

Wine & Wellness in LAPOSTA

| By Lucia van der Post

It was like a siren call. Join us, read the invitation, on a 3-day journey through the best of Tuscany's wine and wellness traditions. Yes, yes, yes, cried out every cell in my body. When are we off?

To put it in context. My beloved husband had died just a few months before and with an empathetic friend I had tried to find some solace, pampering and weight loss in a very sought-after Turkish spa. I had not found it an experience I wanted to repeat. The days were fine – gossip round the pool, treatments, gloopy juices – but it was the nights that got me down. They stretched out gloomily with a glass of green slime at 8 pm, nothing on the TV except long drawn out BBC World news and the odd embarrassingly touchy-feely class on offer. What I wanted at 8 pm was a glass of something crisp and chilled, my feet under the table and something delicious to eat. So – wine and wellness – two thrilling words inextricably bound together for three spoiling days seemed just the ticket. And – a bonus – it was all to be experienced at La Posta, a family-owned hotel on the edge of a tiny village in one of Italy's most beautiful valleys – the UNESCO-listed Val d'Orcia – home to two of Italy's most famous wines – Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano.

La Posta is one of those hotels you can't help but be charmed by. A mere two hours' drive from Florence, it is surrounded by picture-perfect Tuscan hills with lines of Cypress trees (did you know their deep roots help prevent the soil from being washed away?) leading up to enchanting stone villas or castles. The valleys and the sides of hills are lined with vineyards and olive groves. It has only 35 rooms and sits just beside one of the sweetest of hamlets – Bagno Vignoni which is itself built round its own thermal waters. Here are villages that the dead hand of modernisation seems never to have reached. Houses that have seen the sun and rain for hundreds of years, land that has been tended by the same families for many generations.

The owners of La Posta, the Costa family, do not seem to have heard of minimalism and have no affection for beige. It is a one-off, furnished as if it belonged to some eccentric comfortably-off Italian family who have filled it with things they love, have inherited or have discovered by serendipity in some vintage store. And though when we were there, there was a terrific group of British women who had come on a girl's wellness outing, looking around the grounds and the dining-room, it is clear that word has spread amongst sophisticated Italians that this is a place to be cherished.

The core of the three night Wellness and Wine package is the deep immersion into Italian life that it offers, which means delicious food, local wines, hiking in the surrounding hills and the inimitable pleasures of three geothermal pools all of which you can access directly from the hotel.

Now in case you're of the school of thought that thinks wine and wellness are surely not natural partners it's worth turning to the numerous studies that have shown that moderate (this is key) wine consumption is associated with a greatly (up to 50%) reduced risk of heart attacks, strokes and heart failure as compared with those who drink very little.

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Research into those living in the so-called Blue Zone areas where the inhabitants are known to live longer than most others, has found that wine is key, it is a regular part of their life-style. In Sardinia, for instance, where Grenache wine, rich in antioxidants, is everywhere, there is to be found one of the world's highest concentrations of male centenarians whilst Tuscany itself has one of the highest male life-expectancies in Italy. All of which is exceedingly comforting as we embark on the numerous tastings on offer.

La Posta makes it clear that the key to wellness is enjoyment and of that there is no lack. The hotel sits right on the Via Francigena, the ancient pilgrimage route, that ran between Canterbury and Rome and so a hike along part of the way that so many have followed since Roman times is a fine way to start the three day adventure. The views are breathtaking, the churches and little hamlets along the way tell their own haunting tales. After the little town of San Quirico, the road leads to Vignoni Alto, where we see a memorial to another more recent, more tragic story – a plaque commemorating seven local resistance who were murdered by Germans during the Second World War.

The hike ends at a local winery - Poggio Grande, where we learn, in the nicest possible way, a great deal about the Sangiovese grape which naturally needs a little local sustenance – Tuscan cheeses and salamis - to accompany it. And just in case that hasn't quite filled all the corners, lunch back at the hotel under the trees offers yet another Tuscan spread.

Between visits to vineyards – all in ravishing country, all places where we taste and learn, this being a wellness retreat, we need our pampering too. And pampering we get. Massages with Santa Maria Novella products in the afternoon where the La Posta Signature massage uses vinotherapy (wine-based products), which are rich in resveratrol and polyphenols, two of the most potent natural antioxidants which are said to be full of antioxidants which protect against stress as well as improving the elasticity and firmness of skin - all things much to be desired. In the indoor spa, which has two saunas, a steam room and a jacuzzi, a host of different treatments can be ordered a la carte. And then there are the thermal pools – the unassailably magic ingredient. Here the waters have been springing up at a constant 49 degrees ever since records were made. You can slip into the warm mineral-rich waters from inside the hotel itself and swan up and down whilst all around is the crisp autumn air, the trees turn to gold, the hills roll away in the distance, with the hexagonal 12th-century Tentennano Fortress topping them all. On Friday and Saturday nights there is bathing at night - *sotto le stelle* - under the stars - and it's hard to convey quite what a magical experience it is – lolling in the

soothing waters, chattering with one's companions, sipping the local sparkling wine, knowing that back in the La Rocca restaurant, another Tuscan feast awaits (I strongly recommend the Ribollita).

In three days it is hard to experience everything, but it is enough to soothe the soul and restore the spirits. I may not have lost half a stone (and as one of my wise friends put it “Lucia, why on earth do you bother – nobody is going to love you more if you lose a few pounds”) but I have had a rattlingly restorative, happy time. I can't wait to go back. ■



The 3-day Wine and Wellness Experience includes three nights, with visits to vineyards, to the Renaissance town of Pienza, treatments and all meals with wines and beverages included. Euros 1,875 per person based on double occupancy. www.lapostahotel.it

