one will cycle past and be able to visit the famous ancient Tuscan hilltowns of Lucignano, Cortona, and Montepulciano ~ among many other charming towns. This flat valley, and the nearby hilltowns looking over it, so rich in history, have been important since Etruscan times ~ so exploring the area slowly and in depth with bicycles rather than by car just seemed a most idyllic thing to do!

We began our itinerary this past spring in the center of Arezzo, having arrived there by train with our bicycles from Lucca. We then basically split our journey along the entire trail into 3 leisurely days of cycling, ending with memorable wining and dining each evening. Our third day was the longest and a round trip: cycling from our lodging near Montepulciano to the top of Chiusi and then back for our final night near Montepulciano before taking the train back to Lucca the next morning.

DAY ONE:

Scenes from our bucolic bike ride from the top of the trail in Arezzo down to the small hilltop village of Brolio (20 km later, just 1 km off of the trail).

There we had a beautiful room and incredible dinner awaiting us after our first of 3 days cycling and living off of our packed up bikes!



A stop in the little village of Frassineto, not far off of the trail a few km north of Brolio, is a must in order to taste and purchase the especially well made local red and white wines of Tenuta di Frassineto ~ just be sure to time your arrival to the select hours they are open!



The proprietor asks that you kindly ring their bell for tastings only during their opening hours, which are posted outside and were as follows during our trip:

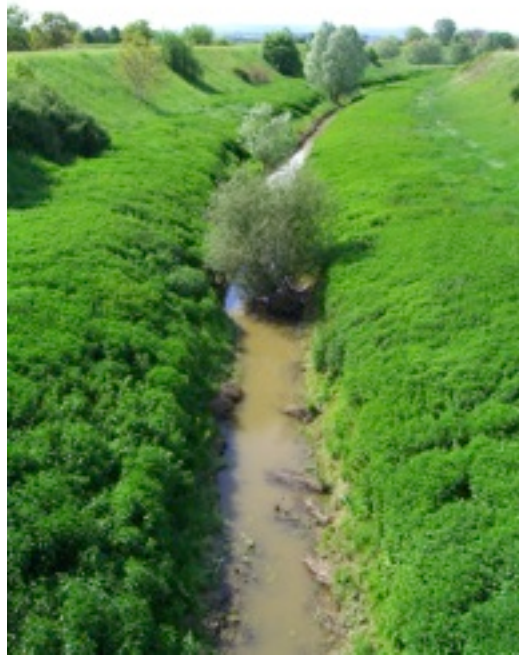
**Monday through Friday:
11:00 - 1:00 and 4:30 - 6:00**

**Saturday:
9:00 - 1:00 and 3:00 - 6:00**

**Sunday:
Closed**



*The beauty of the trail and the valley continued as we made our way up the hill
to the casual elegance of Casale di Brolio (www.casaledibrolio.it)
for what was our first amazing late afternoon and evening of this little adventure!*



Below: Heading up to Brolio





We were warmly greeted with lovely glasses of ice water upon arrival by the charming owner of this special locanda and restaurant, Marcello Barducci.

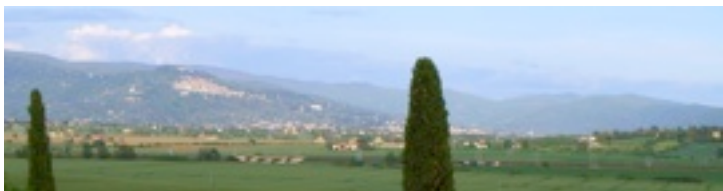
www.casaledibrolio.it



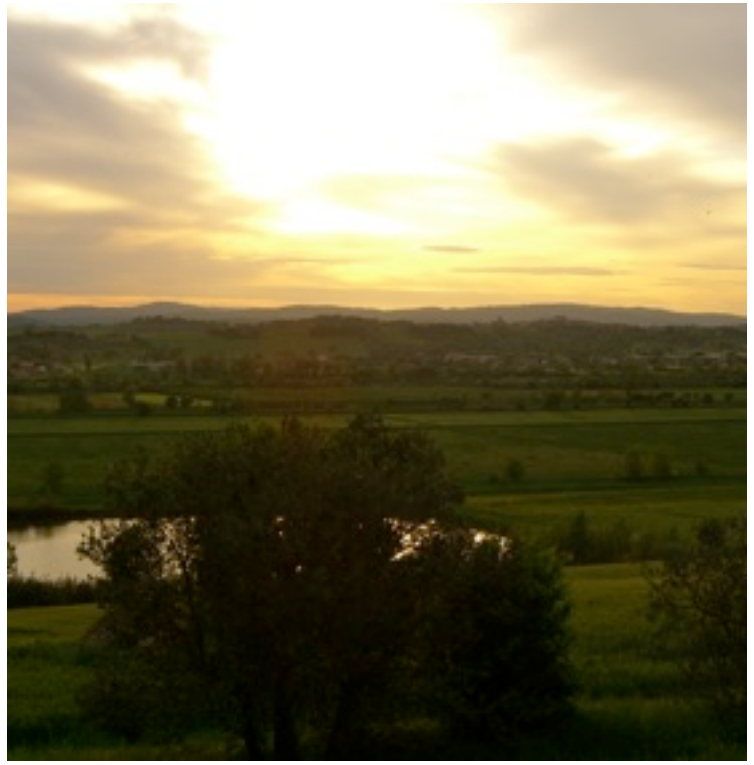
Open window above: Our room with a view



Above: the entrance to the restaurant



This property is situated perfectly upon a ridge just off of the trail with spectacular views of Cortona up in the hills to the east and also sunset views over the hilltown of Lucignano to the west.



After much needed showers and freshening up in our room, we had a perfectly chilled bottle of local Tenuta di Frassineto Rancoli Vermentino waiting for us on the terrace, along with some gorgeous canapes soon to surprise us ~ all nicely foreshadowing the ample talents of chef Claudio Tamburini and our exquisite dinner to come later in the evening! (See below).



This was one of the most memorable meals we have ever had living in Italy, so I am going to take you on a journey here of what a proper Italian meal can be in the hands of an Italian with soul who knows what he is doing using only the very best quality ingredients ~ an artistic labor of love, and there is nothing more Italian in concept than that! It was a very quiet spring evening in the middle of the week, so we had chef Claudio do his own thing with what was freshest in his kitchen as to the 45 Euro (yes, that is correct!) tasting menu (there is a menu of the sea and one of the land). Below is a description of much of what we savored that evening ~ truly inspirational in its quality, artistry and flavor combinations. Just go, if you ever have the chance!



Tasting Menu

Of the Land

Egg cooked at low temperature with a carpaccio of artichokes,
truffle fondue and thinly shaved Pecorino sheep cheese

Tartare of Chianina beef with prosciutto with balsamic vinegar and
crispy panzanella (salad of bread and tomatoes)

Gazpacho with ice cream of extra virgin olive oil

Risotto with Taleggio (soft Italian cow cheese) on a sauce of pears
stewed in Chianti

Braised Chianina beef cheeks with polenta, potatoes and demi-glace
of red wine

Crème brûlée with coffee, grappa sorbet and coffee-chocolate mousse

To be ordered for the whole table

€ 45,00 per person



The wine we chose for the evening ~ another winner from local producer Tenuta di Frassineto “Fontarronco” ~ a 2008 Cabernet Franc.



The divine amuse-bouche to begin the evening was a magically light as air crema di burrata topped with anchovies and fresh garden herbs.



One of the freshest of fresh local free range eggs that we so treasure in Italy, over a truffle fondue and carpaccio of artichokes accompanied by a slice of the local pecorino ~ rich, decadent and completely delicious.

More wine poured as we began to realize what we were in for, at that point, and we excitedly awaited our next course!



Left: John giddy with pleasure as he tastes his super fresh (raw) tartare of the prized local Chianina beef accompanied by a slice of prosciutto and the chef's very original take on panzanella (with the bread crispy).

Below:

This was also a revelation. Gazpacho topped with a gelato of extra virgin olive oil? Suspicions resolved ~ delicious!



Left:

Risotto with Taleggio cheese on a sauce of pears stewed in Chianti. Another WOW~

Wild to look at, but after a few bites we were totally convinced that this chef could do no wrong!



Left:

And then the main course arrived ~ using once again what was fresh and special in the kitchen to surprise us.

*This was seared tuna three ways:
Coated in sesame seeds, coated in mixed herbs and coated in ground coffee ~ each with a special coulis and accompaniment.*

Just plain gorgeous!

Below:

The waiter brought out a sorbetto made of celery, lime and tequila for dessert ~ an homage to our being from the Americas?

Everyone who knows me knows that I am not big on desserts, but this was right up my alley.

By that point, I felt that chef Claudio could read my mind!

The perfect ending to our perfect evening.



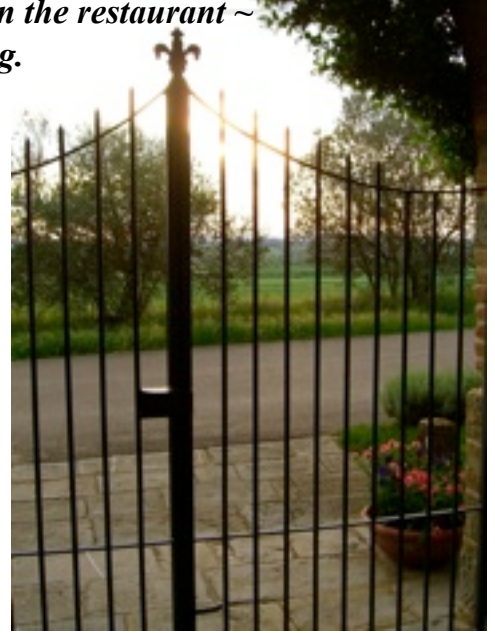
*Morning has broken and off we go, after a nice breakfast in the restaurant ~
happily reliving our previous evening.*



*A fresh morning
of cycling awaited us,
but it was still difficult to
leave the gates
of such a perfect world.*

Below:

*Cycling along the street leaving
Brolio as we began day 2 of our
cycling adventure*



End of Part One