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OCTOPUS

Bringing Tuscany Home



SENSUOUS STYLE FROM
THE HEART OF ITALY

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WITH EDWARD MAYES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN ROTHFELD

...We assumed these crumbling, secret haunts of ours were irreclaimable. Then we found Sogna. We'd gone with friends in search of a restaurant, Le Antiche Sere (The Antique Evenings) located in the borgo. Over the valley, down the Siena road, a right turn onto a white road, and then through pastoral countryside, we came to an amazing sight: the borgo Sogna, brought back from ruin. This idyllic village dozing in the sun, we learned, had seized the imagination of Fulvio Di Rosa several years ago and he determined to save it. We were especially captivated by his placement of modern sculptures among the old stones. I wanted to meet him, and shortly did, through a friend of friend.

He stood in the doorway of Le Antiche Sere, very tanned, very fit. A man who knows who he is, I thought immediately. Later, I would get to know his quixotic humor, his flashes of anger at any slowness or incompetence, and, most of all, his brilliance.

He walks me through the village. He has a passion for his heritage and knows how to rebuild structures while respecting their integrity. After eight years of working on contemporary projects in Brazil, he returned to Italy and began ambitious restorations. Sogna, he says, is actually his third borgo. He's a visionary, with energy like a brush fire. Since in my next life I will be an architect, I have paid a great deal of attention to buildings in this life, especially to the houses in the Tuscany vernacular. Fulvio does the most meticulous and artistic work I have seen.

Knowledge of the superior destroys you for the ordinary. Unfortunately, since seeing his work, I hate most restorations, where every nuance of craft has gone over to the powers of the cement mixer-cement totally erases the stonemason's art.

Sogna, instead, looks as if time rolled back, showing the village as it once was. No wires, no shiny brick, no kitsch, no artificial landscaping. Here's the dignity of simplicity.

We then have several dinners at Sogna, I tuck their handwritten menus into my yellow writing book. Fulvio and his wife, Aurora, sponsor concerts of avant-garde music in the chapel he restored. Each raucous and shocking concert is followed by a splendid dinner for twenty or so close friends. We begin to be invited, then we invite them to Bramasole. We talk non stop about architecture and authenticity in design.

We exchange great bottles of wine and recipes. Though they've lived for years in Tuscany, both Fulvio and Aurora are from Piemonte. We begin to know more about the wines of that area and their risottos made with Barolo or melon. Then we begin going with them to festas in the countryside, adventurous restaurants (fried wisteria? Fried sambuco flowers?) and visiting artisans in the hills.

I am thrilled to have found such friends. We laughed in the same places, the poet Louise Bogan wrote. Laughter is a strong bond. I feel that I have an Italian brother. Aurora takes my arm as we walk, which makes me feel deliciously Italian.

Fulvio invites us to see his new project. This time he's taken on Vagli, a borgo in our neighborhood.

Leaving Cortona, driving toward Mercatale, you quickly enter a wilder Tuscany. We're often out this way to eat at Trattoria Mimmi in Mercatale, where you pass neat rows of lettuces and beans on the way to the door. En route, I'm always dazzled when, rounding a sudden curve, the castello La Rocca di Pierle rises before me. Even if you're not inclined toward the magical, this looming stone relic catapults you into thoughts of princesses and knights. Italy has many eleventh-century castles, but this is a paradigm. Quite simply, it looks immortal. A white road to the left winds around the chiesetta, little church, of San Biagio, and into the hills above Pierle. There lies Vagli. As we climb and dip, we're looking down onto the Rocca's crumbling three towers, where Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, and Briar Rose all must be hiding. There may be a more mystical view in Tuscany, but I don't know where.

Fulvio waves from the entrance of a muddy construction site. We see a classic borgo with exceptional stonework. Vagli is a residence club. I'd never really give up my house in Cortona, but I imagine not receiving midnight calls at home in California, seven thousand miles away, from someone asking what should be done about the broken pipe now shooting water into the stairwell. I would store a box of family photos, sauté pans, pillowcases, and books, unpack in a

flash and begin my vacation. A nice twist of fate-from plowshare to timeshare.

Given that the farmers probably will not be returning, I begin to plot new purpose for the hundreds of borghi in the Italian hills: music camps, artists' colonies, hospices, religious retreat centers. After all, easily taking the past into the future is part of the Italian genius for living.

As Ed and Fulvio linger over drainage pipes, I keep wandering off, wanting to see the rabbit hutch that will hide all the electrical connections, a curving stone staircase, the terraced levels for sunning and swimming. Everything from the toppled buildings has been saved for a new use: stone fireplaces refitted, broken beams reappearing as staircase supports, old planks forming cupboards and shelves, the original stone sinks simply left to be admired. I even see a salvaged pile of rusted handmade nails.

What I love are the stonework around the doors and windows, the steps worn to a slope in the middle, the ghosts of voices in the path-wide street, the rusted hand plows found in a pigpen and now set in the garden as sculpture. Most of all I love feeling the mysterious sense of lives in a remote and secret place. We point to lintels and portals farmers took from other buildings and put to use. When, in 1800, a window frame from 1400 collapses, why not hoist the one from the fallen plague hospital or the castle torched by mercenaries? At the top of one building, Fulvio shows us a sculpted, spooky human head and serpent in tow relief - a little comic, a little sinister. I especially admire the unusual round windows, porthole-sized, beside many doors. I almost expect a ruddy face to look out.

The luscious yellow, salmon, and blue paints of the interior walls are mixed with earth then applied directly onto the plaster, creating a chalky, fresco color depth. The fourteenth-century grain growers certainly would be delighted with the seventeenth-century convert beds, new stone sinks, and hand-painted armoires.

Every details contributes to a sense of home, a word that does not exist in Italian, but one that Fulvio understands well. He embodies the Jamesian dictum, "A painter can never be responsible enough for every inch of his canvas". He even designed the sun-washed dishes and the cutlery. Hollowed into the wall, cupboards are closed by aged wooden doors called stipi. He combs the antique markets for these, and for the iron tables and chairs on his patios.

My hand is out - touching chestnut stair rails, brick treads, jigsaw-patterned stone floors, white marble counters, and especially the fabrics. Busatti in Anghiari still makes traditional Tuscan cotton and linen. I've used many patterns in my own house in Cortona. My mushroom-hunting socks come from there, too. The bright yellow dye derives from ginestre, broom flowers, in the spring months and from onions in winter. They reproduce the bright orange, brown, and red plaids the contadini used to tie up food they took to the fields. Some of their fabrics are copied from the Virgin Mary's dresses in paintings and from heraldic shields. At Vagli, Busatti's waffle-weave towels hang in the bathrooms and classic white woven spreads cover the beds as they have for generation. Busatti still makes rough gray wool undershirts that the farmers at Vagli surely wore and that one of the Busatti owners, Giovanni, showed me under his own shirt when I visited the factory. The Busatti family has been making linen and striped cotton and thick blankets ever since Napoleon passed this way. Naturally their fabrics look at home in the Tuscan landscape.

Dina, who lives below Vagli, in the village of Mercatale, waits for us at the end of our walk. With her grandmother's long rolling pin, she starts her work on a just-made disk of pasta. Soon she spins the dough like a frisbee. She flips and twirls the supple circle, rolls the pin all the way up to her elbows. I am watching a master. She removes her big board and sets the table with hand-painted pasta bowls. Fulvio opens the wine, as she sets down a loaf of bread and her meltingly light but toothsome homemade pasta with wild boar sauce. Then she brings a platter of her husband's salumi including the traditional one made with fennel. I pretend that I will be climbing the stairs after dinner to the bedroom with the big iron bed, turning down the covers, looking out the round window at ten million stars, and in the distance, the dreaming towers of Pierle.

Vagli became my school. Ed., too, was captivated by the skill of the plasterer, Francesco,

whose work made the walls seem alive, not squared-off and sprayed. Hidden in the first layer against the stone walls are millions of pinpoint-foam balls, which provide insulation in otherwise frigid stone rooms. The final plaster coats cover them. Each ground floor is taken up, excavated, and fitted with interlocking plastic igloos, which allow air to circulate and moisture to drain away. Then the old brick or stones are relaid by Sauro. Fulvio has found true practitioners of their crafts. Each careful segment of the work complements the others.

As we leave, we see men digging mud and rubble where last night a house wall collapsed onto a large tractor. When the tractor is unearthed, one of the workers hops on and turns the ignition. After one or two chugs, it starts. What paradise - a construction site.

On a late August day, a few months after our tour of Vagli, Ed and I are picking blackberries with our neighbor, Chiara. We follow a Roman road from Torreone up the slope of Monte Sant'Egidio. Chiara leads us to the sweetest blackberries on the mountain.

Just past a dry little riverbed, Ed points to a stone ruin. Soon we are scrambling through the brush. The house sits, broody and remote, beside a grove of old-growth chestnut trees. To the left, we see another heap, completely covered with vines. "Little Red Riding Hood, where are you? Come out", I call. We cannot get to the gaping doors because of the weeds, but we see adze-shaped small windows, which mark it as a very old structure, and the stone roof, parts of which have been replaced by cheap tile. A stone roof. One side of the house is collapsed.

Later, after the blackberry jam is sealed in jars, I ask our friend Rupert about the house. Because there are now so few country ruins left, he tends to know all of them. I'm shocked to hear him say, "Frances, the house is for sale and has been for several years. There's a bloody lot of work to do up there". He tells us that the last farmers to live there left shortly after World War II. "The count is in no hurry", he explains. "He's looking for the right person". This sounds oh-so familiar to us since we'd heard versions of it when we were looking for a house in 1990.

The count lives in a secluded villa at the top of the mountain. He drives a venerable jeep, which we come to know well as we become friends. I have been bounced in the backs of many cars on Tuscan back roads, but never as profoundly as in the back of that relic. The properties that old Italian families can own staggers the imagination. If your ancestors have stayed in place since the eleventh century, they've had time to accumulate. He show us everything - a monastery, shepherds' house, a Roman bridge, an extensive fortress-like house with fascinating outbuildings, villas and his own enshrouded, romantic house with a fireplace big enough to sit inside. Fortunately, he's read my books and thinks we'll do right by the house. We are even more smitten when he tells us that the house was built by hermits who followed St Francis of Assisi in the early thirteenth century. Down the hill and along the torrent into which "our" torrent flows, the great old beehive of a monastery, where St. Francis had cell, still swarms with brown-robed monks. We often see them in our local bank with their long beards and bare feet. Their Sant'Egidio, for everyone in Cortona, is a sacred mountain.

The count shows us the oldest map he has. The spidery ink spells out a grand name for the rustic farm, Fonte delle Foglie, the source or font of leaves. He thinks the name comes from an Etruscan spring, where the house's water flowed. We troop through more weeds to find the tumbled stone springhouse, where just at the base a spring bubbles into a pool of water. Under the canopy of trees, the name suddenly makes sense. It poetically joins the greenery and water that most characterize the place.

Before we even sign the deeds, we think of Fulvio. In Tuscany, everyone has a secret soprannome, nickname. We have begun to call Fulvio "MegaMan" for the brand of vitamins he takes. We should invest in a few bottles ourselves, if his energy level can be duplicated. He could guide us through a historic restoration and we could witness the transformation. Already, we are determined to restore the ancient stone roof instead of replacing it with tile.

"Well, let's have a look", Fulvio agrees. We bounce him along the track leading to Fonte. When he gets out of the car, he merely says, "My goodness." Noncommittal, but I think I hear a note of wonder at the site - or maybe at the magnitude of the folly involved in restoration. Ed

has cut a path to the house with the weed machine and a swath in the vine-covered heap near the house, enough to find a crumbled stone hay barn underneath. We step inside on the house's bottom floor, where the animals lived, sending their steamy heat up through the slightly spaced floorboards to the shivering family upstairs. Low and oppressive, the four downstairs rooms retain mangers and stone-paved floors. The long room to the side, a rabbit hutch and chicken coop, is mostly a pile of fallen stone. "Volumi" Fulvio says, that magic word, volumes, which can be translated into square meters and presented to the town architects for additional space in these tightly controlled historic buildings. He is sizing up how much will have to be excavated, and how that will affect the foundation. The upstairs four rooms are high-ceilinged and possess two fireplaces and a worn stone sink under a window. One room has traces of decorative painting on the pitted and falling plaster. All the windows look over the treetops at the silhouette of Cortona nestled on the distant spur of Sant'Egidio. We see the volcanic cone of Monte Amiata drawn in outline above the horizon, surrounded by the rippling Apennines. What you hear is - silence. The first rains have opened the torrent and its light music sounds like an extension of silence. Fulvio tells us he never has restored a house for anyone before. He prefers big projects of his own.

The next day we go to lunch with Fulvio and Aurora at Mondo X in Cetona. They were married at this eleventh-century cloister, which is a recovery residence for people with drugs problems. These reforming young people operate a restaurant fit for the heavenly host. The restoration, which Fulvio considers one of the best in Italy was also accomplished by the residents. We're wild about the food and ambiance, which manages to feel both luxurious and chaste. At the end of a long succession of dazzling courses- each presented with Zen clarity- Fulvio raises his glass. "Because you are friends, I would like to be involved in the project. To my opinion, we will have a lot of work".

We place ourselves under Fulvio's tutelage. The three of us make many site visits deciding where the stairs will come down, which rooms will be bathrooms, where the brooms will be stored. We are to locate the builder for the structures and roof. Fulvio will supervise, then later supply the artisans for the finishing work and cabinetry. "Down there, just out of sight, we will have a beautiful pool." I almost can see it in the pupils of his eyes, instead of the actual snarls of broom and weed trees.