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RENAISSANCE TOWN

BY LAUREN BIRMINGHAM PISCITELLI

Montepulciano is a Medieval Renaissance town set on a hill in the region of Siena in Tuscany. Rolling hills, endless vineyards, silvery green olive trees, and fields of sunflowers surround the village. From its viewpoints

after him,” says Andrea Sorlini Bifulchi, owner of La Porta di Bacco, an osteria and enoteca in the historical center of Montepulciano. La Porta di Bacco is a landmark.

I am spending the day with Andrea, Graziano Rossi, executive



Left to right: Palazzo Contucci was built in 1517, Montepulciano Cathedral is on the right; Chef Graziano Rossi; Clock tower with Pulcinella; Contucci cellars with wine barrels; Main room of Palazzo Contucci named “Sala della Feste” painted in 1702 by Andrea Pozzo; Road through Val d’Orcia; Andrea Contucci; 2019 La Magia. Photography by Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

you can see the Val d’Orcia and tall cypress in shades of green. The Torre di Pulcinella, a clock tower with Pulcinella (the Neapolitan character from the *Commedia dell’Art* of the 17th century) stands guard over the village. The town is filled with enotecas, restaurants, artisan food halls, and leather and linen shops.

The small hamlet is home to the Palazzo Comunale and the Palazzo Tarugi, along with the ancient churches of Santa Lucia, Santa Maria Assunta and Santa Maria delle Grazie, which are decorated with Renaissance art. The church of the Madonna di San Biagio, an iconic 16th century landmark, is set on the road outside the city. Montepulciano is known for its Super Tuscan wine, excellent farm-to-table cuisine, ancient history and passionate locals who welcome guests with open arms.

I am lucky to be visiting one of the best chefs in the area.

“Benvenuti a La Porta di Bacco — welcome to the door of Bacco. Bacco is the god of wine, and I named my osteria

chef of Bacco, and Signor Contucci, a noble winemaker. The visit starts with an introduction to Andrea’s world of Tuscan food and wine.

“After 1495, Florence strengthened the walls of Montepulciano and built the fortified Bastion of Porta Prato, under the direction of Antonio da Sangallo, the same architect who built the Palazzo in Piazza Grande and the Temple of San Biagio. Today, our family business is in what was once the guardhouse in this Renaissance building,” he says.

As we enter the stone structure, he leads the way through a series of secret passages and medieval chambers which is now a wine cellar. Dining room tables and chairs are elegantly set inside while wine bottles are stocked everywhere. Crystal wine glasses of all shapes and sizes, and bottles of Vin Santo, meaning blessed wine, are on display for sale. It’s a wine emporium, restaurant and shop — all in one.

Signor Andrea takes a bottle of Brunello from the shelf and

pours the garnet-hued vino rosso in large bulb-shaped glasses and lets the wine breathe while he speaks of his upbringing.

“My great fortune was to grow up in a family where love for the family was always the top priority. Gabriella, my maternal grandmother, came from Radda in Chianti, and she brought her culinary traditions to Montepulciano. My grandparents owned this restaurant and dedicated a private room to us grandchildren every day where she prepared traditional cuisine from Montepulciano,” he says.

“Nella was my paternal grandmother. She came home every afternoon to make homemade pasta and ragù of many kinds. This is where my passion for cooking started — thanks to the presence of my grandmothers and their attention to quality and genuine food,” he says.

“My mom, Cinzia Sorlini, and my father, Adelmo Barlesi, greatly influenced my life, too,” he adds, noting that he studied to be a pharmacist, but his love for the family business was greater.

Signor Andrea Contucci, a neighbor, friend and noble wine-maker, arrives. His family is one of the oldest winemakers in Montepulciano dating back to the XI century — before the Renaissance. He calls the winemakers “putative fathers” who made and continue to make *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* wine. Their wine was produced with grapes intended for the tables of nobles. As early as 1800, the family was awarded medals and certificates for their excellent wine.

Signor Contucci calls the winemaking business “a family affair. Montepulciano is a village where everyone knows everyone, and everyone helps each other,” he says.

His family’s farmland extends 170 hectares, of which 22.5 are cultivated vineyards. The vineyards are comprised of native vines grown by the Spurred Cordon technique (a method that trains the grapevines to extend horizontally along a wire, producing fruiting spurs that grow into new shoots that carry fruit).

“We do not use chemicals, and the grapes are cut by hand at



Andrea also owns la Bottega del Nobile, a high-end restaurant and enoteca and tasting room with Neapolitan chef Gennaro at the helm and Antica Trattoria il Marzocco, a family trattoria, with chef Guido leading in the kitchen.

The family empire includes the Parco Villa Trecci, an eco-sustainable garden oasis designed by Adelmo Barlesi which produces farm-to-table ingredients used in the restaurants’ kitchens, along with the Montegalda Castle, an historical palazzo outside of Venice, Palazzo Nobile of San Donato, Villa Benefizio, the Church of San Bartolomeo and Palazzo Mosela. The properties are architectural jewels.

Three high-end pastry shops, also owned by the family, include San Bartolomeo di Caselle, Palazzo Avignonesi Caffetteria and Pasticceria Regina. The pastry chefs produce artisan biscotti, pastries and cakes every day.

Andrea applauds his mom for her work at San Bartolomeo di Caselle, naming her “the undisputed protagonist of the Tuscan territory and an authentic eno-gastronomic and cultural experience entrepreneur.”

harvest time, producing *Vino Nobile di Montepulciano* in five versions, *Rosso di Montepulciano*, *Bianco della Contessa* and *Vin Santo di Montepulciano*,” he says.

In the kitchen, Graziano Rossi, executive chef of Bacco, has three dozen farm-fresh eggs at room temperature, a mound of 00 flour, semolina and extra virgin olive oil ready to be transformed into the famous 30-Yolk Tagliolini.

He explains the importance of using “your hands in the pasta making and not over-working the dough.” He cracks 30 eggs into the center of the mound, then folds in the flour.

A slow-cooked ragu, marinated with wine, bay leaves, sage and thyme, simmers on the stove. The pasta is now cut and dropped into salted boiling water. The table is set and in less than three minutes everyone is twirling their forks into butter-yellow pasta doused in ragù.

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RENAISSANCE TOWN



PUMPKIN FLAN

- 5 1/4 cups baked pumpkin**
- 16 large egg whites (about 2 cups)**
- 7 tablespoons Parmigiano Reggiano**
- 3/4 cup cornstarch**
- Salt to taste**
- 1/4 cup cream**

Blend all the ingredients together. Pour the mixture into buttered flan molds. Bake in a water bath (bain-marie) using a steam oven at about 500°F for 55 minutes.

Makes 10 servings.



CHOCOLATE MOUSSE

- 1 cup (6 ounces) semisweet dark chocolate**
- 3 cups heavy cream, divided**
- 2 tablespoons sugar**
- 1/4 cup Frangelico liqueur**
- Whipped cream, if desired**

Melt the chocolate morsels in the top of a double boiler. Whisk in 1 cup of heavy cream until well blended. Remove from heat. Let sit for 20 to 30 minutes to come to room temperature.

In a chilled mixing bowl, combine the remaining 2 cups of cream, the sugar and the Frangelico. Use a hand or electric mixer to whip them together until stiff peaks form when the beaters are stopped and lifted out.

Gently fold one-third of the melted chocolate mixture into the whipped cream. Add the second third and fold in gently. Add the last third and fold in gently. If the mousse becomes soft, don't worry; just chill it in a bowl for 15 to 20 minutes.

Makes 6 servings.