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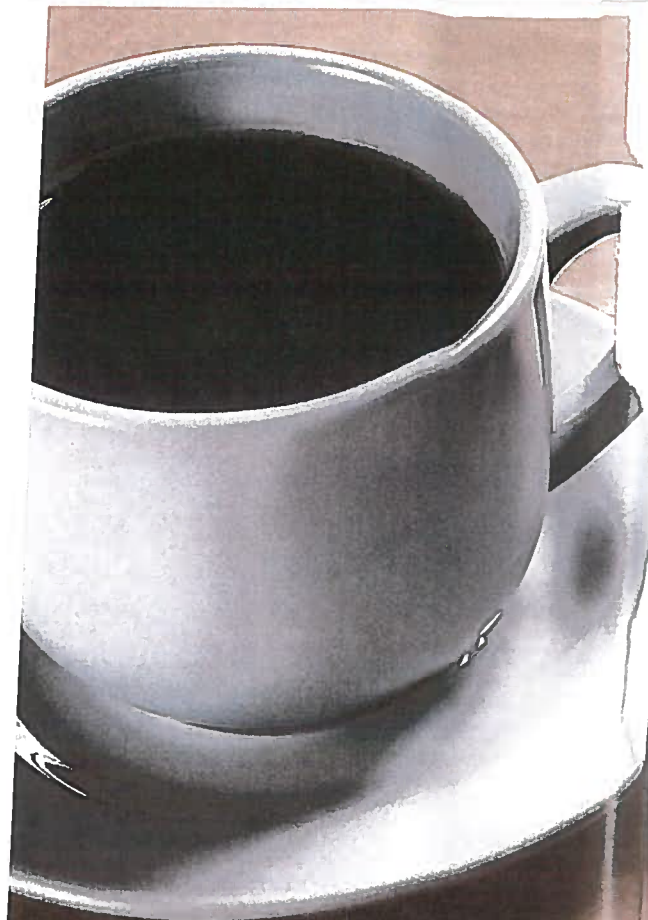
FOODS *of* TUSCANY

A FAMILY FARM NEAR FLORENCE INVITES VISITORS FROM AROUND THE WORLD TO BOND OVER THE REGION'S DELICIOUS FOODS.

By Susan Van Allen



Farm and Family Photos Courtesy of Montestigiano



The Donati Family: Virginia, Damiano, Giancarlo, Luisa, and Massimo. **Page 33:** Chocolate salami.

NATIVE INTEL

The drive from Florence to the farm estate of Montestigliano is an ooh-and-ahh inspiring adventure. The road opens to a Tuscan dream landscape: stately cypress trees, rolling green hills covered with vineyards and olive groves. Luisa Donati is at the wheel, winding me through this paradise to her family's farm.

I'd met Luisa in Florence, and was instantly charmed by her smiling cherubic face, framed with wild, curly brown hair. Walking through the historic center, she led me to a piece of her family history: Piazza Donati, just off Via del Corso. It's now an enchanting small courtyard, tucked behind the major shopping street. But in 13th century Florence, it was the noble home and tower of the powerful Donatis. According to Luisa, her ancestors left the city during its turbulent medieval days and settled in the Le Marche region, just west of here.

Cut to the 1950s, when Luisa's grandfather, set on finding a farm for his retirement years, searched all over Italy until he came upon the perfect hillside spot near Siena: Montestigliano. The 2,500 acres had been owned by aristocratic families since the 18th century. Villas and farmhouses they built were transformed by the Donatis in 1985 into guesthouses—each unique, retaining original wood beams and floors, with windows and terraces that open up to stunning views of flourishing olive and fig trees, fields of wheat, corn, and sunflowers.

"Each house is named after a Donati family member," Luisa tells me as we curve up the gravel road to the main villa and she smiles, pointing out Casa Luisa. The Donati family is key to Montestigliano's success. All take part in running the place, with passion, joyful dedication to local tradition, and warm welcoming that makes guests feel as though they're spending a vacation with relatives.

"What I like most about my work is sitting down to dinner and the entertainments that we have in the evenings in the big hall or out on the patio, with visitors from all over the world," Luisa tells me. "Many come from England, America, and Canada—some families have been coming every summer since we started, so now, 30 years later, we've watched the children grow, marry, and bring their own children to enjoy a real farm holiday."

A real farm holiday around here means bonding around delicious Tuscan food—at

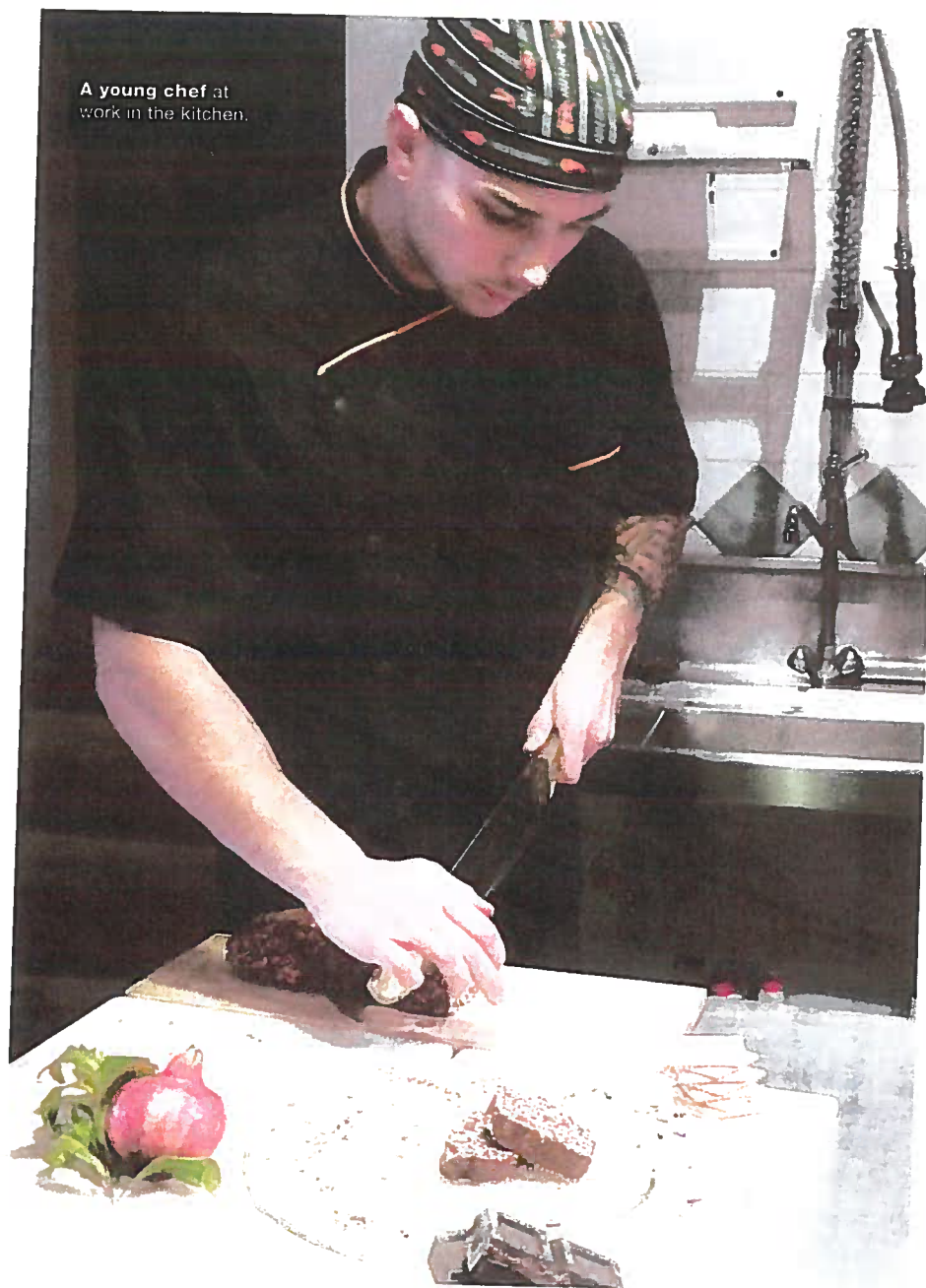
Montestigliano's dinner parties, in their cooking classes, olive oil and wine tastings. Every taste here is local—changing with the seasons and produced from ingredients grown on the Donati's farm or their neighbor's.

The day I visited, I joined Luisa and some workers for a while, turning over the soil in their raised vegetable garden beds. It felt great to get a little workout in the beautiful spot, with songbirds tweeting in the background. And then there was delicious lunch with the family, made by Chef Maria—pasta with pumpkin sauce, some tangy greens, roasted chicken, and rich red wine.

Luisa tells me in winter those vegetable gardens are full of cabbages and lettuces. Things at Montestigliano get quieter than in the warmer months, and visitors come for a cozy time, when a mist hangs magically over the valley and the view of Siena in the distance.

Luisa's nephew, 21-year old Pierluigi, who recently joined the farm's staff of chefs, shares with us his Montestigliano wintertime recipes, so wherever you are, you can join in for the deliciousness enjoyed around family tables, as the Donatis do, Tuscan style.

For more information, see www.montestigliano.it



A young chef at work in the kitchen.

Farfalle with Pumpkin Sauce

- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 ounce shallot, minced
- 2½ ounces pancetta, cubed
- 4 cups fresh pumpkin, cut into small cubes
- 6 ounces of white wine
- 1 teaspoon fresh rosemary, minced
- 1 pound farfalle (bow tie) pasta

In a large pot, begin to boil the water for the pasta.

Pour the oil in a large frying pan and sauté the shallot over medium heat. When the shallot gets soft, stir in the pancetta and cook for 2 minutes.

Stir in the cubed pumpkin. Pour in the wine and cook until the wine evaporates. With a ladle, take a cup of water from the pasta pot and pour over the pumpkin mixture. Cook until the pumpkin softens, adding more water if necessary. Once it is cooked, stir in the rosemary. Remove half the mixture and pulse it in a food processor until it becomes a cream.

Cook the pasta according to the directions on the box, till al dente. Drain the pasta and pour it into the big frying pan, adding the creamed pumpkin. Mix together well. Serve immediately.

Makes 6 servings.

Chocolate Salami

- 10 tablespoons butter
- 6 ounces dark chocolate
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 2 tablespoons Vin Santo
- 3 cups of crumbled plain butter cookies

Leave the butter out to soften an hour before beginning. Melt the chocolate in a bain-marie and set it aside to cool.

Put the softened butter in a large bowl and mix with the sugar until well blended and creamy. In a separate bowl, beat the eggs and mix into the butter-sugar mixture. Mix in the Vin Santo. When the chocolate has become tepid, mix it into the bowl. Then mix in the cookie crumbs until you have a thick paste.

Lay the paste on a sheet of parchment paper and shape it into a thick salami. Place the salami on a sheet of aluminum foil and roll it more into a salami shape. Wrap tightly in aluminum foil and chill in the refrigerator for at least 4 hours. Remove 10 minutes before serving it, in slices, at room temperature.

Makes 6 servings.

Note: You can make cookie crumbs by chopping in a food processor, or placing cookies between two sheets of parchment paper and crushing them with a rolling pin.

Crumbs can be different sizes, like lard in a salami.

Baked Red Endive with Balsamic Vinegar

- 2 bunches of red endive
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Salt, to taste
- 2 to 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar, to taste

Heat oven to 425°F. Trim ends of endive and slice lengthwise into quarters. Place endive, cut side up, on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Drizzle olive oil evenly over the endive. Bake for about 10 minutes, until tender and slightly golden. Before serving, sprinkle with salt as desired, then drizzle balsamic vinegar over them. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Makes 6 servings.



A guest house on the farm.