

Tuscany: Two Blissful Country Retreats



Castello Banfi
PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

RETURNING TO NAPLES, WE BOARDED A HIGH-SPEED 'ITALO' TRAIN AND WHIZZED UP TO FLORENCE in less than three hours. We then continued our journey by car. I wonder whether it is possible ever to tire of Tuscany: Gentle hills are layered over one another like paper cutouts; orchards of age-gnarled olive trees still bear abundant fruit; and vineyards furrow the slopes like green wide wale corduroy.

On the way down from Florence to Siena, I could not resist meandering through the vineyards of Chianti, making a rewarding stop at the Monterinaldi vineyard, where the welcome was warm and the tasting program informative, relaxed and exceptionally enjoyable. (See my article online.)

Back on the road, we headed south, and after a 90-minute drive, spied a hilltop castle of golden stone. As we drew closer, I realized that this was our destination. Castello di Poggio alle Mura, a fortress that once marked the southern edge of the Republic of Siena, is now the centerpiece of the



Our room at Castello Banfi
PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

Tuscan holdings of the American wine firm Banfi. In the 1980s, Banfi's owners, the Mariani family, completely restored the fortress, which World War II and general neglect had left in perilous shape. They further improved the property by repairing the adjacent tiny village of field workers' homes. And in 2007, they opened **Castello Banfi**, with two restaurants and an extensive wine shop/tasting room, plus a charming hotel, Il Borgo, of nine rooms and five suites.

Set in stone buildings along a paved "street," the accommodations are done in a lovely Tuscan country house style, with dark wood furniture and terra-cotta tile floors. Our Double Room Riserva had two floors, the main featuring a seating area with a couch and armoire. A stone stairway led to a lower level, where we discovered a spacious bath and the cozy bedroom. A complimentary bottle of Banfi Brunello awaited us; later, a bottle of the top-of-the-line ExcelsuS arrived with a welcoming note.

A prevailing mood of generous hospitality greatly added to our enjoyment. In the main dining room, an intimate space with a mural of intertwining grape vines, the staff took orders with charm and grace.

CULINARY ARTS



Gastronomic Inspiration

ON A TRIP full of memorable experiences, high among them would have to be our cooking class at Castello Banfi. The session was scheduled to start at 10 a.m., and I assumed we'd go through our paces and then sit down for lunch at the usual hour. Instead, we spent six hours in the kitchen (using residential rather than professional appliances) under the careful and congenial direction of the head chef, Riccardo Cappelli. Everyone pitched in — we were six in all — measuring, chopping, slicing, whisking, tossing, cranking (a pasta machine), plating and serving. Under the chef's watchful eye, we produced a full four-course meal: light flans flavored with zucchini, complemented by a tomato concasse; handmade tagliatelle pasta topped with a rich ragu of Chianina beef; sliced fillet of veal with sautéed porcini mushrooms and mashed potatoes ennobled with black truffles; and chocolate lava cake. Finally, we sat down to eat at 4 p.m. All of the dishes were accompanied, of course, by fine Banfi wines.

The cuisine was superb, and I was happy to be able to indulge in one of my favorite dishes: a rich ragu of wild boar on a bed of fettuccine.

During the ensuing days, we enjoyed relaxing by the pool with its sweeping views of the Tuscan countryside, touring the nearby winery and marveling at the glass collection in the Museum of Wine and The Bottle. Best of all was a cooking class that culminated in a late but utterly delicious lunch. (See box.)