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THE SOUL OF TUSCANY

Fascinating People, Romantic Places, Delicious Food



GOING OUT: REFINED DINING



DINNER AT LA FRATERIA DI PADRE ELIGIO NEAR CETONA COULD VERY WELL BE DESCRIBED AS A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE. THE RESTAURANT—LOCATED IN A RESTORED THIRTEENTH-CENTURY CONVENT—OFFERS A PRIX FIXE, MULTI-COURSE MENU EVERY EVENING. THE CONTEMPORARY TUSCAN FARE AND COOL, SPARE ATMOSPHERE ATTRACT VISITORS FROM AROUND THE WORLD.

THE ELEGANT SIDE OF TUSCANY

Sophisticated restaurants with beautiful settings and fabulous food—and a few Michelin stars, too

By Alexander Lobrano

DAWDLING OVER A CAPPUCINO in the medieval village of Cetona, I found the image that best expressed the refined Tuscan dining experience. A friar in a long brown robe tied with a rope passed by the café terrace where I was sitting. No sooner had I thought about how appropriate he looked in this setting than he pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. This juxtaposition of tradition and innovation is what you find in the most sophisticated restaurants of Tuscany. It's in the decor, on the menu and in the taste of the food. Let's visit ten places that merge past and present best.

LA MORA makes its home in the drowsy hamlet of Ponte a

Moriano, located just north of Lucca at the gateway to the Garfagnana, a mountainous area that was formerly poor and isolated. At Sauro and Angela Brunicardi's one-star restaurant, an old post house now painted pink and white, chefs Franco Marcuzzo and Angela prepare hearty regional dishes that you won't find in too many other places.

Lunching on the garden terrace, I sampled the wonderful house antipasti, which included fennel-flavored salami; *lardo di Colonnata* (sinfully delicious cured fatback); fried polenta triangles topped with porcini mushrooms; and croutons piled with a paradigmatic *ragù*. I almost made the mistake of passing >

Hidden away just outside the town of Cetona in southeastern Tuscany is **LA FRATERIA DI PADRE ELIGIO**, a magical place that proves that the ultimate refinement is spiritual. The magnificent thirteenth-century monastery was painstakingly renovated by a community of recovering drug addicts under the auspices of Mondo X, a Franciscan outreach project founded by the famous Padre Eligio. The monastery is now the community's home, a working farm, a luxury inn and a highly regarded restaurant.

In the stone-walled dining room with vaulted ceiling and brick floor, candlelit ➤

meals are impeccably served at refectory-style walnut tables set with embroidered linens. The hand-painted menu changes often but proposes a single, stylish seven-course feast of contemporary Italian fare created by longtime chef Walter Tripodi. A sample meal: *baccalà* mousse with tomatoes, olives and capers; rabbit pâté with pine nuts on a bed of sliced plums; *pecorino* and black truffle soufflé; timbale of potatoes and sweet onions; beef- and beet-filled ravioli; pigeon braised with juniper berries; and fig tart with fig ice. I love to stay the night so that I can savor the serenity of the morning and enjoy a breakfast of homemade bread and cake, fresh cheese, cured meats and preserved fruit.

Meandering northward, I like to visit the Renaissance church of San Biagio outside Montepulciano and then head to the village of Montefollonico about noon.