

When in Italy, eat where th

The provinces of Tuscany, Umbria, and Liguria have been cooked in, constructed upon, and cultivated for thousands of years to create a diadem of culinary gems

BY JANE SUNDERMAN,
TUSCANY

Florence, Pisa, Siena, Orvieto ... been there, done it. But Montepulciano, Castiglione del Lago, Cinque Terre, Poggibonsi: These, too, are names that spark sighs of recognition from both foreign cognoscenti and Italians alike. The provinces of Tuscany, Umbria, and Liguria have been seducing travellers and locals for centuries (as Frances Mayes recounts in her popular *Under the Tuscan Sun*), as much for the little gems that lie off the beaten track as for the big names.

So once you've seen Florence and the Leaning Tower of Pisa, hit the back roads. Rent a car or hop on a train and go where the Italians go.

Take Poggibonsi, for example. It was here, where Umbria meets Tuscany, at the cut-off to Siena along the Rome-Florence stretch of the Autopista, that I had the most memorable Italian meal of my life.

Like most memorable moments, it was unexpected. We were hungry after a day of driving from one hill town to the next, snapping pictures of sunflower fields and golden ridges rimmed with cypress and pine. It was late and the distant hills lay layered and shrouded in the blue darkness for which Tuscany is famous. As we neared the busy Autopista, we spotted a sign: Il Rigogolo, Pizza Club and Spaghetteria.

Tucked among factories in an inauspicious industrial area (the north, between hill towns, is Italy's industrial engine), Il Rigogolo seemed unlikely to be a gourmet hot spot, but the parking lot was full of cars with Italian licence plates (always a good sign), so in we

pulled.

Stumbling around in the dark we came upon an entrance in the hedge at the back of the parking lot, and more or less fell into a delightful garden festive with lights and packed with people dining outdoors: families, couples, groups of friends, possibly a soccer team. There wasn't a free table, but already determined to join in what ever was going on, we headed toward the indoor restaurant at the back of the garden. A waiter materialized and offered to move a table outside, indicating a spot under an avocado tree. The rest is history: sole in olive oil and garlic baked in a clay oven; seafood risotto; wilted spinach sautéed with garlic; fresh garden salad; Chianti. It doesn't get better. I think I also had crème brûlée, but who remembers? Some time later, in Florence, we described to a young architect friend, Rosaria Palma, our spectacular meal in no-name Poggibonsi.

"Yes, of course," she said, puzzled that we were puzzled, "They eat very well in Poggibonsi. People go there all the time."

That's how it is in this part of Italy. The region has been cooked in, constructed upon, and cultivated for thousands of years, and by now everything everywhere is just about perfect.

Montepulciano is one of the countless perfect hill towns in the region, all living museums. In medieval times, feudal princes picked hills and built castles and cathedrals, often over Etruscan ruins, and then fought each other. Between battles, they competed in architectural projects in a kind of "my tower is higher than your tower" and "my cathedral has more marble than yours" religious frenzy. Orvieto in Umbria and Siena in



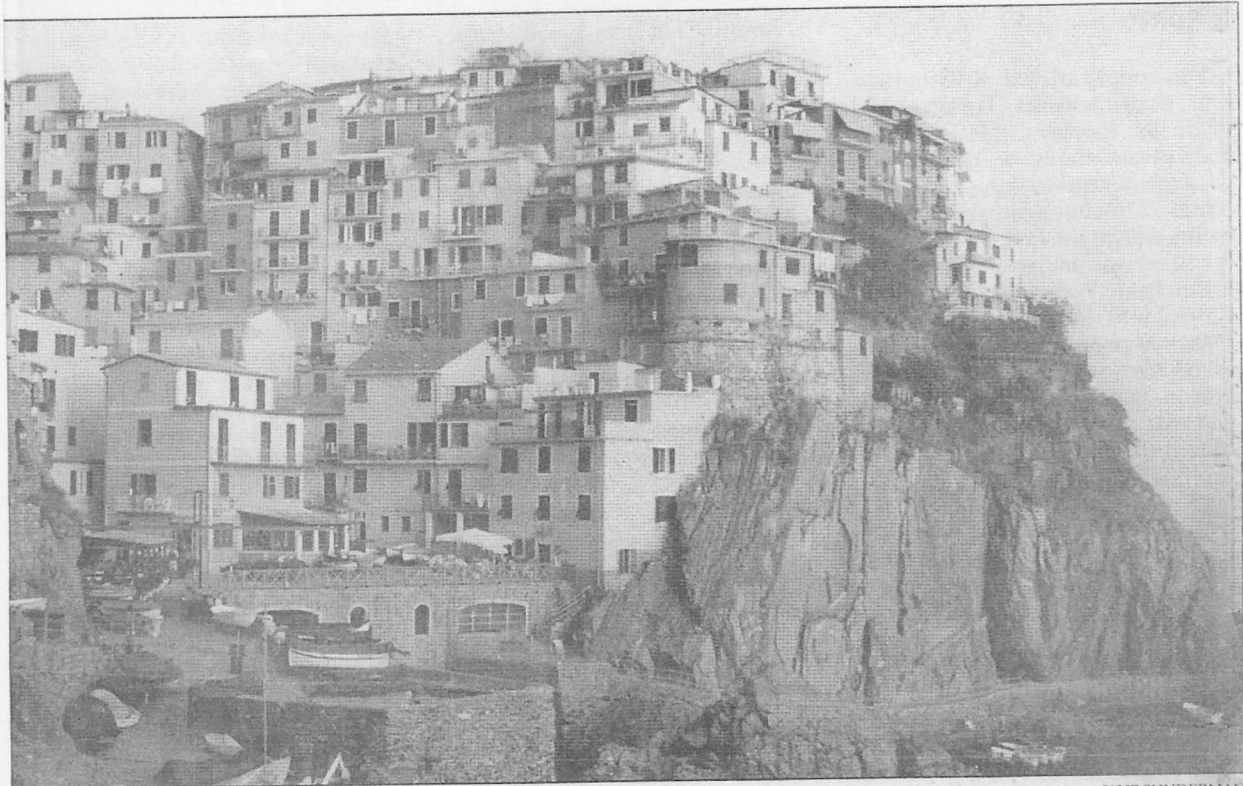
In the evening, Riomaggiore's main

Tuscany are most commonly known to foreigners, but Montepulciano is their equal on a more human scale, and, like Poggibonsi, a destination for seekers of subtle pleasures. Rent a car, or take the train there and wander the steep and ancient streets without rubbing shoulders with countless tourists.

You might try one of the two reds for which Montepulciano is renowned: its *Vino Nobile*, available locally only, and the great Tuscan Brunello. You can also tour the 12th-century cellar of the Cantina Citavecchia, carved deep in the mountain rock, and buy a Brunello starting at \$60 (which is more or less what they start at in Toronto, too).

Nearby is little Lago Trasimeno, one of two small Umbrian lakes. The drive over from Montepulciano is enchanting, through fields of sunflowers, corn, and wheat, olive groves and vineyards, and villages draped in bougainvillea and gerani-

ne locals eat



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ums.

Italian families from the region summer on Lago Trasimeno. The walled town of Castiglione del Lago, which overlooks the lake, has evolved from fortress to resort, with antique shops and a Saturday flea market in the spotless main piazza. Down by the beach, restaurants cater to a local holiday crowd; at a kind of Wasaga Beach eatery, we ordered deep-fried lake fish and got a plate of minnows, many, many minnows, with their tiny mouths and eyes battered open. You won't get these in Florence!

Not far away, to the northwest, the Ligurian coast's Cinque Terre is becoming, alas, a secret known to many, especially hikers and backpackers. It's a string of five fishing villages along a rugged, indented stretch of coast linked by a coastal path. The hike from the first postcard village, Riomaggiore, is tame, but after that the trail is knee-deestroying up and down cliffs. Most

people get no further than the fourth and most beautiful village, Vernazza, in a day. The rocky cliffs all around are terraced for vineyards although how anything grows in this almost soil-free environment is beyond me.

A rail line now links these once isolated villages, but otherwise they are barely equipped to handle tourists. In the evening, Riomaggiore's "main street", steep and winding, is the haunt of the young and free; they hang out while the old ladies of the town, wrapped in shawls to ward off any night chill, sit conferring outside their doorways as they have always done. I got the impression they would be just as happy if Cinque Terre had not been discovered. Nonetheless, local entrepreneurs are fixing up rooms to rent and hanging out restaurant shingles. Inadvertently, as usual, we discovered what we later learned is considered Riomaggiore's gastronomic highlight. Climbing through

alleyways and under dank arches one night, we came across La Lanterna, its tiny terrace packed.

"Go on inside," said the waiter. "There's air-conditioning." In the tiny room we were served perfectly simple baked fish and pasta with pesto, a Ligurian specialty. Perfect. Later we climbed down a street by the harbour and, at one point, looked down through a stone doorway into a lantern-lit kitchen crammed with fishermen, a dozen or so, sitting down shirtless to their evening meal at a long wooden table, surrounded by gear and nets and hooks. It was a scene straight from the past, proof that men still fish in Riomaggiore.

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