

RECONNECTING WITH THE LIVING PLANET

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# An Italian inspiration

Satish Kumar visits a regenerative farm in Tuscany

If your question is, “How do you make an ecologically sustainable farm also financially sustainable?” then my answer is, “Follow the way of Fattoria La Vialla!” And if your question is, “How do you grow good food in sufficient quantity and at the same time address the climate crisis?” then my answer is “La Vialla way!”

I had the pleasure of visiting this flourishing farm in Italy. I was impressed and inspired.

My gracious guide was Annette Mueller. We walked together around the farm visiting vineyards, olive groves and gardens of herbs, fruits, flowers and vegetables grown organically and biodynamically.

This 2,000-hectare estate is situated in the fertile fields of Tuscany, near the town of Arezzo, which is famous for its medieval Basilica of San Francesco. I had visited Arezzo a few years before to see the masterpiece fresco by Piero della Francesca depicting the Legend of the True Cross as dreamt by Emperor Constantine. But at that time I was not aware of the masterpiece of La Vialla. Just as the famous fresco was created by a Piero Della Francesca, the legendary La Vialla farm was created by another Piero, Piero Lo Franco, together with his wife Giuliana.

Annette narrated the brief history of the farm to me.

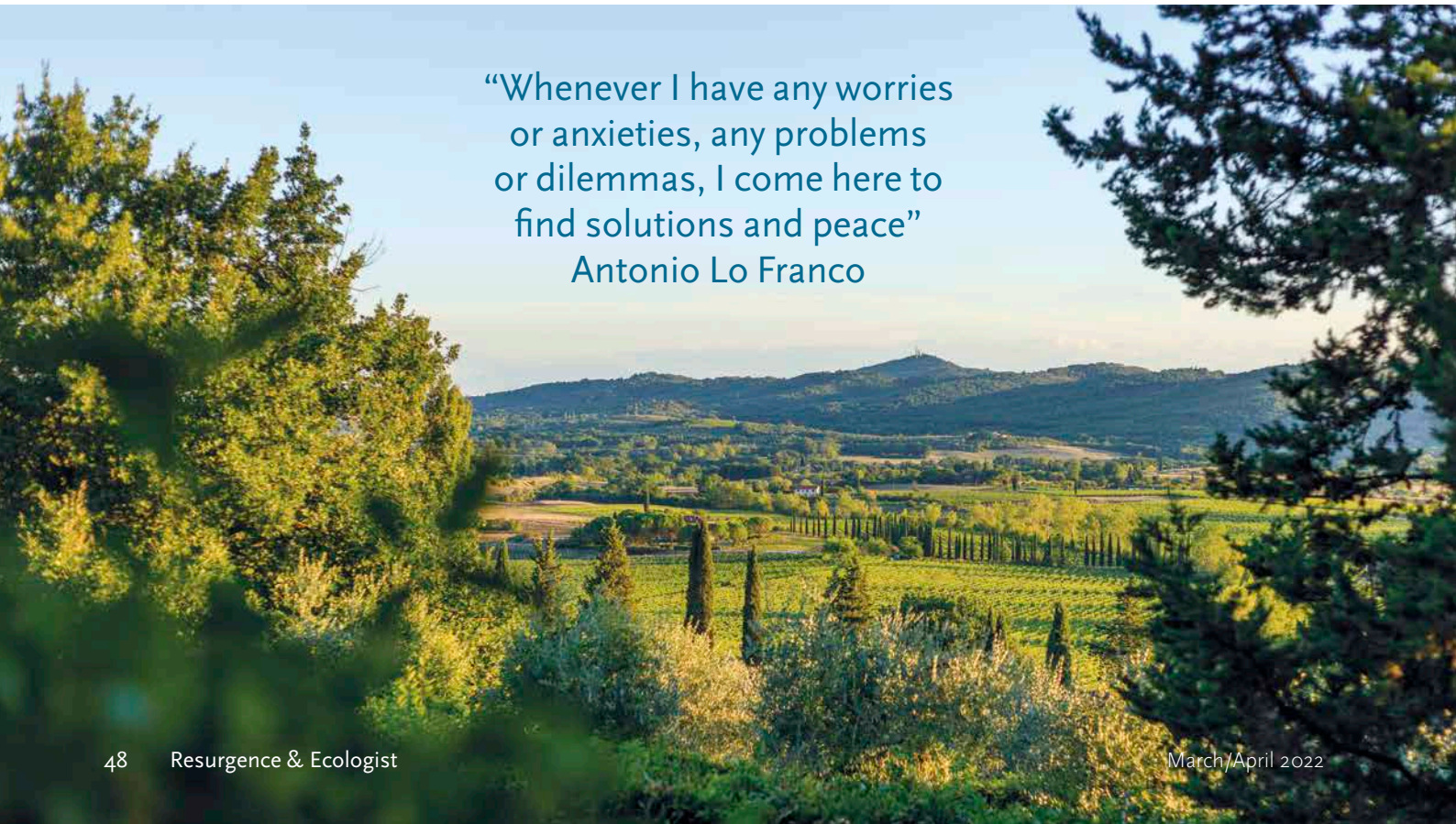
Over 40 years ago textile merchants Piero and Giuliana Lo Franco were pained to see the devastation

of rural Tuscany, where small farmers were being forced to leave the countryside as their livelihoods became unviable. Driven by the desire to conserve the countryside, Piero and Giuliana bought a run-down farmhouse together with some land, even though they had no experience in farming. But they had a vision to revive the rural surroundings of Arezzo, so they dedicated their minds and money to fulfil the mission of restoring the rural economy.

Piero and Giuliana had three sons: Gianni, Antonio and Bandino. Love of the land grew in their hearts as they grew up in the hills, fields and forests. The three brothers together not only inherited the legacy of the land from their parents, but also their passion to care for the soil, animals and trees. The growing of good food became a profession as well as a vocation for them. Over the years, the family acquired many deserted, broken-down and empty farmhouses, as well as abandoned land and endangered forests. Thus they contributed to the vitality of culture and agriculture of the region.

The three brothers work together and run La Vialla as a family farm. They are totally committed to organic and biodynamic principles of farming, which is a superb example of regenerative agriculture rooted in the ideal of biodiversity.

La Vialla produces a variety of grapes from which are



“Whenever I have any worries or anxieties, any problems or dilemmas, I come here to find solutions and peace”  
Antonio Lo Franco





Satish Kumar walking with Antonio Lo Franco

made prize-winning wines. The olive oils and Pecorino cheeses are of superb quality. The farm makes its own pasta and bread baked in wood-fired ovens. Then there are the La Vialla preserves of tomatoes, artichokes and other fruits and vegetables.

When I experienced La Vialla food, I came to know what artisan food looks like and tastes like. Olives, grapes, herbs, vegetables, fruits and flowers are all hand-harvested, handcrafted and well presented. At La Vialla they cherish and celebrate the Italian sense of Beauty, Utility and Durability: what I call the BUD principle.

The ruined and derelict cottages and farmhouses have been restored modestly, simply and elegantly in the traditional way, keeping the rural spirit of the place intact. These houses are tucked away in the woods, valleys and hilltops, so guests can enjoy holidays in healing surroundings. In the therapeutic tranquillity of Nature they can experience solitude without the feeling of separation.

Annette explained that the key to the financial success of La Vialla lies in the fact that all produce is sold directly to customers, without any intermediaries. Nothing is sold through restaurants, shops or supermarkets. All foods are value-added and supplied straight to individual households. Thus all income comes back to the farm and in turn the profit is invested in the farm. Much attention is devoted to maintaining the highest quality of food and the greatest satisfaction of customers. This approach fosters personal relationships and a sense of belonging in all buyers of La Vialla food.

I had lunch at the old farmhouse, which is the summer residence of the three brothers and their families. This is an enchanting place, high on a hill plateau blessed with a mixture of wild woods and planted trees. In front of the house is a large piece of levelled ground in the middle of which stands a majestic tree. Our lunch was served under it.

Antonio, his wife, their two daughters and Bandino were my hosts. The lunch was truly a feast! This was

the best Italian home cooking that I have ever experienced. All the ingredients were from the farm itself, superb evidence of self-sufficiency and local economy.

“Whenever I have any worries or anxieties, any problems or dilemmas, I come here to find solutions and peace,” said Antonio. “I have been listening to your audiobook *Elegant Simplicity*. We are trying to put some of your thoughts and ideals into practice here at our farm.”

“I am moved by your practical idealism! This is the kind of farming we need to address the climate crisis,” I said. “Between 30 and 40% of carbon emissions and greenhouse gases in the atmosphere come from food and farming.”

Annette added, “Researchers at the University of Siena have been monitoring La Vialla over a long period of time and they have concluded that there is a high degree of carbon sequestration in La Vialla soil.”

Craig Sams, who is an expert on soil science, has remarked: “If all farmers were to follow the La Vialla way, the sequestered carbon would not just cancel out the entire increase in greenhouse gas globally, but actually reduce it significantly, year after year!”

It may seem that La Vialla, though a success story in many ways, is still a relatively small farm surrounded by giant fossil-fuel-dependent farms across the world. Nevertheless La Vialla gives me hope! A great river starts as a small spring somewhere in the remote hills. Likewise a river of regenerative agriculture is springing forth in the hills of Tuscany. May it become a forceful flow of transformation. R

Satish Kumar is the author of *Soil, Soul, Society*, which is available from the Resurgence bookshop.

[www.resurgence.org/shop](http://www.resurgence.org/shop)

For more information about Fattoria La Vialla visit

[www.lavialla.com](http://www.lavialla.com)

Photographs by Ruben Drenth

