

Real World: Casa Ombuto



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The past five days have been pretty incredible. I can't remember the last time I was this relaxed for this sustained a period of time. When I first arrived at Casa Ombuto, I was pretty nervous; I thought this was the weirdest thing I'd ever done, showing up alone to an Italian villa in the middle of Tuscany. Five days later, I can tell you it's also one of the best things I've ever done. To give you a bit of a taste of what life is like here, I figured I'd break it down into two parts:

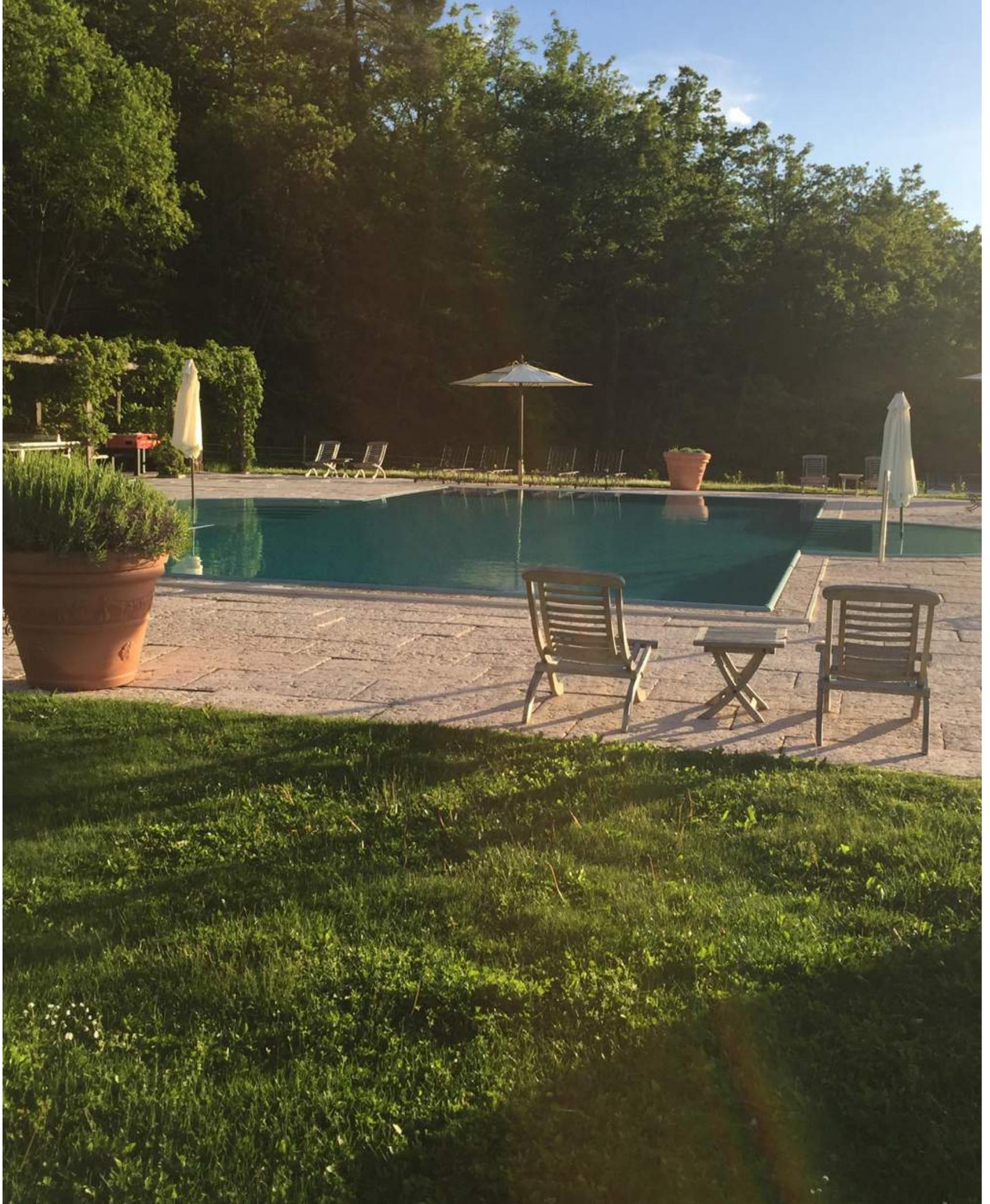
- What my days are like
- What the squad is like

For those who are concerned about my well-being, this is the post for you. The next 7 minutes of reading will document the circumstances in which I have found zen and had one of the best experiences of my life. I feel relaxed, refreshed, energized, and very happy. For those of you interested in having an entertaining read, this might not be your favorite post, as I'm in one of the most relaxed places I've been in in a while, but you can scroll down below to the squad section to get your fill, where you will meet my new friends...and Greg.

A typical day

A typical day at Casa Ombuto looks something like this: I wake up around 10am, take a shower, and head to breakfast. Breakfast ends at 10:30, I usually miss it and grab a piece or two of remaining fruit, which people from my time at Uber will know is my calling card. I take my apple and banana and head to the pool.





Casa Ombuto pool

From 10:30am–1pm, I read by the pool and sometimes partake in an activity with my housemates. Two days ago that involved me heading to the stove-heated hot tub, putting a leg in, screaming numerous expletives in a decibel heard only by dogs, seeing the thermometer read 110, and heading back to the pool. Yesterday it

involved me and Niesje prevailing over the Aussie sisters in a three-game ping pong match.

The reading has been great. I like to think of myself as a reader, but in the real world, I don't do much reading beyond long-form articles. Here I've already read Game Change and half of Hillbilly Elegy, I hope to finish that tomorrow and then start When Breath Becomes Air and Shoe Dog (thanks again to everyone for the recommendations).

At 1pm I head to lunch; lunch is made by these great sous chefs on staff. Each day we have a protein, a homemade pasta and sauce, a veggie, a salad, and a homemade pie for dessert. Yesterday was penne in an aubergine sauce, guinea fowl, sauteed green beans, romaine salad with fruits and veggies, and a lemon cake. Words don't do it justice, but you get the picture. Then there's another hour off; I try to get some more reading in before class starts at 3.

I approach class in an emotional state best described, in my new found recipe speak, as 5 parts excitement and 1 part fear. That's because I've found cooking to require a fair bit of brain power and to be simultaneously fast-paced and cathartic (cue the excitement) and Chef Paola to be hilarious and terrifying (cue the fear). Within the span of five minutes on Monday, Chef Paola said to me, "Steven (she often calls me Steven), I am so proud of you and how you are improving" and "Steven (see above), why did you come all the way over Italy to do this to me?!?!?" For those concerned that I chopped off her pinky finger or insulted her youngest daughter to provoke this kind of existential frustration, fear not: this was in response to my forgetting to separate the egg whites from the egg yolks before transferring to the mixer.

Class goes from 3–7:30pm, with one 15-minute break for wine and bread in between. Chef Paola starts break by screaming "STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING, HURRY UP, AND GO ON YOUR BREAK!!" and ends break by screaming "YOU LAZIES, WHY ARE YOU JUST SITTING AROUND?! WE'RE NEVER GOING TO FINISH IN TIME!!" It's a roller coaster here at Casa Ombuto.





Me, my chocolate roll, and some light bed head

Class usually consists of our group of 6 making two appetizers (think a ricotta pie, cheese flan, or some other 1000-calorie dish stuffed with dairy), two first courses (ravioli, gnocchi, pasta roll — you can see the theme), two entrees (usually a meat or chicken), and a dessert. So far I've made pizza margherita from scratch, gnocchi

with truffle sauce, pici pasta in garlic sauce, pistachio-coated chicken stuffed with fontina over an apple/orange potato puree, a chocolate cake roll stuffed with homemade whipped cream and raspberries, and a handmade pasta roll stuffed with ricotta and sauteed leeks. Definitely a step up from Kraft mac and cheese.

From 7:30–8:15pm, I take advantage of break time to get in a run. There's a 400 meter hill outside the villa that's pretty damn steep, so I usually go on a 5–10 minute warmup run and then run up and down that guy 7 or 8 times, which takes about 20 minutes. It gets the heart rate up, makes me break a sweat, and impresses some of my fellow villa mates, so you can't really ask for more than that.





The dinner table

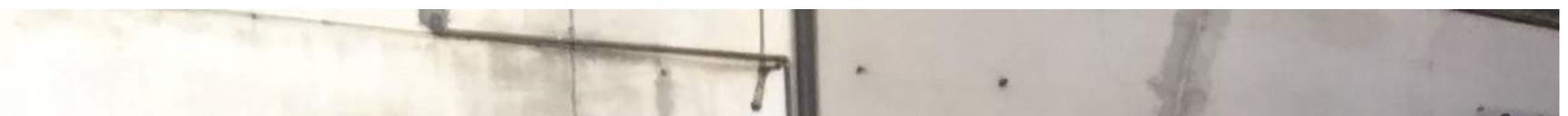
At 8:15, we convene for dinner, which with four courses usually goes past 11. For the dessert course, they bring out about 30 bottles of dessert wine. The first night I grabbed some grappa, thinking it was whiskey. It is not. Wikipedia says it's a "grape-based pomance brandy," which I guess would be accurate if these grapes were grown on a vineyard where they were infused with petrol. Since that fateful moment, I've been stuck having to drink grappa every night since, which sends me to bed feeling pretty loosey.

Around 11:30, I head to bed, do some reading/blogging, and pass out between 1–2am, then wake up each morning at 10 and repeat.

One thing I failed to mention about the daily routine was the wine. I would like to one day find someone who looks at me the way that any Italian I've met here looks at a bottle of wine. There is wine everywhere in this country; consequently, you're drinking wine all the time: at the pool, at lunch, during breaks from cooking, during dinner, as your pre-run drink, as your post-run drink, sometimes even in place of coffee at breakfast. As they say, when in Rome ... literally.

The squad

A squad of 6 strangers from all walks of life has convened here at Casa Ombuto, accompanied by the regulars who make this place run. In general, it's a great crew. The average age (excluding me) is 60; when you throw me into the mix, we run a youthful 54. Here we are enjoying a day out on the town in Arezzo:





From left to right: Greg, Billy Jean, Niesje, Jo, Alex, Sue, Spencer, Spencer's second chin (missing: Chef Paola)

And now, a little bit about the players in my new life (for two more days, at least) here in Poppi.

The regulars





Chef Paola flashing a smile while also contemplating killing me with a tub of whipped cream

Chef Paola: Despite the sentiment I may have conveyed earlier in this article, I love Chef Paola. I think this may be a Stockholm Syndrome type of love, but it's love nonetheless. She can alternate rapidly between being brutally honest and overwhelmingly kind — often over two successive cuts of a stalk of celery, depending on your cutting form — but it all comes from love. She holds no grudges, except against one American woman who came to school two years ago, was incredibly rude the whole time, and then on the last night got wasted on dessert wine, ambushed Paola in the kitchen, and farted on her multiple times, but I share Paola's conviction that some offenses are unforgivable. She also says “ALLORA” every ten seconds, which is apparently Italian for “well...”/ “OK”, but until I realized this (on day 3), it made me think that I'd misheard Sue's name and that she was really named Laura. Paola is a larger-than-life figure; she is incredibly funny, full of life, and pretty naughty (every picture she takes, she asks you to “SAY SEX!” rather than “cheese,” presumably because everything else we do revolves around cheese). We will miss each other when we part ways, or at least that's what I tell myself when Paola is prying the knife from my hands to recut the chicken again.





Calm view from the top of Montepulciano, right before I discovered I had left my hybrid Yaris unlocked and running for 3 hours

Alex: Alex is the GM of the 3 Tuscookany cooking schools and is our host for the week. He is from Greece and previously worked for Royal Caribbean. He and his wife Lena moved to Italy five years ago, and he's been with Tuscookany ever since. He is funny, interesting, organized, and forces me to drink grappa like the world is going to end. He laughs at everything, including his own stories, which makes dinner conversation really light and lively. He also organizes excursions for the villa — we took one to Arezzo and one to Montepulciano — and has made this trip extremely enjoyable.

The other guests

Jo: Jo's in her early 50s, teaches Phys Ed to primary school students in Perth, Australia, and is on her second trip to Casa Ombuto. She actually won a contest to come here for free last Monday, and booked the trip five days before arriving. She has four kids (her oldest is my age) and she is an awesome person and presence. She looks out for me when Chef Paola seems ready to deport me to Remedial Cooking School for Idiots, guided me through my return trip on the Autostrada today (it was a success, thanks for asking), and is a constant source of laughter. I'm planning on staying at her house whenever I visit Australia, though it's unclear if she realized I was serious when I told her that.

Billie Jean: Billie Jean is Jo's younger sister, in her mid-40s, who agreed to come on this trip with Jo last Monday. She lives in Melbourne with her husband and two kids and spends a lot of her time working at her family-owned business and taking care of

her mom; this is her first time in Europe and it's a much-deserved break. She's better than me at cooking by a mile but also newer to it than some here; we bond over the regular "verbal encouragement" we receive from Chef Paola and our interactions with the Master of the Dark Arts described a bit below. She is a great conversationalist and really fun to play ping pong with and walk around with on our expeditions to the surrounding towns.



Niesje's first selfie!

Niesje: Niesje is a mother of two in her early 60s who calls Holland home (she lives right outside of Amsterdam). I feel fairly confident that we knew each other in a past life. For the first 3 days, I accidentally spelled her name Nietzsche, like the philosopher, though in my defense, she does share his intellect, if not his undying fundamental conviction that "god is dead." She is an expert cook: her ricotta pie and pork filets were both out of this world. She's an even better person. Today, when I got a bit frazzled after coming back to my car following our 3-hour excursion to

Montepulciano and realizing that I'd never shut the hybrid Toyota Yaris' power off (there's no key to start the car) or locked the doors, meaning that a running 2013 Toyota Yaris was sitting in a packed parking lot for 3 hours and could have been sniped by *literally anyone*, she just sat down in the front seat, looked at me calmly, and said "Next time when you say you want to sit by the pool all day, just sit by the pool. Stop pressuring yourself. This is your life. Do what makes you happy." She makes tons of jokes, gets my humor, drinks grappa like a sailor, and is just all around awesome.

Sue: Sue is 70, recently retired from her job at a local bank branch in Ohio, and moved to Nashville. She has a ton of hobbies — she just finished her term as president of the Singles Club in her gated community, volunteers twice a month at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, and recently took up swimming lessons. She has a lot more energy than her age would suggest, a very kind spirit, and a real passion for life. We have disagreements on the pros and cons of a single-payer health care system—which we've talked about more than you'd expect to during any week of the Gregorian calendar, let alone during a week when you're at Tuscan cooking school — but we treat each other with mutual respect and enjoy each other's company a lot.

...and Greg: This all brings me to Greg. Greg is what happens when the producers of the "Real World" think the first 6 people cast are too normal to give them the kind of season they need so they add a 7th member to "spice things up." Greg, 69, is retired from the military and a software/technology job that I would have asked him more about if I hadn't given up on trying to start conversation with him. Why did I give up? Greg has a take on everything...10 times out of 10 it is not positive. Here are a few of Greg's hot takes:

- *On the topic of Puerto Vallarta, which the rest of the guests unanimously expressed a strong affinity for:* "Ugh, if the humidity doesn't kill you, the drug dealers will."
- *On the topic of Monday night's dinner, which featured great food, tons of wine, and a Bruce Springsteen singalong:* "I'm leaving dinner early, but before I do, I want to explain to you all why: it's because I'm not enjoying myself."
- *On the topic of Alex telling me I'm like an Italian because I talk a lot:* "You beat me

to the punch, I was gonna tell him to shut the hell up!”

- *On the topic of him being the only person in the villa to have his own balcony, which everyone is jealous of: “What good is my balcony when the chairs are two inches off of the ground? Who the hell can sit on that?!”*
- *On the topic of me waiting around for Paola to bring flour over so I could start making my pasta roll, which gave me a free minute of rest in the kitchen: “Young man, as we used to say in the military, get off your ass and get back to work!”*
- *On the topic of me leaving my car unlocked and running for 3 hours in a parking lot while we ventured around Montepulciano: “That man is an idiot.” [EDITORS NOTE: while not a kind comment, Greg was in fact correct here].*

Greg’s negativity is kind of remarkable in that it transcends culture and nationality and knows no bounds; he’s an equal opportunity offender who can usually get in a comment directed at each of us over the course of the day. We are weirdly very politically aligned, which is simultaneously oddly inspiring and fucking terrifying. If we can make it through tomorrow night’s dinner without any of us blowing up at him for the entire week, this villa’s mystical powers and intangible zen will go unquestioned forever.

With that, I head to bed, ready for the last full day at Casa Ombuto tomorrow. Sans Greg, everything here has surpassed expectations by multiple kilometers (we use the metric system here in Italy).

ALLORA!

Food

Medium

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