



Travel

A taste of the good life on the Tuscan farm where guests can stay

Some customers love La Vialla’s mail-order wines, oils and cheeses so much they spend their holidays helping with the harvest

Adam Weymouth

Guests gather for a lunch at La Vialla last month © Hetty van Oijen

Within five minutes of arriving at La Vialla we are seated at a long table in the autumn sunshine, surrounded by other guests. It is lunchtime, and laid before us is a spread of cheeses and salami and salads and wines. It has been two days getting here on the train from London — one night in Paris, another in Milan — but all that feels very far away all of a sudden. These lunches, we are told, will happen every day. Within half an hour we are discussing moving to Italy.

La Vialla is a biodynamic farm in eastern Tuscany where guests can stay, learn about its workings, even help out with the harvest. Its origins are charmingly homespun: in 1978, Piero and Giuliana Lo Franco, having made their money in textiles, bought a dilapidated farmhouse in the hills above the Arno Valley, with the intention of giving their three young sons a better connection to the seasons.

The Tuscan landscape had long been shaped by *mezzadria*, a sharecropping model dating back to the Middle Ages. Landowners provided accommodation, tools and fields, labourers provided a workforce, with the produce split between them. Few corners were left uncultivated. But with agricultural reforms after the second world war, and the drift to Italy’s new industrial centres, the practice was gradually abandoned, before being abolished outright. Labourers left behind grand, crumbling farmhouses and fields going fallow. The Lo Francos bought up more of this land, restoring the buildings as they went. They replanted olive groves and vineyards. Today, La Vialla comprises more than 6,000 acres, with 29 properties sleeping between two and 10 for rent from April through to October.

We are lent an electric Fiat to get around. I am here with my wife and our two young kids, and some of my wife’s Swedish family. Our home for

the week, Casalduro, is a 15-minute drive from the main farmstead along unpaved roads that twist and climb up through the woods. These woods comprise more than half the farm’s land, and besides some gentle management for firewood and to maintain the hiking trails, they are left largely untouched. There are wild boar, deer, foxes,

secluded among olive groves and scrubby forest. It is early autumn, the leaves are golden, the light is clear and sharp. Inside, a fireplace big enough to roast a pig dominates the far side of the main room; a table that could seat 20 at the other. The floors are terracotta, the walls thick stone. Upstairs are four simple bedrooms, uncluttered and



A long communal table outside La Vialla’s old olive mill



Adam Weymouth and his daughter pick olives © Hetty van Oijen

There are two wolf packs. On the cultivated land alone there are 142 bird species, some of them rare. Casalduro is magnificent,



Cattle at La Vialla’s Spedale farmstead, which houses several rental properties © Hetty van Oijen

calm. There is no television, and certainly no WiFi. What there is is an expansive view, and at night we steep in the wood-fired hot tub in

the garden and gaze out over the city of Arezzo, glowing like embers in the valley below.

La Vialla was organic from the start, even before a certification system in Italy existed. It was a choice the Lo Francos made based on how their grandparents had farmed. “Don’t follow the market, follow your conscience,” they told their sons. Italian consumers were unconvinced; it was the Dutch and Germans, holidaying in the renovated farmhouses, who first asked about getting their hands on the products. In 1989, Gianni, the eldest of the three sons, had only had his driving licence for a month when he and younger brother Antonio hitched a trailer to their Renault Espace and drove north to sell wine and oil door to door.

They’ve become more efficient in the intervening decades, but the ethos has not changed. The only shops that stock their produce are the ones on the farm; La Vialla will have nothing to do with supermarkets. Here you can buy not only the wine and oil for which they are best known, but everything for the week’s stay: pecorino cheese, pasta, pasta sauces, chestnut honey, chocolate spread, artichoke hearts, grape juice, marmalade, vegetables.

The labels are all in La Vialla’s looping, sinuous typeface, styled on the handwriting of a family friend. Eighty-five per cent of their food and wine is sold online, with their main markets in northern Europe. A warehouse in Bradford





Nets are spread across the grove to catch the olives as Adam Weymouth and his family help to harvest them © Hetty van Oijen



Gianni and Antonio Lo Franco, sons of the farm's founders © Hetty van Oijen



Cheese and balsamic onion compote made by La Vialla; the same looping typeface, styled on the handwriting of a family friend, is used on all its products © Hetty van Oijen

allows UK customers to sidestep the bureaucracy, and some of the expense, of importing post-Brexit. Everything is produced and packaged on the farm, which employs 200 people (and keeps

them on year-round rather than using seasonal workers). In 2005 La Vialla became certified as biodynamic, a system of agriculture developed by Rudolph Steiner in the 1920s. It pioneered



A flock of sheep on one of the estate's pastures © Hetty van Oijen



Casalduro, where Adam and his family stayed...



.. and Casale di Sotto, which contains several rental properties sleeping between two and six © Hetty van Oijen

modern organic agriculture, but it is elements that are often regarded as pseudoscientific — planting by the lunar calendar, for example, and fermenting manure in cow horns underground — that get the most attention (La Vialla buried 3,800 horns last year alone). With its applications of highly dilute preparations to the land, it has been described as homeopathy for the soil, and you will have your own opinions on homeopathy. Yet wherever you land, biodynamic growing is arguably truer to the original spirit of organics than what much organic farming has become. Today, La Vialla is the largest biodynamic farm in Italy and is certified carbon positive,

tell these are good. One morning Stefania, one of the cooks, comes over to teach us how to make pici, a Tuscan pasta. We have an enthusiastic, convivial language barrier. Pici requires only flour, water and salt, and was the pasta Stefania's grandmother made because she could not afford eggs. We roll out the dough like Plasticine worms until we have a thick, irregular spaghetti. The kids are entranced and covered in flour. At the stove, Stefania melts tomatoes and garlic into large glugs of olive oil for a sauce, and we sit down to yet another lengthy lunch. The season is on the turn. Chestnuts coat the ground. The weather has been turbulent all



Baker Dimitri with freshly baked bread outside the farmshop © Hetty van Oijen



Wine tasting in the cellar with the Lo Franco brothers...



..and some of the estate's olive oil used to roast squash with garlic and herbs © Hetty van Oijen

sequestering more carbon than it emits. Tourism is responsible for just five per cent of the business's turnover, but a visit is the best way to get a handle on the place. I meet people who have been coming devotedly for decades, driving home with their cars stuffed with wine and pasta. Our days pass gently. We roam the woods. We take the kids horse riding at a stables on the far side of the property. One evening we fire up the outdoor pizza oven, built into one wall of the house, and make pizzas with La Vialla's flour and salami. We take the tour of the *fattoria*. The flour is stone-ground in a mill that is 150 years old (the leftover bran goes to the chickens and sheep). The bread and *cantucci* are baked in ovens fired with the farm's own wood. In the cellars, great oak barrels recede into the darkness. I know little about wine, but I can

week, though there is something in the quality of the light that means it has never felt oppressive. But olives must be dry when they are harvested and so, on the one truly sunny day, near the end of our week, we go picking. Most of the guests have turned out, along with the locals. We are given small rakes to comb the trees, and the olives are caught in nets spread across the grove. My daughter sits on my shoulders and rakes olives on to my head. It is pleasant work, in the sun, for a couple of hours. We make our way through perhaps 40 trees, though with 45,000 olive trees on site it's clear that the Lo Francos can't entirely rely on the goodwill of tourists. They have planted more than a million trees — olives, vines, fruit trees, hedges — since they began managing the land. This year is the 40th anniversary of their first olive harvest. Piero has since passed





Stefania, one of La Vialla's cooks, demonstrates how to make traditional Tuscan picci © Ruben Drenth



The picci dough, which requires only flour, water and salt...

away, but the three brothers are here, each with their children, eight in all, who are now in their twenties and contemplating a farmer's life one day, some more enthusiastically than others.

The olives are usually processed in a building that feels more laboratory than press, the fruit macerated in a vacuum because oxygen degrades the quality of the product. But we are back at the old mill for an anniversary celebration, with two vast grindstones mashing the olives to a pulp, which is smeared onto circular mats that are then stacked in a tower and compressed. The end result, streaming into a pail in a thin trickle, seems to glow with its own inner light. I watch the gathered family tasting it and toasting another season with their own wine.

A great table has been laid out in the olive grove. There are grandparents and children, artists and young farmers, workers and



...is rolled into strips, like fat spaghetti © Ruben Drenth

family. There is an astonishing variety of antipasti, and then there is pasta, sausages, roast vegetables, chocolate, wine, grappa, coffee. The lunch lingers well into the afternoon.

Is this all a fantasy? It certainly feels a bit like it. I've been on something of a high all week, though it could be the lunchtime drinking. This is a big farm by biodynamic standards, but how scaleable really is it? Can organic feed the world? Studies vary, but organic yields are 10-25 per cent below those of conventional farming. Yet along with changes in diet and curbing our waste, perhaps it could. The locals are coming around to the idea — to date, La Vialla has supported 91 farmers, managing about 5,000 acres, to adopt similar practices. The dream is to start a training centre, to further spread the Lo Francos' vision.

Undoubtedly, things are getting

harder. The weather is ever more erratic. Last year the temperature edged 40C. The grape and olive harvests are overlapping. This spring was so wet that workers could not get out into the fields. Without fungicides, there is little to do if mould sets in except cut it out by hand. This summer, out of the blue, a hailstorm damaged a 10th of the grape crop; other farms lost everything. Farming is a tough job at the best of times, but now the issues are existential.

But where better to weather the future than surrounded by that which remains constant: community, land, a sense of hope. I ask the brothers what they wish to pass on to their children.

"A way of seeing the world," says Antonio. "That the land is not property, but relationship."

"And maybe a long table," Gianni says. "Full of food, laughter and stories. And to think always of those who will sit at the table after them."

Adam Weymouth is the author of 'Lone Wolf: Walking the Faultlines of Europe' (Hutchinson Heinemann)

## Details

Adam Weymouth was a guest of La Vialla (lavialla.com). Casalduro sleeps seven and costs €178 per night in March and October, €196 per night from April to September. Houses for two start from €88 per night.

Train travel was provided by My Interrail (myinterrail.co.uk) and Eurostar (eurostar.com). My Interrail offers a "global pass" giving five days' rail travel in a month, which would cover the return journey from London to Arezzo, for £267 per adult plus a €60 supplement for the Eurostar. Some other trains may also incur supplements, depending on route and time.



A table is set up outside the old mill to mark the 40th anniversary of the farm's first olive harvest © Hetty van Oijen



'There is pasta ...



...and an astonishing variety of antipasti' © Hetty van Oijen