



Where to savour the rustic dolce vita

In a new guide to Italy, *Alastair Sawday* highlights farmhouses and country retreats with a reputation for good food. Here he picks 10 of his favourites

The slow, low drone of the bees among the flowers, the chirruping of crickets as you sip your wine in the evening, the total silence of deep countryside – these pleasures are often forgotten in the modern rush for the perfect holiday.

Many of them have come together in the shape of Italy's wonderful *agriturismo* system, a network of approved farm properties where tourists can stay and learn about rural life.

It's an excellent introduction to the real Italy, with its delightfully open-hearted people and long traditions of light-hearted hospitality – and it's also relatively affordable at a time when more mainstream holidays in

Casa Clelia, above, dates back to the 11th century

Europe are becoming more expensive.

In fact, *agriturismo* is a complete introduction to Italian country life: organic foods; great wines; gorgeous and varied landscapes, from coast to hillside to Alps; idiosyncratic architecture; and even some local folklore, culture and music. You may find yourself living in a medieval village, on an archaeological site, dairy farm or vineyard, or in a castle or a charming hamlet. The variety is breathtaking, and we have chosen many of the most "special" of the 20,000 *agriturismi* for our guide.

Go to the least explored areas, such as the inland part of the Veneto, or southern Puglia. Can you resist staying with people called Scquizzato, in their big, happy family home on a farm in the middle of a town – and only 40 minutes from Venice by train? Or how about a week with Francesco and his wife in Puglia:

yellow and white check tablecloths, geraniums in terracotta pots, rough-hewn stone walls overhung by large prickly pear plants, breakfasts of fresh local breads, cheese and fruit?

Agriturismi are having a boom – and I can see why. Relaxed informality, great local food, delightful people – and a privileged entrée to the Italy that many of us love so much. Here are 10 of my favourite places; in true Italian style, they all welcome children.

The North

Agriturismo Casa Clelia Bergamo, Lombardy

I Set near the wonderfully-named town of Sotto il Monte Giovanni XXIII, this *agriturismo* has been sculpted out of the 11th-century convent using the principles of eco-bio architecture. The main house stands against wooded hills; beyond are the convent, outhouses, orchards and barns. Bedrooms are well-sized, uncluttered and original, all wood, stone and bold colours. Heat comes from a wood-burner integrated with solar panels; cork and coconut ensure the soundproofing of walls.

One treat is a taster menu of local delicacies made by a talented cook. Kids can spend time with the animals and run free in eight hectares of gardens, orchards and woods.

● Double rooms from €100 (£84) per night, including breakfast; lunch/dinner from €18 per head (0039 0357 99133; sawdays.co.uk/casaclelia)

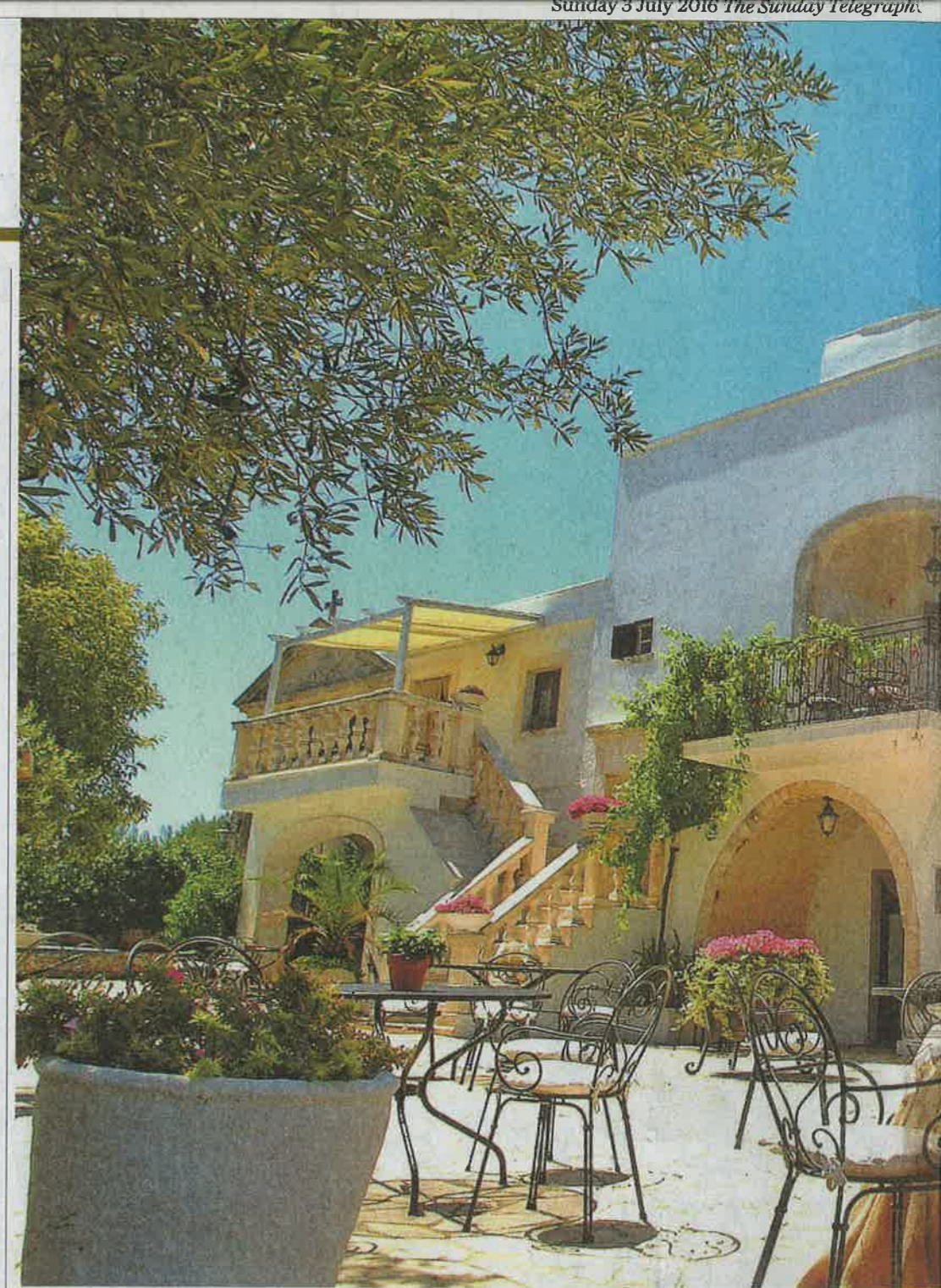
Agriturismo Moscatello Muliner Brescia, Lombardy

2 Olive groves, vines and orchards surround this tranquil *agriturismo* near Pozzolengo in the Morainic Hills, just south of Lake Garda. Lorenzo and Giovanna have transformed his family's old mill into a lovely retreat for foodies, cyclists and walkers. Charming apartments and b&b rooms are divided between the main house, built in the Fifties, and a single-storey barn conversion. Bedrooms have exposed beams, stone floors and colourful bedspreads. Every room opens on to an outdoor seating area – perfect for sipping an aperitif as the sun sets. Outside, there's a pool to cool off in and acres of grounds to explore.

● Double rooms from €80 per night, room only; breakfast €7, lunch or dinner from €30 (0039 0309 18521; sawdays.co.uk/moscatellomuliner)

Ca' de Memi Agriturismo Padua, Veneto

3 The Scquizzato's ramblingly elegant, old farmhouse is in the town of Piombino Dese, with a courtyard and big garden at



Tranquil Masseria Salinola, above; and Moscatello Muliner, left, which is ideal for foodies

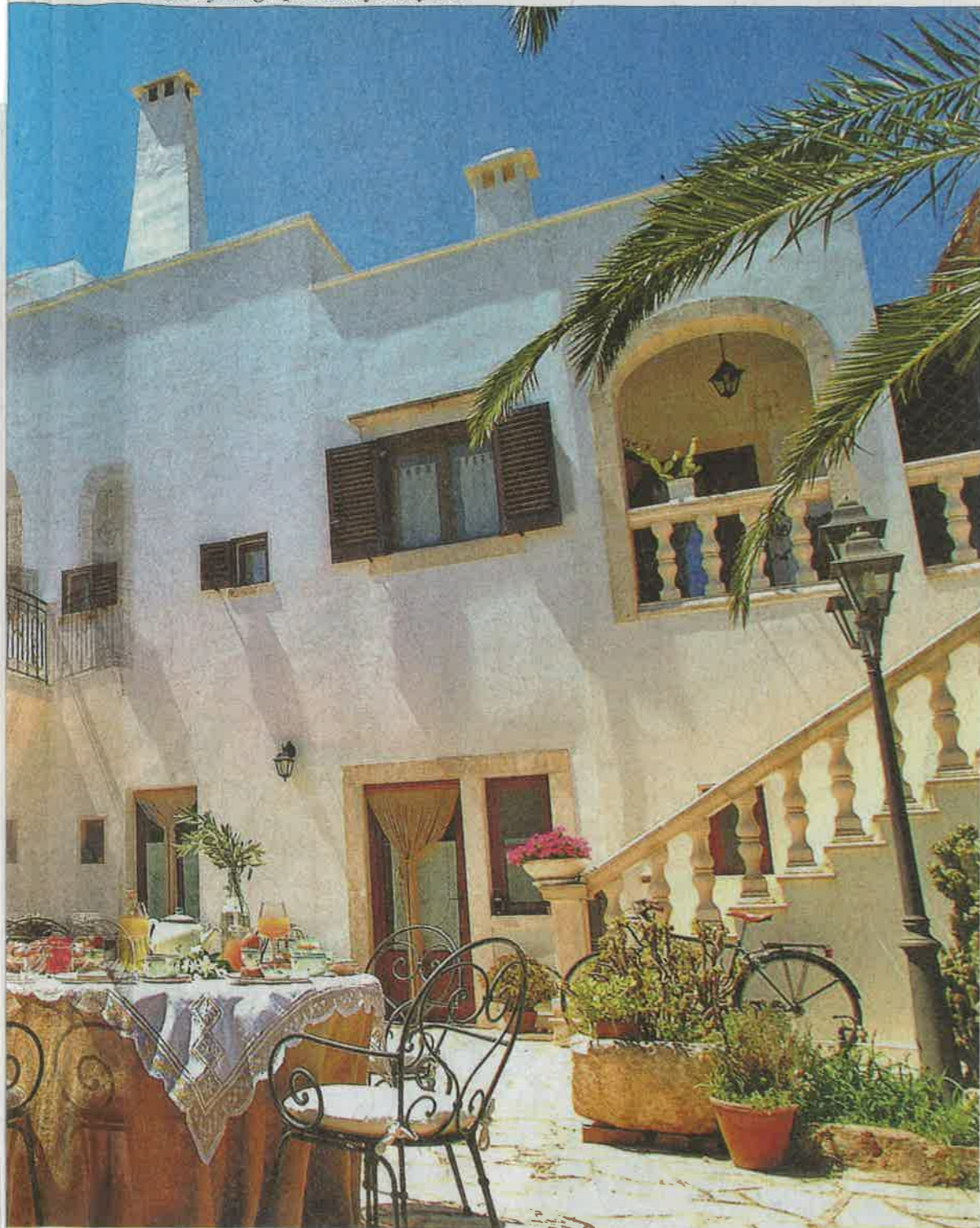
on a mix of antique and new beds, decked with stripes and checks. Venice is 40 minutes away by train. ● Double rooms from €49 per night, including breakfast; lunch/dinner from €20 per head; cookery courses from €60 per person for a two-hour lesson (0039 0499 366516 sawdays.co.uk/ca-de-memi).

Central

Villa di Campolungo Agriturismo Fiesole, Tuscany

4 Described as an "elegant residence" in 1427, this secluded manor makes you feel you've stepped back 600 years. Its bold, yellow façade peeks out from 1,500 organically-grown olive trees which produce extra virgin oil and olive soaps. Passionate about sustainability, Silvia and her husband Eric renovated the building

the back. Ottorino looks after their orchard, the land and the animals while Michela, a sublime cook who specialises in seasonal, regional dishes, looks after guests. Take the children on a tour of the farm and pick up fruit, vegetables and herbs to make Venetian recipes on one of her cookery courses. Sleep soundly in beamed and wooden-floored rooms



Secluded Villa di Campolungo, below

using local stone, Tuscan fabrics and mosaics. The stable doors and mangers are intact and trussed beams, oil jars and terracotta give each spacious room character. Silvia's home-made cakes at breakfast might tempt you to book a Tuscan cooking course or dinner on the terrace. Florence is an easy day trip.

● Double rooms from €110 per night, including breakfast; lunch or dinner available on request from €30 per head; cookery courses from €60 per person for a two-hour lesson (0039 0550 515250; sawdays.co.uk/villadicampolungo).



Agriturismo Podere La Casellina Figline Valdarno, Tuscany

5 Come to this peaceful spot between Florence and Arezzo to experience life's

slow rhythm – and to relish the company of this warm, honest and lovely family. The property is perfect for anyone who wishes to experience “real” Italian peasant life.

Simple bedrooms in the old hayloft and stables have comfortable beds and views of the church. The food, oil and produce are delicious, while the landscape is exquisite with the chestnut woods of the Chianti mountains to one side and oaks, cypresses and olives to the other. Learn to prune vines and pick olives on the farm; or have a go at gathering chestnuts and wild mushrooms in the woods. Afterwards, return to base for Grandma's recipes – the grape flan is scrumptious.

● Double rooms cost from €70 per night, including breakfast; lunch with wine from €16, dinner with wine from €18 (0039 0559 500070; sawdays.co.uk/poderelacasellina).

Agriturismo Val di Boccio Perugia, Umbria

6 Massimo and Lucia are a charming young couple, full of energy for their *agriturismo* adventure. The renovated farm is located on a hillside near Gubbio, surrounded by olive trees, oaks, laurels and lavender. The main building houses the b&b accommodation, while the attached one is for self-caterers, and the family lives just up the hill.

This place is heaven for children; there are four ponies, two donkeys, a cow, goats, sheep, pigs and hens together with a new play area and a beautifully landscaped swimming pool. The guest rooms and apartments are pleasant and spotless: floors are newly tiled and wrought-iron bedsteads have brightly coloured bedspreads.

For b&b guests, there's a big comfy sitting room with books, games and an aromatic fire in winter. Dinners, a highlight, are served at long tables in the rustic dining room: rich pasta sauces, gnocchi with black truffles, wild boar in season and Lucia's wonderful almond biscuits.

● Double rooms from €60 per night, apartment sleeping three from €80 per night including breakfast; dinner with wine €19 (sawdays.co.uk/agriturismovaldiboccio).

Agriturismo Alla Madonna del Piatto Assisi, Umbria

7 A bumpy track leads through woods near the hamlet of Pieve San Nicolo to a simple, centuries-old farmhouse in a hidden corner of Umbria. The position is stupendous. Views stretch over olive groves and forested hills to Assisi and its distinctive basilica, yet you are an easy distance from Perugia and Spoleto. The farmhouse was abandoned for decades until the Italian-Dutch owners fell in love with the view, then restored the building with sympathy and replanted the olive groves, for oil which is organic and delicious. The bedrooms here are airy and uncluttered, their country antiques mixed with Mediterranean artefacts picked up on the owners' travels. Lovely Letizia joins you for a bountiful breakfast of her own breads and jams; she and husband Ruurd are squeaky green, approachable and share their home gladly. Children from three years upwards are welcome.

● Double rooms are available from €90 per night, including breakfast (0039 0758 199050; sawdays.co.uk/agriturismoallamadonna).

Elegant Ca' de Memi, right; and pasta-making at Alla Madonna del Piatto, right



The South

Agriturismo Masseria Salinola Ostuni, Brindisi

8 Daniele's family have been harvesting olives here for hundreds of years, but it wasn't until the Fifties that his grandmother made the inspired decision to rent out rooms. There are now several stylish suites spread across two white stucco buildings just south of Ostuni. Acres of tranquil grounds planted with citrus trees and palms surround the property and there's a gorgeous pool to cool off in. Resident chickens and rabbits entertain the children, and the olive groves are great for hide and seek. Rooms are a delight, with sumptuous beds and eclectic antiques. Breakfast is a feast of local cakes, fresh bread and organic jam, while dinners offer the chance to sample Pugliese specialities.

● Double rooms from €99 per night, including breakfast; dinner from €28 (0039 0831 308330; sawdays.co.uk/agriturismo masseriasalinola).

Masseria Uccio Tricase, Puglia

9 In southern Puglia, at the heel of Italy, this unpretentious hilltop *agriturismo* b&b is set in a historic masseria surrounded by orchards and olive groves. Francesco and his wife returned from Milan to rejuvenate an old family farm and have created an authentic, charming retreat of unfussy rooms around a courtyard. Whitewashed walls, tiled floors and sturdy wooden furniture set the tone. Simplicity is the order of the day: yellow and white check tablecloths, geraniums in terracotta pots and rough-hewn stone walls. Breakfasts of fresh local breads,

cheese and fruit are served in the dining room or loggia. Borrow a bike and explore coastal tracks, hire a boat or visit Gallipoli's beaches.

● Double rooms from €66 per night, including breakfast (sawdays.co.uk/masseriauccio).

Masseria Spartivento Otranto, Puglia

10 Sisters Arianna and Patrizia have converted their grandmother's tuffo-stone farmhouse into a relaxing place wrapped in olive groves and close to Salento's beaches but away from tourist bustle. Cool, white rooms are simply decorated, with tiled floors, plaster walls and high, vaulted ceilings. Furnishings are traditional: embroidered bedcovers, wooden chests, baroque-framed mirrors. Each room opens to the patio, where breakfast is served – an assortment of cakes and pastries. Patrizia lives upstairs and will rustle up *aperitivos* or dinner. She speaks little English but is keen to share tips for exploring the region: hidden beaches or historic Otranto.

● Double rooms from €110 per night, including breakfast; dinner on request from €35 (0039 3289 558929; sawdays.co.uk/masseriaspartivento).



Views stretch over olive groves and forested hills

For more on the places featured or to book, visit sawdays.co.uk/italy. Sawday's *Special Places to Stay: Italy* (€15.99) is available through Telegraph Books at £13.99 plus £1.99 p&p (0844 871 1514; books.telegraph.co.uk).

