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History

Any truthful account of Tuscan and Umbrian life over the past three millennia is more than just a history – it's an opera, and we're all still humming its tune. You're probably already familiar with its famous libretto, which goes something like this:
I Drinking gives way to nefarious intrigues
II Debauchers denounce their wicked ways and promise reform
III Tragedy meets heroism and beasts find beauty
IV Offence is taken and treasures stolen
V Ideals are lost, found and misplaced
VI The cast gathers on stage for an encore

No overture is needed; the action is already well under way.

WINE, WOMEN & THE OPEN ROAD

Italy's oldest known wine is Chianti Classico, with favourable reviews from way back in the 14th century and a growing region clearly defined by 1716.

No one knows exactly why the ancient Etruscans headed to Tuscany and Umbria from parts east (probably Anatolia) in the 9th century BC, but Etruscan artefacts give some idea why they stayed: dinner. The wild boar that still roam the hills of Umbria and Tuscany were a favourite Etruscan menu item, and boar hunts are a recurring theme on Etruscan ceramics, tomb paintings, even bronze hand mirrors. Just in case the odd boar bristle might tickle the throat or a truffle shaving might head down the windpipe, Etruscans washed their meals down with plenty of wine, introducing viticulture to Italy.

Tomb paintings show Etruscan women keeping pace with men in banquets so decadent, they scandalised even orgy-happy Romans. Many middle-class and aristocratic women had the means to do what they wished, which apparently included music, romance, politics and ordering about a vast underclass of servants. Roman military histories boast of conquests of Etruscan women along with Etruscan territory starting in the 3rd century BC, but these accounts are probably exaggerated. According to recent genetic tests, Etruscans did not mingle much with their captors – their genetic material is distinct from modern Italians, the descendants of ancient Romans.

Etruscans didn't take kindly to Roman authority, nor were they keen on being enslaved to establish Roman plantations. They secretly allied with Hannibal to bring about the ignominious defeat of the Romans at Lake Trasimeno, where some 16,000 Roman soldiers were lost in about three hours. Afterwards Rome began to take a more hands-off approach with the Etruscans, granting them citizenship in 88 BC to manage their own affairs in the new provinces of Umbria and Tuscia (Tuscany), and in return securing safe passage along the major inland Roman trade route of Via Flaminia.

Little did the Romans suspect when they paved the road that they were also paving the way for their own replacements in the 5th to 8th centuries AD: first came German emperor Theodoric, then Byzantine Emperor Justinian, then the Lombards and finally Charlemagne in 800.

MAROZIA & MATILDA: HOW TO MAKE (& BREAK) POPES

Social standing was hard to maintain with medieval power constantly changing hands, but a couple of women managed to pull it off. The daughter of a Roman senator and a notorious prostitute-turned-senatrix, Marozia already had one illegitimate son by her lover Pope Sergius III and was pregnant again when she married the Lombard Duke of Spoleto, Alberic I in 909 AD. He was hardly scrupulous himself: he'd achieved his position by murdering the previous duke, and soon had Sergius III deposed. When Alberic was killed in turn, Marozia married Guy of Tuscany and conspired with him to smother Pope John X and install (in lethally rapid succession) Pope Leo VI and Stephen VIII.

Learn to speak Etruscan at Etruscology Online: http://www.etruskisch.de/pgs/vc.htm. Favourite words: *netshvis* (a fortune-teller who reads animal entrails) and *thuta* (which can mean either 'chaste' or 'only married once').

After Guy's death, she wooed his half-brother Hugh of Arles, the new King of Italy. No matter that he was already married: by then Marozia's son had been named Pope John XI, and Hugh's previous marriage was soon annulled. But at the wedding ceremony, the happy couple was arrested by the Marozia's son, Alberic II, who was reportedly scandalised that his mother and grandmother had turned the papacy into a 'pornocracy'. Marozia spent the rest of her life in prison, but her legacy lived on: no less than five popes were her direct descendants.

Another woman who wielded power effectively despite frequent medieval power shifts was Countess Matilda of Tuscany (1046–1115). Rumour has it that she was more than just an ally to Pope Gregory VII, but there's no doubt that she was a formidable strategist on and off the battlefield. To consolidate her family's Tuscan holdings, she married her own stepbrother, Godfrey the Hunchback. She soon arranged for him to be sent off to Germany, annulled the marriage, and found herself a powerful prince 26 years her junior to marry.

When Matilda's ally Pope Gregory VII excommunicated Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV in 1077 for threatening to replace him with an Antipope, the emperor showed up outside her castle barefoot and kneeling in the snow to beg the pope's forgiveness – and Matilda kept him waiting there for three days. Henry retaliated by conspiring with Matilda's neighbours to seize her property, and even turned her trophy husband against her – but Matilda soon dislodged Henry's power base in the north with the support of his own son Conrad. Henry's wife also joined the feud, claiming that her husband had forced her to participate in orgies and satanic rituals. In 1106 Henry died disgraced by his own family and humbled on the battlefield by a woman, and was left buried in unconsecrated ground until his term of excommunication was revoked. Matilda outlived him by nine years, and at her death

TIMELINE

9th century BC
Etruscans bring wine, women and song to the hills of Tuscany and Umbria, but fail to invite the Romans; war ensues

265 BC
Etruria falls to Rome, but remains unruly and conspires with Hannibal against Rome during the Punic wars; Roman headaches are solved by making Etruscans Roman citizens in 88 BC

59 BC
After winning an election by ballot box–stuffing means that would make the Bush administration seem honest, Julius Caesar establishes a soldier-retiree resort called Florentia

AD 476
German king Odovacar (aka Odoacer) snatches Rome out from under Romulus Augustulus, and becomes the first of many foreign kings of Italy

570–774
The Lombards rule Italy as far south as Florence, and manage to turn the tiny Duchy of Spoleto into a booming trade empire

773–74
Charlemagne makes his move on Italy, and grants himself the modest title Holy Roman Emperor with a crown to match on Christmas Day in 800 AD

left behind her substantial holdings to the Church, a line that would claim among its descendants one Michelangelo Buonarroti, and mortal remains to be interred at St Peter's in Rome. Her husband never remarried, and died childless not long after Matilda.

AGONY & ECSTASY

Lashings, starvation, solitary confinement: in the middle ages, it wasn't always easy to distinguish religious practices from criminal punishments. Among the privileged classes it became a mark of distinction to renounce worldly ties for a life of piety – not to mention a handy way to winnow the number of eligible heirs to a title. A nobleman from Norcia named Benedict set the example and started a monastery-building spree in AD 500, when he ditched his studies to seek a higher purpose among hermits in the hills. His rule of peace, prayer and work was taken up by Benedictine religious orders, which limited food intake and downtime but didn't require the vows of silence, fasting or hard labour practised by more hermetic believers. Some Benedictine orders even had help tilling their fields from tenant farmers and hired workers, freeing up monks for reading and creative tasks like manuscript illumination and wine-making. Benedictine communities were founded by noble patrons, such as the widowed *margravise* (marquise) Willa of Tuscany, who in 978 founded Badia Fiorentina, Florence's first abbey (p108).

The undisputed master of pious masochism was Umbrian Benedictine monk San Domenico Loricato, who in a single week is said to have all but flayed himself with 300,000 lashes while reciting psalms.

But not all medieval monks and nuns whiled away the hours with a good book and a nice glass of wine. 'Hair shirts' woven of scratchy sackcloth, horsehair or chain mail became all the rage among the aristocracy after Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (c AD 742–814) was buried in his. The first known case of religious self-flagellation dates from the mid-13th century in Perugia, when a strange spontaneous parade of believers began whipping themselves while singing. By 1260 roving bands of Flagellants appeared in major cities across Umbria and Tuscany, stripped to the waist, hooded and ecstatically whipping themselves while singing *laudi,* songs about the passion of Christ. They made quite an impression in Florence, Siena and Gubbio, where adherents formed *scuole di battuti* (schools of beatings) to build Case di Dio (Houses of God) that served as charity centres and hospices and also hosted mass flagellation sessions using specialised equipment.

The sudden popularity of mortification of the flesh may be tied to the popular outpouring of grief at the death of St Francis of Assisi in 1226 – legend has it that even his trusty donkey wept to see him go. Although he did practise strict poverty and periodic fasting and wore chafing friar's robes, the gentle Francis was apparently too preoccupied with caring for the sick, needy and animals to make a conspicuous display of his own personal suffering, even when going blind.

The Church remained neutral on the issue until the fledgling Flagellants claimed that like scratching an itch, their activities could grant temporary relief from sin. This posed direct competition for the Church's practice of confession, not to mention its steady business in indulgences, pardons and tithes. The Flagellant movement was banned in 1262, only to regain momentum a century later during the plague and recur periodically until the 15th century, when the Inquisition subjected Flagellants to the ultimate mortification of the flesh: burning at the stake. But self-flagellation processions continued to be held in Tuscany under the Church's guidance into the late 19th century, and self-flagellation continues to be practised privately by zealous penitents today.

Born an Assisi heiress, introduced to the joys of poverty by St Francis himself and cofounder of the first Franciscan abbey, St Clare gained another claim to fame in 1958 as the patron saint of TV.

DEMOCRACY AMONG DEVIANTS

Not all agony came with a side order of religious ecstasy in medieval Tuscany and Umbria. Legal records indicate that no one was exempt from violence: leaders of powerful families were stabbed by rivals while attending Mass, peasants were ambushed by brigands roaming the deceptively bucolic landscape and bystanders were maimed in neighbourhood disputes that all too easily escalated to kill-or-be-killed brawls.

But if crime seemed vicious, medieval criminal justice was often worse. Even petty crimes such as theft were subject to some combination of steep fines, corporal punishment and public humiliation, such as public flogging or mutilation. Nobles could demand satisfaction for the rather capriciously defined crime of *laesa maiestas,* or insulting nobility, but an alarming number skipped such legal niceties and kidnapped or suffocated the children of their rivals instead. Jails were rare, since suspects received only cursory trials and incarceration was deemed insufficient to extract true penitence. The earliest known jail in the region (and among the first in Europe) was Le Stinche prison, founded in Florence in 1297. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) endured six rounds of interrogation on Le Stinche's notorious rack for an alleged plot to overthrow the government, and amazingly survived to describe the place. Apparently Stinche was indeed stinky, and also swarming with vermin that attacked shackled prisoners waiting their turn at the rack.

Il Principe (The Prince) is Niccolò Machiavelli's allegory of absolute power – but was it a cautionary tale against the Medici who'd had him tortured for suspected treason, or an instructional manual to get back in the Medici good graces? Five centuries later, the debate continues.

By the 13th century, many Tuscan and Umbrian communities were plenty ready for change. Farmers who had painstakingly reclaimed their fields wanted to get their produce to market alive, merchants needed peaceful piazzas to conduct their business and the populace at large began to entertain hopes of living past age 40. *Comuni* (town councils) were established in cities and towns such as Gubbio, Siena and Perugia, with representatives drawn from influential families, guilds and the merchant classes in a new power-sharing arrangement. Across Umbria and Tuscany, ambitious building projects were undertaken to give citizens a new sense of shared purpose and civic identity. Hospitals and public charities helped serve the city's needy, and new public squares, marketplaces and town halls became crucial meeting places and testing grounds for civic society. Law and order was kept (relatively speaking) by a podesta, an independent judiciary often brought in from outside the city for limited terms of office to prevent corruption.

1082

Florence picks a fight with Siena over ownership of the Chianti region, starting a bitter rivalry that will last the next 400 years – sure, it sounds extreme, but there was some really good wine at stake

1084

Henry IV gets himself crowned Holy Roman Emperor by a specially appointed Antipope, only to be scolded by Countess Matilda of Tuscany that it doesn't count, and he'd better apologise

1136

Scrappy seafaring Pisa adds Amalfi to its conquests, which also included Jerusalem, Valencia, Tripoli and Mallorca, plus colonies in Constantinople and Cairo, among others

1167

The *comune* (town council) of Siena establishes a written constitution, declaring that elected terms should be short and money should be pretty; it's soon amended to guarantee Sienese public boxing matches

1223

Franciscan order founded in Assisi, with strict vows of poverty and lifelong manual labour requirements – and monasteries are soon overflowing with new recruits

1314–21

Dante Alighieri makes a classical allegory shockingly modern in his *Divina Commedia*, told in the first person and the familiar Tuscan dialect instead of the usual formal Latin, and peppered with political satire, pathos, adventure and light humour

Each *comune* (town council) developed its own style of government, but the most imaginative was Siena. To curb bloody turf battles among its *contrade* (neighbourhoods), Siena channelled that fighting spirit into organised boxing matches, bullfights and Il Palio, the annual horse race still run today (see the boxed text, p246). Anyone who broke the peace was subject to heavy fines, and the city's coffers soon swelled with monies collected for cursing in the city's *osterie* (pubs). After Florence won yet another battle against Siena by cutting off the town's water supply, Siena's *comune* was faced with a funding choice: either build an underground aqueduct to fend off Florence, or build a cathedral that would establish Siena as a creative capital of the medieval world. The council voted unanimously for the cathedral. Work began almost immediately in 1215 and continued for more than three centuries, through bouts of famine, banking disasters and plague that nearly wiped out the city. But from these dark days emerged a magnificent Duomo and an expressive, eerily glowing style of painting known as the Sienese School, which is recognised as a precocious precursor to the Renaissance.

'Book curses' in the margins of medieval library books warned borrowers that failure to return a book was a grave offence, subject to fatal attacks of giant bookworms and eternal damnation.

DISASTERS & SAVING GRACES

'Midway on our life's journey, I found myself in dark woods, the right road lost…' So begins the ominous year 1300 in Dante Alghieri's *Inferno,* where our hero Dante escapes from one circle of hell only to tumble into the next. Gloomy? Certainly – but also uncannily accurate. In the 14th century, Dante and his fellow Tuscans would face a harrowing sequence of events, including famine, economic collapses, plague, war and tyranny. Umbrians had all this to contend with plus a series of earthquakes, not to mention lowlands that tended to revert to marsh when not diligently drained. It's no small miracle that anyone in the region survived the 14th century – but it's an even greater wonder that the early Renaissance emerged from this hellish scenario.

For Dante with a pop-culture twist, check out Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders' satirical, slangy translation of *The Divine Comedy*, which sets *Inferno* in hellish Los Angeles traffic, *Purgatorio* in foggy San Francisco and *Paradiso* in New York.

When medieval mystics predicted that the year 1300 would bring certain doom for all but the few, they were only off by about 50 years. Half to two-thirds of the population were decimated in cities across Tuscany and Umbria in the bubonic plague outbreak of 1348, and since the carriers of the plague (fleas and rats) weren't correctly identified or eradicated, the Black Death repeatedly ravaged the area for decades afterwards. Blame for the disease was placed on the usual suspects – lepers, immigrants, gypsies, heretics, Jewish communities, women of loose morals – but no amount of scapegoating could cure the afflicted. Entire hospital and monastery populations were wiped out, leaving treatment to opportunists promising miracle cures. Indulging in flagellation, liquor, sugar or spices were prescribed, as was abstaining from bathing, fruit and olive oil – all to no avail. Florentine author and 1348 plague eyewitness Giovanni Boccaccio writes of entire families left to starve under quarantine, sick children abandoned by parents and family members hastily dumped still breathing in mass graves.

But amid the ample evidence of human failings there were also more reassuring signs of humanity. Meals were shared, and orphans cared for by strangers. Doctors and devout clergy who cared for the sick were the most obvious heroes of the day – though they lacked the medical knowledge to save plague victims, they knowingly risked their own lives just to provide a dignified death for their patients. At age 19, St Catherine of Siena overruled her family's understandable objections and dedicated her life to serving the plague ridden. She also wrote long, eloquent letters to the pope and heads of powerful families in the region, imploring them to reconsider their warring ways and allow the troubled region a moment's peace.

MACHIAVELLI'S MANOEUVRES

Born in 1469 into a poor offshoot of one of Florence's leading families, Niccolò Machiavelli got off to a bad start. His father, an impoverished, small-time lawyer, was continually in debt, but was at least rich in books, which his son devoured.

Somehow the young Machiavelli managed to swing a post in the city's second chancery at the age of 29 and so embarked on a colourful career as a Florentine public servant. Our man must have shown early promise, as by 1500 he was in France on his first diplomatic mission in the service of the Republic.

Impressed by the martial success of Cesare Borgia and the centralised state of France, Machiavelli came to the conclusion that Florence needed a standing army.

The city, like many others on the Italian peninsula, used to employ mercenaries to fight its wars. The problem was that mercenaries had few reasons to fight and die for anyone. They took their pay and often did their best to avoid mortal combat. Machiavelli convinced the Republic of the advantages of a conscripted militia, which he formed in 1506. Three years later it was blooded in battle against the rebellious city of Pisa, whose fall was mainly attributed to the troops led by the wily statesman.

The return to power of the Medici family in 1512 was a blow for Machiavelli, who was promptly removed from office. Suspected of plotting against the Medici, he was even thrown into the dungeon in 1513 and tortured. He maintained his innocence and, once freed, retired to his little property outside Florence a poor man.

It was in these years, far from political power, that he did his greatest writing. *Il Principe (The Prince)* is his classic treatise on the nature of power and its administration, a work reflecting the confusing and corrupt times in which he lived and a desire for strong and just rule in Florence and beyond.

Machiavelli never got back into the mainstream of public life. He was commissioned to write an official history of Florence, the *Istorie Fiorentine,* and towards the end of his life he was appointed to a defence commission to improve the city walls and join a papal army in its ultimately futile fight against imperial forces. By the time the latter had sacked Rome in 1527, Florence had again rid itself of Medici rule. Machiavelli hoped that he would be restored to a position of dignity, but by now he was suspected almost as much by the Medici opponents as he had been years before by the Medici. He died in 1527 frustrated and, as in his youth, on the brink of poverty.

1348–50
Black Death ravages Tuscany and Umbria, wiping out two-thirds to three-quarters of the population in dense urban areas, and it doesn't stop there: 40 more outbreaks are recorded in Umbria before 1500

1353–57
Cardinal Gil de Albornoz exerts Church control across central Italy. Where appeals to faith fail to convince locals, he just barges in with troops and sets up a fortified castle atop the town.

1375-1406
Philosopher-politician Colluccio Salutati serves as chancellor of Florence, promoting a new secular civic identity to trump old feudal tendencies – a bold new model of citizenship for Europe that occasionally even works

1378
The *signoria* (city government) ignores a petition from *ciompi* (wool-carders) for fairer representation: cue the Revolt of Ciompi. *Ciompi* overrun government, with numbers in minor guilds but divisions exploited by major guilds that ban *ciompi.*

1469–92
Lorenzo de' Medici unofficially rules Florence, despite the 1478 Pazzi Conspiracy overthrow attempt that left his brother Giuliano torn to shreds in the Duomo. Before his death at 43, Lorenzo commissions great artistic masterpieces.

1478–80
A confusing set of overlapping wars break out among the papacy, Siena, Florence, Venice, Milan and Naples, as individual families broker secret pacts and the dwindling Tuscan population pays the price

Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1348–53) is the story of 10 young women and men who escape plague-ridden Florence, and tell bawdy, tragic and satirical tales to pass 10 days in a Tuscan villa.

Painful though those days must have been to record, writers such as Dante (1265–1321), Boccaccio (1313–75) and Marchione di Coppo Stefani (c 1336–85) wrote frank assessments of their time, believing that their critiques might one day serve the greater good. More than any painterly tricks of perspective or shading, it's this more rounded view of humanity that brought truth to Renaissance art.

Yet this legacy was nearly lost in another disaster, the 1966 Great Flood of Florence, which deluged the city with more than 4m of water, left thousands of people homeless, and buried three million rare manuscripts and thousands of works of arts under some 500,000 tonnes of mud, stone and sewage. But thousands of people arrived from across Italy and around the world to rescue the city and its treasures from the mud, and today these heroes are honoured as *gli angeli del fango* (angels of mud).

BETWEEN BELLIGERENCE & BEAUTY

The Renaissance was a time of great art and great tyrants, not to mention an uneasy relationship between the two. The careful balance of power of the *comuni* became a casualty of the plague in the 14th century, since political control was mostly left to those who managed to survive and were either strong enough or unscrupulous enough to claim it. Cardinal Albornoz (1310–67) seized the moment to extend Church control across central Italy, building fortifications for new religious authorities in formerly independent secular municipalities such as Perugia. In *comuni* such as Florence and Siena, powerful families assumed control of the *signoria,* the city council ostensibly run by guild representatives and merchants.

Find photos of Florence's 'mud angels' in action and hear stories of survival in the aftermath of the 1966 flood at http://www.angelidelfango.it/english/index_e.html.

Most unelected Renaissance rulers weren't great tyrants but rather petty ones, obsessed with accumulating personal power and wealth, and their lasting contributions to civic life were costly wars of conquest and internal strife. Cities, commercial entities and individual families took sides with either the Rome-backed Guelphs or the imperial Ghibellines, loyalists of the Holy Roman Empire. Since each of these factions was eager to put itself on the map, this competition might have meant a bonanza for artists and architects – but shifting fortunes in the battlefield meant funds for pet art projects could disappear just as quickly as they appeared.

Tuscany began to resemble a chess game, with feudal castles appearing only to be overtaken, powerful bishops aligning with nobles before being toppled and the occasional rise to power of minor players backed by key commercial interests. Nowhere was the chess game harder to follow than in the Ghibelline *comune* of Pistoia: first it was conquered by the Florentine Guelphs, then it split into White and Black Guelph splinter groups, then it was captured by Lucca before being reclaimed by the Florentines.

The Medici family were by no means exempt from the usual failings of Renaissance tyrants, but early on in his rise to power, Cosimo il Vecchio (1389–1464) revealed a surprisingly enlightened self-interest and an exceptional eye for art. Although he held no elected office, he served as ambassador for the Church, and through his behind-the-scenes diplomacy skills managed to finagle a rare 25-year stretch of relative peace for Florence. When a conspiracy led by competing banking interests exiled him from Florence in 1433, some of Cosimo's favourite artists split town with him, including Donatello and Fra Angelico. But they weren't gone long: Cosimo's banking interests were too important to Florence, and he returned triumphant after just a year to crush his rivals, exert even greater behind-the-scenes control and sponsor such masterpieces as Brunelleschi's legendary dome for Florence's Duomo.

In *The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici*, Christopher Hibbert takes on the Medici in all their might, melodrama and dastardly genius – don't expect much on the artists they sponsored beyond namedropping, though.

But sponsorship from even the most enlightened and powerful patrons had its downsides: their whims could make or break artists, and they attracted powerful enemies. Lorenzo de' Medici (aka Lorenzo the Magnificent; 1449–92) was a legendary supporter of the arts and humanities, providing crucial early recognition and support for Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli and Michelangelo Buonarroti, among others. But after Lorenzo narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by a conspiracy among the rival Florentine Pazzi family, the King of Naples and the pope, the artists he supported had to look elsewhere for sponsorship until Lorenzo could regain his position. Religious reformer Savonarola took an even darker view of Lorenzo and the classically influenced art he promoted, viewing it as a sinful indulgence in a time of great need and suffering. When Savonarola ousted the Medici in 1494, he decided their decadent art had to go, too, and Botticellis, Michelangelos and other works went up in flames in massive 'bonfires of the vanities'.

The Medici have nothing to hide – at least, not anymore. Dig your own dirt on Florence's dynamic dynasty in the archives at www.medici.org.

THE SUN & OTHER TOUCHY SUBJECTS

Savonarola's theocratic rule over Florence lasted just four years, until his denunciation of decadence got him excommunicated and executed by Pope Alexander VI (1431–1503), who didn't appreciate Savonarola critiquing his extravagant spending, illegitimate children and pursuit of personal vendettas. But Savonarola's short reign would have an impact on Tuscany and Umbria for centuries to come. The church now saw the need to exert more direct control over the independent-minded region, and guard against humanist philosophies that might contradict the Church's divine authority. The Inquisition made heretical ideas punishable by death, which had an understandably chilling effect on intellectual inquiry. The celebrated universities in Pisa, Perugia and Siena were subject to close scrutiny, and the University of Pisa was effectively closed for about 50 years until Cosimo I de' Medici reinaugurated it in 1543.

One of the most notable faculty members at the revitalised University of Pisa was a professor of mathematics named Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). To put it in mathematical terms, Galileo was a logical paradox: a Catholic who fathered three illegitimate children; a man of science with a poetic streak, who lectured on the dimensions of hell according to Dante's *Inferno*; and an

1494
The Medici are expelled by Charles VIII of France, and Savonarola declares a theocratic republic with his Consiglia di Cinquecento – a kind of religious Red Guard that denounces neighbours for owning books

1498
To test Savonarola's beliefs, rival Franciscans invite him to a trial by fire. Savonarola sends a representative to be burned instead, who is saved when the event gets rained out. Instead, Savonarola is tortured, hung and burned as heretic.

1527–30
Florentines run the Medici out of town, having enough of their costly wars and unelected leadership. The Republic of Florence holds out for three years, until the emperor's and pope's combined cannon power reinstalls the Medici.

1571
Painters are no longer obliged to belong to guilds, so individual artistic expression no longer means you have to pay your dues first

1633
Galileo Galilei is condemned for heresy in Rome, over the objections of Europe's nascent scientific community. True to Galileo's observations of a pendulum in motion, the Inquisition's extreme measures yielded an opposite reaction: Enlightenment.

1656
Oh no, not again: the plague kills at least 300,000 people across central and southern Italy; roughly three times as many as are killed in the 1655–66 Great Plague of London

inventor of telescopes whose head was quite literally in the clouds, yet who kept in close contact with many friends who were the leading intellectuals of their day.

Explore Galileo's life, times, religious context and scientific advances at The Galileo Project: http://galileo.rice.edu.

Galileo's meticulous observations of the physical universe attracted the attention of the Church, which by the 16th century had a conflicted relationship to the stars. Pope Paul III kept several astrologers on hand, and no major papal initiative or construction project could be undertaken without first searching the sky with an astrolabe for auspicious signs. Yet theologian (and sometime astrologer) Tomasso Campanella was found guilty of heresy for dissenting views that emphasised observation. Research into the universe's guiding physical principles was entrusted by Paul III to his consulting theologians, who determined from close examination of the scriptures that the sun must revolve around the earth.

He needed that one for the Inquisitors: see Galileo's preserved middle finger in Florence's Museum of the History of Science (p111).

Equipped with telescopes that he'd adjusted and improved, Galileo came to a different conclusion. His observations supported Nicolaus Copernicus' theory that the planets revolved around the sun, and a cautious body of Vatican Inquisitors initially allowed him to publish his findings as long as he also presented a case for the alternate view. But when Galileo's research turned out to be dangerously convincing, the Vatican reversed its position and tried him for heresy. By then Galileo was quite ill, and his weakened state and widespread support may have spared him the usual heresy sentence of execution. Under official threat of torture, Galileo stated in writing that he may have overstated the case for the Copernican view of the universe, and was allowed carry out his prison sentence under house arrest. Pope Urban VIII alternately indulged his further studies and denied him access to doctors, but Galileo kept on pursuing scientific research even after he began losing his sight. Meanwhile, Tomasso Campanella was taken out of prison and brought to Rome, where he became Urban VIII's personal astrologer in 1629.

GOING FOR BAROQUE

With his astrologers on hand, the pope might have seen Italy's foreign domination coming. Far from cementing the Church's authority, the Inquisition created a power vacuum on the ground while papal authorities were otherwise occupied with lofty theological matters. While local Italian nobles and successful capitalists vied among themselves for influence as usual, the Austrian Holy Roman Empress Maria Theresa took charge of the situation in 1737, and set up her husband Francis as the Grand Duke of Tuscany.

The mother of 16 children (including the now-notorious Marie Antoinette) and self-taught military strategist soon put local potentates in check, and pushed through reforms that curbed witch burning, outlawed torture, established mandatory education and allowed Italian peasants to keep a modest share of their crops. She also brought the Habsburgs' signature flashy style to Tuscany and Umbria, and kicked off a frenzy of redecoration with flamboyant frescoes packed with cherubs, ornate architectural details that

are surely a nightmare to dust, and gilding whenever and wherever possible. Perhaps fearing that her family's priceless art collection might factor into Maria Theresa's redecorating plans, Medici heiress Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici willed everything to the city of Florence upon her death in 1743, on the condition that it all must remain in the city.

Naturally the glint of gold captured the attention of Napoleon Bonaparte, who took over swathes of Tuscany and Umbria in 1799. So appreciative was Napoleon of the area's cultural heritage, in fact, that he decided to take as much as possible home with him. The rest he gave as gifts to various relatives – never mind that all those Tuscan villas and church altarpieces were not technically his to give. When Habsburg Ferdinando III took over the title of Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1814, Napoleon's sister Elisa Bonaparte and various other relations refused to budge from the luxe Luccan villas they had usurped, and concessions had to be made to accommodate them all.

To see a complete list of the alleged P2 members found on Licio Gelli's Rolodex in 1981, see http://www.namebase.org/sources/dE.html.

Still more upscale expats arrived in Tuscany and Umbria with the inauguration of Italy's cross-country train lines in 1840. Soon no finishing-school education would be complete without a Grand Tour of Italy, and the landmarks and museums of Tuscany and Umbria were required reading. Trainloads of debutantes, dour chaperones and career bachelors arrived, setting the stage for EM Forster novels, Tuscan timeshare investors and George Clooney wannabes.

RED & BLACK: A CHEQUERED PAST

While an upper-crust expat community was exporting Romantic notions about Italy, the country was facing some harsh realities. Commercial agriculture provided tidy sums to absentee royal Austrian landlords, but reduced peasants to poverty and created stiff competition for small family farms. In rural areas, three-quarters of the family income was spent on a meagre diet of mostly grains. The promise of work in the burgeoning industrial sector lured many to cities, where long working hours and dangerous working conditions seemed another dead end: 70% of family income was still spent on food. Upward mobility was rare, since university admissions were strictly limited, and the Habsburgs were cautious about allowing locals into their imperial army or bureaucratic positions. Increasingly, the most reliable means for Tuscans and Umbrians to support their families was emigration to the Americas.

Austrian rule provided a common enemy that, for once, united Italians across provinces and classes. The Risorgimento (reunification period) was not so much a reorganisation of some previously unified Italian state (which hadn't existed since Roman times) as a revival of city-state ideals of an independent citizenry. The secret societies that had flourished right under the noses of the French as a local check on colonial control soon formed a network of support for nationalist sentiment. In 1848-49 revolution broke

1737
Maria Theresa makes her move on the Medici, and ends their dynastic rule by installing her husband Francis of Lorraine as Grand Duke of Tuscany. She remains the brains of the operation, reforming and bilking Tuscany from behind the scenes.

1765–90
Enlightenment leader Leopold I continues his mother's reforms in Tuscany. Moved by Cesare Beccaria's case for criminal justice reform in *On Crime and Punishment,* Leopold makes Tuscany the first sovereign state to outlaw the death penalty.

1796–1801
Italy becomes a battleground between Napoleon, the Habsburgs and their Russian allies, and Tuscans and Umbrians witness much of their cultural patrimony divvied up as spoils of war

1805–14
Napoleon establishes himself as King of Italy, with the military assistance of Italian soldiers he'd conscripted yearly since 1802 – but when fortunes turn and conscripts desert, Napoleon loses Tuscany to Grand Duke Ferdinando III in 1814

1860
Two decades of insurrections culminate in a new Italian government, with a parliament and a king. Florence becomes Italy's capital in 1865, despite extensive poverty and periodic bread riots; the capital moves to Rome in 1871.

1915
Italy enters WWI fighting a familiar foe: the Austro-Hungarian Empire. War casualties, stranded POWs, heating oil shortages and food rationing make for a hard-won victory by 1917.

out, and a radical government was temporarily installed in Florence. Nervous that Austrians would invade, conservative Florentine leaders invited Habsburg Leopold II to return as Archduke of Tuscany (1797–1870, Grand Duke of Tuscany from 1824 to 1859). But when rural unrest in Tuscany made Austria's return to power difficult, Austrian retaliation and brutal repression galvanised nationalist sentiment in the region. Although the country was united under one flag in 1861, that early split decision between radicals and conservatives would define the region's political landscape in the years ahead.

Unification didn't end unemployment or unrest, since only 2% of Italy's population gained the right to vote in 1861 – the same 2% that controlled most of the country's wealth. Strikes were held across the country to protest working conditions, and their brutal suppression gave rise to a new Socialist Party in 1881. The new Italian government's money-making scheme to establish itself as a colonial power in Ethiopia and Eritrea proved a costly failure – 17,000 Italian soldiers were lost near Adowa in 1896, in the worst defeat by any European colonial power in Africa. When grain prices were raised in 1898, many impoverished Italians could no longer afford to buy food, and riots broke out. Rural workers unionised, and when a strike was called in 1902, 200,000 rural labourers came out en masse.

BEYOND SECRET HANDSHAKES

With so many despots and inquisitors constantly within earshot, 17th-century Italians had to watch their words – let slip a tax complaint or scientific fact and you might end up charged with treason or heresy. Hence the initial appeal of secret societies, where early Enlightenment thinkers could speak freely among like-minded people without fear of reprisal. Freemasonry is one of the better-known secret societies to take root in Enlightenment-era Italy, but the group's inner workings remain murky today. Initially membership was secret, meetings were clandestine and cloaked in ritual, records were written in code, and members took strict loyalty oaths to protect the proceedings and fellow members. Papal authorities banned Freemasonry in 1738 and an Italian variant known as the Carbonari in 1821, assuming (not incorrectly) that secret societies were fomenting opposition to theocratic and imperial dictates.

But after the new Italian Republic was established, a new secret society was founded in 1877 called Propaganda Due, or P2. In the years after WWII, members took it upon themselves to define a new direction for Italy that looked eerily like its old one under Fascism. According to documents found by police in a 1981 raid of the home of Tuscan banker, P2 leader and former Blackshirt Licio Gelli, the 'plan for democratic rebirth' involved suppressing trade unions and civil liberties and consolidating the media to promote a unified national outlook. Police also found a P2 membership list that included some familiar names: members of Parliament, heads of Italy's secret services, journalists and one Silvio Berlusconi. Pursued on charges of bank fraud and implicated in the 'strategy of tension' that terrorised Italy during the 1970s, Gelli escaped to Switzerland, where he was found but escaped from prison. He fled to South America, where he had friends among the Argentine military junta. Finally he gave himself up in 1987 in Switzerland and was extradited to Italy, where he was sentenced to 12 years for embezzlement. He then fled to the French Riviera, but was extradited from France in 1998 to serve his sentence.

Finally, Italian politicians began to take the hint, and initiated some reforms. Child labour was banned, working hours were set and the right to vote was extended to all men over 30 by 1912 (women would have to wait for their turn at the polls until 1945). But right after the government promised the Socialists to fund an old-age pension scheme, it reneged, and opted to invade Tunisia instead. Then Italy got more war than it had budgeted for in 1914, when WWI broke out. A young Socialist firebrand named Mussolini led the call for Italy to intervene, though most Socialists were opposed.

Lion of the Desert (1981) follows two decades of resistance to Mussolini's occupation of Libya, with an international cast headed by Anthony Quinn as resistance leader Omar Mukhtar, filmed entirely in Libya by Syrian-American director Moustapha Akkad.

By 1917, Italy had won the war, but few Italians were in the mood to celebrate. In addition to war casualties, 600,000 Italians served time as prisoners of war (POWs), and 100,000 died due primarily to the Italian government's failure to send food, clothing and medical supplies to its own soldiers. Wartime decrees that extended working hours and outlawed strikes had made factory conditions so deplorable that women led mass strikes even under penalty of prison. Bread shortages spread nationwide, along with bread riots. Mussolini found support for his call to order in the Tuscan countryside, and by 1922 his black-shirted squads could be seen parading through Florence, echoing Mussolini's call for the ouster of his former colleagues and the purging of communists.

But no amount of purging prevented the country from plunging into recession in the 1930s after Mussolini demanded (and obtained) a revaluation of the Italian *lira*. While the free fall of wages won Mussolini allies among industrialists, it created further desperation among his power base. New military conquests in Libya and Ethiopia initially provided a feeble boost to the failing economy, but when the enormous bill came due in the late 1930s, Mussolini hastily agreed to an economic and military alliance with Germany. Contrary to the bold claims of Mussolini's propaganda machine, Italy was ill prepared for the war it entered in 1940.

A powerful Resistance movement soon emerged in Mussolini's former stomping grounds in the Tuscan countryside – tragically, not soon enough to prevent hundreds of thousands of Italian casualties, plus an as-yet-unknown number of Italians shipped off to 23 Italian concentration camps (including one near Arezzo) and death camps in Germany. A new Italian government surrendered to the Allies in 1943, but Mussolini refused to concede defeat, and dragged Italy through two more years of civil war, Allied campaigns and German occupation. Tuscany and Umbria emerged from these black years redder than ever, and Tuscany in particular became a staunch Socialist power base – though later government investigations would reveal that Fascists lingered on in the ranks of bureaucracy well into the 1970s.

1921

Mussolini forms the Fascist Party, and Tuscan supporters fall in line by 1922. The 1924 elections are 'overseen' by Fascist *squadristi*, and Fascists win a Parliamentary majority.

1940–43

The Fascist Italian Empire joins Axis ally Germany in declaring war on Great Britain and France. Italy loses battles abroad and at home before surrendering in 1943 – but Mussolini refuses to comply, and war continues.

1943–45

The Italian Resistance joins Allied Forces in fighting Mussolini's forces and the Nazis, and with Allied forces liberates Tuscany in 1944. When Italy's civil warfare ends in 1945, a coalition government is formed and the monarchy abolished.

1946

In a hotly contested vote, a national referendum establishes a republic and ousts the Italian monarchy, which had enabled Mussolini's rise to power and briefly rallied under metrosexual Umberto II and his leftist wife Marie-José

1959–63

Italy's Economic Miracle revives post-war economy via industrialisation, entrepreneurship and US Marshall Plan investments to stop Italy from joining the Soviet Bloc. Florence revives its textile industry and becomes Italy's first fashion capital.

1969

Mass strikes of the *autunno caldo* (hot autumn) join ongoing university student uprisings demanding social change, and promote sweeping reforms not just in working conditions but also housing, social services, pensions and civil rights.

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THE BIKER, THE FRIAR & THE ACCOUNTANT

Unbelievable though it may sound, this trio became heroes of the Italian Resistance. Giorgio Nissim was a Jewish accountant in Pisa who belonged to a secret Tuscan Resistance group helping Jewish Italians escape from Fascist Italy. The network was discovered by the Fascists, and everyone involved was sent to concentration camps except Giorgio, who was never discovered. It seemed nowhere was safe for Jewish refugees – until Franciscan friar Rufino Niccacci helped organise the Assisi Underground, which hid hundreds of Jewish refugees from all over Italy in convents and monasteries across Umbria in 1943–44. In Assisi nuns who'd never met anyone Jewish before learned to cook kosher meals for their guests, and locals risked their lives to provide shelter to total strangers.

The remaining problem was how to get forged travel documents to the refugees, and quick. Enter Gino Bartali, world-famous Tuscan cyclist, Tour de France winner and three-time champion of the Giro d'Italia. After his death in 2003, documents revealed that during his 'training rides' during the war years, Bartali had carried Resistance intelligence and falsified documents to transport Jewish refugees to safe locations. Suspected of involvement, Bartali was once interrogated at the dreaded Villa Triste in Florence, where political prisoners were held and tortured – but he revealed nothing. Until his death he refused to discuss his efforts to save Jewish refugees even with his children, saying, 'One does these things, and then that's that'.

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

Today the region's true colours are neither red nor black, but more of a trendy neutral. Since Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing government was ousted in 2006 by the centrist coalition government led by Romano Prodi, the region seems to have joined the rest of the country in wait-and-see mode.

In 1993, a car bomb at the Uffizi killed five people. The Mafia was suspected, but never successfully indicted. That year 200,000 people protested Mafia violence, demanding reform through the Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) task force.

Granted, both Tuscany and Umbria still have their dark sides. Italy's postwar economic miracle brought an influx of wealth but also unregulated real estate developments to these rolling hills, and the violent activities of neo-Fascist and Red Brigade operatives in the area during the Anni di Piombo (Years of Lead) still cast a long shadow over today's political scene. The Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) task force charged with exposing connections between politicians and mafia figures after the Tangentopoli (Bribesville) scandal of 1992 are still at it today, thanks to the delaying tactics of Silvio Berlusconi and other implicated politicians.

But if the history of Tuscany and Umbria is an opera, the last verse is a coda. Today agriculture and travel are once again the defining features of the region, just as they were three millennia ago – and just like way back then, you never know who'll take the stage next.

1970s-80s

The *Anni di Piombo* (Years of Lead) terrorise the country with extremist violence and reprisals; police kill anarchist Franco Serantini in a 1972 protest in Pisa, and Red Brigades kill Florence's mayor Lando Conti in 1986

1993

A string of Mafia-motivated bombings that killed five people and caused US$10 million damage to irreplaceable works of art in Florence's Uffizi galvanises the country against Mafia and spurs Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) reformers

2006

Romano Prodi's centrist government defeats Berlusconi's right-wing coalition. After 12 years of power, corruption, scandals and unpopular moves (such as supporting war in Iraq), Berlusconi is ousted from government but still operates his media empire.

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Art & Architecture

Renaissance palazzo city halls in Poland, Tuscan villa restaurants in Macau and American refrigerators studded with magnets of Michelangelo's *David* dressed in a Hawaiian shirt: the cultural influence of Tuscany and Umbria is such a given that it's hard to imagine how our world might have looked otherwise. What if these hill-top towns hadn't been founded, town hall meetings were never convened, villas had seemed like too much upkeep and nobles decided to show off by throwing a party instead of commissioning art? There might be less democracy on display, fewer masterpieces to stretch our imaginations and a whole lot more Paris Hilton (perish the thought).

The treasury of architectural styles and artistic expression that is Tuscany and Umbria was not the work of one supremely enlightened dictator or artistic genius, but a motley cast of characters worthy of its own fresco cycle. Picture it: party boys get religion and found monasteries; peasants storm castles and demand their basic rights, plus sewage systems and public art; squadrons of artists stay up all night working pigment and fresh ideas into wet plaster; and religious authorities become their biggest fans and worst enemies. All this attracts admirers to the area and its art and architecture, which Napoleon's troops decided made nice souvenirs and Mussolini's minions agreed should be the template for the new Italy – minus a few centuries' worth of architectural details.

But improbably enough, the region's art and architecture survived plague, war, Fascism, earthquakes and a rather nasty rash of post-war housing projects. In small towns, cathedrals and municipal museums across the region, unfold the story of a people whose stubborn independent mindedness and ingenuity bordering on insanity left a legacy like none other.

ELEGANT DEATH: THE ETRUSCANS

About 2800 years before you started dreaming of a hill-top getaway in Tuscany or Umbria, the Etruscans had a similar idea. Dotting the countryside are hill-top towns (p25) founded by the Etruscans to keep a watchful eye on their crops below – and their neighbours across the valley. Perugia has kept much of its character as an Etruscan gated community, with its Arco Etrusco (p323) in the ancient city walls and an Etruscan well in the town centre, just in case the neighbours got nasty and cut off the water supply downhill.

From the 8th to the 3rd century BC, Etruscan towns held their own against friends Romans, and countrymen, worshipped their own gods and goddesses, and farmed lowlands with sophisticated drainage systems of their own invention. How well the Etruscans lived between sieges and war is unclear, but they sure knew how to throw a funeral: a wealth of jewellery, ceramics and other creature comforts for the afterlife have been found in the Etruscan stone tombs of Ipogeo dei Volumni near Perugia (p324) and Crocifisso del Tufo outside Orvieto (p368).

Become an aficionado on Umbrian art in Umbria – check out university-level classes in Italian culture available at University for Foreigners Perugia at www.unistrapg.it/english.

Despite the tantalising clues they left behind, no-one seems to know who the Etruscans were or where they came from. Recent studies of their genetic material suggest they have more in common with Anatolia than with modern Italians, and early Roman historians suggested a connection with Asia Minor. Come up with your own theories at the Museo Claudio Faina e Civico in Orvieto (p367) and the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria in Perugia (p323), where you'll notice that Etruscan ceramic urns and iron horses seem distinctly Greek, while their scarab-beetle jewellery and tomb paintings look oddly Egyptian.

Romans knew a good thing when they plundered it. After conquering swathes of Etruscan territory in Umbria and Tuscany in the 3rd century BC, the Etruscans' highly refined, geometric style seen in artefacts at Spoleto's Museo Archeologico e Teatro Romano (p379) was incorporated into Roman art and architecture. But even after another 800 years of trying, Rome never entirely succeeded in establishing its authority throughout Etruscan territory. This would become a recurring theme, with local municipal authorities battling with papal emissaries from Rome for control over the region right through the 15th century AD.

WELCOME, PILGRIMS: RELIGIOUS ATTRACTIONS

Roman centurions may have failed to make much of an impression, but Christianity began to take hold in Etruscan territory when a lovelorn young man from Norcia named Benedict abandoned his studies and a promising career in the Roman nobility to join the growing community of hermits in the hills of Umbria c AD 500. Fledgling monasteries nearby sought his spiritual leadership, but his appointment as abbot didn't go so well – the monks tried to poison him twice.

How come tourists are the only ones in Italian churches on Sunday? Satirist Beppe Severgnini shares his theories on this and Italy's other cultural developments in English at www.beppesevergnini.com/articles.htm and in Italian at www.corriere.it/solferino/severgnini.

He miraculously survived, and monasteries sprang up in the valley beyond his cave as word of his piety spread. Founded by Longobard Duke of Spoleto Faroaldo II after St Peter commanded him in a dream to build a church, San Pietro in Valle (p389) features five Roman sarcophagi and 8th-century Romanesque frescoes on the upper part of the nave, showing scenes from the Old Testament and crusaders galloping through arches on a couple of pin-headed horses and a camel. Not to be outdone, the nearby monastery of Sant'Eutizio (p387) set itself apart through manuscript illumination c AD 1000 and Eutizio's own hair shirt, a relic with the mystical ability to bring rain when duly venerated.

These buildings and others in the area helped establish the blend of Lombard and Roman style known as Romanesque as the décor scheme of choice for local ecclesiastical structures. The basic template was simple: a stark nave stripped of extra columns ending in a domed apse, surrounded by chapels usually donated by wealthy patrons. Gone were the colonnaded Roman façades seen on earlier buildings, such as the 4th century Tempietto del Clitunno near Spoleto (p378); the new look was more spare and austere, befitting a place where hermits might feel at home and nobles may feel inspired to surrender worldly possessions.

While Umbria kept the architecture relatively simple in local *tufo* volcanic stone, Tuscany couldn't resist showing off just a bit. In the 11th century, the grand colonnade and loggia in Lucca's duomo (p192) and two-tone striped marble nave of Pisa's cathedral (p185) gave Romanesque a Tuscan makeover, and this new look was applied to Carrara's cathedral (p205) and Chiesa di San Miniato al Monte in Florence (p127). Alison Pisano's marble pulpit for the baptistry in Pisa (p186) was another spectacle in marble: a hexagonal structure embodying fellow Pisan Leonardo Fibonacci's mathematical theories about harmonious proportions, covered with deep reliefs of Old and New Testament characters who are almost twisting free of the picture plane.

Siena was not about to be outdone by its neighbours and rivals in Florence and Pisa, and in 1215 its city council approved a no-expenses-spared programme to rebuild and redecorate its greenish-black-and-white striped marble cathedral (p240). They got what they paid for in the 13th century with bronze baptistry doors by Andrea Pisano, a pulpit by Alison Pisano, a rose window designed by Duccio di Buoninsegna and an *Annunciazione* by his star pupil Simone Martini (now in the Uffizi; see p112), plus storytelling inlaid marble floors at the receiving end of many a dropped jaw. Since Florence continued to best Siena rather mercilessly on the battlefield, Siena was determined to outdo Florence with religious spectacle, and commissioned a cathedral that included a Tuscan Gothic façade by Giovanni Pisano, a dome with a cupola by Bernini and the crowning glory by Sienese artist Pinturicchio: the Piccolomini Library frescoes (p241), which tell the life story of Sienese Pope Pius II in jewel-like colours. The plan to outshine Florence worked for about 150 years, until the Florentines picked up a few cues from Sienese painters, and started a little something called the Renaissance.

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE DONKEY

At first glance, the medieval galleries of **Siena's Pinacoteca Nazionale** (p243) may look like a forest of Madonnas on thrones and Jesuses on crosses. But take a closer look at details jumping out from those fields of frozen poses and beatific expressions, and you'll see the Renaissance coming. Grand Gothic gestures give way to a range emotions in Taddeo di Bartolo's 1405 *Adorazione del Magi* (Adoration of the Magi) – note the tender expression of the donkey watching as the wise men kiss the feet of the somewhat blasé baby Jesus and his delighted mother. The figures in the background of Giovanni di Paolo's mid-15th-century *Flight into Egypt* may loom unnaturally large over the Gothic buildings, but his plodding, demoralised donkey gives the whole scene a relatable quality.

But while Tuscany's churches were becoming quite spectacular, nothing prepared pilgrims for what they would find inside the upper and lower churches in Assisi (p334). Not long after St Francis' death in 1226, an all-star team of artists was hired to decorate the churches in his honour: Cimabue, Giotto, Pietro Lorenzetti and Simone Martini captured the life and gentle spirit of St Francis while his memory was still fresh in the minds of the faithful. For medieval pilgrims not accustomed to multiplexes and special effects, entering a space covered floor to ceiling with stories told in living colour must have been a dazzling, overwhelming experience. Painter, art historian and Renaissance man Giorgio Vasari praised Cimabue for setting the standard for realistic modelling and perspective with his Lower Church frescoes, which you can still make out despite the extensive damage wrought over the years by earthquakes – not to mention art thieves who plundered fresco fragments after the devastating 1997 quake.

Wonder what art might inspire ordinary people to self-flagellate, or brave the Assisi crowds in July? Find out what art moves people most and why in Kenyon College's *Pilgrimage Art* magazine, online at http://peregrinations.kenyon.edu/current.html.

But the most startling achievement here is Giotto's fresco cycle, which shows Francis not just rolling up but tearing off his sleeves to provide aid to lepers and the needy, as onlookers and family members gasp and look away in shock. These images had an emotional, immediate impact on viewers, creating a much more theatrical setting for church services. Chants and solos added to the liturgy provided a surround-sound component to the fresco cycles, and the drama reached fever pitch with passion plays and other theatrical elements. Even while it was still in progress in the 13th century, the Basilica at Assisi drew hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year; today annual attendance figures top four million.

ENLIGHTENED DARK AGES: THE RISE OF THE COMUNE

But while communities sprang up around hermits and holy men in the hinterlands, cities began taking on a life of their own in the 13th and 14th century. Some public facilities were holdovers from Roman times: the aqueducts at Narni (p391), the baths of Volterra (p263) and the theatre in Spoleto (up and running each year during the Spoleto Festival; see p381). Road networks also served as handy trade routes starting in the 11th century, and farming estates and villas began to spring up outside major trading centres as a new middle class of merchants, farmers and skilled craftspeople emerged. Taxes and

donations sponsored the building of hospitals such, as Filippo Brunelleschi's Spedale degli Innocenti (p121), which is considered the earliest Florentine Renaissance building (1419–36). Streets were paved, town walls erected and sewage systems were built to accommodate an increasingly sophisticated urban population not keen on sprawl or squalor.

Ouch, that had to hurt: all those gorgeously painted but weirdly gory details are explained in *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* by Mitchell B Merback.

Once townsfolk came into some money they weren't necessarily keen to part with it, and didn't always agree how their tax dollars should be spent. Town councils were formed to represent the various interests of merchants, guilds and competing noble families, and the first order of business on the agenda in major medieval cities like Perugia, Todi, Siena, Florence and Gubbio was the construction of an impressive town hall reflecting the importance and authority of the *comune,* or municipality. Surprisingly, these democratic monuments don't look as though they were designed by committee, and Siena's Palazzo Comunale (p237) has become a global icon of civic pride with its pointed Sienese arches, a splendid marble loggia contributed by Sienese Black Plague survivors, and the tall Torre del Mangia clock tower that serves as the compass needle orienting the entire city.

But in addition to being savvy political lobbyists and fans of grand architecture projects that kept their constituents gainfully employed, medieval *comune* were masters of propaganda. Perugia's carved-relief Fontana Maggiore (p321) by Alison and Giovanni Pisano in the city's central piazza and the frescoed town council hall in the Palazzo dei Priori (now called the Sala dei Notari; p322) were part of a brilliant chamber-of-commerce-style PR campaign positioning Perugia as the embodiment of ancient virtues and Christian belief, with imagery that blended ancient mythology, Biblical themes and Perugia's contemporary history.

Better and bigger than any political billboard is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Effetti del Buon e del Cattivo Governo* (The Allegories of Good and Bad Government) in Siena's Palazzo Comunale (p237). In *Good Government,* townsfolk make their way through town in an orderly fashion, pausing to do business, greet one another, join hands and dance a merry jig. In *Bad Government,* a horned, fanged Tyrannia rules over a scene of chaos surrounded by winged vices, while Justice lies unconscious, her scales shattered. Like the best campaign speeches, this cautionary tale was brilliantly rendered, but not always heeded.

TRADING UP: IMPORTS & COSMOPOLITAN INFLUENCES

When they weren't busy politicking, late medieval farmers, craftspeople and merchants did quite well for themselves in Umbria and Tuscany. Enterprising Umbrians drained marshlands to grow additional crops for sale, and the elegant ceramics, tile and marbles showcased in churches, villas and workshops across Tuscany and Umbria became all the rage throughout

ARCHITECTURE, TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Entablature Atop a row of columns on a classical façade, this includes an architrave, a long slab that holds the columns in place, the decorative frieze atop that and the triangular pediment to cap it off; see the façade of Basilica di Santa Maria Novella, Florence (p115)

Pietra serena Greenish-grey 'serene stone'; see the columns at Basilica di San Lorenzo, Florence (p118)

Rustification Stone with a chiselled, rough-hewn look; see the 1st floor of Florence's Palazzo Medici-Riccardi (p118)

Sgraffito A surface covered with plaster, then scratched away to create a three-dimensional trompe-l'oeil effect of carved stone or brick; see the façade of Pisa's Palazzo della Carovana on Piazza dei Cavalieri (p187)

Spolia Creative reuse of ancient monuments in new structures; see the Arco d'Etrusco, Perugia (p323)

Europe and the Mediterranean. Artisans were kept busy applying their skills to civic works projects and churches, which had to be expanded and updated to keep up with the growing numbers and rising expectations of pilgrims in the area.

With outside interest came outside influence, as local styles adapted to international markets. Florence, Deruta and Orvieto became famous for lustrous, tin-glazed *maiolica* (Majolica ware) tiles and plates painted with vibrant metallic pigments inspired by the Islamic ceramics of Majorca, Spain. Ceramic reliefs by the prolific Florentine della Robbia family are now enshrined at the Museo del Bargello (p108), including Lorenzo de Medici's favourite *Madonna della Mele* (c 1460). Modest Romanesque cathedrals were given an International Gothic makeover befitting their appeal to pilgrims of all nations, but the Italian take on the French style was both more colourful and more subdued than the grey-stone spires and flying buttresses of Paris. Italian Gothic in the region often featured a simple layout and striped stone naves fronted by multilayer birthday-cake façades, which might be frosted with pink paint, glittering mosaics and rows of arches that are capped with sculptures. Particularly fabulous examples of this confectionary approach are the duomos in Siena, Orvieto and Florence. The last two were tricked out by Arnolfo di Cambio, also known for his work in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio (p110). Santa Croce in Florence (p121) is more restrained and gorgeously proportioned, with a broad, window-lined nave that gives a sense of effortless grandeur.

Can you imagine Florence without the art? Neither could the 'mud angels', young people who arrived en masse after the Florence Flood of 1966 to rescue thousands of irreplaceable artworks and manuscripts.

The evolution from solid Romanesque to airy Gothic to a Yin-Yang balance of the two can be witnessed in several standout buildings in the region. The Gothic trend started while the upper church of the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi (p334) was under construction, and the resulting blend of a relatively austere Romanesque exterior with high Gothic drama indoors set a new ecclesiastical architecture standard exported by Franciscan monks all over Europe. The pointed arches on the lower half of the façade of Santa Maria Novella (p115) reveal a Gothic underbelly below the lofty classical proportions of the Corinthian columns and pediment added by Leon Battista Alberti in 1470, with ingenious side scrolls to pull the look together. But while humanist and religious idioms and cross-cultural influences were seamlessly blended in lofty Renaissance architecture, the reality on the ground looked quite different.

UNFRIENDLY COMPETITION: RIVALRIES TO THE DEATH

By the 14th century, the smiling Sienese townsfolk of Ambroggio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government* and the placid Umbrian countryside backdrop of the Basilica di San Francesco frescoes must've seemed like figments of fertile imaginations. The Black Death swept through cities in Umbria and left communal government hobbled, giving Church authorities and warlords an excuse to impose new and decidedly less democratic authority. To quell uprisings by workers in Perugia, the pope's French emissary Gerard de Puy built a new citadel in 1371, which was overrun by unimpressed townsfolk five years later. But while municipalities fended off tyranny, fields returned to swampland, roads became toll-collecting opportunities for thugs, and merchants abandoned the region for greener, safer pastures. The Assisi fresco painters who miraculously survived the plague would not live to see their work finished, due to some rather unkindly acts of God: major earthquakes erupted in Umbria every 20 years for some 250 years.

If you think the architecture in Arezzo and Terni looks cinematic, you and Roberto Begnini have something in common: the Tuscan actor/director filmed his Oscar-winning, box office–busting *La vita é bella* (Life Is Beautiful) in these two cities.

Meanwhile in Tuscany, the great medieval arts capital of Siena was suffering. After a major famine in 1329 and a bank collapse, the municipality

went into debt to maintain roads, continue work on the Duomo, help the needy and jumpstart the local economy. But just when Siena seemed set for a comeback, the plague devastated the city in 1348. Three-quarters of Siena's population was soon dead, and virtually all economic and artistic activity ground to a halt. The *comune* rallied with tough fines on lawbreakers, new business taxes and rules against wearing black mourning attire (too depressing), and within five years Siena was going strong. But when another plague in 1374 killed 80,000 Sienese, followed by a famine, the city never entirely recovered. It did find a new heroine and patron saint in St Catherine, whose devotion to the sick, dying, criminals and lepers is captured in Andrea Vanni's 15th-century fresco in San Domenico (p244) and in frescoes in her childhood home (p244).

For the bigger picture on Italian medieval and Renaissance art, visit the Virtual Uffizi at www.virtualuffizi.com/uffizi/index1.htm for listings searchable by artist or era.

Florence was also hit by the plague in 1348, and despite fervent public prayer rituals, 96,000 Florentines died in just seven months. Those who survived experienced a crisis of faith, making Florence fertile territory for humanist ideals – not to mention macabre superstition, attempts to raise the dead, and a fascination with corpses that the likes of Leonardo da Vinci would call science and others morbid curiosity. Power struggles also ensued among Florence's great families, many of whom had well-placed relatives at the Vatican to make their case for power. Florence's booming post-plague textile trade helped fund military campaigns against its comparatively weaker neighbours Arezzo, Pisa and Cortona, and even brought commercial power players Lucca and Siena into the Florentine sphere of influence.

A building boom ensued as Church and secular authorities competed to become the defining fixtures of the local landscape. In Florence, Cosimo il Vecchio commissioned Michelozzo di Bartolomeo Michelozzi to build Palazzo Medici-Riccardi (p118), an imposing three-storey building on a base of rough-hewn, 'rusticated' stone. Medici archnemesis Filippo Strozzi promptly hired Benedetto da Maiano to build him a bigger, better palazzo (p117), with higher ceilings, an airy arcaded courtyard and a more impressive cornice. Too bad the Strozzis didn't get to stay in their new palazzo for long: after Filippo supported an insurrection against the Medici he retreated to Venice until the latest Medici leader was murdered. When he tried to return to Florence, he was captured and tortured to the point where suicide seemed an attractive alternative.

More to the right, please: Mussolini tried to set the left-leaning Tower of Pisa straight by pouring concrete around its base, which only sunk the tower further into the ground.

THE RENAISSANCE: PICTURING AN IMPERFECT WORLD, PERFECTLY

So who actually came out ahead of all this jockeying for position? Oddly enough, architects. To put an end to the competing claims of the Tuscan Ghibelline faction allied with the Holy Roman Empire (for the often gory details, see p28), the Rome-backed Guelph faction marked its territory with impressive new landmarks. Guelph Florence hired Giotto to design the city's iconic 85m-tall square *campanile* (bell tower; p107), one-upping the 57m-tall tower under construction in Ghibelline Pisa that was already looking a bit off kilter. Pisa battled with Florence throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, and was otherwise too preoccupied with shoring up its sagging political position and its Leaning Tower (p185) to keep up with its construction-happy Guelph neighbours. Eventually Pisa conceded architectural defeat, giving its Piazza dei Cavalieri (p187) a Florentine facelift with the *sgriffito* (scratched-plaster) façade of Palazzo della Carovana by Giorgio Vasari, chief decorator of Florence's Palazzo degli Uffizi.

RENAISSANCE ART SMARTS

Chiaroscuro A three-dimensional effect created with contrasting highlights and dark shading; Leonardo da Vinci was the master of this illusion

Contrapposto Shifting weight in a casual pose, so that a figure is balanced; Michelangelo was able to make it work with colossal statues

Perspective The relationship and proportions of elements in a picture, so that ones that are large and low seem close and those small and high seem far; Raphael got this down to a science

Sfumato Shading built up with layers of translucent colour instead of hard lines; again, see Leonardo da Vinci

Vanishing point The spot in an image where all lines perpendicular to the picture plane converge, tricking the eye into believing that you're seeing into the distance; the astonishing early master is Masaccio

Rebel Artemesia Gentileschi shattered the 17th-century glass ceiling for women artists by excelling in Caravaggio's workshop, taking on historical and religious themes, exchanging ideas with Galileo Galilei and becoming the first woman member of Florence's Academy of Art and Design.

Mess with Florence, and you take on Rome: This was the not-so-subtle hint delivered by Florentine architecture, which made frequent reference to the glories of ancient Rome. Filippo Brunelleschi and Michelangelo Buonarotti recycled the coffered ceiling of the Parthenon in Rome for the Basilica di San Lorenzo (p118), with Andrea del Verocchio providing the Roman-style Medici family sarcophagus. The Roman-inspired Florentine style became known as Renaissance or 'rebirth' – but there was also much to Renaissance architecture that was truly novel. Red-carpet appearances can't compare with entrances made on the grand staircase at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Laurentian Library) at San Lorenzo, which Michelangelo framed for dramatic effect with two curving stairways.

Meanwhile, Florentine artists enjoyed a bonanza of commissions to paint heroic battle scenes, fresco private chapels and carve busts of the latest power players – works that sometimes outlived their patrons' clout. The Peruzzi family rose to prominence in 14th-century Florence as bankers with interests reaching from London to the Middle East, and set the trend for art patronage by commissioning Giotto to fresco the family's memorial chapel in Santa Croce, completed in 1320 (p121). When Peruzzi client King Edward III of England defaulted on loans and war with Lucca interfered with business, the Peruzzi went bankrupt – but as patrons of Giotto's precocious experiments in perspective and Renaissance illusionism, their legacy set the tone for the artistic flowering of Florence.

Was it a genius gene, or something in the water? In *Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall takes a close look at Renaissance paintings and the 15th-century society that made so much impossibly genius seem entirely possible.

One Florentine family to follow the Petrucci's lead were the prominent Brancaccis, who commissioned a chapel in the Basilica di Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence (p126), to be painted by Masolino and his precocious assistant Masaccio, whose work after his death at 27 was completed by Fra Filippo Lippi. In these dramatic frescoes framed in astonishingly convincing architectural sets, select scenes from the life of St Peter allude to pressing Florentine concerns of the day: the new income tax, unfair imprisonment and hoarded wealth. Masaccio's image of expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden proved especially prophetic: the Brancaccis were allied with the Strozzi family, and were similarly exiled by the Medici before they could see the work completed. But Fra Filippo Lippi came out ahead, and went on to complete major commissions, including the fresco cycles of John the Baptist and St Stephen in the choir or the Prato Duomo (p158). Yet he died poor, apparently having given away much of his money to the needy and, by some accounts, various mistresses.

But the patrons with the greatest impact on the course of art history were the Medici. Patriarch Cosimo il Vecchio was exiled in 1433 by a consortium of Florentine families who considered him a triple threat: powerful banker, ambassador of the Church, and consummate politician with the savvy to sway emperors and popes. But the flight of capital from Florence after his departure created such a fiscal panic that the exile was hastily rescinded and within a year the Medici were back in Florence. To announce his return in grand style, Cosimo funded the 1437 rebuilding of the Convento di San Marco by

MADONNA WANNABES

An ageless international star who's an inspiration to Italian fashion designers: can you blame Umbrian towns for wanting their own *Sistine Madonna*? Raphael's leading lady locks eyes with some two million visitors a year at the Old Masters Picture Gallery in Dresden, Germany, putting the town devastated by WWII bombings back on the cultural map and bored cherubs on T-shirts. Most other Raphael Madonnas left behind Raphael's early stomping grounds in Umbria long ago without so much as a backward glance, which for centuries has left the Umbrian communities that provided crucial early support for the orphaned Raphael trying not to feel somehow slighted. Some Madonnas have kept a mysteriously low profile: a Madonna known as the *de Brécy Tondo* hung over a cottage fireplace in Wales for 100 years before it was identified as a probable Raphael in February 2007. Meanwhile, Umbria has had to be content with the damaged 1505 *Holy Trinity* at Capella di San Severo in Perugia, begun by Raphael at age 16 but finished by his tutor Perugino after Raphael's death in 1521. But in 2003, big news hit the tiny Umbrian town of Cerqueto (population 500), when the frescoes in the town's shrine were identified as the work of 17-year-old Raphael. Look out, Madonna: you never know when a young unknown will come out of nowhere to steal your thunder.

Michelozzo, and commissioned Fra Angelico to fresco the monks' quarters with scenes from the life of Christ. Another artist pleased with Cosimo's return was Donatello, who had completed his lithe bronze statue of *David* with Cosimo's patronage, and was able to complete the pulpit he'd been commissioned to create with Michelozzo for the Prato duomo (p158).

Through such commissions, early Renaissance innovations in perspective, closely observed realism, and the play of light and dark (*chiaroscuro*) began to catch on throughout Tuscany and Umbria. Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo de' Medici gave an early and important nod of approval to Cortona-born painter Luca Signorelli, who took foreshortening to expressive extremes in his *Last Judgment* in Orvieto with up-the-nostril angles on angels and creepy between-the-toes peeks at demons (p366). A painter from Sansepolcro named Piero della Francesca earned a reputation for figures glowing with otherworldly light, caught in personal predicaments that seem somehow relatable: Roman soldiers snoozing on the job, crowds left goggle-eyed by miracles bystanders distressed to witness cruel persecution (p301).

THE GREAT DEBATE: SCANDAL, SCIENCE & CENSORSHIP

Cimabue was a primary-school dropout, Rapahel died young because of a sex-induced fever and scary-obsessive Michelangelo sculpted until his shoes disintegrated: Renaissance art star–maker Giorgio Vasari wrote *Lives of the Artists* centuries before the era of fact checking and libel suits, so he dishes better dirt than any tabloid.

The High Renaissance is often seen as a kind of university faculty meeting, with genteel, silver-haired sages engaged in a collegial exchange of ideas. A bar brawl might be closer to the metaphorical truth, with artists, scientists, politicians and clergy mixing it up and everyone emerging bruised. The debate was never as simple as church versus state, science versus art or seeing versus believing; in those days, politicians could be clergy, scientists could be artists, and artists could be clergy. Nor was debate strictly academic: any statement, however artistic, could mark a person as a menace, a has-been, a heretic or a dead man.

Giorgio Vasari's gossipy *Lives of the Artists* (1st edition 1550) documents shocking behaviour from his Renaissance contemporaries that may not have happened quite as he describes, yet is entirely possible given what we know of those tumultuous times. Legal records show that after being exiled from Florence for stabbing a man with a wooden stake, Pietro Vanucci attracted more positive notice for frescoing the better part of the city of Perugia c 1500 under the pseudonym Perugino. He also gained fame as the tutor of a promising young painter named Raphael, who promptly stole papal commissions right out from under him. But you'd never guess this back story

to look at Perugino's serene figures of Justice, Prudence, Temperance and Fortitude in Perugia's Collegio del Cambio (p322). They're painted under the same starry sky as Biblical figures, suggesting that the universe might be able to accommodate both secular and sacred ideals – an idea ahead of its time in 1503. A dispute over salt taxes led to a clash between Perugia's ruling Baglioni family and Pope Paul III, and the ensuing Salt War ended Perugia's relative independence from papal authority in 1540. Papal forces levelled the homes of the Baglioni and with them untold art treasures, though the Collegio was left mercifully intact.

War wasn't the only danger to Renaissance art. Inspired by Masaccio, tutored by Fra Filippo Lippi and backed by Lorenzo de' Medici, Sandro Botticelli was a rising art star who'd worked alongside Perugino and was sent to Rome to paint a fresco celebrating papal authority in the Sistine Chapel. The golden boy who'd painted the Venus with the golden hair for Lorenzo de' Medici's private villa in 1485 (p113) could do no wrong, until he was accused of sodomy in 1501. The charges didn't stick but the rumours did, and Botticelli's work was critiqued as too decadently sensual for religious subjects. When religious reformer Savonarola ousted the Medici and began to purge Florence of decadent excess in the face of surely imminent Armegeddon, Botticelli paintings went up in flames in the massive 'Bonfire of the Vanities'. Botticelli repudiated mythology and turned his attention to Madonnas, some of whom bear a marked family resemblance to his Venus.

Architect, sculptor, poet, incurable romantic: yet again, Michelangelo defines the term Renaissance man with *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, translated by Creighton Gilbert.

Another artist whose classically inspired work was alternately admired and rejected was Michelangelo. Lorenzo de' Medici personally took charge of the young sculptor's schooling from age 13, and he remained the darling of Florence until the Medici were ousted by Savonarola in 1494. By some accounts, Savonarola tossed rare early paintings by Michelangelo onto his bonfires (ouch). Without his Medici protectors, Michelangelo seemed unsure of his next move: he briefly hid in the basement of San Lorenzo and roamed around Italy. In Rome he carved a Bacchus for Cardinal Raffaele Riaro that the patron deemed unsuitable – which only seemed to spur Michelangelo to make a bigger and still more sensuous statue of *David* in 1501 (p120).

Although he was the one artist who Vasari positively gushed about, Michelangelo was by all other accounts fiercely competitive, denigrating the work of Perugino, openly gloating when his rival Leonardo da Vinci failed to complete a commission, and accusing Raphael and Bramante of setting him an impossible task with his Sistine Chapel commission. The magnificent ceiling frescoes took him four years, and the altarpiece was still incomplete in 1534 when an ailing Medici Pope Clement VII called on him to complete the work. But Michelangelo had grown estranged from the Medici for the misery their power plays had caused Florence, so he painted for his old friend a terrifying *Last Judgment* that caused a scandal for violence and nudity that was painted over by another artist for modesty's sake.

A team of Leonardo da Vinci scholars led by Oxford University's Martin Kemp provide the latest scientific and historical thinking about the elusive genius at www.universalleonardo.org.

As the Church consolidated its control across Tuscany and Umbria in the 16th and 17th century, science at odds with scriptures became more risqué than sensual. Pisa-born mathematician and devout Catholic Galileo Galilei had three illegitimate children, but did not incur the wrath of the Church until his astronomy research demonstrated that Copernicus was right, and earth really did revolve around the sun – contrary to then-current interpretation of Biblical phrases. Although Church authorities allowed him to make a published case for and against heliocentrism, Galileo was found guilty of heresy and spent the rest of his life under house arrest, studying physics even while going blind. The Church reversed its ruling posthumously and Galileo's remains are now fittingly interred at Florence's Santa Croce,

DA VINCI MYSTERY SOLVED

And you thought the new guy at your office was a weirdo: Botticelli and Perugino once worked in the same workshop as an audacious teenager who filled notebooks with wild theories about painting, music, engineering and warfare – in mirror-image handwriting, no less. He also admitted to robbing graves of some 30 human cadavers so that he could dissect them, which at the time was a punishable offence of desecration, and still sounds pretty creepy. But Lorenzo de' Medici was so impressed with this young man of many talents that he sent him as an ambassador to broker peace with Ludovico Sforza of Milan. Today few of Leonardo da Vinci's 13,000 pages of notes remain in Florence, and 72 pages of wild, scribbled theories about fossils and moon glow are privately owned by Bill Gates, who bought them for $30 million. But in 2005, another priceless treasure surfaced: the artist's Florence workshop, hidden behind the walls of Santissima Annunziata monastery. If this sacred ground was the site of Leonardo's stolen cadaver experiments, the Church must have been more understanding than anyone imagined. Sure makes doodling and daydreaming on the job seem forgivable, and possibly even a savvy career move.

where Brunelleschi's rational architecture blends harmoniously with Giotto's devotional frescoes (p121).

The constraints imposed by papal emissaries and petty tyrants created a creative backlash in the 16th century, as 'mannerist' artists explored darker visions and eerie special effects in the manner of the High Renaissance. Scenes of *Il Deposizione* (the Deposition, where Jesus' body is taken down from the cross) provided the ideal opportunity to explore extreme perspective and twisting, restless bodies in works from the 1520s at the Cattedrale di Volterra in Arezzo by Il Rosso Fiorentino (aka the Redhead from Florence) and at Santa Felicità in Florence (p123) by Jacopo Pontormo. In both works, the figures seem lit by a camera flashbulb and their bodies boneless under layers of drapery – movie magic ahead of its time. The Sienese painter known as 'Il Sodomo' (for reasons unknown but rather nastily insinuated by Vasari) combined Leonardo's High Renaissance illusionism with moody Sienese drama in his 1542 *Saint Sebastian with Madonna and Angels* (now at Pisa's Museo Nazionale di San Matteo; p188). The same year, the Inquisition arrived in Italy, marking a definitive end to the Renaissance exploration of humanity, in all its glorious imperfections.

OUR SUMMER PLACE: COLONIAL POWER & INFLUENCE

Who says you can't take a villa home with you? Discover all the architectural elements that make a home quintessentially Tuscan in Alexandra Black's *Tuscan Elements,* and turn your cold-water flat into the most desirable destination this side of Lucca.

In the centuries that followed the sack of Rome by Charles V in 1527, artistic production in Tuscany and Umbria came to be defined by passing trends, imperial excess and periodic pillaging. Umbria began to reclaim its farms from marshlands and make a comeback in the late 15th century, but regular looting by passing armies made it slow going. Deruta and Gubbio struggled to regain their reputations as ceramics centres, but a steady stream of pilgrims and tourists en route to Rome helped keep Umbrian artistic traditions limping along. But anything that wasn't nailed down was lifted by Napoleonic forces in the 18th century, making artistic progress from this time period hard to track.

Tuscany had the rather more dubious luck of being the holiday destination of choice for despots, generals and imperial relations. Imported Roman baroque touches started to make an appearance on the Florentine cityscape in the 17th century: Gherardo Silvani's bodaciously curvy, sculpture-bedizened façade for San Gaetano (p117), and Pietro da Cortona's ornately obsequious frescoes at the Palazzo Pitti (p123) celebrating the four ages of man – and the power of the Medici through them all. But Cortona's prediction did not hold, and the Medici power waned despite Maria de' Medici's convenient and turbulent marriage to King Henry IV of France in 1600.

Lucca in particular began to look distinctly French, with wide boulevards, neoclassical buildings and more than 300 baroque villas. As a consolation prize for separating from her husband, Elisa Baciocchi was dubbed by her brother Napoleon Bonaparte the Duchess of Tuscany, and soon established the trend for Italian vacation villas with her Villa Reale near Lucca (p199). When Napoleon lost Tuscany in 1814, former Grand-Duke of Tuscany Ferdinando III was briefly reinstated, only to lose Lucca in a treaty to Elisa in 1815. But the Bourbon Queen Maria Luisa of Etruria (western Tuscany) had an eye on a villa herself, and through treaty negotiations took control of Lucca in 1817.

A 'Grand Tour' of Italy became an obligatory display of culture and class status by the 18th century, and Tuscany and Umbria were key stops on the itinerary. German and English artists enraptured with Michelangelo, Perugino and other early High Renaissance painters took the inspiration home. This resulted in the high-octane romanticism of Henry Fuseli (1741–1825), the Swiss-German naturalised British painter best known for his unruly horses, and the moody, craft-conscious Pre-Raphaelite movement of Dante Gabriel Rosetti (1828–82), William Morris and friends. Conversely, Italian artists picked up on artistic trends making a splash in Northern Europe

MASSIMO BARTOLINI

The acclaimed conceptual artist responsible for dreamlike spaces and out-of-body experiences, toast of biennials (Venice, Shanghai, Frankfurt etc) and proof that artistic inspiration is alive and well and (still) living in Tuscany.

Why he lives and works in a small Tuscan town It's not just for the food. I was born here and honestly, I would rather return here.

Where the Renaissance meets installation art Piero's *Pregnant Madonna* in Monterchi, at the border with Umbria. This Madonna is hosted inside the former elementary school of the town, and the inside is like a home, it's domestic. There's a welcome mat, townsfolk that chat in the atrium, and people in the town still bring flowers to the Madonna to protect pregnancies, though they're forced to put them behind the big glass that protects the painting. That vase of little flowers behind that monolith of technology is a memorable vision, just as this elementary school is the most beautiful museum I've ever visited.

How the Renaissance obsession with light and dark figures into his own work I like to associate light with actions and objects. Light adds painting to sculpture, and it creates a landscape that contains sculpture, hosting it and shaping it.

Favourite landscape features I like the pine woods and little bars in hill-top towns. I'm sorry that in Tuscany there are no deserts, which are my favourite natural landscapes, but it seems that soon I'll be indulged [with global warming].

Hidden gem due for discovery The insane asylum in Volterra, where about 10 pavilions from the beginning of the 1900s are left in disrepair, but it's a place of incredible beauty. In a cloister of one of these pavilions, there's about 100m of wall carved with writings and drawings by one of the patients with a belt buckle in the 1960s.

What it's like to be a contemporary artist surrounded by Old Masters Warhol was surrounded by famous actresses and canned soup and he made masterworks from it. I try not to worsen the landscape that surrounds me, the masterpieces I see every day. [laughs] I made sculptures of mountains inspired by the mountains painted by Fra Angelico. A masterwork becomes nature; the artefact disappears, so you're free to look at it just as you look at the sea, a beautiful machine, a rock.

ARTISTS DIRECTORY:
25 LATE, GREAT TUSCAN & UMBRIAN ARTISTS

Artist	Known for...	As seen in...
Ambrogio Lorenzetti	riveting tales starring flat but expressive characters caught in compromising positions, in glowing colours Hollywood can't match	*Effetti del buon e del cattivo governo* (The Allegories of Good and Bad Government), c1290–1348, in Siena's Palazzo Comunale (p237)
Andrea della Robbia	taking ceramics way beyond teacups with (1435–1525) eye-catching, sometimes garish high-contrast reliefs; where Wedgwood found its blue-and-white inspiration	*Madonna della mele* (Madonna of the apple), Museo del Bargello, Florence (p108)
Artemesia Gentileschi (1593–1653)	turbulent, violent mythological scenes revealed by otherworldly spotlighting; think *Pulp Fiction* meets *Citizen Kane* in oil paint	*Giuditta che decapita Oloferne* (Judith Beheading Holofernes), Uffizi, Florence (p112)
Cimabue (Cenni di Pepi; c 1240–1302)	frescoes of religious figures with steady gazes, elegant poses worthy of a supermodel and the intimate quality of a family portrait	Lower church frescos at Basilica di San Francesco, Assisi (p334)
Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–94)	crisp, revealing portraits capturing every last detail with a lively line, blending the earthiness of his peer Fra Filippo Lippi and the elegance of Sandro Botticelli	Sassetti chapel altarpiece in Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence (p119)
Donatello (1386–1466)	taut, lithe, twisting figures that set the standard for *contropposto* (shifting weight in a casual pose, so that a figure is balanced) and Renaissance hunks	*David* statue in Florence's Palazzo del Popolo (p108); pulpit for Prato cathedral (p158)
Duccio di Buoninsegna (c 1255–1318)	the Sienese school: ethereal, riveting figures with level gazes and pale-green skin against glowing gold backgrounds, like elegant aliens	*Maesta* (Madonna and Child Enthroned with 20 Angels and 19 Saints) at Siena's Museo dell'Opera della Metropolitana (p241)
Fra Angelico (Guido di Pietro Trosini, also known as Beato Angelico; 1395–1455)	frescoes of relatable religious figures with wry expressions and casual poses, with a light that seems to come from within – makes a laborious fresco look like that one great snapshot you get between posed photos	frescoes at Museo di San Marco, Florence (p119)
Fra Filippo Lippi (1406–69)	pure charm and uncanny empathy: moon-faced Madonnas, squirming baby Jesuses, and crowd scenes where you can read the minds of each person	fresco cycles of John the Baptist and St Stephen in the choir of Prato Cathedral (p158)
Giotto (1267–1337)	kick-starting the Renaissance with action-packed frescoes that you'll swear are in motion; each character pinpoints emotions with facial expressions and poses that need no translation	Life of St Francis fresco cycle at Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi (p334); frescoes in Santa Croce (p121)
Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)	genius so flabbergasting, the term polymath (aka 'Renaissance man') had to be coined to explain him, and new painting terms defined to describe his style (*sfumato, chiaroscuro,* see boxed text, p46)	*Annuciazione* (Annunciation) at the Uffizi, Florence (p112); workshop at Santissima Annunziata (p121)

Artist	Known for...	As seen in...
Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455)	precise, dynamic reliefs that look like jewels and read like comic books, with strong diagonals to keep the plot moving	*Gates of Paradise* bronze doors at Florence Baptistry (p107)
Luca Signorelli (1455–1523)	bringing irresistible beauty to the grotesque, with sunny scenes of eternal damnation and eerie, contrasting-colour shading	*Last Judgment*, Orvieto Cathedral (p366)
Masaccio (1401–28)	putting painting into perspective, framing figures in architectural settings of astonishingly correct mathematical scale and proportion	Cappella Brancacci frescoes, Basilica di Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence (p126)
Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475–1564)	turning raw marble into imposing figures with impeccable balance, muscular movements and subtle emotion; he wasn't kidding when he claimed he saw the angel in the marble, and set it free	*David* at Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence (p119)
Alison Pisano (c 1220–84)	Roman-inspired marble friezes writhing with more activity than an ant farm, without losing the plot	Pisa baptistry doors (p186); Fontana Maggiore in Perugia (p321)
Paolo Uccello (1397–1475)	vast battle scenes with a distant vanishing point and such high-contrast highlights that the horses seem lit by lightning	*Battle of San Romano* at the Uffizi, Florence (p112)
Perugino (Pietro di Cristoforo Vannucci; 1446–1524)	ideal 'can't we all just get along?' visions of wind-blown philosophers, modern virtues and curious cherubs flitting through sublime classical architecture	Collegio del Cambio frescoes, Perugia (p322)
Piero della Francesca (1412–92)	luminous figures with lovely, limpid eyes and penetrating gazes that seem to follow you across the room and into your next life	*Legend of the True Cross* frescoes at San Francesco in Arezzo (p296); *Pregnant Madonna* at Montevarchi (p300)
Pinturicchio (Bernardino di Betto; 1452–1513)	centuries before the first Milan fashion week, he pictured a world where everyone glowed in vibrant colours and distinctive good looks	Piccolomini Library frescoes in Siena (p241)
Pontormo (1494–1557)	gorgeously dishevelled boneless beauties in distress whose unfurrowed brows could be an advert for Botox	*Il Deposizione* at Chiesa di Santa Felicità, Florence (p123)
Raphael (1483–1520)	Madonnas with skin as immaculate as conception holding court with angels, in simple settings and restrained colour schemes	*Annuciation* at the Uffizi, Florence (p112)
Rosso Fiorentino (1494–1540)	crowd scenes that come alive with ingenious stage lighting and eerie colour contrasts achieved centuries before digital effects	*Il Deposizione* at the Pinacoteca Comunale, Arezzo (p295)
Sandro Botticelli (c 1444–1510)	the world's loveliest nudes: translucent, floating figures that glide across the canvas and glow from within	*Birth of Venus*, at the Uffizi, Florence (p112)
Simone Martini (c 1284–1344)	surprising expressions in spectacular gilded Gothic settings: cranky Madonna, pushy angels, furious toddlers	*Annunciation* from Pisa cathedral, now at the Uffizi, Florence (p112)

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without having to leave home. Impressionism, plein-air-painting and romanticism became trendy among Italian artists, as witnessed in the collection at Florence's Galleria d'Arte Moderna (p124). But the most fascinating case of artistic import-export is Italian Art Nouveau, named Liberty after the London store that put William Morris' Italian-inspired visual ideals into commercial action.

Get the scoop on the Renaissance artist with the biggest cult following at www.pierodellafrancesca.it.

SHOCKS TO THE SYSTEM: WAR, FUTURISM & FASCISM

After centuries under the thumbs of popes and sundry imperial powers, Tuscany and Umbria had acquired a certain forced cosmopolitanism, and local artists could identify with Rome or Paris in addition to their own *campanile* (bell tower). The wave of nationalism that came with Italian unification didn't have a clear, immediate artistic effect within Tuscany or Umbria, whose biggest star in the early 20th century was Livorno-born painter and sculptor Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920), who lived most of his adult life in Paris. A precocious and precarious talent, Modigliani made pilgrimages to the Uffizi, read Nietzsche, seduced maids and smoked hashish – all of which have been suggested as possible inspirations for his iconic long-faced, blank-eyed female figures.

Forward momentum for the local scene was provided by futurism and Gerardo Dottori's 1914 *Ciclista,* which echoed experiments in picturing movement by Umberto Boccioni and seems to have been the working prototype Fortunato Depero's famous 1924 futurist poster for Bianchi Bicycles. But what started out as a radical experiment in *aeropittura,* the sensation of flight, became codified into a staunch nationalist aesthetic under the Fascists, and Dottori became better known for his 1933 portrait of Il Duce, aka Benito Mussolini. The Fascists also took quite a shine to the striking medieval buildings of Umbria, and decreed that all Umbrian buildings should be stripped of post-medieval ornament – a decision thankfully not put into practice, since soon thereafter the Fascists became otherwise occupied with losing the war. Still, Mussolini got his wish with austere, rationalist tower blocks that sprang up in the suburbs of Terni, Spoleto and Foligno, which have since been disparaged as only marginally liveable.

Cracks in the futurist fabric were memorably rendered by Alberto Burri (1915–95), who was born in Città di Castello, went to Africa as a doctor, got captured by the Americans and started to paint while in a prisoners of war (POW) camp in Texas. His abstract works combine oil paint and lowly materials like burlap and salvaged wood – an instinct shared by radical 1970s Arte Povera (Poor Art) artists, who used only materials they could get for free or on the cheap. Burri's earthy, exposed-seam works proved the ideal foil to Victor Vasarely's giddy, airtight Op art at the 1965 Sao Paolo Biennial, where the artists jointly landed the top prize. To judge for yourself, head to Città di Castello to see two galleries warehousing his work (p354).

During the Renaissance, the average artist earned about a third of the salary of a lawyer –today, it's about a fifth.

CONTEMPORARY ART: WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE

Tuscany and Umbria can still draw crowds just with past glories, with 120 museums in Umbria and 1.5 million visitors annually to the Uffizi alone in Tuscany. But though 2800 years of rich artistic tradition means job security for legions of art conservation specialists and art historians, it can have a stultifying effect on artists attempting to create something wholly new. But look beyond the usual etchings of key landmarks and the inevitable sunflowers, and you'll find contemporary art in progress.

Most notable is Massimo Bartolini (b 1962), who radically alters the local landscape with just a few deceptively simple (and quintessentially Tuscan)

adjustments of light and perspective that fundamentally change our experience: a bedroom where all the furniture appears to be sinking into the floor, Venice style, or a gallery where the viewer wears special shoes that subtly change the lighting in the gallery with each step. Bartolini has also changed the local flora of the tiny Tuscan town of Cecina near Livorno where he lives and works, attracting colourful flocks of contemporary art collectors and curators. These days you might be more likely to find his work at the Shanghai or Venice Biennale, but his installations can occasionally be found interrupting the countryside at the biennial Tuscia Electa arts festival (www.tusciaelecta.it).

Another artist who works with local material is Florentine Gianfranco Masi (b 1979), whose digital videos show the ever-changing configurations of clouds and tourists that define the Tuscan landscape. Check out his work online at www.etraarte.com, and find out about other upcoming contemporary art events. As long as Tuscany and Umbria exist, there will be no lack of art.

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The Culture

Find Umbria online at www.regione.umbria.it (in Italian)

The land is the essence: just as Florentine perfumer Lorenzo Villaresi finds inspiration for his finely crafted fragrances in the Tuscan countryside (opposite), so it is the natural scape of cypress trees and vines that creates this region's strong cultural backbone.

Deeply attached to their patch of land, people in this rural neck of the woods with a sugar dusting of small towns are not simply Italian or Tuscan or Umbrian. Harking back to centuries of coexistence as rival political entities with their own style of architecture, school of painting and so on, it is the *paese* (hometown) or, in the case of Siena, the *contrada* (neighbourhood), in which one is born that reigns supreme. People from Florence, Pisa, Perugia and so on wear their authentic 'Made in …' labels with overwhelming pride.

What single word best describes the Tuscan lifestyle?

Passion (p268).

Hence the strong local rivalry, albeit one that, when the chips are down, is light-hearted(ish): 'Tuscans are more or less similar no matter where they come from, in so far as they speak the same language, share the same turn of phrase', believes Francesco Carlo Griccioli (p59), typical of the many whose family trees create split loyalties. 'Florentines are witty; they like to joke, they have a strong sense of humour…it can be a very nasty sense of humour, (derisive) comments that touch an exposed raw nerve. Sienese are rougher (less sophisticated) in a way' he continues, concluding 'yet apart from this local rivalry, their likes and dislikes are really the same'.

The standard form of greeting is the handshake. Kissing on both cheeks is generally reserved for people who already know one another, sometimes after only a relatively brief acquaintance.

Passionate, proud, reserved, hard-working, family-oriented, fond of food and wine (p66), pernickety about their appearance and thrifty are characteristics attributed to Tuscans across the board. With their gargantuan artistic heritage and tradition of master craftsmanship (opposite), Florentines are known for their attention to detail, quest for perfection, appreciation of beauty and deep respect for the past. Brash, no, but they do like to make it known where they stand in Florentine society: from oversized doorknobs to sculpted stonework, overt statements of wealth and power are everywhere in this class-driven city, whose Florentine – penned for the world to read by literary greats Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch in the 14th century – is deemed the purest form of Italian.

Landlocked Umbria has always had to lean on its own land for sustenance and remains devout to its past as a port-less place unaccustomed to foreign influences. Self-reliant, honest and unabashedly direct are Umbrians who have little time for vanity or conceit – no messing here luv, what you see is what you get. That said, Umbrians are Italian, too (albeit salt-of-the-earth Italians) and, even in the pokiest of towns, they still don big sunglasses when it's cloudy.

The quintessential Umbrian never travels, lives in the same place for 400 years and has little worldliness to share. He is aloof, distant and will give you the warmest welcome when you leave. Those in walled, impenetrable Perugia will quickly realise it has yet to shake off its city-under-siege mentality.

TALK OF THE TOWN

Tune into the underbelly of what people are thinking NOW with these locally generated blogs.

Bytes of Italy (www.bytesofitaly.com) 'Random Pieces of Italian Culture, Food, Products and Travel' is the strapline of this brilliant Italy-wide blog.
Florence Night & Day (http://lovingflorence.blogspot.com) Diary of a 30-something Florentine gal, in English.
Living in Florence (www.melindagallo.com/blog) An American moves to Florence.
Tuscany Blog (www.tuscanyblog.com) Crammed with useful links, recommendations and advice, this is a one-stop shop for tracking down food and wine, real estate, farm accommodation, B&Bs, upcoming events and so on.
Tuscany Travel (http://tuscany-travel.blogspot.com) Useful info on where to go, what to see, sleeping, eating, events and so on in Tuscany
Tuscany.Podtravels.tv (http://tuscany.podtravels.tv) Videoblogs covering everything from Tuscany's grape harvest to pig breeding and futuristic sonic gardens.

THE FINE ART OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

An intense respect for Tuscany's fine art of craftsmanship drives **Lorenzo Villoresi** (☎055 234 11 87; www.lorenzovilloresi.it; Via de' Bardi 14; 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), a Florentine perfumer who crafts unique fragrances in an elegant rooftop atelier on the Oltrarno with panoramic river views.

'We have revived materials like marble, silver, other stones, olive wood etc that always belonged to the art and tradition of perfumery but disappeared in the last 50 years,' explained Mr Villoresi. His unusual, highly sensual olfactory collection is as much about natural cotton sachets filled with Tuscan herbs, scented wood bundles, ebony bathroom accessories and olive-oil bodycare products as exquisite custom-made perfumes stars flock to Florence for. Visits are by appointment only and cost from €2500 to €3000 for a two-hour session and a bottle of perfume.

'Alabaster, typical to southern Tuscany, is special. It has been used since ancient times as a vessel of fragrance and of light, for lamps and chandeliers. But we have created scented candles in alabaster jars,' said Mr Villoresi, citing his use of statuary marble to craft grooming accessories and white or red travertine marble to make potpourri jars as other examples of his unexpected use of traditional materials.

Mr Villoresi has travelled the world, greatly admires the traditional hospitality and sensuality that greeted him in India, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, the Middle and Far East, and sees his perfume house as timeless, aspiring to no specific style, Florentine or other. The 16 fragrances in his prêt à porter range (€90 to €120 for a 100ml bottle) – split into classical and fantasy and designed for either gender – draw their names from several languages, French, Latin, Persian and Akkadian included. Some (such as Alamut) are earthy, opulent, aromatic and immediately transport your olfactory senses to the Orient. Acqua di Colonia recalls the age-old use of natural essential oils; while others simply recreate familiar aromas much-loved by all – the scent of a freshly powdered face (Teint de Neige), a freshly cut meadow (Yerbamate), a Tuscan herb garden (Spezie).

Despite the exotic influence of far-flung lands, a childhood spent in a villa near Florence plays its part in the art of this highly revered nose who won the coveted Prix François Coty in Europe's perfume-making capital, Grasse, in southern France in 2006.

'In the countryside where I grew up there were wild poppies in the fields; all the herbs and spices of the garden, those used for cooking, tomatoes, and so on, laurel and many other sources of odours and colour.'

'I use galbanum, especially in Yerbamate, a scent similar to that of wild poppy. In Uomo (Man – the first fragrance crafted by Mr Villoresi and the one he wears) and Dilmun I use laurel; if you take a laurel leaf and break it – a child especially does it – the smell is fantastic. Also in my family home, there were oranges, bitter oranges, 6m high, full of blossoms – an incredible smell.'

And if Florence were a fragrance: 'It would be a spring kind of fragrance, between April and May. It would be the fragrance of trees in the city, the magnolia trees, also wisteria, mimosa, other flowers and the green part of the city too made by the Cascine park.'

Mr Villoresi's next fragrance, Mare Nostrum, will reflect Tuscany's heady mix of mountain and seaside.

LA DOLCE VITA

Life is *dolce* (sweet) for this privileged pocket of Italy – two of the country's wealthiest regions – where the family reigns supreme, and tradition and quality reign over quantity. From the great names in viticulture to the

flower-producing industry of Pescia and Umbria's small-scale farms, it is family-run businesses handed between generations that form the backbone of this proud, strong region.

Florence is one of Italy's biggest centres of Buddhism, which counts 5000-odd followers throughout Tuscany; the city has small Jewish and Muslim populations, too.

In Florence – the only city with a whiff of cosmopolitan air wafting through it (still pinprick tiny and scarcely multicultural compared to London, New York or any other real city) – daily life is the fastest paced. City-slick Florentines rise early, drop kids at school by 8am then flit from espresso standing up in the same *caffè* to the office by 9am. Lunch is a lengthy affair for these food- and wine-mad people, as is the early-evening *aperitivi* enjoyed in a bar with friends to whet appetites for dinner (around 9pm). Smokers – fast dwindling – puff on pavements outside.

Theatre, concerts, art exhibitions and *il calcio* (football) entertain after hours. Indeed, the region's two top-flight professional football clubs ACF Fiorentina and less lucky Perugia Calcio enjoy fanatical fan bases. Weekends see many flee their city apartments for less urban climes where the din of *motorini* (scooters) whizzing through the night is less, space and light more: green countryside is a 15-minute getaway from lucky old Florence, unlike many urban centres where industrial sprawl really sprawls.

Peep into a Tuscan home with Frances Mayes' beautifully illustrated, glossy coffee-table book *Bringing Tuscany Home: Sensuous Style from the Heart of Italy.*

Tuscans and Umbrians by their very nature travel little (many spend a lifetime living in the town of their birth) and place great importance on their family home – at 75% home ownership, Italy is among Europe's highest. An increasing chunk of Florentine society owns the countryside home they weekend in: €80,000 gets you a ramshackle fixer-upper on a hectare of land with olive trees near Terni; €200,000 buys the chance of a dream home in an abandoned 70 sq m deconsecrated stone church atop a hill near Città di Castello; and €4 million is the price to pay for a 16th-century Medici hunting lodge with orchard, camellia garden and manicured grounds near Pisa (some work required). At one time the domain of Tuscany's substantial well-off British population (there's good reason why playwright John Mortimer dubbed Chianti 'Chiantishire' in his 1989 TV adaptation, *Summer Lease*), the region's bounty of stylish stone villas and farmhouses with terracotta floors, wood-burning fireplace and terrace with view are as much in the hands of Tuscans eagerly rediscovering their countryside today as foreigners.

Rural lifestyle, particularly in Umbria, is slavishly driven by close-knit, ancient communities in small towns and villages where local matters and gossip are more important than national or world affairs. Everyone knows everyone to the point of being clannish, making assimilation for outsiders hard – if not impossible. Farming is the self-sufficient way of life, albeit one that is becoming increasingly difficult – hence the mushrooming of *agriturismi* (farm-stay accommodation; p309) as farmers stoically utilise every resource they have to make ends meet.

Urban or rural, children typically remain at home until they reach their 30s, often only fleeing the nest to wed. In line with national trends, Tuscan and Umbrian families are small – two or three kids, with one third of Tuscan families childless. Despite increasing numbers of women working, chauvinistic attitudes remain well entrenched in more rural areas where career opportunities have always been less or nonexistent.

A PEASANT LIFE

Mezzadria (share cropping), a medieval form of land management in place until 1979, was the key to success in the Tuscan countryside.

Contadini (peasants) lived and worked on the land, receiving in return a home for their traditionally large families (typically 10 – the more hands the better) and 50% of the crops or profit reaped from the land they worked. The other half went to the *padrone* (land owner), who often did not live on his *fattoria* (agricultural estate) but in the city.

Post-WWII industrialisation saw the birth of the tractor and the first shift in the equal balance between landowner and peasant: farmers had no money to buy tractors, obliging owners to invest instead and so upsetting the apple cart in terms of who gave how much. Gradually farm workers gravitated towards towns in search of better-paid jobs, the 1960s witnessing a particularly large exodus and so prompting the eventual collapse of share cropping and many a Tuscan farm with it.

A NOBLE LIFE

Sitting in the smaller of two lounges, hunting prints on one wall, line-up of past presidents on another, a white-gloved waiter in dovetail jacket brings two glasses of white wine on a silver tray. This, I later learn, is the 'foreign part' of the club where lady guests like myself (why, oh why, didn't I don a skirt this morning and leave my Adidas messenger bag at home) can tread: the games room, library, billiard table, ballroom and reading room with the day's newspapers are reserved strictly for members of Florence's exclusive, elusive Circolo dell' Unione (club of nobles to you and me), enthroned since 1852 in a *palazzo* (palace) on Florence's most aristocratic street, Via de' Tournabuoni.

You don't need 'a crown on your head' to join the club. But it helps, as Francesco Carlo Griccioli, *nobile* (nobileman) of both Florence and Siena (and the best-dressed, spriteliest 85-year-old in town), explains over lunch (in the guests' dining room; blue-blooded members lunch elsewhere).

'Names are examined, families, connections and all that, and the New Members' Commission gives its judgement to the board of directors – one black ball annuls five white balls', says Mr Griccioli, quickly explaining the club's self-perpetuating black-balling means of election, typical to many a gentlemen's club, as a perplexed look flashes across my face. Not hereditary, membership costs (a lot). Most of its 410 members (some female since five years ago) are, as Mr Griccioli delicately puts it, 'family members': 60% bear a title, albeit titles unrecognised by the Italian state since 1948 following the fall of the Italian monarchy.

From the 12th century until the Renaissance when wealth and ability overtook aristocratic ranking, titles of nobility – prince, duke, marques, count, viscount, baron, patrician and noble – ruled the roost. 'Florentine nobility derives mainly from bankers and merchants who made Florence what it is,' says Mr Griccioli whose family – silk weavers – originated in Florence but moved to Siena in the 16th century where it acquired property. 'The titles of count and baron belong to feudal families, not merchants, who lived in castles and properties outside Florence', he says, citing the wine-making Ricàsoli family from Il Chianti as an example.

An army officer's son educated at home by British governesses, Mr Griccioli perfected his flawless English public-school accent during WWII attached to the British 8th army as Italian intelligence liaison officer. After a lifetime career working for Italian motor giant FIAT in India and the US, Mr Griccioli returned home, living first in a farmhouse outside Florence (Pisan wife Carla's dowry) and later moving into town when country life became too difficult.

'We like to have open house and always had guests and friends coming and going. Until 10 years ago it was fairly easy to get (domestic) assistance', says Mr Griccioli as the club's 'invisible' waiter glides silently towards our table, silver platter of veal in hand.

'I don't know if it is good or bad but when I was 20, 30 and 40 there was a separation between classes. Today, when I speak to my nephews, it is clear they mix with everyone. Yes, our club is exclusive, but outside of here the world is open.'

'If you can imagine we had servants galore and we had influence, prestige, position and all that, and this today doesn't exist any longer,' says Mr Griccioli good-naturedly. For him, patriotism, Roman Catholicism, the upkeep of tradition, gracious living and 'presenting oneself with a straight face to the rest of the world' matter most.

On Florence as one of the world's great cultural capitals: 'I always maintain the mayor of Florence can pick up the phone and call his counterpart in London or New York and they will listen.'

TUSCAN DESIGN

Never has Italian design been so expressive as in 1963 when Piaggio in Pontedera (p191), 25km east of Pisa, launched the Vespa 50, a motorised scooter requiring no driving license. Overnight it became a 'must-have' item as Italy's young things snapped up the machine and the freedom and independence it gave. All of Europe's Vespas are still made in the Tuscan plant where the original 'wasp' was born in 1946.

While Audrey Hepburn was cruising around Rome side-saddle on a Vespa for Hollywood, a group of anti-establishment artists and architects were busy building a reputation for Florence as the centre of 1960s avant-garde design: design groups Radical Design, Archizoom and Superstudio were all founded in Florence in 1966, and included hot-shot Florentines Massimo Morozzi (b 1941; buy his pasta set from Alessi) and Andrea Branzi (b 1938), whose furniture designs are timeless.

As with fashion, the design scene moved to Milan in the 1970s starving Tuscany of its cutting edge.

E' QUI LA FESTA?

It's here the party? Delve into the mindset of a Tuscan or Umbrian and a holy trinity of popular folklore, agricultural tradition and religious rite of passage dances before your eyes. No cultural agenda is more jam-packed with ancient festivity than theirs: patron saints alone provide weeks of celebration given every village, town, profession, trade and social group has a saint they call their own and venerate religiously.

Festivities climax (twice!) with Siena's soul-stirring Il Palio (p246), a hot-blooded horse race conceived in the 12th century to honour the Virgin Mary and revamped six centuries on to celebrate the miracles of the Madonna of Provenzano (2 July) and Assumption (16 August). Deeply embroiled in its religious roots is fierce *contrada* rivalry, not to mention a fervent penchant for dressing up and a widespread respect of tradition that sees horses blessed before the race, jockeys riding saddleless, a local Sienese artist designing August's winning silk banner and a non-Sienese artist doing July's etc. Legend says that a Sienese bride marrying in far-off lands took earth from her *contrada* with her to put beneath the legs of her marital bed to ensure her offspring would be conceived on home soil. Atypical only to Siena, other folkloric festivals such as Arezzo's Giostra del Saracino (p298) and Pisa's Gioco del Ponte (p188) reflect the same historic division of cities and all-consuming *campanilismo* (literally, loyalty to one's bell tower).

Smoking in all enclosed public places in Italy has been banned since 2005. Fines for maverick puffers range from €27.50 to €275, with higher penalties still for those who light up in the presence of pregnant women, lactating mothers and *bambini* (kids) under 12.

No ritual is more agrarian in origin than Carnevale (p202), celebrated with gusto in Viareggio around Mardi Gras.

By no means the social force it was, Catholicism (the religion of 85% of the region) and its religious rituals play a key role in daily lives: first communions, church weddings and religious feast days are an integral part of Tuscan and Umbrian society.

'Better a death in the family than a Pisan at the door' so goes an old Florentine proverb.

LA BELLA FIGURA

A sense of style is vital to Tuscans who take great pride in their dress and appearance – not surprising given this is where the Italian fashion industry was born. Gucci and Salvatore Ferragamo (p151) got the haute-couture ball rolling in the 1920s with boutiques in Florence.

But it was in 1951 when a well-heeled Florentine nobleman called Giovanni Battista Giorgini held a fashion soiree in his Florence home that Italy's first prêt-a-porter fashion shows were spawned. The catwalk quickly shifted to Florence's Palazzo Pitti where Europe's most prestigious fashion shows dazzled until 1971 when Milan stole the show – for women's wear. Top designers still leg it to Florence twice a year to unveil their menswear collections at the Pitti Immagine Uomo fashion shows and their creations for *bambini* (kids) at Pitti Bimbo; both events waltz around Fortezza da Basso. Florentine designers to look for include Roberto Cavelli, Enrico Coveri, Pucci and Ermanno Daeilli, the creative energy behind the Ermano Scervino label.

Indisputably beautiful is *la bella figura* of Umbrian-born model-turned-actress Monica Bellucci (b 1968), better known as Mary Magdelene in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) than the face of *Elle*. Most recently, six months pregnant, she posed nude for *Vanity Fair* to express her disgust at an Italian law restricting in vitro fertilization to married couples and preventing the use of donor sperm.

Prato is one of Europe's major textile production centres; some 9000 factories employ around 45,000 people.

Style tips: dress up, not down – shorts, flip-flops (thongs) and tacky T-shirts are no go in restaurants, cafés, clubs and bars in towns and attract plenty of stares elsewhere. Cover yourself well when entering a church (no shorts, short skirts or sleeveless tops) and at least a little when sunbathing on a beach; topless bathing is not *de rigueur* and nude sunbathing offends anywhere other than on a few remote beaches.

ARTS

Painting, sculpture and architecture is covered in Art & Architecture (p41).

Literature

The stirrings of Italian literature written in the vernacular began in Tuscany and Umbria in the beginning of the 13th century. One of the genres first created was spiritual poetry, concentrated in Assisi after the death of St Francis.

www.greatdante.net explains all you wanted to know about the great poet, his life and works.

The first writer of real stature was Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), who wrote equally comfortably in both Italian and Latin. Born in Florence to a wealthy family, he received a rounded education, then became active in Florentine politics allying himself with the Guelph faction. Flexing his literary muscles,

TOP 10 NOVELS WITH A TUSCAN OR UMBRIAN SETTING

Travel literature aside, there are reams of novels with a local setting to pick from, ranging from 20th-century classics to comic contemporary works of fiction.

A Room with a View (EM Forster; 1908) A comedy of manners exploring the emotional awakening of a prim young English lady as she encounters Florence.

Aaron's Rod (DH Lawrence; 1921) A coal miner from the Midlands abandons his wife and children to pursue his dream of becoming a professional flautist in 1920s Florence.

The Birth of Venus (Sara Dunant; 2004) The glory – and gore – of Renaissance Florence is painted with extraordinary potency in this gripping bestseller.

The Custom of the Country (Edith Wharton; 1913) A honeymoon near Siena.

Indian Summer (Williams Dean Howells; 1886) A 40-something American newspaper publisher pursues his dream of living in Florence in this comic American-literature classic.

Innocence (Penelope Fitzgerald; 1986) The romantic adventures of an Italian noble family in the 16th and 20th centuries; short-listed for the Booker Prize.

My House in Umbria (William Trevor; 1991) A tender novel about the relationships between the survivors of a terrorist bomb attack as they recuperate in the Umbrian countryside. In 2003 it was made into a film starring Dame Maggie Smith.

Renato's Luck (Jeff Shapiro; 2001) Strife for the head of the local waterworks in sleepy Sant'Angelo d'Asso when a dam threatens to submerge the town.

Tuscany for Beginners: A Novel (Imogen Edward-Jones; 2005) Boisterous, racy, easy-on-the-brain story of life in a Tuscan B&B, with more than a touch of *Fawlty Towers*.

Where Angels Fear to Tread (EM Forster; 1905) 'Clash-of-cultures' tale about Lilia who marries an Italian gigolo in 'Monteriano', a fictionalised version of San Gimignano.

LOVE-LOCKED LOVERS

Any real Italian Romeo knows what to do when in Florence – head to the most famous bridge across the Arno where love-locked lovers declare their eternal love for another by locking a padlock, marked in felt-tip pen with the date and their initials, to the railings around a statue of Renaissance Florentine sculptor Benvenuto Cellini. Then they toss the key in the river.

In mid-2006 police cornered off part of Ponte Vecchio to remove 5500 *lucchetti d'amore* (love locks) from the railings. Just months later, they were smothered with hundreds more. The fine for love-locked lovers caught in the act is €50.

he began to write in different styles and genres, covering everything from philosophy and politics to love. He was exiled from Florence in 1301 when the opposing group, the Ghibellines (p34), took the reigns of power. He spent most of the rest of his life wandering Europe and composing, among much else, his *Divina Commedia* (Divine Comedy), the first great work written in Italian to stand the test of time.

Dante does not stand completely alone. Together with two fellow Tuscans, he formed the triumvirate that laid down the course for the development of a rich literature in Italian.

Locally published *The Tuscany Lifestyle* by Pier Francesco Listri is a detailed portrait of just that: the Tuscans, their living space, their art of making and cuisine.

Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca; 1304–74), born in Arezzo to Florentine parents who had been exiled from their city at about the same time as Dante, wrote more in Latin than in Italian. *Il Canzoniere* is the distilled result of his finest poetry. Although the core subject is his unrequited love for a girl called Laura, the whole breadth of human grief and joy is treated with a lyrical quality hitherto unmatched. His influence spread far and across time: the Petrarchan sonnet form, rhyme scheme and even subject matter was adopted by the English Metaphysical poets of 17th-century England, such as John Donne.

The Florentine Giovanni Boccaccio (1303–75), who ended his days in Certaldo, was a friend of Petrarch. His masterpiece, *Decameron,* was written in the years following the plague of 1348, which he survived in Florence. Each of his 10 characters recounts a story featuring a vast panorama of personalities, events and symbolism.

For spot-on, humorous anecdotes on local Tuscan culture seen from a female perspective, read Linda Falcone's entertaining *Italian Dance & I'm a Wallflower.*

During the second half of the 15th century, Lorenzo il Magnifico, the Medici ruler of Florence and patron of the arts *par excellence,* was handy with a pen in his own right. Just as importantly, his enlightened approach to learning and the arts created a healthy atmosphere for writers to flourish.

Another outstanding writer of the Florentine Renaissance is Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527; see p33), known above all for his work on power and politics, *Il Principe.* His *Mandragola* is a lively piece of comic theatre and a virtuoso example of Italian literature.

Tuscany and Umbria took a literary break during the 17th to 19th centuries, although Tuscany did give birth to Carlo Lorenzini (1826–90), creator of *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* (p200).

19TH CENTURY ONWARDS

Giosue Carducci (1835–1907) was one of the key figures of 19th-century Tuscan literature. Born in the Maremma, he spent the second half of his life in Bologna. The best of his poetry, written in the 1870s, ranged in tone from pensive evocation of death (such as in *Pianto Antico*) or memories of youthful passion *(Idillio Maremmano)* to an historic nostalgia harking back to the glories of ancient Rome.

Florence's Aldo Palazzeschi (1885–1974) was in the vanguard of the Futurist movement during the pre-WWI years. In 1911 he published arguably his best work, *Il Codice di Perelà* (Perelà's Code), an at times bitter allegory that in part becomes a farcical imitation of the life of Christ.

By the 1920s and '30s Florence was bubbling with activity as a series of literary magazines flourished in spite of the Fascist regime. Magazines such as *Solaria,* which lasted from 1926 to 1934, its successor *Letteratura* (which began circulating in 1937) and *Il Frontespizio* (1929–40) gave writers from across Italy a platform from which to launch and discuss their work. One of its founding authors, Alessandro Bonsanti (1904–84) wrote essays and literary criticism. Guglielmo Petroni (1911–93), from Lucca, was another contributor to *Letteratura.* Although a poet of some note, he's chiefly recognised for his novel *Il Mondo è una Prigione* (The World Is a Prison; 1948), a vivid account of a political prison and the Italian Resistance. Mario Tobino (1910–91), from Viareggio, used his experience as director of a lunatic asylum to great effect in *Le Donne Libere di Magliano* (Free Women of Magliano).

One of Italy's leading post-war poets was the Florentine Mario Luzi (1914–2005), whose poetry expressed the anguish arising from the contrast between the individual and the broader universe.

Few women writers reached the limelight in Tuscany but an important exception was Anna Banti (1895–1985). Her approach to her characters was psychological, while simultaneously analysing the position of women in society.

Dacia Maraini (b 1936), for many years the partner of author Alberto Moravia, is Tuscany's most prominent contemporary female author, with some 10 novels and a fistful of plays to her credit. An interesting one is *Voci* (Voices), a mystery laced with disturbing social comment, where the main character, a female journalist, embarks on the investigation of a murder.

Gem up on local politics with the website of Tuscany's regional government at www.regione.toscana.it

Pisa-born Antonio Tabucchi (b 1943) has written more than a dozen novels, plus volumes of short stories. One such story is *Sostiene Pereira* (translated into English and titled, bizarrely, *Pereira Declares* for the US market and *Declares Pereira* in the UK), set in prewar Lisbon.

Cinema

Tuscany's first claim to fame in the world of cinema is as the place where the film projector was invented, a year before the Lumière brothers patented theirs in Paris; poor Filoteo Alberini created his *kinetografo* (cinema projector) in Florence in 1895 but everyone ignored him.

TOP 10 FILMS SET HERE

Tuscany and Umbria remain a favourite location for English-language film directors.

- *A Room with a View* (1986)
- *The English Patient* (1996)
- *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993)
- *Life Is Beautiful* (1998)
- *Tea with Mussolini* (1999)
- *Gladiator* (2000)
- *Hannibal* (2001)
- *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003)
- *My House in Umbria* (2003)
- *Portrait of a Lady* (2003)

> Tuscans have a strong oral culture linked to the tale. They have a deep sense of humour, are always making fun of situations, imitating their neighbours.
>
> MARIA CASSI, COMIC ACTRESS

The biggest name is Franco Zeffirelli (b 1923), whose career has taken him from radio and theatre to opera production and film. He created the TV blockbuster *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) and many film adaptations of operas, along with film hits such as *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), *Hamlet* (1990) and the semiautobiographical *Tea with Mussolini* (1999).

Director and spirited actor Roberto Benigni (b 1952), a child of the village of Misericordia near Arezzo, picked up three Oscars and created a genre all of his own – Holocaust comedy – with *La Vita é Bella* (Life Is Beautiful; 1998), a film that prompted Charlie Chaplin's daughter, Geraldine, to declare that Benigni had inherited her father's cinematic poetry. Parts of *La Vita é Bella* and Begnini's less successful rendition of *Pinocchio* (2002) were shot at Papigno, a factory converted into movie studios near Terni.

Umbria hasn't seen much in the way of the film industry; Zeffirelli's 1972 *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (about the lives of St Francis and St Clare) was shot in Assisi.

Theatre

Comic actress Maria Cassi, on stage for 25 years, is no fool; she can really make people laugh. Born of peasant stock in the house opposite the church on top of the hill in San Domenico di Fiesole, she is much loved all over Italy for her strong Tuscan humour, mime and expression, which she gets from her dad: 'He had a strong sense of narration, of telling a tale with gestures to make it stronger,' she says with a smile. For Ms Cassi, artistic director at Florence's ground-breaking Teatro del Sale (p141), theatre in Tuscany has never been so innovative: the region boasts more than 200 theatres, many 'more like workshops, constantly producing, evolving'.

No theatre better reflects Tuscany's peasant roots than Monticchiello's Teatro di Povero (p273), near Pienza in central Tuscany. Each summer and at Christmas, villagers stage a series of plays inspired by the traditions, trials and tribulations of their tiny Tuscan village, home to some 300 people.

> If you read Italian, www.cultura.toscana.it bursts with up-to-the-minute information on Tuscany's cultural scene, theatre, music, literature and dance.

Music

Far and away Tuscany's most famous musical figure is Lucca-born Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924), composer of opera classics *Madame Butterfly, Tosca* and *La Bohème* (p195).

On a different note, one of Italy's former leading pop bands Litfiba was a Florentine product – its ex-singer Pero Pelù, now continues solo – and both Jovanotti, the country's most popular rap singer, and the singer Irene Grandi are also Tuscan. Siena-born Gianna Nannini is an internationally acclaimed and politically active Italian artist whose work ranges from rock albums to film soundtracks.

Tuscany has produced plenty of bands and musicians, ranging from Marasco – a gritty, folksy singer from Florence big in the 1950s – through to Dirotto Su Cuba, a trip-hop band. In Umbria, jazz has an enormous following thanks to Umbria Jazz and the Spoleto Festival, major events on the European jazz calendar.

DANIELE'S PLAYLIST

A high-flying events organiser, self-confessed reggae junkie and world traveller, Milan-born Daniele Palladini left for Jamaica when he was 18, has worked in Toronto, Boston and Rome, and arrived in Florence in 2005 to open Plasma (p146). As manager and art director of the region's most experimental music and video-art space, he knows the beat. Daniele says a wholly Tuscan sound is hard to pinpoint.

'Kids all over the world are connected with things like MySpace and You Tube. It's a huge melting pot and in the Western world there's been a standardisation of styles, making it difficult to tell if a band is from the UK, Italy or Finland, let alone Tuscany!'

'Tuscany is quite good for indies. But big bands only stop in Milan and sometimes Rome. The big problem is Italy's getting old and it's increasingly difficult for young people to find spaces to express themselves. Yes, Italy does have the biggest arts patrimony in the world, but we cannot live forever in the Renaissance.'

Despite all the odds, Tuscany does yield a diverse line-up ('the soil for musicians here is rich') as Daniele's playlist of the region's most interesting sounds now reveals.

Appaloosa (www.appaloosarock.com) Rebellious Livorno's much-loved band.
Elton Junk (www.myspace.com/eltonjunk) Psychedelic punk trio from Siena.
Ether (www.myspace.com/3ther) Electronic IDM sound, a tad experimental, from Florence; independent indie label.
evanicetrip (www.myspace.com/evanicetrip) Florentine rock band looking for a label.
Jealousy Party (www.myspace.com/jealousyparty) Florentine free jazz trio dedicated to improvisation.
Miranda (www.mirandamiranda.it) Florence-based noise/experimental-punk trio, brilliant live, with two albums to date; *Rectal Explorations* (2006; from SCRATCH records) is the latest.
Moleskin (www.moleskin.it) Post-rock from Città di Castello.
O.B.O (www.oboism.com) oshinOko Bunker Orchestra: noise'n'roll in Florence.
Samuel Katarro (www.myspace.com/samuelkatarro) Modern one-man band from Pistoia.
Train de Vie (www.traindevie.net) Florentine popfolk fusing a violin, flute, guitar and voice with strong Afro-Latin and folk-rock rhythms hammered on bass and drums; its third album was recorded live in Florence's Teatro di Rifredi in 2007.
TV Lumière (www.tvlumiere.it) Dark melodic melancholic post-rock sound from Terni; self-produced its first album, *TV Lumière* (2005).
Zenerswoon (www.zenerswoon.com) Three-piece indie rock band from Florence with one album to date, *There In the Sun* (2005).

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Food & Drink

Be it shopping for fresh produce at Florence's central market (p143), snacking on a tripe burger (p137), sinking your teeth into a *bistecca alla fiorentina* (p68) or sniffing out truffles (p170), this region cooks up a feast of gastronomic experiences.

Ask any Tuscan who created French cuisine and they'll say Tuscany: in 1533 Catherine de' Medici wed the Duke of Orleans in Marseille, taking an entourage of master cooks, pastry makers and meat men with her from Florence.

'To cook like your mother is good, to cook like your grandmother is better,' says the Tuscan proverb. And indeed, it is age-old recipes passed between generations that form the backbone of contemporary Tuscan and Umbrian cuisine. Ever faithful to its humble rural roots, it is a peasant fare based on beans, bread and other cheap, abundant essentials that these *mangiafagioli* ('bean eaters' as Tuscans are known by other Italians) thrive on…and are envied the world over.

During the 13th and 14th centuries when Florence prospered and the wealthy started using silver cutlery instead of fingers, simplicity remained the hallmark of dishes cooked up at the lavish banquets held by feuding families as a show of wealth. During the Renaissance the Medici passion for flaunting the finer things in life gave Tuscan cuisine a fanciful kick as spectacular sculptures of sugar starred alongside spit-roasted suckling pig on the banquet table.

Yet for ordinary Tuscans and town trattorie, it was the region's age-old 'poor dishes' that kept hunger at bay. These dishes were dictated by each season, used fresh local produce or leftovers, and were savoured around a shared table. Contemporary Tuscan and Umbrian cuisine continues this tradition.

THE COUNTRY KITCHEN

It was over an open wood fire in *la cucina contadina* (the farmer's kitchen) that Tuscan and Umbrian cuisine was cooked up. Its basic premise: don't waste a crumb.

THE ARK OF TASTE

Save the Zolfino bean and the Cetica red potato (makes a mean gnocchi)! Bake more Casola chestnut bread! Breed more Zeri lambs!

An international project born and headquartered in Florence, the Ark of Taste is essentially a list of endangered food products drawn up by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity in partnership with the Region of Tuscany. It covers the world and protects indigenous edibles threatened with extinction by industrialisation, globalisation, hygiene laws, environmental dangers and so on.

In Tuscany 32 items make it onto the list (including Colonnata lard, Certaldo onions, Garfagnana potato bread, Carmignano dried figs, Londa Regina peaches, Pistoian Mountain *pecorino* cheese and *bottarga* – made from the salted roe of red mullet). Umbria has three endangered items (sweet red Cannara onions, Trevi black celery and Lake Trasimeno beans).

Tuscan cured meats are particularly plentiful on the endangered list: *maleggato* (blood sausage from San Miniato), *mortadella* (made dull pink with drops of alkermes liqueur), Siennese *buristo* (pig's blood salami), Valdarno *tarese* (a 50cm- to-80cm-long pancetta spiced with red garlic, orange peel and covered in pepper), Florentine *bardiccio* (fresh fennel-flavoured sausage encased in a natural skin of pig intestine and eaten immediately) and *biroldo* (spiced sausage made from pig's head and blood in Garfagnana).

Dining on or sampling any of these items when in the region guarantees an authentic, delicious, tasting experience. For a full list see www.fondazioneslowfood.it.

Meat & Game

The icon of Tuscan cuisine is Florence's *bistecca alla fiorentina,* a loin steak legendary not only for its gluttonous size but because it was at one time outlawed (see p68).

Tuscan markets conjure up an orgy of animal parts most wouldn't even dream of digesting. In the past the prime beef cuts were only the domain of the wealthy. Offal was the prime fare of peasants who cooked tripe in the pot for hours with onions, carrots and herbs to make *lampredetto* or with tomatoes and herbs to make *trippa alla fiorentina* – two Florentine classics still going strong.

Fortunately *pasto,* a particularly gruesome mix of cows lungs *(picchiante)* and chopped potatoes, is not even a gastronomic curiosity these days – unlike *cibrèo* (chicken's kidney, liver, heart and cockscomb stew) and *colle ripieno* (stuffed chicken's neck), two dishes not for the faint-hearted that can still be sampled at Trattoria Cibrèo in Florence (p141). Another fabulous golden oldie (cooked by the Etruscans no less as many a fresco illustrates) still going strong is *pollo al mattone* – boned chicken splattered beneath a brick, rubbed with herbs and baked beneath the brick. The end result: handsomely crispy.

Wild boar, hunted in autumn, is turned into sausages *(salsicce di cinghiale)* or simmered for hours to make a rich stew.

Pork reigns supreme in Umbria, where every last morsel of the family pig was eaten. Butchers from Norcia (p383) were so well known for their craft in medieval times that, to this day, a pork butcher anywhere in Italy is known as a *norcino* and works in a *norcineria.* Pigs are roasted whole on a spit to become *la porchetta* (suckling pig), or slaughtered, butchered and conserved (to eat in the long hard winter traditionally) as *prosciutto di Norcia,* a coarse salty cured ham. Other porky Umbrian specialities include *capocollo* (seasoned cured pork sausage), *barbozzo* (pig-cheek bacon) and *mazzafegati* (pork liver, orange peel and sultana sausages).

In Tuscany the family pig invariably ended up on the plate as a salty slice of *soprassata* (head, skin and tongue boiled, chopped and spiced with garlic, rosemary etc), *finocchiona* (fennel-spiced sausage), *prosciutto* (from Casentino is the best), nearly black *mallegato* (blood sausage spiked with nutmeg, cinnamon, raisins and pine kernels from San Miniato) or *mortadella* (salami speckled with cubes of white fat). Butcher legend Dario Cecchini (p166) in Il Chianti is the most fun man to taste these with and buy them from. *Lardo di Colonnata* (tasty pig fat aged in salt and herbs for at least six months) is among the Tuscan food products safeguarded by Slow Food's Ark of Taste (opposite).

The strap line of Bill Buford's hilarious *Heat* says it all: an amateur's adventures as kitchen slave, line cook, pasta maker and – most significantly – an apprentice for six months to Il Chianti's legendary Dante-quoting butcher (p166).

Fish

Livorno leads the region in seafood, fishy *cacciucco* (one 'c' for each type of fish thrown into it) being its signature dish. Deriving its name from the Turkish *kukut,* meaning 'small fry', *cacciucco* is a stew of five fish simmered with tomatoes and red peppers, and served atop stale bread. *Triglie alla Livornese* is red or white mullet cooked in tomatoes and *baccalà alla Livornese,* also with tomatoes, features cod traditionally salted aboard the ships en route to the old Medici port. Salt cod, not to be confused with unsalted air-dried stockfish *(stoccofisso),* is a Tuscan trattoria mainstay – served as tradition demands on Friday.

The area around Lake Trasimeno in Umbria is another *pesce* (fish) hot spot, where you can fish and eat your own catch (p359), or dine out on *carpa regina in porchetta* (carp cooked in a wood oven with loads of fennel and garlic) and *tegamaccio* (a kind of soupy stew of the best varieties of local lake

THE ETIQUETTE OF BISTECCA ALLA FIORENTINA

'There is only one way to cook a *bistecca alla fiorentina.* If you ask for it blue or well done you are asking for something else', says Umberto Montana between antipasti bites of *soprassata* (head, skin and tongue boiled, chopped and spiced with garlic, rosemary etc) and *finocchiona* (fennel-spiced sausage) over lunch at Osteria del Caffé Italiano (p140), his *osteria* which cooks traditional Tuscan cuisine.

'Burnt outside and completely raw inside…that is not a *bistecca alla fiorentina.* It should be pink in the middle; just the finest slither is blue', he continues enthusiastically, illustrating the required rainbow of colours with two slices of bread as I savour a sweet Tuscan artichoke and eye up the 45 different bottles of olive oil vying to be tested on a dresser opposite.

Florence's legendary hunk of a beef cut sits on the T-bone, is between 3cm and 4cm to 5cm thick and easily feeds two. It comes from Tuscany's beautiful cream-coloured Chianina cattle aged at least 15 months old and the loin must hang for a minimum of 10 days.

'Good meat and a good fire' are the secrets to a perfect *bistecca alla fiorentina* says Mr Montana, who pays a good deal more for his meat to hang for at least 25 days, preferably 40, thus ensuring it arrives in his restaurant mouth-melting tender. He cooks it straight – no salt ('dries the meat, makes it tough'), no olive oil ('fat in the meat already') – and cooks it on all three sides ('turn it thrice') above an exactly controlled fire of moderate temperature ('too hot, it will burn'). Total cooking time: 15 to 20 minutes; salt and pepper before serving.

Bistecca alla fiorentina, banned by the EU for fear of mad-cow disease in 2001 and back on the menu since 2006, is priced by *l'etto* (100g). Pay around €45 per kilo.

fish – eel, whiting, perch, trout and so on – simmered in olive oil, white wine and herbs).

Pulses, Grains & Vegetables

Poor man's meat was precisely what pulses were to Tuscans and Umbrian centuries ago. Jam-packed with protein, cheap and available year-round (eaten fresh in summer, dried in winter), pulses (beans, peas and lentils) – of which an incredible variety exist – make some of the region's most traditional dishes, *minestra di fagioli* (bean soup) and *pasta e ceci* (chickpea pasta) included. Throw the other dirt-cheap staple, bread, into the pot and what do you get – *minestra di pane* (bread and bean soup) and *ribollita* (a 'reboiled' bean, vegetable and bread soup with black cabbage, left to sit for a day before being served).

Enjoy great website design and plenty of recipes and extensive descriptions of regional Tuscan and Umbrian specialities at www.italianmade.com.

White *cannellini* beans drizzled in olive oil are an inevitable accompaniment to meat. Amid the dozens of different bean varieties, *cannellini* and dappled *borlotti* are the most common, the round yellow *zolfino* and silky smooth *sorano* bean the most prized. The greenish *verdino di Cave* and yellowish *giallo di Cave* cultivated for at least century in Cave, a hamlet near Foligno in northern Umbria, is harvested and the entire crop sold at the village's Sagra del fagiolo di Cave in October. Another Umbrian variety, the small white *fagiolo del purgatorio* (purgatorial bean), alludes to the centuries-old Lenten tradition of eating beans on Ash Wenesday to purge sins.

Lenticchie (green lentils) from Castelluccio, near Norcia in Umbria, are another source of local pride, as are the 18 local varieties of *farro dicocco* (emmer wheat), an ancient grain cultivated in the Valnerina area and around Spoleto, southern Umbria. Of a similar age to emmer but with a tougher husk is *farro della Garfagnana* (spelt), a grain grown in Central Europe as early as 2500 BC and one that has never died out in the Garfagnana, northwest Tuscany.

The Tuscan vegetable garden is lush, strictly seasonal, and one that sees medieval vegetables cultivated alongside tomatoes, zucchini, mushrooms

and others common to most European tables: wild fennel, black celery (braised as a side dish), sweet red onions (delicious oven baked), artichokes and zucchini flowers (both stuffed and oven baked), black cabbage, broad beans, chicory, chard, thistle-like cardoons and green tomatoes are among the more unusual to look out for.

Practically an antique and prized the world over as one of the most expensive spices, saffron is fast becoming all the rage again, particularly around San Gimignano where it was enthusiastically traded in medieval times. A fiery red and as fine as dust by the time it reaches the kitchen,

INTERVIEW WITH FABIO PICCHI

Deeply rooted in tradition yet full of surprises best describes the cuisine of Tuscany's most well-known chef, Fabio Picchi, who famously serves no pasta in his fabled Florentine trattoria (p141) – itself named after one of his most ancestral dishes, *cibrèo.*

'It is an old family recipe – chicken kidney, liver, heart and cockscomb. It may be stewed, but the best way is with spinach and parmesan flan, in the middle of which you throw the *cibrèo'*, says the Florentine with a wide smile. He casually throws in that stuffed chicken's neck (which, incidentally, is served head on plate) is another memorable family heirloom recipe.

Fabio Picchi smiles a lot. A large burly man with handsome white hair, full beard, he has an enormously gentle, charismatic manner. He exudes passion – passion for the Renaissance city where he was born, for food, for his four children (two of whom, 20-year-old Duccio and 25-year-old Giulio, work with him) and for his own childhood, of which five months of the year was idyllically spent on Isola d'Elba.

'My father, a professional scuba-diving fisherman, tried not to become rich but to simply do what he loved, and that was fishing. At home there was always lots of fish for my mother to cook.' Fabio cites two of his most poignant culinary memories as shellfish cooked with tomatoes, and particularly fatty fish – such as *sgombro* (mackerel) or *sugarelli* (scad) – combined with rosemary, sage, garlic, olive oil and 'other things found on the rocks', then cooked in vinegar to annul the fat.

The other is *arrosto di agnello* (leg of lamb), a traditional Tuscan family feast served at Easter and, depending on the family, a handful of other times a year.

'For me it wasn't so much the lamb as the way of eating it. I realised I was an adult the day my father gave me the roasting tin to mop up the juices with bread!' says the larger-than-life chef. On the day I lunched there, his Teatro del Sale (p141) kitchen cooked up an inventive mouth-watering mix of spit-roasted meat cuts, sausage and, most notably, hunks of baguette-type bread dunked in oil before cooking. The result – dished up in a roasting tin – was divine.

For Fabio Picchi, food and taste is a happy, emotional affair, nurtured by the extraordinary love his own parents exhibited so passionately towards one another and expressed today in the chef's culinary philosophy of combining simple flavours.

'Mayonnaise – a combination of egg, olive oil and lemon juice – is a perfect example of this, of creating a fourth element completely different from the original three.' One of his personal favourites served at Cibrèo (p141) – a simple ricotta and potato flan – gets its kick from the puddles of *ragù* (meat sauce), olive oil and dusting of grated parmesan it is served with. His star *primo,* so much in demand that he deliberately doesn't always serve it to ensure appetites stay whetted, is *passato di peperoni gialli* (yellow bell-pepper soup).

'So why no pasta?' I ask this Slow Food–hailed chef for whom Tuscan cuisine is an age-old tradition that scarcely changes ('there's a big difference between Tuscan cuisine and Tuscan restaurants'). Is it, as the press says, a deliberate move on his part to uphold a true Tuscan culinary tradition?

'No. Pasta is as traditional to Tuscany as it is to Naples. When I opened Cibrèo in 1979 I was 24 and only had a wood stove, and to keep water boiling all day on a wood stove was a problem. So I decided no pasta. And the next day everyone was talking about this Italian restaurant in Florence with no pasta. It was my fortune!' he laughs.

saffron in its rawest state is, in fact, the dried flower stigma of the saffron crocus. Should you want to learn how it is grown, stay at Podere Castellare (p165).

Pasta

Florentine chef Fabio Picchi (p69) says it is a fallacy to say that pasta is not part of Tuscan cuisine: he has a good giggle every time the press yet again cites the absence of pasta in his Florence trattoria as a reflection of true Tuscan gastronomy. Indeed, no Tuscan banquet would be quite right without a *primo* of home-made *maccheroni* (wide flat ribbon pasta), *pappardelle* (wider flat ribbon pasta) or Siennese *pici* (ultrathin strands of spaghetti-like pasta dried in *tagliatelle*-style nests) served with a duck, hare, rabbit or boar sauce.

Any dish *alla livornese* is tomato red, Livorno apparently being Europe's first city in the 16th century to cook with tomatoes (imported from the USA).

Umbria has its own pasta: round stringlike *umbricelli* (also spelled *ombricelli*), fatter than spaghetti, and *strangozzi (strozzapreti* in some towns), which is like *umbricelli* but with a rougher surface to better absorb the accompanying meat, tomato or (culinary orgasm alert!) black-truffle sauce.

Bread

One bite and the difference strikes – *pane* (bread) here is unsalted, creating a disconcertingly bland taste many a bread lover might never learn to love.

Yet it is this centuries-old staple, deliberately unsalted to ensure it lasted for a good week and to compliment the region's salty cured meats, that forms the backbone of Tuscany's most famous dishes: *pappa al pomodoro* (a thick bread and tomato soup, eaten hot or cold), *panzanella* (a tomato and basil salad mixed with a mush of bread soaked in cold water) and *ribollita*. None sound or look particularly appetising, but their depth of flavour is extraordinary.

Thick-crusted *pane Toscana* (also known as *pane casalingo)* is the basis of two antipasti delights, traditionally served on festive occasions but appearing on most menus today – *crostini* (lightly toasted slices of bread topped with liver pate) and *fettunta* (also called *crogiantina* or *bruschetta;* toast fingers doused in garlic, salt and olive oil).

Cheese

'In Tuscany the bread has to be eaten and if it can't be eaten, you cook it.'

UMBERTO MONTANA, ALLE MURATE (P139), FLORENCE

So important was cheese-making in the past, it was deemed a dowry skill. Still highly respected, the *pecorino* (sheep's milk cheese) crafted in Pienza, a Tuscan town near the Umbrian border, ranks among Italy's greatest *pecorini:* taste it young and mild in the company of fava beans; or more mature and tangier, spiked with *toscanello* (black pepper corns) or *pecorino di tartufo* (black-truffle shavings). *Pecorino* massaged with olive oil during the ageing process turns red and is called *rossellino.*

Pecorino is commonly served region wide as a first course with either fresh pear or chestnuts and honey. Mild-tasting *caciotta* is made from cow's milk and laced with truffle shavings by Umbrians to become *caciotta al tartufo.* Shepherds in the Umbrian hills traditionally salted ricotta (*ricotta salata*) to preserve it.

AN APPETITE FOR UMBRIA

The best cookbook on Umbria right now is *An Appetite for Umbria* by Christine Smallwood (£19.99; Bonny Day Publishing). Smallwood has compiled recipes from the best restaurants in Umbria – Il Bacco Felice in Foligno, La Fornace di Mastro Giorgio in Gubbio etc – along with a beautiful guide to Umbrian food and wine. Available for sale in several of the restaurants listed and from the website www.appetiteforumbria.com.

PIG UGLY BUT PRECIOUS

From Etruscan truffle hunts to hunting with Imperio and a dog called Toby (p170), how *tartufi* (truffles) grow remains a mystery. They're not a plant, they don't spawn like a mushroom and cultivating them is impossible.

The known facts are that they grow in symbiosis with an oak tree; come in 'white' (actually a mouldy old yellowish colour) or black; and are sniffed out by highly trained dogs (traditionally it was a pig) from late November to early January in two privileged pockets of Tuscany (around San Giovanni d'Asso near Siena and San Miniato west of Florence), and Norcia and Spoleto in Umbria.

Pig ugly but precious, these highly sought-after lumps of fungus are certainly worth their weight in gold. They are typically served with simple mild-tasting dishes (a plate of pasta? perfect!) to give the palate full opportunity to revel in their subtle flavour. Yet it is the pungent aroma of these knobbly lumps that is the most extraordinary (it can even be aphrodisiacal according to some).

Olive Oil

Olive oil heads the culinary trinity (bread and wine are the other two) and epitomises the earthy simplicity that Tuscan and Umbrian cuisine is all about: dipping chunks of bread into pools of this liquid gold or biting into a slice of oil-doused *fettunta* are sweet pleasures in life here.

The Etruscans were the first to cultivate olive trees and press the fruit to make oil, a process later refined by the Romans. As with wine, strict rules govern when and how olives are harvested (October through to 31 December), the varieties used and so on. Extra virgin oil originating from the terraced hillsides in Umbria is covered by one state-regulated Denomination of Protected Origin (DOP), while the best Tuscan oils bear a Chianti Classico DOP or Terre di Siena DOP label and an IGP certificate of quality issued by the region's Consortium of Tuscan Olive Oil.

In *Around the Tuscan Table,* renowned food scholar and academic Carole Counihan takes an anthropological look at family and food and how it has changed over the decades in 20th-century Florence.

Sweets, Chocolate & Ice

Be it the simple honey, almond and sugar-cane sweets traditionally served at the start of 14th-century banquets in Florence or the sugar sculptures made to impress at the flamboyant 16th- and 17th-century feasts of the power-greedy Medici, *dolci* (sweets) have always been reserved for festive occasions. In more humble circles street vendors sold *bamboloni* (doughnuts) and *pandiramerino* (rosemary-bread buns), while carnival (p73) in Florence was marked by *stiacchiata* (Florentine flat bread made from eggs, flour, sugar and lard, then dusted with icing sugar).

As early as the 13th century, servants at the Abbazia di Montecelso near Siena paid tax to the nuns in the form of *panpepato* (a pepper and honey flat bread), although legend tells a different tale: following a siege in Siena, the good-hearted Sister Berta baked a revitalising flat cake of honey, dried fruit, almonds and pepper to pep up the city's weakened inhabitants. Subsequently sweetened with spices, sprinkled with icing sugar and feasted on once a year at Christmas, Siena's *panforte* (literally 'strong bread') – a flat, hard cake with nuts and candied fruit – is eaten year-round today. An old wives tale says it stops couples quarrelling.

Unsurprisingly it was at the Florentine court of Catherine de' Medici that Italy's most famous product, gelato (ice cream), first appeared thanks to court maestro Bernardo Buontalenti (1536–1608), who engineered a way of freezing sweetened milk and egg yolks together; the ice house he designed still stands in the Boboli Gardens (p124). For centuries, ice cream and sherbets – a mix of shaved ice and fruit juice served between

TOP FIVE CHEFS

Memorable feasts are part of the furniture for the crème de la crème of regional cuisine:

- Fabio Picchi at Cibrèo et al, Florence (p141)
- Giuseppe Alessi at La Pentola dell'Oro, Florence (p140)
- Francesco Berardinelli, Beccofino, Florence (p142)
- Arch rivals Giorgio Vissani & Paolo Trippini (try them both), Lago di Corbara (p372)
- Salvatore Denaro at Il Bacco Felice, Foligno (p347)

courses at Renaissance banquets to aid digestion – only appeared on wealthy tables.

Tuscan *biscotti* (biscuits) – served with candied fruits and sugared almonds at the start of and between courses at Renaissance banquets – are dry, crisp and often double baked. *Cantucci* are traditionally studded with almonds but spiked with anything from chocolate to apricots these days. *Brighidini di Lamporecchio* are small round aniseed-flavoured wafers; *ricciarelli* are almond biscuits, sometimes with candied orange; and pine kernels stud *lardpinocchiati*. All these biscuits are best sampled when dipped in a glass of *Vin Santo* (p74). In Lucca *buccellato*, a treat that is given by godparents to their godchild on their first Holy Communion, is sweetness and light (p198).

In Tuscany there are some six million olive trees studding 55,000 hectares, framed by 10,000 olive-oil producers.

Umbrian chocolate is legendary – the world-famous *baci* (hazelnut 'kisses' covered with chocolate) being made at the now Nestlé-owned Perugina chocolate factory (p324), which can be visited in Perugia.

TUTTI A TAVOLA

Walk into a trattoria or restaurant half an hour before opening time and the chatter of its entire staff merrily dining around a communal table strikes you instantly.

For where to eat and drink, typical restaurant opening hours, dining with kids, drinks other than wine, vegetarians and vegans and so on, see p403.

Tutti a tavola (the shared table) is an integral part of culinary culture. Traditionally gathering for a hearty *pranzo* (lunch) around noon, families – during the working week at least – tend to share the main family meal in the evening now. Sunday lunch does, however, remain sacred. *Colazione* (breakfast), a quick dash in a bar or *caffé* on the way to work for a cappuccino and *cornetto* (croissant), scarcely counts as a meal.

An everyday *cena* (dinner) comprises a *primo* (first course) and *secondo* (second course), usually accompanied by a *contorno* (vegetable side dish) and a piece of fruit as dessert. The traditional Italian, belt-busting five-course whammy of *antipasto* (appetiser), *primo*, *secondo* with *contorno*, *insalata* (salad) and *dolci* (dessert) generally only happens on Sunday and feast days. In true Italian style, coffee – as in a short sharp espresso shot and *nothing* else (no cappuccino please) – is only ever served at the end of a meal alongside, on special occasions, a digestive of grappa (p74) or other fiery liqueur. Bread flows but don't expect a side plate; put it on the table (sauce-mopping is not allowed) and know you'll pay for it – restaurants charge a fixed €1.50 to €3 per head *coperto* (cover).

On the volatile subject of pasta, Italians don't go to restaurants to eat pasta – every Italian thinks he can cook pasta better at home. It is not locals therefore who eat *lasagne* and *spaghetti Bolognese* in restaurants, rather tourists, meaning places with these dishes are essentially tourist traps. Should your pasta involve fish don't ask for parmesan, and if it happens to be long and thin, twirling it around your fork as if you were born twirling is the only way. Should you be confronted with a long piece dangling, bite rather than suck.

Dress decently when dining and strike a pose by resting your forearms or wrists (never elbows) on the table. Finally, if you want to avoid dishes tampered to suit tourist tastebuds, avoid the fixed-price *menù turistico*. Good value as it might appear, it is a pale reflection of authentic fare consumed by locals.

Elizabeth Romer's *The Tuscan Year* is a beautiful and extremely informative account of Tuscan farm life in a valley, seen through the eyes of a committed foodie; recipes add extra zest.

Smoking is illegal in all public places, cafés and restaurants included.

BUONE FESTE

Be it the start of a harvest, a wedding, birth or religious holiday, traditional celebrations are intrinsically woven into Tuscan culinary culture. By no means as raucous as festivals of the past when an animal was sacrificed, most remain meaty affairs. As integral to the festive calendar as these madcap days of overindulgence are the days of eating *magro* (lean) – fasting days, usually preceding every feast day and in place for 40 days during Lent.

Tuscans have baked simple breads and cakes like ring-shaped *berlingozzo* (Tuscan sweet bread) and *schiacciata alla fiorentina* (a flattish spongey bread-cum-cake best made with old-fashioned lard) for centuries during Carnevale, the period of merrymaking leading up to Ash Wednesday. Fritters are another sweet Carnevale treat: *cenci* are plain twists (literally 'rags') of fried sweet dough sprinkled with icing sugar; *castagnole* look like puff-up cushions; and *fritelle di mele* (apple fritters) are slices of apple battered, deep fried and eaten warm with plenty of sugar.

A typical Chianti Classico stays on the table and is part of the food. As a child I remember my grandfather putting the *fiasche* (flask) on the table and it stayed there for every meal.

COSIMO GERICKE, CHIANTI WINE PRODUCER, FATTORIA DI RIGNANA (P312)

Pasqua (Easter) is big. On Easter Sunday, families take baskets of hard-boiled white eggs covered in a white-cloth napkin to church to be blessed and return home to a luncheon feast of roast lamb gently spiced with garlic and rosemary, pre-empted by the blessed eggs. In Umbria, *ciaramicola* is the traditional Easter cake. Shaped in a ring with five humps representing Perugia's five historical quarters, it comes iced in white and sprinkled with multicoloured hundreds-and-thousands.

September's grape harvest sees grapes stuck on top of *schiacciata* to make *schiacciata con l'uva* (grape cake), and autumn's chestnut harvest brings a flurry of chestnut festivals and *castagnaccio* (chestnut cake baked with chestnut flower, studded with raisins, topped with a rosemary sprig and delicious served with a slice of ricotta) to the Tuscan table. Come *Natale* (Christmas), a *bollito misto* (boiled meats) with all the trimmings is the traditional festive dish in many families: various meaty animal parts, trotter et al, are thrown in the cooking pot and simmered for hours with a vegetable and herb stock. The meat is later served with mustard, salsa verde and other sauces. A whole pig, notably the recently revived ancient white-and-black Cinta Senese (Siena belted) breed, roasted on a spit is the other option.

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Call yourself a rock star? Then show us your wine label! While Bob Dylan's scrawl of an autograph graces the etiquette of the full-bodied red Planet Waves, produced from a Montepulciano and Merlot grape mix at the Fattoria La Terrazza (www.fattorialeterrazze.it), 100km east of Umbria, Sting has plumped for the Tuscan heart – Il Chianti. His private label, limited and signed, is a Chianti Colli Aretini known as Il Serrestori, named after the silk-weaving family who once ruled the vast wine-producing estate near Figline Valdarno that the ageing rocker snapped up for a mere €6 million in 2002.

HOT DATES

Dedicated oenophiles could plan a trip around the last weekend in May when dozens of wine-producing estates in Tuscany and Umbria open their cellars to wine-tasters during **Cantine Aperte**, an annual festival organised by Italy's dynamic **Wine Tourism Movement** (www.movimentoturismovino.it).

Other hot dates to consider include **Benvenuta Vendemmia** (Welcome Harvest), a grape-harvest festival on a September Sunday; **Novello in Cantina**, an opportunity to taste the new wines in November; and the festive **Calici di Stelle** on 10 August which ushers in wine, dance and folk music to town squares.

Food festivals – a great excuse to dine well, drink and sometimes dance 'til dawn – stud the region's rich cultural calendar (see p22).

WINE

There's much more to this vine-rich region than cheap, raffia-wrapped bottled Chianti – *that* was the 1970s darling. Something of a viticulture powerhouse in Italy today, Tuscany and Umbria provides plenty of excitement for visiting oenophiles.

Vin santo (literally 'holy wine') is sweet to both regions. Sip the golden syrupy dessert wine at Mass (!) or as a dessert with a plate of almond-studded *cantucci* (p71).

Indispensable for any expert or lover of Italian wines is *Italian Wines* (Gambero Rosso & Slow Food Editore), an annual wine guide in English with detailed reviews of 2200 wine producers and 16,000 wines across 1000 pages.

Wine tasting is an endless pleasure in both regions where myriad *enoteche* (wine bars) and *cantine* (wine cellars) ensure tastebuds stay titillated. Trattorie wine lists feature a limited selection generally, but most midrange and top-end restaurants stock a gambit of price ranges and geographical origins.

When selecting, remember a *vino da tavola* (table wine) could well be so simply because its producer has chosen not to adhere to the regulations governing production, thus does not bear a state-issued Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC) or Denominazione d'Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) classification typically associated with quality. *Superiore* on the label denotes DOC wines above the general standard (perhaps with greater alcohol or longer ageing) and *Riserva* is applied only to DOC or DOCG wines aged for a specified amount of time.

This said, ordering a glass or jug of *vino della casa* (house wine) costs no more than €6 a litre and will not disappoint.

Tuscany

Tuscany is largely about reds, Brunello di Montalcino being up there at the top with Italy's most prized: count on €5 a glass, €20 to €100 for an average bottle and €5000 for a 1940s collectible. Intense and complex with an ethereal fragrance, it is the product of Sangiovese grapes grown south of Siena; must spend at least two years ageing in oak; and is best paired with game, wild boar and roasts. See p258 for more detail. Brunello grape rejects go into Rossi di Montalcino, Brunello's substantially cheaper and wholly drinkable kid sister.

American food, wine and travel writer Kyle Phillips, wed to a Florentine and living in Tuscany, produces two excellent websites reviewing Italian cuisine at http://italianfood.about.com and wine at www.italianwinereview.com

Prugnolo Gentile grapes (a clone of Sangiovese) form the backbone of the distinguished Vino Nobile di Montepulciano (2006 was an exceptional year). Its intense but delicate nose and a dry vaguely tannic taste make it the perfect companion to red meat and mature cheese.

Then there's Chianti, a cheery full and dry red fellow known the world over, easy to drink, suited to any dish and wholly affordable. More famous than it was good in the 1970s, contemporary Chianti gets the thumbs up

from wine critics today. Produced in seven sub-zones from Sangiovese and a mix of other grape varieties, Chianti Classico – the traditional heart of this longstanding wine-growing area – is the best known with a DOCG guarantee of quality and a Gallo Nero (Black Cockerel) emblem that once symbolised the medieval Chianti League. Young fun Chianto Colli Senesi from the Siena hills is the largest sub-zone; Chianti Colli Pisane is light and soft in style, and Chianti Rùfina (p165) comes from the hills east of Florence.

Tuscany produces six DOCG wines and 30-plus DOC wines. Umbria's twinset of DOCGs stand alongside a dozen or so DOC wines.

One result of Chianti's 'cheap wine for the masses' reputation in the 1970s was the realisation by some Tuscans – including the Antinoris, Tuscany's most famous wine-producing family – that wines with a rich, complex, internationally acceptable taste following the New World tradition of blending mixes could be sold for a lot more than local wines. Thus, innovative exciting wines were developed and cleverly marketed to appeal to buyers in both New York and Florence. And when an English-speaking scribe dubbed the end product 'Super Tuscans' the name stuck. Sassacaia, Tignanello and Solaia are super-hot Super Tuscans.

Tuscan whites amount to one label loved by popes and artists alike during the Renaissance: Vernaccia di San Gimignano (p258).

Umbria

Umbria was first recognised for its whites, most notably the dry Orvieto Classico, as gorgeous as the southern Umbrian town that bears its name and where Etruscans first cultivated vines. Ironically, some of the most prestigious wines from this area, such as the fruity well-structured Cervaro della Sala (literally 'Stag of the Hall', made from grechetto and chardonnay grapes) and the sweet golden dessert wine Muffato della Sala (a blend of four grapes), are made by Tuscany's Antinori family. The Antinoris bought Castello della Sala in Ficulle, 18km from Orvieto, in 1940 and slowly made the centuries-old estate complete with 52 hectares of vines and olive groves, 29 farms and a dilapidated 14th-century castle into the highly respected label it is today. The man behind the transformation: Umbrian-born Renzo Cotarella.

Packed with fascinating facts and insights on Umbrian culinary products and the best for learning about Umbrian food is Umbria's Centro Agro Alimentare dell' Umbria at http://english.umbriadoc.com

Queen of Umbrian wine is Chiari Lungarotti, whose family transformed Torgiano, south of Perugia, into the royal wine-making area it is today: Torgiano was the first wine-producing area of Umbria to gain both the DOC (1968) and DOCG (1990) quality recognitions. Lungarotti wine production is vast and covers the whole gambit of wine today – white, red, rosé and

THE WINE ROADS

There is nothing quite so idyllic or so perfect an opportunity to glimpse the traditional farming lifestyle as following Le Strade del Vino, well-marked wine trails that take motorists and cyclists along scenic Tuscan and Umbrian back roads, past a plethora of vineyards and vintner's wine cellars (look for the sign *'cantine aperte')* where you can taste and buy wine.

Each *strada* has its own distinct emblem; look for a sign that has something resembling a bunch of grapes and you're probably on the right track. Every *strada* has its own map, with listings of wineries and sometimes *agriturismi* (farm-stay accommodation), restaurants, wine-tasting *enoteche* (wine bars), and even open olive mills or other gastronomic delights.

To date 14 Tuscan and four Umbrian *strade* have been marked crisscrossing famous wine-production areas like Rùfina and Montepulciano in Tuscany, and Umbria's Colli del Trasimeno and Strada dei Vini Etrusco Romana between Narni and Orvieto. Tourist offices have maps and information, as does www.terreditoscana.regione.toscana.it and www.umbriadoc.com (in Italian).

TOP FIVE VIRTUAL TUSCAN KITCHENS

Peek into a Tuscan kitchen with these excellent food-driven blogs:

Delicious Italy (www.deliciousitaly.com) 'Bite-sized portions of information for the independent traveller' (who likes to eat well): click on the map to reach excellent dining and food-shopping recommendations, itineraries etc for Tuscany and Umbria.

Faith Willinger (www.faithwillinger.com) Florence is home for hugely successful author, food critic and chef, Faith Willinger.

Luculian Delights – An Italian Experience (http://lucullian.blogspot.com) Tip-top food-driven blog with loads of recipes tried and tested by Swedish Ilva living with Marco, three children and a dog in a farmhouse near Pistoia.

Mestolando (www.mestolando.com) Recipes, including videoblogs, from a kitchen in Florence by Florentine Claudia and expat Brian.

Over a Tuscan Stove (http://divinacucina.blogspot.com) Food-focused blog cooked up by a cooking school in Florence.

sparkling. Its Museo del Vino (p331) and neighbouring *cantina* (wine bar) provides prime opportunity to discover Umbrian viticulture and taste its wine, as does the extraordinary wine list in the top-notch restaurant and hotel (p331) the family owns: Torgiano Rosso Riserva DOCG is its most renowned appellation.

Bevagna (p345) and Montefalco (p344), east of Perugia, make up the other wealthy wine area thanks to the Sagrantino di Montefalco, which comes as a *passito* (sweet) or *secco* (dry) white – best drunk with sweet biscuits and venison or roasts respectively – or as a red. Taste all three at numerous points along the well-marketed Strada del Sagrantino (www.stradadelsagrantino.it; p75).

WINE & COOKERY COURSES

The website www.italycookingschools.com has hundreds of possibilities to consider.

Badia a Coltibuono (☎0577 74 48 32; www.coltibuono.com) Rolls-Royce course with prices to match, founded by author of 30-odd cookbooks Lorenza de' Medici (of *those* de' Medicis) over 20 years ago and continued today by her son, Guido: the art of Tuscan cuisine in an 11th-century abbey at Badia a Coltibuono, 38km northeast of Siena in Il Chianti; one-, three- and five-day courses.

Cordon Bleu (Map pp100-1; ☎055 234 54 68; www.cordonbleu-it.com; Via di Mezzo 55r) Chocolate, cakes, pastry, Christmas specialities, cooking courses for kids and other sessions aimed at more serious, gourmet cooks; you'll find the school in Florence.

Cordon Bleu Perugia (☎075 592 50 12 in Italian, 075 692 02 49 in English; www.cordonbleuperugia.com) Three-hour beginners' class to week-long pro chef courses at this cooking school near Perugia (p324), northern Umbria.

La Cucina Caldesi (☎0207 487 0570; www.lacucinacaldesi.com) Famously featured in the BBC TV series, *Return to Tuscany*, this cooking school run by Tuscan-born Giancarlo and wife Katie during winters in Marylebone, London, and summers in Tuscany at Torrita di Siena near Pienza.

La Cucina del Garga (☎055 21 13 96; www.garga.it) Hands-on Tuscan cookery courses, from one-day Florence classes to eight days in southern Tuscany, run by the team from Trattoria Garga (p138).

Faith Willinger (www.faithwillinger.com) Wednesday morning-long market-to-table sessions in an 18th-century home in central Florence and longer Food Lover tours with the author of *Adventures of An Italian Food Lover* and other bestselling titles.

Organic Tuscany (☎347 328 93 33; www.organictuscany.org; hamlet of La Selva, 5km from Certaldo) Week-long organic cooking courses with Florentine Riccardo, Shilpa and Manuela in an ecofriendly farmhouse; includes visits to local biodynamic and organic farms, wine tasting and accommodation. Highlight: vegetarian cooking course during the September grape harvest.

…toscaneggiando (☎348 644 24 63; www.toscaneggiando.it; Via Villa Fontana 90, San Colombano, Capannori) 'Simple cooking lessons in a familiar atmosphere' is how this small, enterprising and highly imaginative team markets itself. Lessons in central Lucca or surrounding countryside (one/two people €110/160).

Villa San Michele (p156) To-die-for thematic cookery courses (for kids aged eight to 14 years, aristocratic Florentine cuisine, recipes for single diners etc) in a to-die-for venue on the hills overlooking Florence; morning courses followed by lunch with the villa's own Tuscan chef, too.

EAT YOUR WORDS

For pronunciation guidelines, see p426.

Useful Phrases

I'd like to reserve a table.
Vorrei riservare un tavolo. — vo·*ray* ree·ser·*va*·re oon *ta*·vo·lo

I'd like the menu, please.
Vorrei il menù, per favore. — vo·*ray* eel me·*noo* per fa·*vo*·re

Do you have a menu in English?
Avete un menù (scritto) in inglese? — a·*ve*·te oon me·*noo* (*skree*·to) een een·*gle*·ze

What would you recommend?
Cosa mi consiglia? — *ko*·za mee kon·*see*·lya

Please bring the bill.
Mi porta il conto, per favore. — mee *por*·ta eel *kon*·to per fa·*vo*·re

I'm a vegetarian.
Sono vegetariano/a. — *so*·no ve·je·ta·*rya*·no/a

I'm a vegan.
Sono vegetaliano/a. — *so*·no ve·je·ta·*lya*·no/a

Food Glossary

AT THE TABLE

aceto	a·*che*·to	vinegar
coltello	kol·*te*·lo	knife
cucchiaio	koo·*kya*·yo	spoon
forchetta	for·*ke*·ta	fork
olio	*o*·lyo	oil
pepe	*pe*·pe	pepper
sale	*sa*·le	salt

STAPLES

aglio	*a*·lyo	garlic
burro	*boo*·ro	butter
formaggio	for·*ma*·jo	cheese
miele	*mye*·le	honey
pane	*pa*·ne	bread
panna	*pa*·na	cream
riso	*ree*·zo	rice
soya	*soy*·ya	soy
tartufo	tar·*too*·fo	truffle
uovo/uova	*wo*·vo/*wo*·va	egg/eggs
zucchero	*tsoo*·ke·ro	sugar

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DRINKS

acqua	*a*·kwa	water
birra	*bee*·ra	beer
caffè	ka·*fe*	coffee
tè	te	tea
vino (rosso/bianco)	*vee*·no (*ross*·o/*byan*·ko)	wine (red/white)

MEAT & SEAFOOD

agnello	a·*nye*·lo	lamb
aragosta	a·ra·*go*·sta	lobster
carpaccio	kar·*pa*·cho	very fine slices of raw meat
coniglio	ko·*nee*·lyo	rabbit
cozze	*ko*·tse	mussels
frutti di mare	*froo*·tee dee *ma*·re	seafood
gamberoni	gam·be·*ro*·nee	prawns
granchio	*gran*·kyo	crab
pollo	*pol*·lo	chicken
polpi	*pol*·po	octopus
prosciutto	pro·*shoo*·to	cured ham
salsiccia	sal·*see*·cha	sausage
tonno	*tonn*·o	tuna
trippa	*tree*·pa	tripe
vitello	vee·*te*·lo	veal

VEGETABLES

asparagi	as·*pa*·ra·jee	asparagus
carciofi	kar·*cho*·fee	artichokes
carota	ka·*ro*·ta	carrot
cavolo	*ka*·vo·lo	cabbage
fagiolini	fa·jo·*lee*·nee	green beans
finocchio	fee·*no*·kyo	fennel
funghi	*foon*·gee	mushrooms
insalata	in·sa·*la*·ta	salad
melanzane	me·lan·*dza*·ne	eggplant/aubergine
olive	o·*lee*·va	olive
patate	pa·*ta*·te	potatoes
peperoni	pe·pe·*ro*·nee	capsicums/peppers
piselli	pee·*ze*·lee	peas
pomodori	po·mo·*do*·ree	tomatoes
rucola	*roo*·ko·la	rocket
spinaci	spee·*na*·chee	spinach

GELATO FLAVOURS & FRUIT

amarena	a·ma·*re*·na	wild cherry
arancia	a·*ran*·cha	orange
bacio	ba·cho	chocolate and hazelnuts
ciliegia	chee·*lye*·ja	cherry
cioccolata	cho·ko·la·ta	chocolate
cono	*ko*·no	cone
coppa	*ko*·pa	cup
crema	*kre*·ma	cream
fragola	*fra*·go·la	strawberry
frutta di bosco	*froo*·ta dee *bos*·ko	fruit of the forest (wild berries)
limone	lee·*mo*·ne	lemon
mela	*me*·la	apple
melone	me·*lo*·ne	melon
nocciola	no·cho·la	hazelnut
pere	*pe*·ra	pear
pesca	*pe*·ska	peach
uva	*oo*·va	grapes
vaniglia	va·nee·lya	vanilla
zuppa inglese	tsoo·pa een·gle·ze	'English soup', trifle

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The Environment

THE LANDSCAPE

If you think of Tuscany's coast as the base, the region forms a rough triangle covering 22,990 sq km. Crammed within that triangle is a remarkable variety of land forms, from mountains in the north and east to flat plains in the south, from islands off the coast to the hill country of the interior.

Much of the coast facing the Tyrrhenian and Ligurian Seas is flat, except for a stretch immediately south of Livorno and parts of the Monte Argentario peninsula.

In all, two-thirds of Tuscany is mountainous or hilly. The Apennines, shared with Emilia (part of the Emilia-Romagna region), close off the northern flank of Tuscany and run roughly from east to west (with a gradual southward drop). The Apuane Alps (p204), an offshoot that rises from the coastal plain up in the region's northwestern corner, are renowned for their white marble deposits (see p207).

The gentle rounded hills of Il Chianti and Le Crete contrast with the wildness of the mountains. Their undulating, richly fertile slopes have been shaped as much by humans as by the forces of nature. It's a satisfying, mathematically correct landscape of sweeping fields, olive groves and vineyards, where even the sparse lines of cypress trees have been planted by previous generations.

On either side of them sprawl Monte Albano south of Pistoia, and Monte Pratomagno in the province of Arezzo to the east.

It takes a full 5kg of olives to produce 1L of virgin oil.

The most extensive lowlands are the inland Maremma Pisana, one-time swamps south of Pisa, and the main Maremma, which extends down the coast and over the regional boundary with Lazio.

The River Arno, all 240 winding kilometres of it, is Tuscany's main river. It rises in Monte Falterona in the Apennines, flows south to Arezzo and then meanders northwest for a while. By the time it passes through Florence it is on a westwards course towards Pisa and finally the Ligurian Sea. It was once an important trade artery, but river traffic today is virtually nonexistent.

Of the seven islands scattered off Tuscany's coast, the central and eastern parts of Elba (p223), along with Giannutri (p289) and parts of Giglio (p289), are reminders of a great Apennine wall that collapsed into the sea millions of years ago. Capraia (p219), Montecristo (p233), western Elba and parts of Giglio were forced up by volcanic activity. The islands vary considerably, from the unexciting flatness of Pianosa (p233) to the rugged and rocky coastline of much of Elba.

Neighbouring Umbria is an undulating, landlocked region with an area of more than 8400 sq km. Around 53% of its terrain is mountainous and most of the rest is decidedly hilly. The massive Umbrian-Marche Apennines are dominated by the Monti Sibillini (p386), whose highest peak, Monte Vettore, rears up to nearly 2500m. Other notable ranges include the Gubbio Apennines, the Monti Martani, and the lower yet still impressive peaks of the Amerini and Spoleto clusters.

Less than 10% of Umbria is low lying. Through it, curling from north to southwest and bisecting the region, runs the Tiber River, navigable for centuries. The second-longest river is the Nera. As it meets its Velino tributary, it forms the Cascata delle Marmore (Marmore Waterfalls; p388), a spectacular sight when the nearby hydro station lets water flow their way.

Umbria is also rich in both natural and artificial lakes. Lake Trasimeno (p356), in the west, is the largest lake in central-southern Italy. Lake Corbara and Lago di Alviano (p396), these days more of a marshland, are artificial.

FLORA & FAUNA

The flowers of Tuscany and Umbria, especially if you're around in springtime, are spectacular. In the mountains, alpine and sub-alpine varieties abound, while wild flowers common to the Mediterranean world thrive in the hills and intensively cultivated plains, flourishing thanks to a relatively low use of pesticides. Wild animals, by contrast, have a hard time of it in a land where it's almost a badge of masculinity to go hunting with your mates.

The Dunarobba Fossil Forest, near Avigliano, is one of the oldest woods in the world, thought to date back almost two million years.

Animals

Cinghiale (wild boar) has been on Tuscan menus since the days of the Etruscans, and the rural areas of the region still teem with them. The only difference is that today most are the offspring of Eastern European boar, imported to make up for the depletion of local species. They also roam many of the regional nature parks in Umbria. Although they're common enough, you'll be lucky to spot them on walks in the countryside; they are busy avoiding their most dangerous predator – the armed hunter.

Among other animals fairly common in the Tuscan and Umbrian countryside are squirrels, rabbits, foxes, martens, weasels and hares. The badger and the black-and-white-quilled *istrice,* a porcupine supposedly imported from North Africa by the ancient Romans for the dinner table, are rarer. In parks such as the Parco Regionale della Maremma (p285), there's a good chance of spotting roe deer, grazing at dawn or dusk.

Wolves – the prey of both feral dogs and unscrupulous hunters, despite their protected status – are making something of a comeback with an estimated 150 animals roaming the more remote upland areas in small packs. Sightings are extremely rare. The wildcat is another predator that roams the scarcely populated areas of Tuscany and Umbria, but it too is rare and hardly ever seen.

Where to Watch Birds in Italy, published by the Italian Bird Protection League (LIPU), highlights over 100 recommendations for species spotting.

On a more slithery note, you can encounter several kinds of snakes. Most are harmless and will glide out of your way. The only poisonous one is the viper, identified by its diamond markings. Rocky areas and the island of Elba are among its principal habitats.

Bird life is varied in Tuscany. The best time of year for twitchers is from November to March, when many migratory species linger in coastal nature reserves such as Lago di Burano (p289), Laguna di Orbetello (p287) and Monti dell'Uccellina (p285). As many as 140 species call Tuscany home or use it as a stopover. They include the black-winged stilt, buzzard, falcon, hawk, hoopoe, jay, kestrel, kingfisher, osprey, thrush, woodpecker and wren.

Umbria is also a great place to see a wide variety of bird life. Its extensive marshlands are an important stopping-off place for migratory species, such as the grey heron, purple heron, bittern and spoonbill. In other parts of the region birds of prey, such as the golden eagle, goshawk, peregrine falcon, eagle owl and osprey, circle the skies.

Birds of Britain & Europe with North Africa & the Middle East by Herman Heinzel et al, *Birds of Britain & Europe* by John Gooders and the exquisitely illustrated *Birds of Europe* by Lars Jonsson make excellent guides for spotters.

Plants

Tuscan and Umbrian farmland is a visually pleasing mix of orderly human intervention and nature left more or less to itself. Everywhere, long lines of vines stripe the countryside, alternating with olive groves (olives were introduced in Etruscan times from the Middle East).

Tall, slender cypress and the odd flattened *pino marittimo* (cluster pine, found mainly on the coast) are among the most striking of the regions' trees. The cypress was introduced from Asia Minor in Roman times precisely for its decorative qualities.

Beech trees thrive in the cooler mountainous territory of the Apuane Alps, often competing for light and space with chestnuts. Thereabouts, hunting for

chestnuts then roasting them is a favourite pastime on November weekends. In the Casentino (p303) and Vallombrosa areas of eastern Tuscany, deep, thick forests of pine, oak (one species of which is the cork oak, its bark important to the wine industry) and beech still cover large tracts of otherwise little-touched land. Other species include maple, hazelnut, alder and imported eucalyptus.

www.blueflag.org lists Tuscany's cleanest beaches.

In Umbria, other trees of note down in the plains include willows, poplars and the black alder. Water lilies flourish in the rich marshlands, while rare flowers such as the yellow poppy discreetly survive in Parco Nazionale dei Monti Sibillini (p386).

Springtime, of course, is the brightest time of year in Tuscany and Umbria; whole valley floors and upland plains are awash in a technicolour sea of wild flowers, including jonquils, crocuses, anemones, gentians and orchids.

Down by the sea, Tuscan coastal and island areas boast typical Mediterranean *macchia* (dry, prickly scrubland).

NATIONAL PARKS

Three of Italy's 24 national parks are within Tuscany.

For further information on national parks and other protected areas in Tuscany and Umbria visit www.parks.it. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has an Italian chapter at www.wwf.it.

The Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago Toscano (p217), Europe's largest marine park, embraces the islands of Montecristo, Gorgona, Giannutri, Pianosa, and part of Capraia, Elba and Giglio. It protects both their fragile coastlines and the wild, mountainous hinterland.

Within the Parco Nazionale delle Foreste Casentinesi, Monte Falterona e Campigna (p303), on the border with Emilia-Romagna, is Italy's most extensive and best-preserved forest. Deep inside the woods of chestnut and beech, threaded by ancient mule tracks, a few wolves are re-establishing themselves. You won't see them but you may well spot another predator, the golden eagle, as it planes above you.

To the west and also shared with Emilia-Romagna, the recently created Parco Nazionale dell'Appennino Tosco-Emiliano protects the fragile mountain environment of the Apennines. Below its highest peaks – Prado, Cusna and Alpe di Succiso, each above 2000m – are glinting lakes, rocky cliffs and grasslands.

Tuscany also has three regional parks, one in the Apuane Alps, one in the Maremma and one on the heavily urbanised coast near Livorno.

Umbria has just one national park, the Parco Nazionale dei Monti Sibillini (p386), which takes its name from the principal mountain range in the area. An amazing 1800 varieties of plant, including the Apennine edelweiss and several strains of orchid, populate its deeply incised north-facing valleys and jagged upper slopes.

Legambiente (www.legambiente.com in Italian) is Italy's largest environmental organisation, with over 1000 local branches. Look out for its green swan insignia, indicating ecofriendly places.

On a more modest scale, Umbria has a fistful of regional parks: Parco Regionale di Colfiorito, Parco Regionale del Trasimeno, Parco Regionale del Monte Cucco (p351), Parco Regionale del Monte Subasio, Parco Regionale del Fiume Nera and Parco Regionale del Tevere.

Other protected areas and places of naturalistic interest include La Valle Nature Oasis, La Cascata delle Marmore (p388), Fonti del Clitunno (Clitunno Springs) and Foresta Fossile di Dunarobba (Dunarobba Fossil Forest).

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

In a recent poll organised by *National Geographic Traveler* magazine, Tuscany was rated 9th equal among 115 major tourist destinations. Criteria, on all of which the region scored highly, included a place's ecological and environmental quality, its aesthetic appeal and the sensitivity of its tourism development.

But not everything's rosy. One of the greatest ecological issues in the region is marble extraction in the mountains of the Apuane Alps. The great white scars, which from the seaside look almost like snowfalls, are the result of many centuries' work.

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TOUGH TUSCAN LOVE

Bureaucrats tend to get bad press worldwide and Tuscans, like all of us, enjoy a good moan from time to time. But big brother restrictions, which the farmer or home owner may perceive as petty, have done wonders in preserving the region's countryside, saving it from the blight of overdevelopment that poisons so many Mediterranean lands where tourism rules.

Tuscany imposes some of Europe's strictest building regulations and land-use restrictions (why, there are even limitations on the colour you can paint the exterior of your house). New construction is limited to two storeys so buildings retain their traditional squat, low profile. Most importantly, land cannot be subdivided. So, since plots remain intact, the region is spared the ugly rows of identical terraced housing or clone villas that elsewhere scar not only the coastline but, increasingly, inland too.

Agriturismo, in the form of rural home stays and B&Bs, is actively fostered and funded so that small farms can stay in business. Here, there are also restrictions on getting too big for your boots and regulations ensuring that they retain their mud: should the family income from tourism exceed the earnings of the farm, the farmer's low-interest loans and tax concessions will be snatched away.

Not everything's perfect, of course, and Tuscans find ways of slipping around restrictions they regard as inconvenient. There's concern over the number of properties, new and old, that function as second homes, occupied for only a few weeks each year. And the temptations are great. If you're a cash-strapped mayor, it's difficult to resist the siren song of property developers who might promise to repair the streets, build a community centre or sports hall if you'd nod, wink and just sign here, *signor*…

Before WWII, the level of incursion was much slighter and marble miners eased blocks down to nearby villages with complex pulley systems. But today, the pace of removal has accelerated. About 1.5 million tonnes per year are scraped out and trundled away on heavy trucks. The extraction is disfiguring part of a nature reserve, the waste produced creates disposal problems and the heavy truck traffic is invasive. However, few voices seriously object to this prestigious industry. Carrara marble (p207) is sought after worldwide by everyone from architects to sculptors and the industry is a significant local employer.

Heavy industry never really came to Tuscany or Umbria, so the associated problems of air and water pollution elsewhere in Italy are not as great here. That said, the medium- and light-industrial areas of Livorno, Piombino, suburban Florence, Perugia and along the Arno and Tiber Rivers are far from hazard free. Heavy road traffic makes clean air a distant dream in much of the densely populated Prato-Pistoia area. Noise pollution can also be a problem in cities.

Flower spotters will enjoy *Mediterranean Wild Flowers* by M Blamey and C Grey Wilson. *Trees of Britain & Europe* also makes a handy companion, while Paul Sterry's *Complete Mediterranean Wildlife* is a good general guide to the flora and fauna of the region.

Umbria, where farming remains a significant occupation, is much less affected. The introduction of several hydroelectric plants and the manufacturing of chemicals, iron, steel and processed food have all taken their toll on the countryside, but on a much smaller scale and with a less detrimental impact on the environment.

The landscape of Tuscany and Umbria appears something of a work of art, with farmers alternating a patchwork quilt of farmland with stretches of forest. The post-WWII crisis in agriculture saw many farmers leave the land and in more remote spots, where wringing results from the earth was always a challenge at best, forest or scrub is reclaiming its territory. Sometimes this uncontrolled regrowth has a downside, helping propagate bushfires.

Regional government bodies in both Tuscany and Umbria are now taking a tougher line concerning the environment, partly in response to EU directives. Initiatives include reforestation and the promotion of environmentally friendly agricultural methods.

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Tuscany & Umbria Outdoors

The gorgeous landscapes of Tuscany and Umbria beg to be explored and savoured, slowly. Those who tear through the countryside on the highways miss out on a rich variety of outdoor activities that underscore the area's splendour.

Because Tuscany and Umbria are year-round destinations, there's something to do in every season, from adrenaline-inducing winter skiing to leisurely countryside strolls. Families will be delighted to discover how accessible these activities are, while those in search of more demanding pursuits won't be disappointed either. There will still be plenty of time left to lounge around the villa and sip Chianti – which tastes all the better after a day in the region's fresh open air.

WALKING

Tuscany and Umbria are eminently suited to walking. Indeed, a common sight throughout the region is large hiking groups, mostly from the UK and frequently distinguishable at 200m by the floppy white sunhats they so often seem to sport.

The patchwork countryside of the centre, the wilder valleys and mountains in the south and northwest and, even more dramatically, the Apuane Alps and Apennine ranges all offer colourful variety.

A truly ambitious trekker could undertake the 24-stage Grande Escursione Appenninica, an arc that takes you from the Due Santi pass above La Spezia southeast all the way to Sansepolcro. Alternatively Umbria's Monti Sibillini is superb for walkers using Castelluccio as a base, with a choice of demanding backpack hikes to the summit or casual day hikes.

People have been crisscrossing Tuscany for millennia, creating paths and trails as they went. One of the most important pilgrim routes in Europe during the Dark Ages was the Via Francigena (or Via Romea), in its time a veritable highway across Tuscany. Starting in the Magra River valley and winding through the wild Lunigiana territory of the northwest, the trail hugged the coast for a while before cutting inland to Siena via San Gimignano and then turning south to Rome, capital of Christianity. Parts of the route can still be walked today and there's a movement afoot to restore even more of it as a resource for hikers.

Edizione Multigraphic produces good maps of Tuscany and the Apennines at 1:25,000.

Best Time of Year

Spring is the prettiest time, while the colours of autumn have their own mellow appeal. Since summertime lingers into late October, you have plenty of daylight for longer walks. After Tuscany's mad summer tourist rush, things begin to ease off by late September – all the more so out in the countryside.

If you're planning to go walking in the Apuane Alps or other mountain areas (such as Monte Vettore or the small Orecchiella reserve), the most pleasant time is in summer. August, though, the month when most Italians take their holidays and trails get busy, is best avoided if you can be flexible. Lower terrain, by contrast, is best left untrodden in high summer as the heat can be oppressive, making even a crawl to the nearest air-conditioned bar a strain.

What to Take

For your average walks in the Tuscany-Umbria area you will need only a minimum of items. For easy, undemanding outings, a pair of comfortable trainers (runners) is usually quite adequate. Otherwise, pull on either comfortable walking shoes or sturdy boots, depending on what kind of terrain you are planning to cover. A small daypack should contain an extra layer of clothing, in case temperatures drop, and some kind of wet-weather gear. Depending on the season, sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat are recommended. Obviously you need a map of the area, and a compass too if you're planning some serious stuff off the beaten track. Whatever the season, pack at least one bottle of water, calculating for at least 1.5L per walker for a summer day walk. A fistful or two of light, high-nutrition, easily assimilated food such as power bars, dried fruit or nuts can stave off hunger pangs and impart a quick kick of energy.

For slip-in-the-pocket reference books about flowers, trees, birds and bigger mammals, check the sidebars in the Environment chapter (p80).

Wild camping is not permitted in the high mountains. That may seem like bad news to some, as you will need to plan your overnight stops around the availability of beds in *rifugi* (mountain huts). The upside is that you can leave tents, cooking gear and the like at your base accommodation. Bring your sleeping bag along as extra insurance against the cold.

It's not just the cold – be prepared for all kinds of weather in the mountains. The day may start in splendid sunshine and heat, but that can easily change to chillingly cold, wet and clammy. Bear in mind that the Apuane Alps get the greatest concentration of rainfall in all Tuscany.

Prime Spots

Il Chianti (p164) is a favourite among walkers of all levels. One of the classic walks takes you rambling over several days (perhaps as many as five or six) from Florence to Siena. *Chianti Classico: Val di Pesa-Val d'Elsa,* a map at 1:25,000 published by Edizioni Multigraphic (see www.edizionimultigraphic.it – in Italian – for its full map catalogue), covers most of the area and has hiking trails superimposed.

Smart multiday hikers walk with only a daypack, having signed up with one of the many outdoor adventure companies that transport your luggage from stage to stage.

Another area within easy reach of Florence for a day's walking is Il Mugello (p163), northeast of the city and extending to the border with Emilia-Romagna. *Sorgenti Firenze Trekking* (SOFT; Florence Springs Trekking) are a network of signed day or half-day trails crisscrossing the area. *Mugello, Alto Mugello, Val di Sieve,* produced by SELCA, is a decent map for hikers at 1:70,000.

For a day of history and hiking, you could walk from San Gimignano to Volterra or vice versa. Both your point of departure and your goal are fascinating medieval towns, each of which has reasonable transport links and plenty of accommodation.

History buffs may want to walk in the tracks of the Etruscans, basing themselves in Suvereto or Campiglia Marittima. In a more structured way, at the Parco Archeologico di Baratti e Populonia (p222) you can follow the Via delle Cave, an undemanding, signed two-hour walk that passes by a series of tombs and the quarries from which their building blocks were hewn.

Back on the spine of the Apennines, the Garfagnana (p207), up in the northwest, and Lunigiana (p211), spilling into Liguria, both offer exciting medium-mountain walking. Castelnuovo (p210) makes a good base and its **Centro Visite Parco Alpi Apuane** (www.parks.it/parco.alpi.apuane) is well stocked with information and maps.

You can enjoy these two areas in their own right or do a couple of limbering-up treks, then attack the Apuane Alps (p204). The serious hikes are stunning and challenging, but there are also possibilities for less arduous itineraries. *The Alps of Tuscany: Selected Hikes in the Apuane Alps, the Cinque*

Terre and Portofino by Francesco Greco presents many enjoyable multiday routes. For gourmets and gourmands, it also recommends restaurants and local dishes to tempt you at the end of each walk. Edizioni Multigraphic's *Parco delle Alpi Apuane* map at 1:50,000 covers the whole of the range. If your Italian is up to it, you might go for one of several Italian guides to the mountains, such as the *Guida al Parco delle Alpi Apuane* edited by Giuliano Valdes or Angelo Nerli's *Alta Via del Parco Alpi Apuane*.

The island of Elba is especially well geared for short walks and you will generally be able to plan your own routes quite easily. For more information, contact **Il Genio del Bosco – Centro Trekking Isola d'Elba** (☎0565 93 08 37; www.geniodelbosco.it in Italian).

In Umbria, hiking in the scenic Monti Sibillini (p386) is wonderful, although there are relatively few marked trails. For information, contact the **Ente Parco Nazionale Monti Sibillini** (☎0737 97 27 11; www.sibillini.net). A good base for shorter day hikes is Castelluccio, with a choice of trails threading from the village. One of the most popular leads to the Lago di Pilato under Monte Vettore; here, legend tells, Pontius Pilate is buried. The Club Alpino Italiano (CAI) map *Parco Nazionale dei Monti Sibillini* covers the park at 1:25,000, as does the Edizioni Multigraphic alternative of the same name.

If maps leave you flustered, tackle one of Tuscany's signed trails, such as the three-day Piglione Trekking, starting from Metato, Apuane Trekking, a four- to eight-stage circuit from Carrara, or, further north, the 10-day Garfagnana Trekking.

Information

MAPS & BOOKS

Edizioni Multigraphic publishes a couple of series of maps that are designed for walkers and mountain-bike riders (*mulattiere*, or mule trails, are especially good for mountain bikes). The *Carte dei Sentieri* series is at 1:25,000, while the *Carte Turistica e dei Sentieri* maps are at a scale of either 1:25,000 or 1:50,000.

In addition to Edizioni Multigraphic and the CAI, the German cartographers Kompass produce 1:25,000 scale, walker-friendly maps of various parts of Italy, including Tuscany and Umbria.

Walking in Tuscany, by Gillian Price, is an excellent guide that describes over 50 walks and hikes of a none-too-strenuous nature (the text spills over into neighbouring Umbria and Lazio). Its ample selection takes you from Chianti country to the island of Elba, and to plenty of less explored parts of the Tuscan region as well. However, it doesn't cover the more arduous trekking possibilities in the Apuane Alps in Tuscany's northwest.

The series of *Guide dei Monti d'Italia*, grey hardbacks published by the Touring Club Italiano (TCI) and CAI, are exhaustive walking guides containing maps. *Walking and Eating in Tuscany and Umbria* by James Lasdun and Pia Davis embraces two of the region's most delightful activities, offering 40 varied itineraries across these two central regions of Italy and plenty of tips for restaurants and overnight stays.

Organised Walking Holidays

Most major British adventure travel companies offer guided walking holidays in Tuscany, and usually Umbria, too. Established players include the following:

ATG Oxford (☎01865 315 678; www.atg-oxford.co.uk; 69-71 Banbury Rd, Oxford OX2 6PJ) Also offers cycling holidays.
Explore (☎0870 333 4001; www.explore.co.uk; Nelson House, 55 Victoria Rd, Farnborough GU14 7PA) Also offers cycling holidays.
Headwater (☎01606 720 033; www.headwater-holidays.co.uk; The Old School House, Chester Rd, Northwich CW8 1LE) Also offers cycling holidays.
HF Holidays (☎020 8905 9558; www.hfholidays.co.uk; Imperial House, The Hyde, Edgeware Rd, London NW9 5AL) Also offers cycling holidays in Umbria.

Inntravel (☎01653 617 459; www.inntravel.co.uk; Inntravel Ltd, Nr Castle Howard, York YO60 7JU) Also offers cycling holidays.
Ramblers Holidays (☎01707 331 133; www.ramblersholidays.co.uk; Lemsford Mill, Lemsford Village, Welwyn Garden City AL8 7TR) With this offshoot of the nonprofit Ramblers Association, in business for over 60 years, you can sign up for a straight hiking holiday or opt for its hybrid walking and cooking Tuscany option.
Sherpa Expeditions (☎020 8577 2717; www.sherpaexpeditions.com; 131a Heston Rd, Hounslow TW5 0RF) Also offers cycling holidays.
Walks Worldwide (☎01524 242 000; www.walksworldwide.com; 12 The Square, Ingleton, Carnforth LA6 3EG)
World Walks (☎01242 254 353; www.worldwalks.com; 30 Imperial Sq, Cheltenham GL50 1QZ)

Hidden Italy (www.hiddenitaly.com.au) is an Australian outfit that sets up self-guided walking tours in Tuscany and Umbria.

CYCLING

Italy is generally a cycle-friendly country and Tuscany and Umbria are no exception. Although most historic town and city centres are closed to motorised traffic, cyclists are free to wobble around at will. There are plenty of places where you can rent a bike, buy your colour-coordinated Lycra, and obtain advice on routes and itineraries. Whether you're out for a day's gentle pedalling around town with the children in tow, a sybaritic weekend winery tour in Il Chianti with a bunch of friends or a serious workout on that muscle tone with a week or more of pedal power, Tuscany and Umbria provide plenty of cycling scope.

Cycling to Suit You

Matching the varied landscape, there is also a wide choice of roads and routes. Paved roads are particularly suited to high-tech racing bikes (watch out for the Sunday swarm of identically clad riders from the local club as the peloton sweeps by) or travelling long distances on touring bikes. Country roads, known as *strade bianche*, have dirt surfaces covered with gravel for stability.

Back roads and trails are a further option if you are fairly fit and have a multigear mountain bike, as this is mainly hilly terrain. There are also plenty of other challenges for the more ambitious cyclist: Monte Amiata is the perfect goal for aspiring hill climbers, while hilly itineraries with short but challenging climbs beckon from Umbria through to Il Chianti and Le Crete. Don't despair; there are also plenty of itineraries with gentler slopes for amateur cyclists and even for families with children.

Best Time of Year

The best time of year for serious pedalling is spring, not only because of the obvious advantage of a cooler temperature, but also because the scenery is at its most breathtaking at this time of year, with valleys drenched in poppies and wildflowers. However, Easter and the days either side of 25 April and 1 May, both national holidays, are best avoided because of the crowds that infiltrate the region.

Autumn is also a good season, although there's a greater chance of rain, which can lead to slippery roads and poor visibility.

What Type of Bike?

The most versatile bicycle for most of the roads of Umbria and Tuscany is a comfortable all-terrain bike capable of travelling over both paved and country roads and, even more importantly, able to climb hills without forcing you to exert yourself excessively. Ideally, it should give you a relaxed riding posture, have front suspension and be equipped with a wide range of gears, similar to a mountain bike.

If you are bringing your own bike from home, check in advance with your airline if there's a fee and how much, if any, disassembling and packing it requires. Bikes can be transported by train in Italy, either with you or to arrive within a couple of days.

www.parks.it is an excellent site, full of information about Tuscany and Umbria's national and regional parks, nature reserves and other protected areas.

Prime Spots

IL CHIANTI

The picturesque SS222, also known as the Strada Chiantigiana, runs between Florence and Siena, cleaving right through Chianti country. Although it is far from traffic free, you'll find it's a scenic and justifiably popular cycling route.

More importantly, there are over 400km of traffic-free roads and plans are underway to develop cycle touring further with more trails and special cycle signposts to indicate directions, as well as offering information about accommodation, mechanical assistance and bicycle rental.

Edizioni Multigraphic's map *Chianti e le Colline Senesi* has mountain-bike trails superimposed.

Parco Ciclistico del Chianti (☎0577 74 94 11; www.parcociclisticodelchianti.it), based in Gaiole in Chianti, is an ecologically committed local cycling organisation that offers both tailor-made and 'ready-to-ride' tours.

AROUND SIENA

The hills around San Gimignano and Colle di Val d'Elsa are another favourite venue for cyclists. One challenging route starts from Casole d'Elsa, following the road as it climbs to Monteguidi, then descending to cross the Cecina River before reaching the village of Montecastelli in the province of Pisa. An easier ride starts with a panoramic circuit around the town walls of Monteriggioni, carrying on to Colle di Val d'Elsa, and continuing towards San Gimignano and Volterra.

LE CRETE & VAL D'ORCIA

The rolling landscape here is similar to Il Chianti's, except that instead of pedalling through woodlands, you pass between vast swathes of wheat fields. Among the most stunning routes are the Monte Sante Marie road from Asciano to Torre a Castello and the Pieve a Salti road from Buonconvento to San Giovanni d'Asso. Both are unpaved and require all-terrain or mountain bikes. An alternative for cyclists with touring bikes is the legendary Lauretana road from Siena to Asciano and onwards towards Chiusure, Mont Oliveto Maggiore and Buonconvento.

WINDING DOWN, SOAKING IT UP

After a day on the hoof or in the saddle, nothing rivals a good long soak to ease the stiffness. From the hills of Tuscany and Umbria bubble restorative waters that people hereabouts have been using ever since Roman times. Nowadays the emphasis is upon curing and beauty treatments, but many spas also offer wellness programmes or simply the chance to dunk yourself in water fresh from their springs.

Following an active day in the Garfagnana you can relax in the thermal waters at Bagni di Lucca (p208). If you're heading back to the plains, the grander resort of Montecatini Terme (p163) has a huge choice of hotels and several health establishments. After walking or biking in Le Crete and the Val d'Orcia, a dip in the large pool at lovely little Bagno Vignoni (p270) rounds the day off nicely or, if you prefer more bustle, Chianciano Terme (p276) has spas and hotels aplenty. Umbria's main spa is at Terme di Fontecchio (p355), near Città di Castello, while Nocera Umbra (p351), not far from Gubbio, is a smaller but no less attractive option.

MONTE AMIATA

Only die-hard peddlers should attempt to climb the steep flanks of this 1738m long-extinct volcano. The good news is that, at a mere 1370m, you'll come across a restaurant (Prato Le Macinaie) to revive you, roughly a 4km ride from the peak. You can also spend the night here, should your exertions have exhausted you. You can attack the mountain by several routes: the easiest are those leading up from Arcidossa and Abbadia San Salvatore; the latter is a 14km uphill ride with a steady but reasonably slight gradient. The most difficult approach is via Castel del Piano, 15km of unremitting uphill work with a steady, steep 7% gradient for the first 10km. But, oh, the exhilarating joy of whooshing down without a single turn of the pedals…

UMBRIA

The broad valleys of the Umbria region around Orvieto, Spello and Lago di Trasimeno are not too physically demanding. They're well suited for cyclists who want to experience the beauty of the unique and varied landscape at a leisurely pace.

Il Cornacchino (www.cornacchino.it) is a very special *agriturismo* on the slopes of Monte Amiata, east of Grosseto (p316). With more than 50 horses from the gentle and docile to friskier mounts, Ezio, Gulio and Fabio, supported by their international, multilingual team, offer lessons, treks and fun in the saddle.

Information

MAPS & BOOKS

Bicycle Touring in Tuscany by David Cleveland describes eight multiday tours, each with a detailed route map. In defiance of its title, it also embraces cycle trips in Umbria and Le Marche. *Garfagnana by Bicycle* by Lucia and Bruno Giovannetti has detailed descriptions of key route features, a contour map, 27 itineraries for mountain bikes and five touring maps.

The *Guida Cicloturistica del Chianti* by Fabio Masotti and Giancarlo Brocci has 20 cycling itineraries and 32 detailed maps of the Chianti region. Another excellent planning resource, though older, is the two volumes of Sergio Grillo and Cinzia Pezzani's *Toscana in Mountain Bike,* between them they cover 69km of off-road itineraries throughout the region. Both are in Italian but very visual with explicit maps.

CYCLING ASSOCIATIONS

The Siena-based **Amici Della Bicicletta** (☎0577 4 51 59; www.adbsiena.it in Italian) is an active, ecologically minded group that promotes cycling as a daily form of urban transport and organises day-long and sometimes more extensive bike trips. It also dedicates considerable effort to developing and promoting cycling paths and itineraries for visiting cyclists.

Cycling Tours

From Florence, a handful of operators offer one-day cycling excursions into Il Chianti, complete with cycle rental, often with lunch and sometimes with a visit to a winery thrown in. For more details, see p131. From Arezzo, **Alessandro Madiai** (☎338 649 14 81; torrequebrada@virgilio.it), himself a passionate cyclist, runs day and overnight tours around the enchanting southern Tuscany countryside.

Several UK-based outdoor travel companies organise cycling tours of Tuscany and Umbria, whether accompanied or wheeling free. Among them are most of those we suggest for walking tours (see p86). Each does bike tours in either Umbria or Tuscany and, in most cases, both. Also well worth considering is the wondrously named **The Chain Gang** (www.thechaingang.co.uk), specialists in two-wheel travel.

In the US, both **Ciclismo Classico** (www.ciclismoclassico.com) and **ExperiencePlus** (www.experienceplus.com) offer cycle tours in Umbria and Tuscany.

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SKIING

The region's skiing scene centres upon **Abetone** (www.abetone.com), on the border with the region of Emilia-Romagna. While the Apennines are smaller and less majestic than the Alps, they have a charm of their own. Abetone and the neighbouring, much smaller resort of Cutigliano have between them some 50km of downhill pistes. Abetone has a couple of cross-country trails, while Cutigliano offers a more demanding, more attractive 15km circuit.

Best Time of Year

The ski season generally runs from December to late March. Abetone gets pretty busy during weekends as skiers head up here from Florence and other nearby cities, such as Lucca and Pisa, by the bus and car load.

If you are here in late March, you may catch Pinocchio Sugli Sci, a keenly contested ski competition for children.

Prime Spots

A couple of shops on the main square in Abetone hire boots and skis – you'll have to supply your own woolly hat. From here it is a couple of minutes' walk to the chairlift that takes you to the top of Monte Selletta (1711m). Here, there's a good choice of blue runs and a couple of red, although the latter should pose little problem to even relatively novice skiers. On the contrary, they are exhilarating with dips that allow you to pick up speed, followed by slower, flat sections where you can regain control.

Once you've warmed up with a couple of easy runs, ski across the face of the ridge to lift 17, then take lift 15 and whoosh down the trail to lift 18. This is the heart of the ski area with trails leading into all the valleys on the Tuscan side. It's also the access point for the Val di Luce (Valley of Light), a beautiful, appropriately named valley that has most of the area's more rewarding intermediate trails. If you head to the Alpe Tre Potenze (1940m), you will be rewarded with gorgeous panoramic views stretching all the way to the Tuscan coast.

Lake Trasimeno abounds with water sports and outdoor activities. Ask for *Tourist Itineraries in the Trasimeno District,* a booklet of walking and horse-riding tracks, at the tourist office (www.castiglionedellago.it).

Information

For ski-lift passes and more information contact the **Ufficio Centrale Biglietti** (☎0573 6 05 56; Piazza Piramidi, Abetone; 1-day weekday/weekend €28/33, 3-day weekdays €72, 1 week €135). You can sign up for lessons with a trio of ski schools. **Scuola Zeno Colò** (☎0573 6 00 32), **Scuola Sci Montegomito** (☎0573 6 03 92) and **Scuola Sci Colò** (☎0573 60 70 77). Over the mountain in Cutigliano, Scuola Amerigo **Colò** (☎0573 62 93 91) is your only option.

WATER SPORTS

Enjoying the water needn't involve any special effort, equipment or outlay but, if you are keen on more than an idle paddle or swim, there are plenty of activities that are on offer. Diving facilities are generally of a high standard, and scuba-diving courses are not that expensive, with good rental gear widely available. Snorkelling, the low-tech alternative, still allows you to get dramatically close to fascinating aquatic life. Although there are several areas, such as Monte Argentario (Porto Ercole), that are excellent for diving, the island of Elba is where most divers of all levels head. The main tourist office in Portoferraio carries a list of schools and courses that are available.

If you're into wrecks, you can dive at Pomonte where the *Elvisco* cargo boat is submerged at a depth of 12m. Alternatively, a Junker 52, a German plane from WWII, lies on the seabed near Portoferraio at a more challenging depth of 38m.

Typical prices are: one dive with guide €35; six dives €190; introductory snorkelling €50; PADI course €220; and open-water diving course €350.

The coves of the Tuscan archipelagos and around Monte Argentario are superb for sailing, as well as windsurfing, kite surfing and sea kayaking. You can rent equipment and receive instruction at the major resorts. A six-day sailing or windsurfing/kite surfing course (1½ hours' instruction per day) costs from €170.

Windsurfing is also very popular on the Costa Fiorita near Livorno. For information on sailing and windsurfing courses here, contact **Costa Fiorita Booking Centre** (☎0586 75 90 59; www.costafiorita.it in Italian). Further up the coast, Viareggio holds several annual sailing regattas, including the Coppa di Primavera in March and the Vela Mare Cup in May. For more information, check out the website www.circolovelamare.it (in Italian).

Fishing in the sea is unlikely to lead to a very plentiful catch because of commercial overfishing that, in turn, has led to occasional fishing bans. For a more certain catch, you are better off heading for the trout farms and artificial lakes and streams of the interior. Before you cast your line in fresh water, you will need a permit, available from the **Federazione Italiano della Pesca Sportiva ed Attività Subacquee** (www.fipsas.it in Italian), which has offices in every province.

Best Time of Year

In Monte Argentario and Elba it's possible to enjoy most water sports, including diving, throughout autumn and winter as the water temperature remains relatively temperate year-round. For diving, however, you'll shiver without a semidry wetsuit between November and May, but you can switch to a regular wet suit for summer.

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