

*A Culinary Learning Journey
sponsored by
The International Caterers Association Educational Foundation*

TASTING TUSCANY

September 2nd to 12th, 2022

Produced by Jason Capps and Frank Puleo



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General Information - Tuscany is home to Botticelli and Michelangelo – to Chianti and Brunello – to Panforte and Pecorino – and for eleven days in September, it will be our home too.

We will focus our sights on the charming hill towns, the classical Tuscan cuisine, and the soft rolling hills of three of Tuscany's provinces: Lucca, Siena, and Florence. We'll also be venturing into three other Tuscan provinces, just for quick site visits. While we have bus transportation to the towns, these smaller towns do not accept large buses entering the town wall, so we need to be prepared to walk – and some of that walking is uphill. We mentioned hill towns, and we remind you that Tuscany is indeed hilly.

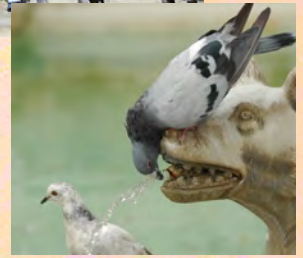
We'll begin our adventure in Lucca, an undiscovered jewel in the Tuscan crown. Often overshadowed by its larger sisters, Florence and Pisa, Lucca is small, charming, and everything you'd expect in a small, walled Tuscan town, but no hill! An added bonus is that I believe the BEST olive oil in Italy comes from Lucca. Our home will be a 13th-century villa just outside the city center, VILLA LA PRINCIPESSA, for the first three days. (www.hotelprincipessalucca.it) Yes, we will visit the nearby "tourist" sites, like the Leaning Tower of Pisa... but our concentration will not be on the history, but on the Tuscan cuisine.



All travelers should plan on departing the US on September 1st – to arrive in Pisa on the morning of September 2nd. Unfortunately, there are no direct flights from the US to Pisa. All transatlantic flights need to make one European stop before arriving in Pisa. Depending on your airline of choice, that stop could be London, Paris, Dublin, etc. Please be sure your flight arrives before NOON. Depending on your arrival time, you will be given instructions to get to the hotel OR directly to the restaurant for the first meal. Set in a garden in a very rural location, LA CECCA will be your first introduction to the Tuscan table.... And so begins Day 1.

Friday, September 2

There will be no rest for the travel-weary – at least not now. After lunch, we will head to Lucca for a quick walking tour of the town. Lucca is different at different hours of the day. In the morning, the town is quiet, with just a few women shopping for their lunch and dinner ingredients, but by 4 pm, it is a cacophony of aromas and chatter as the streets fill up with people doing their pre-dinner strolls. After having digested lunch, you will be brought back to the hotel for a quick wardrobe change before heading out to our first event. The opening night party is at DOMAZZANO, also known as Villa Capps. That's right, our own Jason Capps is hosting our first-night event at his brand new home on the outskirts of Lucca. We've hired Master Chef Aurelio from Locanda del Sesto to roast a pig, raised specifically for us by one of Jason's neighbors. Tonight we dine on PORCHETTA.



Sleep well tonight; we hit the ground running tomorrow. Breakfast will be served at each hotel each morning.



Saturday, September 3

After breakfast, we are heading just north of Lucca to Carrara. Carrara is home to some of the finest, purest, whitest marble in the world. It was the marble Michelangelo used exclusively for his sculptures. We'll tour deep into the marble caves and see the stone workers cutting giant blocks and vast sheets of marble directly from the mountain. The stone also has another remarkable property: this is the stone used to make "lardo," a delicious cured pork fat product. So yes, we will learn how it is made and have time to taste some samples at COLONATTA, where we have lunch with our host Algeria.

After lunch, we will leave the mountains and head to the sea. The beautiful beach community of Viareggio will enchant us with its 2 miles of boardwalk – lined with shops, restaurants, and bars. We'll stop at Pietrasanta for a sunset cocktail before heading to a seafood dinner at IL PORTO. (Note, the only time we will be eating a seafood meal is when we look at the sea. Of course, there are non-seafood items available for those who do not prefer fish.)



On **Day 3, Sunday, September 4**, you'll need to pace yourself with your food intake today. After a savory breakfast at the hotel, we'll head over to a pasticceria for a sweet breakfast, tasting several types of Lucchese cakes, pastries, and tarts. It is typical for Italians to eat sweets in the morning, often stopping at, at least one bar for a second cup of coffee and something sweet – or at minimum, something savory with a sweet, creamy filling.

Now comes our "tourist" item of the day. We'll make a quick stop in Pisa to have a photo op at the Leaning Tower before doing a far-less touristy adventure.... Truffle hunting with Marco and Savitar. After finding this elusive fungus, we'll be escorted to their storefront for a tasting of our bounty. You never know what he will provide, sometimes it is crostini with a truffle topping or perhaps a taste of pasta with butter and truffles or a truffle omelet. You'll also have the opportunity to purchase truffles and various products made with truffles here. Marco also ships his products worldwide. Don't fill up. This is just a snack. Our actual lunch will be coming a bit later.

Now we head back to Lucca for a more formal tour of the city led by Paola... to help us build up an appetite for a "rustic" lunch in the city center.

Sundays are quiet days in most towns... but we have miles to go before we rest. Literally miles. This afternoon we are renting bikes and riding atop the wall of Lucca. The wall completely encircles the city – and you'll have the opportunity to ring the entire town... hopefully working up an appetite. But, of course, if you select not to ride a bike, there will be a second walking tour available for those of us who like both feet on the ground. The reward for walking or biking will be GELATO.

After a short break back at the hotel, we are off to dinner, but not before we have a cocktail at the hotel bar. Remember our chef from the first night? Tonight we get to dine at his family's restaurant LOCANDA DI SESTO – and their whole family will be there...they always are. Before dinner, we will make a quick stop for one more photo op at The Devil's Bridge. (And yes, a charming story will be told.) An authentic Lucchese meal will follow and we will head back to the hotel for a nightcap with our bellies full.

Perhaps this evening will call for biscotti and Vin Santo. Remember you are traveling with two hosts whose hearts are Tuscan – so there will be charming stories about every stop we make, every food we eat, and every beverage we drink...even the simple vin santo has a great story. If you counted meals and snacks today, did you count to six? One note on food... We don't expect you to eat everything, but we want you to taste everything – because it will all be delicious, authentic and that is why you are here.

Monday, September 5 – After breakfast today, we will load the bus with our luggage and head into Siena province, stopping first in the medieval town of San Gimignano. We will have a guide leading us through the city and provide us with samples of several "sweets" (Do you see a pattern forming here?) In the US, "fruitcake" has a well-deserved bad reputation, so I really do not even want to use that term to explain what Panforte is. Imagine a dense cake of raisins, dates, nuts, dried fruit, nutmeg & cinnamon.... But don't imagine a fruitcake. If that sounds too dense for you, Ricciarelli is the alternative. Think light, fresh, buttery cookies that melt when they touch your tongue. You'll sample both as we walk through San Gimignano.



For lunch on this day, we're going to head to another hill town, Castellina in Chianti, so there should be no doubt what type of wine we will be drinking. After lunch, we will check into our hotel where we are staying for the next three nights. The Hotel Fonteverde & Spa in San Casciano dei Bagni will blow you away. It is a five-star Tuscan hotel and spa. (www.fonteverdespa.com) I know that once several of you see it, we will lose you to spa appointments and sitting poolside the next day. But remember, you can go to a spa anytime. You're in Tuscany, so explore every moment.

While Tuscany is known for its Chianti, late this afternoon we will visit the town of Montalcino, known for what is often considered the finest wine of Tuscany – Brunello di Montalcino. The winery POGGIO ANTICO will tour us and dine us to a multi-course dinner based on Brunello wines.

Tuesday, September 6 – Today, we visit Pienza, the home of Pecorino Romano. This cheese is a gift from the beloved sheep of Tuscany. We'll be tasting some freshly made (typically eaten at the end of a meal before dessert), some made six months ago (usually an antipasto cheese, eaten with salami or other cured meats)– and some made two years ago. The aged version is best grated as a topping for many Tuscan kinds of pasta and soups.

Our lunch restaurant in Pienza is called IL CHIOSTRO. Owned by a friend of a friend, we're anticipating being treated like American royalty. After lunch, a short 18-minute drive will take us to yet another hill town, Montepulciano. Even though this is a small town – and in a small geographic area – it is a particular wine-growing region, and the wine is called Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. (I know that is a mouthful to say, which is why we did not bring you to San Gimignano and Montepulciano on the same day.)

After a quick wine tasting, we will have free time to walk through the town to shop or just experience what life is like in a small hill town. Of course, our dinner this evening will feature the Vino Nobile.



Wednesday, September 7 – If you saw the movie Under the Tuscan Sun, today might be the day you decide to buy yourself a villa and move to Cortona as the heroine of this movie did – on the spur of the moment, after seeing a Vendesi (for sale) sign. Like most of the other hill towns we visited, this town will have two main shopping streets and loads of history. So much so that we will have a guide walking us through explaining the history of this walled town, high on a hilltop. We have several options for lunch today, and we will advise you on where we are going as the trip approaches.

The afternoon brings us from a small hill town to an actual large city – or at least large by Tuscan standards – Siena. Siena is magical. Every village in Italy has beautiful churches. Here we can't miss a visit to this church. The building took over a century to complete – due to supply chain issues (where have we heard that before), the war against Florence and other city-states from the north.... And oh yes, the plague, which ravaged the city. We'll have time to stop for a beverage and perhaps some crostini in the famous Campo, where the Palio horse race takes place twice each summer. The city's magic will reveal itself as we watch the setting sun become an artist with a giant paintbrush, changing the colors of the buildings surrounding the campo.

Dinner this evening will be in this magical town. It will be fascinating to see the difference in the city at 4 pm when it is bustling with tourists, to after dinner, when the crowds are gone and leave the Campo, to the local inhabitants, including a few kids who will be kicking around a soccer ball.



Thursday, September 8 – One final change of hotels brings us to Florence. But before heading to Florence, we will have time to stop at one additional winery. This one is truly unique because spread out through the vineyard is fantastic artwork. Italy's finest sculptors have their works displayed here surrounded by Sangiovese grapevines. Depending on the harvest, we may have lunch here – but we won't know that until we know the exact dates for their picking. If not there, we will drive directly to Florence, where a local guide will walk us through this gem of the renaissance.

Our home in Florence is the fabulous Hotel Balestri, right on the banks of the Arno river. (www.hotel-balestri.it/eng) Tonight's most elegant dinner is being hosted at CANTINETTA ANTINORI, located in a 14th-century palazzo in the center of Florence. The Antinori family has been making wine for 15 generations. I don't know how many "greats" that would be before the word grandfather, but it sure must be a lot. So let me tell you that the Antinori family does not usually accept parties of this size; however, thanks to a friendship forged years ago with Alyssia Antinori, the ICAEF got an invitation. Yes, this will be your "dressy" night.



Friday, September 9 – I know we just got to Florence, but today we are whisking you away. Not only are we leaving Florence, but we're actually going to be leaving Tuscany for one day, heading north to Bologna for an action-packed day. Today we're truly going to be living as Italians.

We'll be taking a high-speed express train from the Florence train station to the Bologna station – at speeds approaching 100 miles per hour. It is their equivalent of Amtrak but traveling at twice its speed. Bologna is the food capital of Italy. The richest, the fattest, the saltiest, the most decadent food in all of Italy can be found here. So loosen your belt and get ready. In the morning we're going to have a guide show us the most impressive food emporiums of Bologna. Then bring us to an "odd" luncheon consisting of several of the most famous pasta of Bologna and a selection of salads. That's it. Light lunch, eh?

After a cooking lesson in the afternoon, we'll have a bit of time for shopping before heading out to a typical Bolognese dinner. We might feel a bit rushed since we have to make that last express train back to Florence after dinner.



Saturday, September 10 – Finally, a full day in Florence. After breakfast, our guide will meet us for another walking tour. This time, we'll start out at the Mercato Centrale, the primary market for both wholesale and retail produce, meat, and a whole lot more. We'll be sampling as we pass by vendor after vendor of cured meats, traditional cheeses, vintage-dated olive oil, several varieties of vinegar, and some very unique Tuscan products. We'll conclude the morning with one cultural activity.... Perhaps visiting the Accademia or perhaps the Palazzo Vecchio. It will be hard to choose a specific museum since ALL of Florence is a museum.

Lunch will be outdoors in one of the main squares of Florence, the Piazza Della Signoria. (Nobility Plaza). If you have seen any tv show or movie with Florence in it, you've seen this square. The restaurant is relatively new (by Florentine standards, "new" could mean this century, but in this case, it means this decade. OSTERIA FRESCOBALDI is owned by a winery of the same name. The Frescobaldi family has partnered with the Mondavi family and now owns vineyards throughout Italy – and even in California. Lunch promises to be spectacular...so perhaps only one gelato this afternoon.

Tonight your stomach gets a bit of a break. Usually, I would not bring guests for pizza if we were anywhere further than 50 km from Naples. Tonight I am making an exception to that rule because I found this pizzeria in Florence that makes the most authentic Neapolitan pizza outside of Naples – and it is walking distance from the hotel, but yes, up another hill. I think it will be a nice, casual break from all of the rest of the meals we have had. But don't get used to it. Tomorrow starts the frenzy once again.



Sunday, September 11 - Today is still in the development stages because the Chianti festival starts this weekend, in the town of Greve, just outside of Florence. Usually, when there is any type of festival when I am in Italy, I go to it.... But usually, I am by myself or with one or two other people – never 35 of my nearest and dearest. That crowd may overwhelm our crowd, so while we plan to attend, we are playing it by ear. But I never leave a meal up to chance – so lunch is planned and will be fabulous. We are going to the small town of Panzano, just outside of Greve, to have giant Tuscan Steaks, prepared by the famous butcher of Panzano, Dario Cecchini. This will be a simple meal. Large and filling, but simple. Tuscan steaks from Chianina beef are extraordinary.

Tonight we are being entertained by Olio e Convivium, Florence's most famous caterer. They are planning to blow us away with everything from the location to the food to the entertainment. So be prepared to have your socks blown off.

Monday, September 12 – Alas, it is time for most of us to leave. If you are flying home today, we will have a ride to the airport ready for you. If you are going elsewhere in Italy and need a ride to the train station, that can also be arranged. If you need another day or two in Florence, just let us know. Check-out time is noon (or any time after breakfast, if you prefer); most flights from Florence to other European cities for flights home usually depart before 9 am to catch the transatlantic flights.

PRODUCERS' NOTE: At the time of printing, Feb 2022, the dates of the trip are confirmed, and the hotels are confirmed, but we are still working on some of the activities and restaurant confirmations. Please note that the producers may be changing the schedule of activities and/or restaurants and/or towns slightly to create a better flow of events and accommodate travel times between meals, events, and activities. The autumn harvest may also force us to change wineries, vineyards, and tastings.