

WOMEN & WINE™

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Castello di Casole Beckons



Like a Pashmina shawl on a beautiful woman, dusk envelops the vineyards stretching below me. I hear a scuffle in the dirt and spot a hare, its long brown ears on alert,

chasing another one among the vines. I wonder: are the animals fighting or playing? Since this is Italy, I'm betting it is the latter.

I have come to Italy to sample the "Tuscan lifestyle" at **Castello di Casole**, a remarkable resort and residence club in development on 4200 acres northwest of Siena, an hour's drive from Florence. My playground tonight is "Casale La Casa," one of eight single- and fractional-ownership homes that have been completed. Over the next few years, a total of 31 such homes will be built on the ruins of the ancient farmhouses ("casali") that dot this historic estate. Each will be unique inside and out and surrounded by from many bucolic acres. All will be constructed in the traditional Tuscan style without wood or nails, using ancient stone and terra-cotta roof tiles reclaimed from the ruins.

A 7,500 square-foot, four bedroom villa that sleeps 10, like the proposed villas **Casale La Casa** features country-Italian designer furnishings and antiques, Carrara marble bathrooms with Murano glass-mosaic tiles, not to mention fireplaces, wi-fi, plasma-screen TVs and an infinity pool. As servers bring around pizza hot from the wood-burning oven and wine made from Sangiovese and Cabernet grapes grown in the vineyard, I remark that this is "Tuscan lifestyle" brought to the highest level of luxury.



My host, Operations Manager **Silvia Anichini**, a blonde Florentine with a lusty laugh, says that was exactly the plan of developer **David Burden**, President of **Timbers Resorts**, whose other properties include **The Timbers Club at Snowmass, Colorado, The Rocks Luxury Residence Club in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Esperanza, an Auberge Resort, in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.**



"In the Fifties, parts of this estate belonged to the famous Italian filmmaker **Luchino Visconti**," adds

Silvia with a twinkle in her eye. "He lived and partied in the castello, but it's rumored he housed his many mistresses in the surrounding casali."

The "castle" Silvia is referring to is the one overshadowed by a giant construction crane on the hilltop above us. Built in the 17th Century by a noble Sienese family, it is in the process of being transformed into a luxurious 41-suite boutique hotel with a world-class spa and restaurants. "We are hoping to open the hotel in the summer of 2008, but you know how it is with Italian construction," says Silvia. "Some days the workers come in late; other days they leave early. But they live a lot longer than Americans!"

It's a short walk through a field aglitter with fireflies to **Casale San Giuseppe**, another of the



completed farmhouse villas, where I spend the night. Up a narrow stone staircase, my suite has a comfortable sitting room, a huge bathroom with a marble tub and a bedroom featuring a king-sized bed outfitted with Frette linens. In the morning, when I'm awakened by the cries of pheasants, I realize that my suite commands sweeping views of the surrounding countryside.

Today's taste of the Tuscan lifestyle begins with a ceramics class taught by **Ava**, Castello di Casole's resident ceramicist. The artist demonstrates how to paint swirls and interlocking designs like those that have been signature on Tuscan ceramics since the Renaissance. Though my artistic skills are seriously challenged, I do my best to decorate a plate. Other students decorate terra cotta roof tiles. "You know why the tiles are curved?" says Ava. "Because long ago, when they were made by hand, they were shaped on a woman's thigh."



Since I'm a much better cook than an artist, I immediately take to the Tuscan cooking class taught in Casale San Giuseppe's kitchen. **Lisa and Maurizio**, the exuberant teachers, demonstrate the basics of making

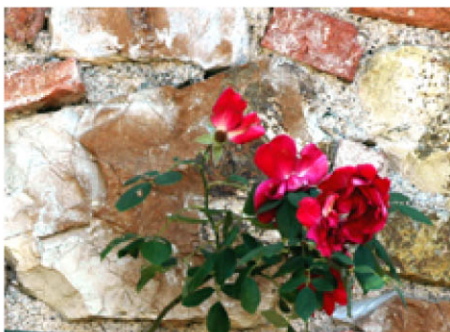
ravioli from scratch. In between bites of bruschetta topped with basil-and-garlic-scented chopped tomatoes, I take my turn at cranking the dough through a pasta machine.

We also learn to make Tuscan chicken with raisin, pine nuts and olives, using olive oil pressed from olives grown on Castello di Casole property. The best part is sitting down to enjoy the dishes for lunch.



Over my three-day stay at **Castello di Casole**, other Tuscan lifestyle experiences bring me to a winery in nearby Chianti and to Florence. Silvia—because she knows everybody—arranges for a private tour of the **Vassarian Corridor** in the **Uffizi Galleries**.

Once used by the Medicis as a secret passageway between their winter and summer palaces, the corridor spans the Ponte Vecchio and houses many artworks rarely seen. Among them are scores of brooding self-portraits by artists, famous and infamous. More beguiling is the view out the windows of the **River Arno**.



On my last night, tucked into what I call my "Princess and the Pea" bed, I muse about what it would be like to enjoy **Castello di Casole's** dreamy Tuscan lifestyle

as an owner. For around \$635,000 members get a minimum of four weeks a year in their villa—more time in it or another villa if there is availability. In the fall one year, perhaps the spring another, I imagine myself hiking on the trails through the woods, shopping at a farmers' market in one of the neighboring hill towns, then preparing a festive meal (with the help of the villa's cook) for family and friends. We'd dine on the patio, of course, watching the sunset...

Though I'm unable to invest in Castello di Casole at the moment, I intend to return. I look forward to staying at the **Castello Hotel** once it is complete. Until then, there is another attractive option for potential members. The resort recently opened **Cetana Bed & Breakfast** in one of the

restored farmhouses. Its five spacious suites and rooms go for only around 170 Euros a night, but they are decorated in the same inviting Italian designer style as the villas .

By Sharon Boorstin
For more information www.castellodicasole.com



Lisa and Maurizio's Bruschetta
Make 6-8 servings

3-4 ripe tomatoes
¼ cup freshly torn basil leaves
Salt to taste
6-8 slices Italian or French bread, about ½ inch thick
1-2 cloves garlic
Extra-virgin olive oil

Chop the tomatoes and remove the seeds and place in a colander with a pinch of salt. Drain juice. Place tomatoes in a bowl with basil and salt to taste, then coat with olive oil to moisten. Toss and blend well. Set aside. Toast sliced bread on a grill or toaster oven. Rub the warm bread with garlic. At this point drizzle bread with olive oil and add topping or add topping then add more olive oil. Serve immediately.



Lisa and Maurizio's Tuscan Chicken
Serves 4-6 servings

10-12 chicken thighs
1½ cup cold water
1½ cup white wine vinegar
6 tablespoons olive oil
2 red onions, finely chopped
2 leaves fresh sage,

chopped
1 cup white wine
1/3 cup each: olives, pine nuts, raisins
Salt & pepper to taste

Set the chicken pieces in a bowl with the water and white wine vinegar. In a casserole put the olive oil and sauté onions and sage over medium heat for about 10 minutes. Drain chicken and add it to the casserole. Brown the chicken on both sides, for about 10 minutes total. Add the white wine, turn the heat down to low/medium and cover. Cook for 30 minutes for 10 minutes, on both sides. Add the olives, pine nuts and raisins and let set 15 minutes before serving.