

The Tuscany Adventure

Picking and pressing olives – country cooking – wine - culture – nature and exciting people in Tuscany – November 2006.

We arrived in Dolce Toscana – a Tuscan Country Inn (3 km from Cécina, south of Livorno) – late afternoon and found our host Charles in the garden bottling the red wine, which we should consume “en masse” during our stay. Eight people – the majority living in Switzerland – should spend four days and five nights in this lovely Bed and Breakfast Inn to enjoy and experience the wonders of Tuscany, its food and its people as well as of course ourselves. We communicated in many different languages, among them Swenglish, American, French, Italian, Swedish and English.

During the days we picked the olives – handpicking, shaking, climbing, and raking the brave old olive-trees. The olives were placed under the trees on the big nets that we had covered the ground, and the olives were collected. After a couple of days picking, we took all the olives to the local pressing-facilities in the village, and to our amazement after a couple of hours, the most beautiful virgin oil could be tapped into our cans. People came from all the surrounding villages with their olives to have them pressed, so we met a lot of unshaved characters in the small local pressing-factory – called il Frantoio.

Anna Paola, made in Sardinia, but now living in Elba, working as a kayaking instructor – was our charming cooking supervisor for the Tuscany country cooking. Spaghetti with anchovies – Squid – Braised Wild Boar – Risotto with shellfish and crispy eggplant – Catch of the day baked in the oven – these were only some of the many Tuscany-dishes which we learned to cook, eat and enjoy – everything washed down with the racy red Tuscany country wine. Anna Paola had patience as an olive tree and also went up very early each day to bake fabulous breakfast cakes so that we did not have to starve for breakfast. (We are already planning to visit the Kayak-camp that she and her fiancée are running in Elba!)

Italy is of course synonymous for culture – and culture we received. The medieval villages of Casale, Bibbona and Bolgheri were fascinating – as if time had been at a standstill for the past three hundred years. We travelled across the languishing Tuscan landscape with its rolling hills, vineyards, olive groves and cypresses – all created in a seemingly bohemian and dilettantish fashion – and we were delighted. All agreed that the tower in Pisa should soon fall to the ground, but the walls of Lucca will probably stand forever and so will the operas of Giacomo Puccini – who is the pride of the town. The old Etruscan town of Volterra with its alabaster works of art and its medieval structure complete with a Roman theatre was of course something to e-mail home about.

Tuscany without wines would be like (well, fill in something yourself here) – so we really made the most out of it. We mostly drank the normal red local wines, which were juicy with high acidity and very well suited to harmonise with the Tuscany country cooking. Probably because of the dryness in the air our thirst was remarkable, and our great host Charles had to work hard trying to produce bottles to fill our sighing throats. The big three wines in Tuscany – and probably among the finest wines in Europe – are otherwise; Chianti Classico – Vino Nobile Di Montepulciano and Brunello Di Montalcino. These wines should be tasted on very special occasions, of which we of course have plenty.

Another traditional wine for Tuscany that we tried was Vin Santo (holy wine). This wine can be used for desserts. It has been aged for three to four years and tastes somewhat like Madeira or Sherry.

To assist in the digestion most of the meals were of course rounded off by the Grappa.

On the fifth day it was time to say good-bye to Dolce Toscana and our lovely hosts, Silvia, who had now come back from a trip to Bush-country and Charles as well as our cook Anna-Paola. It had been some very intense days and nights and our stomachs were now stuffed with the exquisite Tuscany food and wines – one really felt like an old Tuscany wild boar! – and our hearts and minds were filled with all the great culture and sceneries that we had imbibed – **Una Esperienza Straordinaria !**

In order to try to release the body from some of the excesses – some of the group-members continued to **Cinque Terre** to walk between the five small medieval villages at the sea just north of La Spezia and south of Portofino. This was a fantastic experience – and although some of the restaurants in the villages must be considered as tourist traps – we had great walks from one village to the other on small tracks sometimes rather steep and a lot of steps. We met hardly any tourists along the tracks – November is a great month to travel in south Europe. Stunning views of the sea and coastline accompanied our walks. Farmers have over thousands of years built and maintained these paths and the accompanied stone walls thus creating a landscape that is unique in the world, where cultivation is culture. It is now included on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

This adventure was planned and carried out by **The Dilettante Society** (www.dilettantesociety.com) under the most professional guidance of **Louise Hermelin**. In future we plan other adventures and events in Dolce Toscana (www.dolce-toscana.com)

November 2006 – Anders Björck