

Great Escape

T U S C A N Y & U M B R I A

Rich food, rolling fields, world-class wine: few regions sum up la dolce vita more than Tuscany and Umbria. Look beyond the cities to tour **vineyards**, trek through the **mountains**, explore the **coastline** with cowboys, delve into the history of **hilltop towns**, and finish with **gourmet food** in the valley of Norcia

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The Maremma is a protected stretch of hills and marshes along the Tuscan coast, home to the Italian version of the Wild West cowboy

Plan your trip

1 Drink in views of the **Chianti** hills along with a glass or two of red from the most legendary of Italian wine regions (p52).

2 Hidden in the mountains of northern Tuscany, the **Garfagnana** region is a little-known escape for hikers (p54).

3 For 'cowboys' read 'butteri' in the coastal stretch of the **Maremma**, home to long-horned cattle and their horse-riding herders (p56).

4 Take a spin around three of Umbria's loveliest **hilltop towns** – Orvieto, Spello and St Francis's old home of Assisi (p58).

5 Patience is a virtue for food connoisseurs, as the truffle-hunters and organic farmers of **Norcia** know very well (p60).



MAP ILLUSTRATION: ALEX VERHILLE. PHOTOGRAPHS: WAYNE PERRY/ALAMY

1. Chianti

Get a real taste of Tuscany – where a passion for wine seeps into every corner of life – with a visit to one of its hallowed vineyards

AHAZY YELLOW SUN IS cresting over the hilltop as Monica Raspi sets out on her daily tour of her vineyards at Villa Pomona. It's early; crows are cackling in the trees and mist cloaks the fields, drifting through rows of glossy green vines that unfold in every direction as far as the eye can see.

'This is always the best time of day in the vineyard,' Monica says, breathing in the crisp morning air. 'When the fields are quiet, and before the midday heat.' She stops beside a row of vines, a tangle of acid-green leaves popping out from the orange soil. Brushing back the branches, she reveals the vineyard's hidden treasure: clusters of plump, purple-black grapes, skins still frosted with dew. Producing a pair of secateurs from her pocket, she snips off a bunch. 'Sangiovese grapes. The soul of Chianti wines,' she says, popping one into her mouth as she disappears into the vines.

Even in a country as oenologically blessed as Italy, the vineyards of Chianti command a special status. Sprawling across Tuscany's hilly spine between Siena and Florence, this is Italy's oldest and best-known wine region. Viticulture has been a cornerstone of life here since Roman times, and vines cover every inch of landscape, rolling down the

hillsides, carpeting the fields, sprouting from gardens, creeping up the sides of farmhouses and barns. Along the backroads, 'degustazione' signs line the verges, inviting customers to sample the latest vintage – a crucial part of Tuscan wine culture, and something that's offered by every vineyard, from world-famous villas to humble backyard growers.

'Everyone in Chianti is an expert. Or thinks they are,' Monica says, uncorking a bottle and filling up glasses on a table outside her cellar. 'But it's good that everyone here is passionate. Wine is more than a drink here. It's a way of life.' She takes a sip and rolls it around her mouth, sucking in air to intensify the flavour. The taste should be fruity and floral, she says, with a sharp, acidic finish from the Sangiovese grapes, and a nutty overtone from the oak barrels in which the wines are aged. It's especially good with food – and as if by magic, a plate of cheese, olives and ham arrives from inside the farmhouse, carried by her mother, who ran the vineyard before Monica took it over in 2007. Together they settle down to enjoy their winemaker's breakfast – or caffè rosso, as Monica prefers to call it – enjoying the sunshine and the scent of clematis and rosemary wafting across the courtyard.

For Monica, at Villa Pomona, as in most Chianti vineyards, winemaking is a family affair. The first vines here were planted in the 19th century by her great-great-grandfather, Bandino Bandini, and the vineyard has been in family hands ever since. It sits right in the heart of the Chianti Classico, a 7,000-hectare area between Siena and Florence known for producing some of the region's finest, and most expensive, wines. Standards within this hallowed zone are strictly enforced, from blending techniques to bottle designs, and only the best wineries can display the gallo nero, or black rooster, on their labels. The ultimate seal of Chianti quality, his crowing presence is an appropriate symbol for a region which has elevated winemaking to an art form.

Once you've had your fill of Chianti's vineyards, ask your designated driver to make a beeline for the craggy peaks of the Apuan Alps. It's a 95-mile drive (be sure to break for lunch in Florence). 

The borders of the 'Chianti Classico' wine region were first set as far back as 1716



Essentials



 **Castello delle Serre** This grand baronial castle in the hilltop village of Serre di Rapalano has been lovingly restored by its American owner. Rooms are full of medieval atmosphere, with tiled floors, solid beams and shuttered windows overlooking the valley. There's a gorgeous rooftop pool, as well as a fancy tower suite offering 360° views over the countryside (from £140; castellodelleserre.com).

 **Villa Pomona** is nine miles north of Siena (fattoriapomona.it). Most Chianti vineyards are open for visits, but some only by arrangement, so do check ahead. Tasting is generally free of charge, but it's good manners to buy a bottle.

The hills around Villa Pomona are a tapestry of vineyards and old stone farmsteads, many now converted into wineries



GREAT ESCAPE



Monica Raspi examines a glass of Villa Pomona red. LEFT Accompaniments for a wine tasting. RIGHT In the cellars at Villa Pomona

