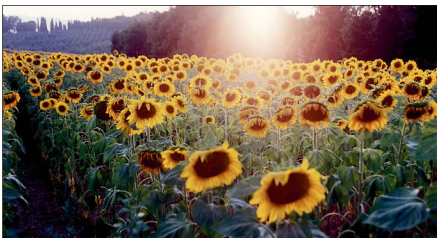


## FEATURES



Tuscan sunflowers as seen from the road.

### Under a spell

An Italian love affair with the enchanting Tuscan countryside

Story and Photography by DAVID BUTWIN

When dinner was finished on the flagstone terrace, we moved to the garden and watched the pale Tuscan sky shade to blackness. Under a full moon, the rows of cypresses along the inn's bordering walls seemed to march away like sentries. The air smelled of jasmine, and owls hooted in the barn.

If that isn't romantic enough, you should have seen the way the titled innkeeper, a count named Carlo, greeted his female guests here in Italy. It was the old continental brush of lips across a startled hand, and it worked wonders.

My wife, Pam, was putty to this lean silver-haired man in his uniform of chinos, loafers and Izod shirt. How does he do it? I wondered. Is it his twinkle, his title? We'd return to the inn — Pam, teenage daughter Kate and I — from a hot and tiring outing, and there in the stone archway, Carlo Citterio would set things right with a bow, a smile and a "Buona sera!"

Not that there was much to set right during that week in Tuscany and Umbria. The 17-room Locanda dell'Amorosa proved an almost perfect holiday base. Though it sat in an unremarkable plain, we had Tuscany all around us, the green heart of Umbria out back, and the autostrada leading to Florence was just five miles away. Yet we hardly needed Florence, with Siena just 30 miles west, and the sweet Tuscan hilltowns of Pienza and Montepulciano closer to the south. This is how a day starts at the inn: You're sitting on the terrace spooning up the last cappuccino froth and reading up on Pienza and Montepulciano in a guidebook when a visitor from Milan at the next table waves you over.

"Do not miss Bagno Vignoni," he says, of an ancient spa town he and his wife had toured the day before, themselves tipped off by an article in a local newspaper. At 11 a.m., we parked outside the walls of Montepulciano and started the long hike up the steep winding main street, via nel Corso. Montepulciano is one of the prime examples of late Renaissance life as it was lived outside Florence. It is more stately than dramatic, but its views will stagger you, and so will the famous local wine, the ruby-colored Vino Nobile.

For me, though, the nectar of the gods is Italian coffee. Since landing in Milan, we'd made at least a twice-daily habit of coffee bars, and now we were drawn to Caffè Poliziano. After Poliziano, your local coffee bar will never look the same. Opened in 1888, this gem of art-nouveau design has a pocket-size balcony perched over a cliff. It was named for the town's own Il Poliziano, a fine Renaissance poet who saved Lorenzo de' Medici from assassins in 1478. Two things to know about Italian coffee bars: The portions are small, and they don't linger over their drink. They stop in, drain a cup in five minutes and move on, often repeating the act three and four times a day.



The author and his daughter, Kate, in the courtyard of the 17-room Locanda dell'Amorosa.

We lingered all of 10 minutes, then climbed to the top of the street and the Piazza Grande, a large sunstruck square whose architectural disparity somehow blends into a harmonious unit. A wooden stage was being set up for a musical festival in front of the 16th-century cathedral.

"Kid," I say to Kate, "we're not done climbing," and leaving Pam to write postcards in the piazza, we entered the 14th-century town hall, ascending a steep staircase to a clock tower. The view from the top gets the maximum three stars in the Michelin green guide. The stairway became a cramped brick path and then we came out on a narrow deck. Pam was a miniature doll in the cafe far below. A young woman in a drab olive uniform stood on the deck, with binoculars, a radio phone and a bag lunch. She was a forest ranger, scanning the baked summer hills for fires.

Then we were off to Pienza, another extraordinary hill town. You wind upward to 1,500 feet, and there on a tiny plateau behind noble gates stands "the pearl of the Renaissance" — compact, elegant Pienza. The town was built from scratch by Pope Pius II in the mid-15th century, the first modern example of town planning, but he died soon after, and so did his architect, and their dream of an urban utopia was never realized.

At 1 p.m., the streets were almost empty, the shops closing for siesta. We window-shopped, admired the perfectly proportioned Renaissance piazza and peered over the town walls to the green Tuscan floor below. On a shaded terrace just outside the gates, we took the last empty table at restaurant Da'Faiolo.

Share a secret? Everything we ate we could have ordered back home at Dante's Pizzeria in Leonia, N.J.: gnocchi in Bolognese sauce, spaghetti carbonara, minestrone. There was one difference: Pienza, not Leonia, was waiting for us when we finished.

Pam led us back to a hardware store she had marked. Tuscan hardware stores are both utilitarian and eye-catching, stocked with objects of shiny steel, bold crockery, natural wood. We picked up a set of eight wooden plates and a plate rack, one of the most useful if not artistic buys I've ever made abroad. The plates, a fixture in Tuscan kitchens, have since served us a thousand ways.

At 4:15, we were tossing pebbles into the town pool at Bagno Vignoni, the ancient spa town the man from Milan had mentioned at breakfast. The rectangular pool, about 40 by 60 yards, functions as a watery piazza, surrounded by proud stone buildings. We dangled our feet in the water, then ducked out of the heat into a gelateria. I asked the barman for an iced cappuccino, sensing I might be on shaky ground. He shrugged. I tried to tell him how to make it. "You do it," he says finally, pushing the ingredients across the counter. Kate and Pam shot me exasperated looks and retreated to a far corner with bowls of ice cream.

On the hottest days, there was considerable comfort in driving back through fields of sunflowers to the cloistered inn and the count's courtly welcome. Locanda dell'Amorosa was first a medieval village and in recent times a large farm. In Carlo Citterio's hands, the inn drips with cultural authenticity.

The wastebasket in the dining room was a weathered wooden cylinder, a wine press, or bigonzo, in Tuscan slang. My only quarrel with the country-chic look was the black morning suit inflicted on Fabio, the hotel manager. Fabio always looked overheated, especially standing beside the boss, in his loafers, Izod shirt and chinos.

Amorosa's restaurant attracts diners from afar. The menu is poetic in its limitations: a fillet of turbot with porcini mushrooms or grilled sirloin with tarragon. Among the regional items are cheeses from the Pienza hills, salami from Trequanda and the house stracciatella, a wide pasta made every day by Onelia, the pastaiola (pasta maker), daughter of a farmer who had once toiled here.

Then one morning we packed up, Pam collected her last courtly kiss, and we headed into Umbria. There were stops in the big Umbrian capital, Perugia, and in Deruta, a hill town totally dedicated to pottery making. In one of the many pottery shops, I picked a small pitcher off a shelf. There was something familiar about it, and then it came to me: I'd bought one just like it 10 years earlier, in the same shop run by the same smiling, impish potter, who stood 10 feet away.

On our last full day in Italy, we prowled Assisi and saw the Giotto frescoes, collapsing late in the afternoon in the Piazza dei Comuni, a lovely compact rectangle. The fountain was aswarm with pigeons and tourists.

We lingered over espressos in Caffè Minerva as a breeze fluttered the umbrellas and church bells bonged out the hour. There would be no Italian count in the courtyard waiting for us that day, but we had a marbled room in a restored palazzo hotel in the hill town of Spello, with a wide window that looked out across the Umbrian plain. It would do for a night.



The author's wife, Pam Fenwick, is about to receive a courtly kiss from Count Carlo Citterio.

#### By the numbers



A night at Locanda dell'Amorosa runs from \$289 for a standard room to \$812 for a luxury suite, including buffet breakfast. Rates may vary. A swimming pool was added recently. The inn, near the town of Sinigaglia, is 40 minutes south of Florence.

Rome is the closest international airport.

FOR INFORMATION  
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