

Domhnall and Teresa Micco at Petra Vineyard



Few regions delight food and wine lovers more than Tuscany, writes **Domhnall O'Donoghue**

Augusto Graziano from Petra's winemaking team says: "Being close to the Tyrrhenian Sea, our climate isn't too hot — our grapes are ripe but not cooked." Located in Tuscany's Cornia Valley, this vineyard's 300 hectares also overlook Elba, the island where Napoleon was exiled — the magical surroundings and local produce must surely have comforted Le Petit Corporal as his power evaporated.

"Because we aren't hidden by hills, we get two additional hours of light daily," Augusto continues. "It's light, not heat, that makes grapes ripe."

Around us, this spring sunshine illuminates the vines standing sentinel across the sloping fields, creating a dancefloor for butterflies, moths, hornets and dragonflies — all whirling in its warmth. Until now, my appreciation of vino has been limited to consumption, but today, I'm intoxicated simply by listening to Augusto discuss the importance of nature in the process.

"There's a combination of limestone, magnesium and iron in our soil," he reveals. "The salty air is another natural element — acidity is important; without it, you become tired while drinking red wine."

We tour their Bond-esque facility, made from pink Veronese stone and resembling an ancient temple. It was designed by Swiss architect Mario Botta, famed for his museums and churches, and commissioned by the vineyard's owner, Italian construction entrepreneur Vittorio Moretti, responsible for Bellavista sparkling wine in Northern Italy. Sommelier Elena Volvanska mentions that here, however, they specialise in the red variety — Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah and Sangiovese.

"Our entry-level wine is Hebo — €14 per bottle," she reveals. "It acts like our business card — if you like it, you might buy another wine."

After sampling their more expensive options — Petra and Quercegobbe — I proffer descriptions like "woody", "peppery", "balsamic", "liquorice", and "spicy",

leaving Elena impressed. It might be the wine talking, but I'm convinced I'll soon be a connoisseur.

CROSS-BORDER COLLABORATIONS Fifty kilometres south, in Central Maremma's Rocca di Frassinello, the vineyard's press officer, Delia Demma, explains that their land is similar to Tuscany's most famous wine regions — Chianti and Montalcino — but the warmer temperatures allow their grapes to ripen up to four weeks earlier. Rocca di Frassinello was initially an ambitious collaboration between Italy's Castellare di Castellina and leading French brand Domaines Barons de Rothschild (Château Lafite).

"Typically, there's a rivalry between French and Italian producers — this was the first time they came together," Delia explains. "We brought together Tuscany's main vine variety, the Sangiovese, with their Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Shiraz."

Like Petra, the premises — designed by Renzo Piano — fuses functionality with beauty. The terracotta-coloured rooftop channels a flying carpet soaring over the rolling hills, while the tower, a tribute to Medieval times, allows sunlight to flood the subterranean pyramid-shaped barrel room — although to preserve the stock, this decorative feature is rarely used.

For their bottles, the vineyard regularly collaborates with international artists, including famed photographer Dave LaChapelle. Their most exclusive bottle is the heavenly limited edition Baffonero costing €230 per bottle — its name pays tribute to local wild boar hunters.

"Everything's done by hand, so the grapes are never stressed," Delia mentions, adding that the vineyard marries advanced technologies with local winemaking traditions dating back to the Etruscans.

"Inside the estate, we even discovered a 2,500-year-old Etruscan container with chemical elements of wine. We mightn't yet have the fame of other Tuscan regions, but here, the winemaking traditions span thousands of years."



A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Accompanying me on my wine-tasting adventures is Teresa Micco, Sales Manager for Icon Collection Hotels — a quintet of luxury properties scattered across Tuscany. Returning to my accommodation — the newly opened Sense Experience Resort — I'm thankful she's keeping an eye on the road, as my gaze is firmly fixed on the landscape, lionised in books, films and the imagination of millions worldwide.

"In Italy, there's an expression — 'il dolce far niente,'" Teresa says, revealing the translation is, wonderfully, 'the art of doing nothing'. "Our domestic guests are happy to lounge by the pool or beach or listen to local musicians in the evening."

"Our international guests, however, like compiling itineraries, which we're happy to assist with — horse-riding, exploring Florence, Pisa, Lucca and Elba, or visiting vineyards."

Overlooking the Gulf of Follonica and



protected by a canopy of pine trees, the effortlessly cool Sense Experience Resort was once a 1960s holiday camp. With its mixture of rooms, suites and on-site facilities, this four-star establishment is suitable for families, couples and solo travellers.

According to Teresa, they chose the name because they want people's senses to connect with the sounds of the waves or gulls overhead, the breeze on their faces, and the smell of the garden's 7,000 shrubs, like helichrysum, juniper and mallow.

"When developing the resort, our architect, David Fantini, preserved the original buildings and grounds — minimal environmental impact with maximum yield," Teresa says, noting that the interior colour scheme — a combination of blue, green and turquoise — mirrors the surrounding sea, mountains and gardens.

She proudly mentions that they're an eco-hotel — evident in the use of local products, their commitment to water conserva-



Left and below centre, The Sense Experience Resort. Above, some of the food on offer at the resort and (below) Petra which was designed by Renzo Piano



It plays with classic recipes by changing the textures or incorporating both sweet and savoury

tion and recycling and their many electric car stations. While I receive a warm welcome, Mother Nature is clearly the resort's VIP guest — precisely as it should be.

LA DOLCE VITA

This green approach is apparent across their duo of restaurants, Dimorà and

fine-dining Eaté, listed in this year's Michelin guide. Overseen by husband-and-wife duo Nazareno Dodi and Alessandra Zaccari, their ethos is, according to Alessandra, "interpreting regional Italian food in a modern way to stimulate all five senses."

In Tuscany, Nazareno says popular dishes include wild boar and Maremma beef, but their concept "plays with classic recipes by changing the textures or incorporating both sweet and savoury."

That night, as I sample their food — including chickpeas and eel and homing pigeon — I learn the couple met in Venice. With kitchens being notoriously stressful environments, I ask whether these pressures have impacted their relationship.

"We share the same vision and philosophy," Alessandra reports. "10 years later, I'm still smiling." After devouring their culinary delights, so am I.

Visit thesenseresort.com