

The Observer has published an article on 'San Giovanni' Tuscan farm tourism.

## You can't beat a Tuscan peasant...

Italian *contadini* are increasingly turning to agriturismo - farm tourism - to help pay the bills. And, as **Amy Raphael** discovers, this means mountains of delicious local food and organic homegrown produce served in idyllic surroundings

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A perfect spring day and we are sitting in the shade outside, watching the feast arrive. Plates cluttering the table overflow with the thinnest strips of prosciutto, chunks of mature pecorino to dip in pale honey and crostini decorated with chicken liver paté. After the antipasti comes the primo piatto: a thick, long spaghetti, once favoured by the poor because it is made with flour and water rather than egg, called pici which is served with a sauce of field mushrooms, garlic and plenty of herbs.



Giovanni and Onelia at their Tuscan agriturismo.

A bottle of thick, dark green extra virgin olive oil so spicy it burns the back of the throat sits alongside a pitcher of robust red wine. Yet we are not at London's River Café but on a farm in deepest Tuscany. This is the freshest, simplest, most authentic Italian food and it costs barely £10 a head for more than anyone could eat. It is served by Giovanni and Onelia in what was once just a working farm but is now also an agriturismo - a farm that rents out apartments and offers its

guests a chance to taste everything it cultivates.

Giovanni and Onelia have spent most of their lives on this farm. Both in their seventies, they are contadini - peasant farmers - who have suffered from the recession in farming but who are making the best of what they have. There are around 11,000 agriturismi in Italy and more are appearing all the time; unsurprisingly, given its continuing popularity as a tourist destination, 25 per cent of the money generated comes from Tuscany. Many lie in the countryside outside Florence and Siena, but here in the lush, verdant Val d'Orcia deep in the south, there are dozens of agriturismi signs poking out of hedgerows. And there is no more authentic way to experience Italy and its food at an affordable price. After the long, relaxed lunch, Giovanni and Onelia show me around the farm. It has been Agriturismo San Giovanni for the past eight years but it still feels like a farm and the couple still look like contadini. Giovanni has an athletic build, wears heavy boots and a blue and white shirt tucked into turned-up denim jeans; Onelia wears a faded apron round her calf-length skirt.

While Giovanni works the land, Onelia takes control of the food, cooking lunch or dinner for guests on request and serving it under shaded pergolas next to the swimming pool. Nearly all the food Onelia makes comes from the farm. The only thing she buys from outside is bread. There seem to be endless dark, cool rooms crowded with food and drink - the couple insist it's all organic and despite having no stamp of approval from an official body, it probably is in the old-fashioned sense. Most importantly, perhaps, it's as fresh and local as possible.

**Onelia pulls a chunk of pizza di Pasqua** from a huge freezer and explains how the Easter treat is made from egg, parmesan, two different types of pecorino (sheep's milk cheese), oil, salt and pepper before being cooked in the old wood-fired oven built into the side of one of the buildings. There are frozen chunks of shoulder, rib and leg that used to belong to sheep and pigs alongside bags of strongly scented mushrooms. We had some of these for lunch with the pici, but Onelia has other ambitions for them too: 'I am waiting for the tomatoes to ripen in August to make a sauce for tagliatelle.'

Another room is dedicated to last year's crop of tomatoes. Row upon row of jars are filled with what Onelia proudly calls pomodori naturali: tomatoes so pure they were simply boiled for 45 minutes, skinned and stored in jars until needed for a simple sauce ('I just cook them up with onion, garlic, salt, basil and parsley') or perhaps for a ragu di carne. While Onelia wanders off to attend to some kitchen duties, Giovanni continues the tour.

**The contents of these rooms is so varied, of such a high quality, that I wonder if they are hiding a secret work force. There is prosciutto from last year hanging from a ceiling to dry-cure while 2003's batch sits on a wooden table with a basket of bread ready to make panini.**

There is a vat of the young extra virgin olive oil we had for lunch - one of the best I have ever tasted - not to mention the unusually sweet but still lethal grappa al limone, the light, aromatic vin santo and the tart red wine with a little bit of a Lambrusco-style fizz because it's so young, barely a year old. The 2003 version has settled and is a rich, full-bodied table wine. Nothing has a label - everything is served up in recycled wine bottles.

I am feeling a little overwhelmed by all these rooms - I haven't even mentioned the home-made cherry and peach jams, or the onions and garlic hanging from the garage ceiling to dry - when Giovanni leads the way to the orto, the vegetable garden. It is dense with artichokes, tomatoes,



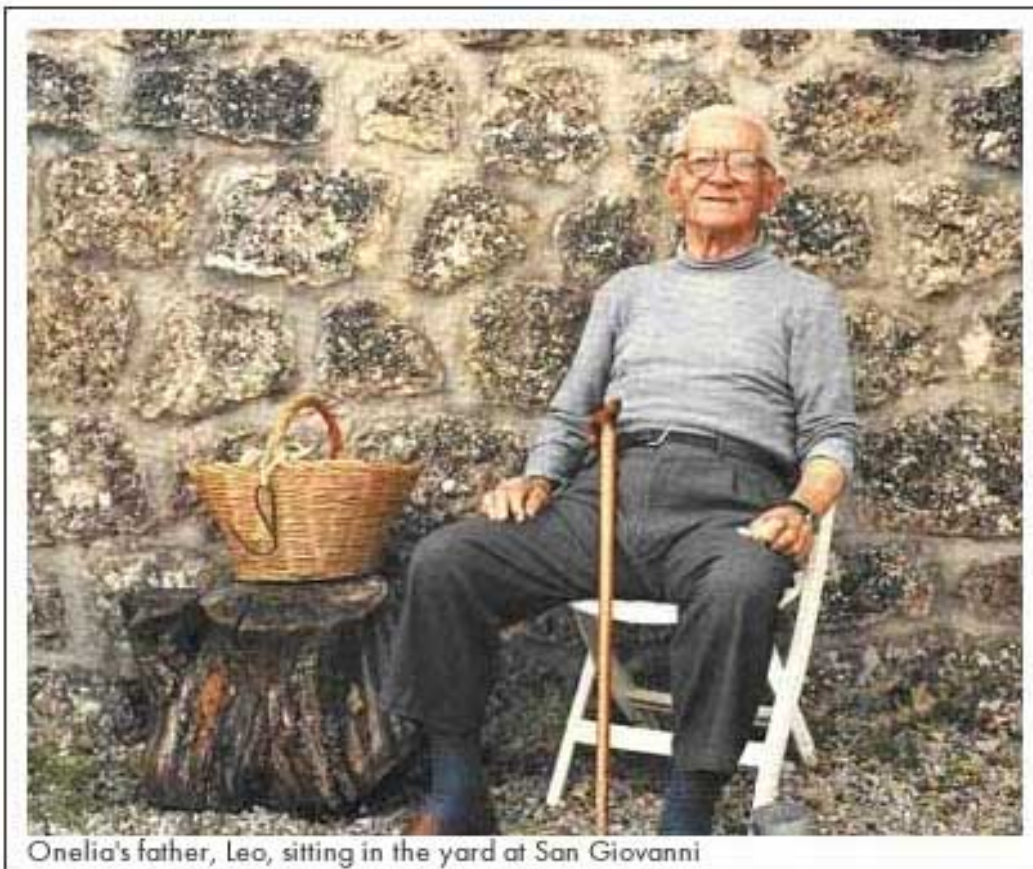
Giovanni and Onelia with their home-cured hams, bottled tomatoes and hand-made pasta that they serve at San Giovanni.



garlic, broad beans, peas, lettuce, rocket and more. Next to the woodpile sits a large coop with a few dozen hens and turkeys.

Giovanni explains how the farm has been in his family since the end of the 18th century and he has lovingly restored the buildings himself. He shows me around the three immaculate apartments. Grasping my arm, he points at the beams, the tables, the beds and smiles: he made everything himself and all the wood, every last bit, came from the farm.

**He stops at a faded black-and-white photo taken at the turn of the last century: 'My grandparents,' he explains proudly. 'All the sacrifices my grandmother made to keep this land. She barely had a lira when she started, and after four years she managed to buy this building we're standing in that was once the farmhouse. She sweated all those years ago and I am still sweating...'**



Onelia's father, Leo, sitting in the yard at San Giovanni

As the afternoon sun becomes more intense, we sit down to talk in the shade under one of the pergolas. Giovanni finds it hard to sit still for too long. He jumps up, disappears, returns armed with wine, vin santo and a stack of plastic cups. 'Go on!' he implores. 'Enjoy yourself!' Giovanni tells his story with passion. 'This land was split between my mother and one of her sisters. Unfortunately, my mother died. I had a good herd of cows going for a while but the milk prices were getting lower. I was aware that you could get a grant from the government to start an agriturismo ... in the end, it was the only option.'

He shrugs, sighs. 'I have to stress that it's only part of our income; we still grow sunflowers, olives, grapes. In other words, all the things we had before, apart from the cattle. We have had to make a lot of sacrifices. Many, many sacrifices. But it's becoming easier. Apart from the fact that we still have to pay tax. Out of every €100 we make, we have to give 10 to the state. And everyone who stays has to have a proper bill...'

Franco Fani, who runs an annual agriturismo fair in Arezzo in the heart of Tuscany, says that it's often a difficult transition for farmers to make. An authentic agriturismo has to make the bulk of its profits from agriculture rather than tourism - a tough call when a considerable amount of time has to be invested in actually learning how to adapt to a new life. 'They were born as field workers, not hotel workers. Suddenly they have to deal with bookings, people, cooking for guests, websites and, of course, other languages. Perhaps the wife and grandmother will cook while the son or daughter will go to university to study a language and learn how to build a website.'

Not all agriturismi serve food - some offer a simple breakfast, a few expect guests to be completely self-catering - but those that do are supposed to follow certain guidelines. 'The food has to come from the farm itself or the local area,' says Fani. 'Preferably it is organic. Guests are always keen to try local specialities, so there is some pressure to offer local dishes too.' While showing me her jars of tomatoes, Onelia made a joke about some agriturismi being less than authentic. 'If you go into some kitchens, you will find them full of supermarket shopping bags. They don't always follow the rules.'

