

# Eat Like a Local in Italy

Zigzagging from Rome to Piedmont, T+L takes a tasting tour of the country's artisanal offerings.

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## Tuscany: Cheese, Chocolate, Chickens, and Pigs

After five hours battling trucks north from Campania, we rendezvous with Paolo Parisi, prince of eggs and pigs, at a traffic circle off the autostrada near Florence. Revered by Italy's snobbiest foodies for his *prodotti*, Parisi was one of the early crusaders to save Tuscany's now-celebrated black Cinta Senese pigs. A formidable gastro-snob himself—burly and dapper in sunglasses designed by his photographer pal Oliviero Toscani—he proclaims that [Fattoria Corzano e Paterno](#), where we're headed, makes Tuscany's most exclusive, sought-after cheeses.

Ten miles south of Florence we chug up a dirt road through the Renaissance cypresses of green Tuscan hills. The Fattoria was developed in 1969 by the late Swiss architect Wendel Gelpke. His estate (which also produces excellent Chiantis and olive oils) is a vision from an Italy-besotted expat's fantasy; its herd of Sardinian sheep graze on property once in the Machiavelli family. Cheesemaker Antonia Ballarin (Ceres lookalike; half-English half-Italian) and her apprentice Sibilla Gelpke (Oxford grad; middle name Rapunzel) introduce us to their remarkable cheeses. Barry's wild for the Erbolino, a young Pecorino shot through with green *peperoncini* and saffron. I'm nuts about the dairy's signature crinkly-skinned *bucio di rospo*, decadently oozy but somehow not rich. Parisi votes for the subtle, soft Marzolino. "It's Tuscany's mozzarella," he says. "But only these ladies know how to make it."

Fantasy over. More autostrada. Another dirt road, finally, near Pisa. We jounce past someone's palazzo onto farmland surrounding Parisi's own farm, [Azienda Le Macchie](#). Down a steep hillside, his pedigreed black oinkers

munch pine nuts and chestnuts. Each animal gets three blissful years of roaming wild—then is reincarnated as blissful *prosciutto crudo*, *prosciutto cotto*, coppa, salami, *lardo*, *guanciale*. As Parisi slices these up in his rusticated high-ceilinged kitchen, my allegiance to Spain's *jamon ibérico* wavers with each glistening pinkish curl. "I'm poaching some eggs," he announces next, recounting how a few years ago, bored just being Signor Cinta Senese, he began a search for the egg equivalent of a great Burgundy wine. The quest led him to feed goat's milk to Livornese hens. The grateful birds rewarded him with the truly aristocratic eggs we are tasting, with a lean compact yolk and a pronounced almondy taste.

Dessert? A trek into Pisa, to [de Bondt chocolate shop](#) by the Arno. Paul de Bondt, congenial, long-haired, and Dutch, was one of the original leaders of Tuscany's *cioccolato artigianale* movement, blending exotic fine cacao beans long before the Pisa-Pistoia-Florence triangle became branded as "Tuscan Chocolate Valley." De Bondt's perfectly calibrated confections are as sleek and restrained as the geometric packaging by his artist wife, Cecilia Iacobelli. "I wanted to make chocolate attractive to men," he explains. "Women too," adds Barry, watching me polish off pralines and truffles flavored with citrus and herbs, with arbutus honey from Alto Adige's Mieli Thun, and with piquant *peperoncini* produced by the good brothers of Monasterio Siloe in Grosseto.

Before crashing for the night at the rustic *agriturismo* on Parisi's estate, we conclude the day's endless road trip within a road trip with a *piatto di carbonara a crudo* under one of his fig trees. Parisi whips the sauce up from his eggs and raw nuggets of Cinta Senese *guanciale* cured (iconoclastically) on a conveyor belt orbiting a burning brazier. That whiskey-like inflection? "Brava!" Parisi nods. "We extinguish the brazier with peat."

Peaty pork jowl, almondy eggs, English dairy dames, monastic chile-spiked chocolate—was this the most extraordinary food day of our lives? Or was it the next day, when we talked beef with Dario Cecchini, the learned celebrity-butcher in the town of Panzano, and sniffed out a whole world—licorice, citrus, tobacco—in slow twirlings of fabled [Avignonesi vin santo](#) on the winery's property overlooking the Sieneese hills. The meats for our lunch are cooked in a rotisserie of special design. The designer? One Leonardo de Vinci.