

# WINE TOUR OF **TUSCANY**

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Working hours adapted to meals and wine? That's nothing unusual. Welcome to Tuscany, the region of Italy where the enjoyment of food and wine, along with a good dose of joie de vivre and leisure, have been perfected to an art form.







Tuscany's convenient location lets visitors arrive without requiring them to spend many hours in a rental car. As one flies into Pisa Airport, wine country is already knocking at the door. However, seeing as the airport lies only a few minutes' drive from the centre of the city, it would be a sin to not first take a look at medieval Pisa's wonders.

It's lunchtime, and the sun at its zenith pampers us with a truly southern wave of hot weather. Pisa's small streets are quiet, in the courtyards dogs sleep stretched out in the shade, a woman is hanging out the wash, and a group of laughing teenagers passes by on mopeds. The fact that I'm in Italy is confirmed by the ornate Palazzo dei Cavalieri university building and the square in front of it. The palazzo was designed in the 16th century by Giorgio Vasari and is richly decorated with *sgraffito* (drawings scratched in wet plaster), while the square historically served as a meeting place for the people of the city and still today hosts numerous concerts and shows. It's hard to get lost in Pisa, because many of the streets lead to Palazzo dei Cavalieri. Unlike Florence, in Pisa it's possible to avoid the crowds of tourists as long as one stays further from the city's main symbol. Instead of visiting the leaning tower, have a lazy lunch at *Nonna Rosa* (Via l'Arancio, 23), a small family restaurant specialising in lasagne – just a couple of tables and a few local patrons as well as the owner herself behind the counter, who describes the day's specials with such mouth-watering detail that it's difficult to choose what to order. A perfect Italian-style afternoon!

But a hot afternoon demands one more thing – gelato! Do not give in to the temptation of the cafés displaying gelato in all colours of the rainbow; they no doubt contain practically the entire periodic table of chemical elements. Instead, head to *La Bottega del Gelato* (on Piazza Garibaldi, you can't miss it), which uses only natural ingredients to make the best gelato in town. Melon, apple, whipped cream...so many flavours! All with a very soft and light aftertaste, as it should be.

And finally, an espresso. After all, what would a vacation in Italy be without the famous pick-me-up? *Caffè Federico Salza* (Borgo Stretto) has become something of a legend in itself and really does seem to serve the best espresso in the city. The outdoor tables between the porticoes offer pleasant shade on even the hottest of summer afternoons. Sit down, enjoy a coffee, and soak up the leisurely spirit of Italy.





Wine tasting in the old cellar at *Salvadonica*



Grapevines are a symbol of Tuscany



Breakfast place at the *Salvadonica* guest house

## In the shade of grapevines

Seeing as this trip to Italy is devoted to the art of enjoying wine, I focus on the Chianti region. Outside Pisa, the scenes are mostly of carefully tended fields with factory chimneys rising on the horizon. The *autostrada* to Florence leads through a gradual change in the landscape – economic activity surrounding the large city is slowly replaced by idyllic country scenes with fields of grapes protected by lazy rows of cypresses. Towns are replaced by small villages, straight roads by hilly serpentine, and, the further I drive, the more it starts to feel like the Tuscany we know from literature and cinema – stone buildings bathed in sunlight and drowning in flowers, herbs, vines and a fascinating sense of calm.

Most beautiful of all is the realisation that it really is possible to stay in one of these oases of peace and calm. For example, the *Salvadonica* ([salvadonica.it](http://salvadonica.it); Via Grevigiana, 82 - 50020 San Casciano Val di Pesa) guest house and winery is located only an hour's drive from Pisa. Its restored buildings speak of history

stretching back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and, thanks to the Baccetti family, who lovingly restored the property in the 1980s, *Salvadonica* now not only embodies a deep history but also provides plenty of modern accents. The owners make small batches of wine and olive oil from their ten hectares of grapes and five olive gardens, which they serve to their guests and also sell to local restaurants. I take a wine-tasting tour of *Salvadonica* and we wind our way down to a secret centuries-old cellar. Collections of select wines line the shelves, their labels covered in a fine layer of dust. The cellar was carved out of natural rock, and the moist air and even temperature is ideal for storing wines.

In the evening, as I enjoy a glass of Chianti Classico in *Salvadonica's* wonderful little restaurant, my eyes rest on the grapevines growing just a few steps from where I sit. These Sangiovese grapes are almost ready to harvest. And it is precisely this variety of grape that dominates the wines from Chianti region and gives them their astringent, typically Tuscan red-wine flavour.

## The mightiness of a spaceship

Anyone who considers himself or herself a wine lover should prepare to spend a whole day at the spaceship-like facilities of the *Antinori* wine magnate in Bargino ([antinori.it](http://antinori.it), Cassia per Siena 133 Loc. Bargino 50026 San Casciano Val di Pesa). As I near it on the highway, a hill of grapevines rises on the left, at the top of which stand a few small, sand-coloured buildings. But don't let this first impression fool you – the complex designed by Florence-based *Archea Associates* is cleverly situated within the hill itself, and one only sees its true dimensions upon arriving in the car park. As I leave the sun behind and enter the dark and quiet centre, I lose all sense of time and space. It seems that the designers purposefully engineered this effect on the visitor in order to enhance the feeling of being inside a space ship.

It took more than ten years and more than 100 million euros to build the grandiose project. In addition, the Antinori family, who has been making wines for 26 generations, was present for every planning and construction decision. After





Tuscany's beautiful landscape



The steps at the Antinori winery resemble a flying corkscrew



Even the wine barrels embody Antinori's philosophy of perfect design



It's time to enjoy the wine

just a few first steps inside the *Antinori* kingdom, only one word comes to mind – perfection. The only other place that might look and feel similar...is the *Apple* headquarters. Everything at *Antinori* is huge, impressive and breath-taking – and, of course, perfect – beginning with the 21-metre-deep wine cellars that resemble sanctuaries (wine is, after all, the drink of the gods). This is one of the largest and most modern wineries and wine storage facilities in all of Italy, where everything has been thought through in the most minute details. For example, wine bark juice has been used to paint an area around the spigots so that the barrels look clean even after wine has dripped onto the oak surface during testing of the wine's readiness. And the impressive stairs that lead up to the grape fields and restaurant resemble a giant corkscrew. When I re-emerge into the sunny outdoors between rows of grapevines, my senses have been on such a merry-go-round that the only way to cool off my mind is, of course, with a glass of wine. I strongly suggest the three-wine tasting; for a very affordable price, one can try *Antinori's* most characteristic wines and listen to the sommelier tell about the winery's best vintages.

### Paradise for wine lovers

One of the biggest discoveries on my trip is the delightful *Fattoria di Rignana* ([rignana.it](http://rignana.it); 15 50022 Greve in Chianti). The gravel road meanders through forests and up a hill, and I begin to wonder whether this is the right road to the guest house. But then, the dust settles and I see an avenue of cypresses and bright green grapevines, the idyllic scene completed by the beautiful Tuscan-style villa. An stunning silence reigns here, broken only by the hypnotic buzz of cicadas. As I enter the villa, I am immediately surrounded by the atmosphere of a real country home; there is a huge hearth in the kitchen, a sturdy wooden table and chairs and a large, friendly dog. The home smells of herbal teas, and the wooden floor creaks pleasantly, thereby attesting to its honourable age. My suggestion is to reserve Room No. 4. The room is flooded in sunlight, and the window opens onto a monumental view of the surrounding hills. Watching the sunset from Room No. 4 is like gazing at a painting by one of the grand old masters. I never do close the window, because I don't want to miss out on the refreshing country air full of the aroma of lavender, warm earth and freshly mown grass.







Antica Macelleria Falorni sells the best meats in Tuscany



View from the Fattoria di Rignana villa



Enoteca Falorni is one of the most impressive wine shops in the world



Fattoria di Rignana also has a small winery

*Fattoria di Rignana* also runs a very small winery, and, as I take a peek at their facilities and wine cellar, I feel like I've finally landed back on dear old Earth after the inter-galactic flight at *Antinori*. With its location seemingly in the middle of nowhere, *Fattoria di Rignana* offers such a feeling of genuineness, of Italian sincerity, that I immediately forget the big cities, work, responsibilities.... My mind switches to a different mode of living. And when I walk through the garden

and then jump into the cool swimming pool, I'm in paradise. In the evening, I take a bottle of Super Tuscan wine from the cooler (wine is sold on an honour basis – just write your room number in the notebook next to the cooler) and watch the sun set behind the hills, only to be woken the next morning by the hot Italian sun and the heavenly smell of coffee. For breakfast, *Fattoria di Rignana* serves juicy tomatoes with olive oil and ricotta cheese that melts on the tongue. It's easy to adjust to the leisurely tempo of life here, and morning coffee naturally stretches on for several hours.

After the hottest part of the day has passed, I drive 20 minutes to the town of Greve. This is the town where wine is drunk everywhere and at all times. Among the countless wine shops in Greve, it's impossible to miss the impressive *Antica Macelleria Falorni* (Piazza Giacomo Matteotti, 71). The shop sells all sorts of meat delicacies, tempting salamis and large prosciuttos. Dine in, or Tuscany's finest butchers will gladly wrap up your purchase to take along.

But the most surprising turns out to be *Enoteca Falorni* ([enotecafalorni.it](http://enotecafalorni.it), Piazza delle Cantine, 6), one of the largest and most impressive wine shops in the world. As I enter, I receive a card that can be inserted

## I take a bottle of Super Tuscan wine from the cooler and watch the sun set behind the hills

into any of the self-serve machines at *Falorni*. Then I choose the size of my drink – anything from just a taste to a whole glass. The machines store the wines in perfect conditions, thereby allowing visitors to taste many different great wines. A true paradise for wine lovers, *Enoteca Falorni* offers tens of Tuscany's best wines: Chianti Classico, Super Tuscan, Montalcino and others. Visitors talk with each other about wines, and the aroma in the air alone is enough to make one's head swoon. The shop is located in a large cellar and the time passes quickly, so be forewarned – it may already be nighttime by the time you leave.

As I return to *Fattoria di Rignana*, there's no need to worry about dinner. Just a few steps from the villa – up the hill and behind the vines – lies *La Cantinetta* ([lacantinettadirignana.com](http://lacantinettadirignana.com)), an outstanding restaurant filled with Italian atmosphere. As I arrive, the scene opens onto a huge terrace full of guests – families, couples and even their four-legged friends lying lazily under the tables. There's music in the air, and the waiters joyously make their way between the tables, balancing platters full of food like acrobats. And the aromas! A large wood-fired stove in the

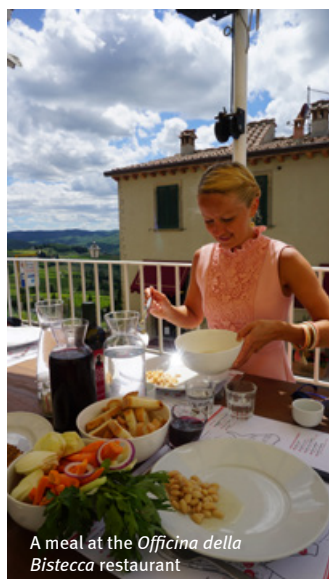




Here, the stone houses  
drown in flowers



Breathtaking views from Panzano



A meal at the *Officina della Bistecca* restaurant



Pick a bouquet of lavender as a souvenir

kitchen prepares delicious roasts, but vegetarians feel just as pampered with selections of local vegetables, grilled artichokes and hearty cheeses. There's a bottle of Chianti Classico on every table, everyone is talking, and after a while I realise I feel like I'm... at home. The last guests leave late, late in the evening, and finally the waiters can take a deep breath, sit down and play a game of cards. Of course, accompanied by some Chianti.

## The romance of the past

Chianti is full of the romance of small Medieval villages. I begin the day in Badi di Passignano, a small village centred around an ancient abbey. Here, the monks have been making fine wine for centuries, and nowadays travellers can slake their thirst at the *Osteria di Passignano* restaurant in the former monastery. The approach to wine-tasting at the modern, *Michelin*-starred restaurant is more than serious – guests are brought an entire Bible of wines, its thick pages offering wine from all corners of Italy. Afterwards, wander the village's small streets, and, on the way out, experience a bit of Italian-style adrenaline when meeting oncoming traffic on the very narrow road.

The road leads further to Panzano, whose hilly location is a favourite for beautiful panoramas. The Santa Maria Assunta Church, built on the ruins of a former castle, now serves as a

## Finally the waiters can take a deep breath, sit down and play a game of cards

sort of central point from which to gaze at the most beautiful views. But the climb up to it is steep and quite taxing on the legs. I reward myself afterwards with a visit at Dario Cecchini's, one of the best butchers in Italy. Right across from his store, he's opened the *Officina della Bistecca* restaurant (Via XX Luglio, 11), which has gained something of a cult status in the region. The host shows me to a table and sets a big bottle of house wine and a large basket of fresh vegetables in front of me. A tasting of delicious meats follows. One should come here only on a very empty stomach! But nor should vegetarians avoid the place, because the grilled vegetables and barley risotto are also delicious. Again, Tuscany proves it is the grande dame of gastronomy.

I end the day with sunset in Volpaia, one of the most beautiful villages in Tuscany. Located 617 metres above sea level at the heart of the Chianti region, it is simply unforgettable. With its cobbled streets and city walls, it seems nothing has changed here since the 11th century, and citizens dressed in Medieval clothing may come around the next corner at any moment. A leisurely stroll around the village takes a mere 15 minutes, but the views contain all the beauty of Tuscany. Here I feel like whispering "under the Tuscan sun" to myself. And these words really do express the essence of this region – a symbiosis of natural beauty and the heavenly human-made drink. This land demands hard work, but the sun and the grapevines pay the people back with the fruits of their labour, fruits any of us can enjoy when sipping on a glass of heavenly wine. **BO**