

# Under the Tuscan sun



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An ochre stone village crowning a hill, bathed in the golden glow of a setting sun should have been my first glimpse of Montalcino. Instead I entered this medieval town with my hand gripping the steering wheel and a prayer on my lips. Fairytale landscapes be damned, all I cared about was not accidentally backing into another car mid gear change as I drove up 90-degree incline roads just a little wider than my Citroën.

When the GPS finally announced--"You have reached your destination", I lumbered out of the car, made a beeline for the reception and broke down. My landlady at the Il Giglio, handed me a glass of wine Rosso di Montalcino and said, "Avventura!" I smiled supposing, what is travel without adventure?

Or for that matter, bad planning. My *raison d'être* for this Tuscan vacation was to take part in a wine harvest. So I chose Montalcino-home to the Brunello di Montalcino, the most revered of all Tuscan wines. The only hitch was I was yet to find a vineyard that would let me participate. Unlike those pictures you see of happy Americans in shorts crushing grapes, tourists aren't permitted to be part of the harvest process. Tightening immigration laws meant that my every request had been turned down months beforehand. Being the eternal optimist I still came hoping that some charitable signor would take pity on a budding novelist. I was wrong.

Phone calls to vineyards became an exercise in futility. My landlady, at the sight of my crestfallen face, said, "La Forza del destino." Everything is fated. So I spent my days taking lunches in Caffè Fiaschetteria Italiana (a tourist trap you can avoid) and Caffè La Fortezza, visiting vineyards, Ciacci Piccolomini d' Aragona and tasting rare vintages at the Enoteca di Piazza, an excellent cellar where you could taste Casanova Di Neri 1999, for a mere four euro. By the third day I had made friends with a gregarious Australian couple who could drink me under the table, my reticent landlady and Luciano, the owner of the local Taverna Grapallo Blu. As I dived into his divine Pinci with Ragu, he said with an air of nonchalance, "Ciao! We have found you a vineyard."

The next day I was picked up by his daughter, Anna Vittoria, as she did her school run. Lithe, blond and camera ready for Vogue, Anna drove me to her family's vineyard, Villa le Prata. There, at the end of a quarter mile driveway flanked by cypress trees lay the villa. Originally a hunting lodge the Count De' Vecchi in 1860, it later became the country residence of the Bishop of Montalcino. Today, Benedetta runs it along with help from family, like Anna.

After a cup of espresso, I was given a pair of gloves and shears to help me harvest one hectare of luscious purple Sangiovese grapes. After three hours and much gossip, I accompanied half a dozen other pickers to a spread of Chicken Cacciatore with rosemary potatoes, all served with the house Rosso. I was paid in the form of two bottles of Brunello, a most rewarding bonus as I headed back home.

The next day I took off for Poppi, a four-hour drive that would take me through the floodplains of the Areezo Valley and the Chianti region of Ruffina. I do believe there is a secret theory in Tuscany that the beauty of a Villa is directly proportional to its remoteness. After some of the trickiest hairpin bends I have ever negotiated, I finally arrived at the wrought iron gates of Casa Ombuto and a lovely driveway strewn with copper leaves of autumn.