

A TICKET TO THE CHIANTI REGION

Tastes of Italia

THE BEST IN ITALIAN COOKING

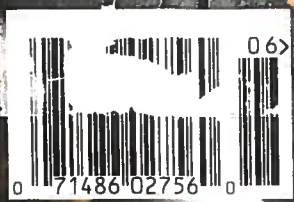
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Pasta for Beginners

Spas Italian Style

Sicily's Magical Taormina

Celebrating Cinque Terre



SPAS, ITALIAN STYLE

How I love Italian spas! You, too, can discover what Italians have known for centuries – that soaking in hot mineral springs benefits your health and feels marvelous as well.

by Susan Van Allen

It took me many visits to Italy before I caught on to the pleasures of “taking the waters.” At first I thought a spa visit too indulgent, pulling me away from museums, major sights, and...yikes...would there be bland “Spa Food?” But I came to realize that a spa break is one of the best cultural experiences a traveler to Italy can have—it’s a chance to blend in with the natives and take part in rituals that have been enjoyed here for thousands of years.

In this country, where curative thermal springs gurggle from every region, the ancients—experts at enjoying sensual pleasures—built bath houses and created social centers where spirits were lifted; aches and pains soaked away. And along with the soaking and massages there were banquets where delicious food and wine were abundant.

The tradition continues today up and down the boot. There are “wild spas”—places where you can drive up or hike in for free, such as Sorgeto on the island of Ischia, where you relax in bubbling hot waters in a glorious beach cove, then have lunch at a restaurant set into the rocks where fresh caught seafood is a delight.

On the other end of the spectrum are luxury hotel spas, where you can check in for a day of soaking and treatments, or stay longer to completely bliss out and recharge. Set in beautiful surroundings, these hotel spas bring a more relaxed approach to the wellness experience than their American counterparts. Though they are taken seriously by the National Health System (Italian doctors prescribe spa visits instead of pills to patients for certain ailments), there’s an emphasis on pleasure, including award-winning restaurants where traditional dishes and prized wines are celebrated. Adding to their appeal are the prices—many

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offers respite

offer budget-friendly package rates, particularly in the early spring or late fall.

Tuscany is the region with the most thermal spas in Italy. It's where I've discovered the Fonteverde Collection—three outstanding hotel spas that combine rich history with state-of-the-art spa services and excellent restaurants.

In the southeastern Val d'Orcia area, I've stayed at the Fonteverde Spa and Resort, which was a Renaissance villa where the noble Medici family once frolicked. There, outdoor pools come with underwater marble thrones so you can get hydro-massaged while taking in glorious views: rolling hills of olive groves and vineyards.

Closer to Florence, set on a hilltop in Monsumanno Terme is Grotta Giusti, an ultra-elegant former 19th century villa. Unique about the property is a large natural cave (grotto), steaming with healing vapors, where you can settle into a lounge chair amidst the stalagmites and emerge glowing and revitalized.

Recently after an art-filled week in Florence, I checked into Bagni di Pisa, the former palazzo of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, set in a quiet village between Lucca and Pisa. The opulent décor was a throwback to the glamorous days of the Grand Tour: elaborately frescoed ceilings, shimmering crystal chandeliers, spiral staircases. Among the many gorgeous pools, my favorite was set in an interior courtyard surrounded by graceful arches and skylight ceiling.

Every evening it was glorious to dress up and be served by tuxedoed waiters at the hotel's Dei Lorena restaurant. Chef Umberto Toscano brings the best seasonal ingredients of this corner of Tuscany to the menu. There were entrees and pastas topped with truffles found in the nearby forests, pecorino cheeses from the farmlands, catch-of-the-day fish dishes cooked with the regions' fine olive oil, and desserts featuring local honey, fruits from the surrounding orchards, and chocolate from Tuscan artisans such as deBontd and Amadei. So I happily indulged, toasting with a glass of rich Brunello wine, following in the footsteps and delicious traditions of the pleasure seekers who came before me.

Here are three recipes inspired by the chefs of the Fonteverde Collection, bringing light Italian flavors to your springtime meals.

For more info: www.ihchotels.it

Susan Van Allen is the author of *100 Places in Italy Every Woman Should Go*, *Letters from Italy: Confessions, Adventures, and Advice*, *50 Places in Rome, Florence, and Venice Every Woman Should Go*, and the Golden Days in Italy blog. She travels frequently to Italy, the native land of her grandparents, and lives in Los Angeles, Calif. susanvanallen.com.

Whole Wheat Spaghetti with Zucchini and Tomatoes

- 1 pound whole wheat spaghetti
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove of garlic, minced
- 4 young zucchini, sliced into thin strips
- 2 cups cherry tomatoes
- 2 teaspoons of salt, for the spaghetti water
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, minced

In a large pot, boil water for the spaghetti. In a pan large enough to later hold the cooked spaghetti, heat the oil on a low flame and sauté the minced garlic until fragrant. Add the zucchini strips, stirring and sautéing for about 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes to the pan and cook until they are blistered. Add the salt to the boiling water and cook the spaghetti as directed on the package until al dente. Drain and add to the skillet, tossing with the zucchini and tomatoes, then stir in the cheese and parsley. Serve immediately.

Makes 4 servings.

Macedonia di Frutta (Fresh Fruit Salad Marinated in Wine)

- 4 cups of ripe seasonal fruit, such as strawberries, blueberries, or peaches, cut into bite-size pieces
- Sugar or honey to taste. If the fruit is very sweet, you don't need extra sweetener
- 2 cups light-bodied red wine

In a large bowl, mix the fruits and sprinkle with sugar or honey, as desired. Pour the wine over the fruit and stir it in. Chill in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours. Serve chilled.

Makes 4 servings.

Whitefish, Asparagus, and Red Pepper Cooked in Parchment

- 1½ cups thin asparagus, cut into 2- to 3-inch pieces
- 1 red pepper, sliced into thin strips
- 2 shallots, minced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 4 to 6-ounce fish fillets, cod or tilapia
- 4 tablespoons of white wine
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- Parchment paper, 4 (15 x 24-inch) pieces, folded in half

Preheat oven to 425°F. In a bowl mix together asparagus, red pepper, and shallots, seasoning with salt and pepper to taste. Stir in the olive oil.

Distribute the mixture evenly on each of the four parchment papers, on one side of the fold. Top the vegetable mixture with a fish fillet. Salt fish as desired. Sprinkle 1 tablespoon of white wine over each fish-vegetable portion.

Fold and pinch together the edges of the parchment packages to seal tightly. Place packages on a baking sheet and bake for 10 to 15 minutes until the paper puffs up. Serve immediately, removing from the parchment, pouring the juices over the fish, and sprinkling with fresh parsley.

Makes 4 servings.

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