

# The TUSCAN CURE

by  
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FEED YOUR  
BODY AND  
SOUL AT  
A RUSTIC  
RETREAT  
IN THE  
HILLS OF  
SIENA THAT  
REDEFINES  
ECO-TRAVEL

THE  
GREEN  
ISSUE

**OPPOSITE/** At Castello di Spannocchia, guests feast on house-cured meats such as (clockwise from top) salame toscano, lardo, rigatine, capocollo, and prosciutto.

**THIS PAGE/** Built in the 1100s, the farm is equipped with modern conveniences (like tractors), but Spannocchia's sustainable spirit stays true to its historic past.



"DON'T SWALLOW,"  
CARRIE CURTIS SACCO  
INSTRUCTED US.

"LET IT MELT ON YOUR  
TONGUE. IT SHOULD BE  
SOFT, LIKE BUTTER."

THE LARDO IN MY  
MOUTH, A PERFECT SLIVER  
OF WHITE FAT, HAD BEEN  
SITTING UNDER SALT FOR  
SIX DAYS, THEN FLAVORED  
WITH BLACK PEPPER,  
JUNIPER BERRIES,  
AND ROSEMARY  
BEFORE LANDING ON  
MY TONGUE.

Usually, *lardo* is eaten on *crostini*, not straight like this. But six of us, all guests at Castello di Spannocchia outside Siena, Italy, were indulging our taste buds and our arteries in a tasting of five *salami* products all made from Cinta Senese pigs, a heritage breed from Siena, which were raised right here on the 1,100-acre *tenute* (agricultural estate).

Although I could probably be persuaded to travel across the Atlantic Ocean just for a *salami* tasting, that is not what brought me to Spannocchia. I came in search of an authentic ecotourism experience. Sure, I have stayed at "green" hotels that ask me to use the same towels for several days and turn off the lights when I leave my room. I've read about lodges that claim to be eco-friendly just because they border a rainforest or have a nightly show of local dancing. That's all fine, but I wasn't looking for ecotourism lite. I wanted the real thing, and I wanted real food. Which is why a hands-on farm stay at Spannocchia, with its sustainable agriculture, nonprofit programs, and rare farm animals, seemed like it might be the answer. We'd be cooking, touring the garden, and immersing ourselves in the Tuscan experience.

Still, when my family—my husband, Lorne; 13-year-old Sam; and 2-year-old Annabelle—and I drove up the long driveway flanked by cypress trees, stone walls, and fields dotted with yellow and white wildflowers, my cynicism kicked in. It was all so Tuscan, so idyllic; there had to be a catch.

A FEW HOURS BEFORE our *salami* tasting, I watched Piero Antichi, the Spannocchia butcher, singe the hair from a pig's head with a blowtorch, cut the legs just so for prosciutto, and choose cuts for the salami. Even though the *salami* we ate wasn't

from that pig, after I watched the butchering and toured the room where 200 prosciutti hung with legs and hooves still attached, I gained a new respect for the meat on my plate.

Now, I moaned over the *capocollo* and savored the salami. The moaning made Carrie, the education director, happy. Like everyone who works at Spannocchia, she loves it here, and takes great pride in their successes. Not the least of which are those pigs.

The Cinta Senese are older than northern European pigs. They appear in various medieval works of art dating from the 14th century, including a fresco in Siena's town hall. Fifty years ago, every family had at least one of these pigs, often living right in the kitchen. But then industrialization arrived, and in 1994 there were only 15 Cinta Senese left in the area. That same year, as part of the Noah's Ark Project, which was created to save endangered farm animals, Spannocchia bought its first pigs. Today, they have a herd of 100 Cinta Senese who forage for chestnuts, acorns, herbs, and grass on the property and get an organic mix of corn, grain, and beans to supplement that diet. They're funny-looking pigs with long heads, floppy ears, and a white stripe around the front of their bodies, and it's hard not to bump into them while strolling around the property.

I considered all of this while I tasted my *salami*. I had seen these pigs in every manifestation: roaming around, dismembered, hanging in salt, and now on my plate. Although the *Lion King* song "Circle of Life" floated through my mind, I had to admit that witnessing this cycle was satisfying and even—dare I say?—exciting.

We moved on to the best prosciutto I have ever eaten—half fat, half meat, pale pink, and perfectly salty. Piero hand-cuts it himself. Industrial prosciutto is finished in just eight months with the help of chemicals that speed up the process. Here, not only does it stay under salt in the traditional Tuscan manner, but it hangs for almost two years. A medium-size Spannocchia prosciutto sells for about \$200, so it is no surprise that prosciutto sales account for a large portion of the farm's income.

All that was left was the headcheese, which is not cheese at all but is, instead, head. Pig head. And bones. And snout. And every other part I normally wouldn't clamor to eat, cooked with cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg in a big stainless steel pot for six hours.

I glanced down at the gelatinous beige piece of meat on my plate.

Sam popped some in his mouth. "Delicious!" Not to be /

Sam popped some in his mouth. "Delicious!" Not to be /



1/ House-made pizza. 2/ Cinghiale rigò made from wild boar. 3, 4/ Fresh pasta made with eggs from the farm's chickens. 5/ Grapes harvested from Spinnocchia's vineyards will be made into Vin Santo dessert wine, a local specialty. 6/ Vibrant tomatoes and peppers from the garden. 7/ Grilled pork from heritage pigs. 8/ Spinach-and-ricotta-cheese-stuffed ravioli with brown butter and sage sauce. 9/ Cake made with ricotta cheese and almond cookies. 10/ Cheeseless, Neapolitan-style pizza with tomato sauce, olives, and anchovies, alongside pizza with cherry tomatoes and arugula. 11/ Balls of pizza dough. 12/ Wild boar rigò served with local polenta. 13/ House-made tagliatelle. 14/ Prosciutti and spalla (shoulder) hang from hooks in the aging room. 15/ Beans, peppers, leeks, potatoes, squash, tomatoes, and lettuce from the garden.



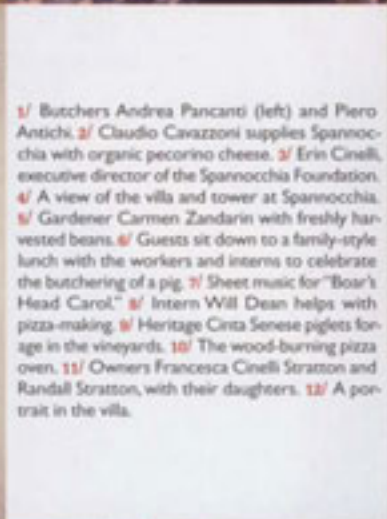


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A close-up photograph of a woman, likely a chef, wearing a white hairnet and a white chef's jacket. She is holding a large, round metal pan in her left hand and a long, cylindrical metal rod in her right hand. She has a slight smile and is looking directly at the camera. The background is dark and out of focus, with a single light source visible in the upper right.

**OPPOSITE:** Resident butcher Piero Anichi cures heritage pork prosciutto. **THIS PAGE:** Cook Graziella Capanni makes all the dinners at Spannocchia.



1/ Butchers Andrea Pancanti (left) and Piero Antichi. 2/ Claudio Cavazzoni supplies Spannocchia with organic pecorino cheese. 3/ Erin Cinelli, executive director of the Spannocchia Foundation. 4/ A view of the villa and tower at Spannocchia. 5/ Gardener Carmen Zandarin with freshly harvested beans. 6/ Guests sit down to a family-style lunch with the workers and interns to celebrate the butchering of a pig. 7/ Sheet music for "Boar's Head Carol." 8/ Intern Will Dean helps with pizza-making. 9/ Heritage Cinta Senese piglets forage in the vineyards. 10/ The wood-burning pizza oven. 11/ Owners Francesca Cinelli Stratton and Randall Stratton, with their daughters. 12/ A portrait in the villa.



one-upped, I did the same. It was delicious. There is something about knowing the pig whose head you are eating that makes it more palatable. Spannocchia has helped save an entire breed of animal and I had just eaten the best *solami* possibly anywhere. Good for the pigs. Great for me.

WHEN WE ARRIVED a few days earlier, Giuseppe Sacco, who is Carrie's husband and who also works at Spannocchia, greeted us.

"I love it here," he said almost immediately. He led us inside the villa, which is actually more like a stone farmhouse with a medieval tower attached. Giuseppe showed us the living room, where everyone would gather for wine before dinner each night; the dining room, with its long wooden tables, where we would eat our meals; and the little room with a fireplace and a stack of games and jigsaw puzzles. "All yours to use," Giuseppe beamed. "However you like, whenever you like. Light a fire. Read a book. While you are here, this is like your home."

He opened the door to our room, No. 5. It was spacious, with high, ornate ceilings and a faded 17th-century fresco on the bathroom wall.

Outside the window I glimpsed a perfect view of rolling hills dotted with wildflowers and sheep. "It's beautiful," I admitted. Giuseppe sighed. "Yes," he said. "I love this room."

During my week there, I learned that people who stay at Spannocchia fall in love with it. Over breakfast of house-made granola and toast with farm-made jams, Erin Cinelli, executive director of the Spannocchia Foundation, told me, "We want this to be a home away from home. We aren't like some of the other estates that are 'Club Med Tuscany.' We aren't a five-star resort. We're a working farm that welcomes people to come and participate in what we do. Hopefully they'll learn things here that they can bring home with them."

In fact, guests at Castello di Spannocchia are required to pay a \$45 membership fee that goes directly to the Portland, Maine-based foundation, which was formed in February 2002 with the intent of supporting conservation, research, and education at the Tenuta di Spannocchia.

Erin first came to work on the farm when she was 18 years old. Her aunt Francesca Cinelli Stratton and her father, Peter Cinelli, own the property. Originally, it was acquired sometime in the 1100s by one of the five wealthiest families of Siena. Francesca's grand-

where to go/

## GOOD FOR THE EARTH, GREAT FOR YOU

ECOTOURISM IS MORE THAN JUST WALKING THROUGH A RAINFOREST OR SUNBATHING ON A PROTECTED BEACH. IT ALSO CONSERVES THE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINS THE WELL-BEING OF THE LOCALS. HERE ARE SOME ECO-RESORTS THAT ARE AS MUCH ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT AS THEY ARE ABOUT GOOD FOOD AND GORGEOUS SURROUNDINGS.

**Daintree EcoLodge & Spa** / DAINTREE, AUSTRALIA / Located in the Daintree Rainforest, the spa uses Aboriginal massage techniques and products. Aboriginal guides lead walks and cultural tours. [daintree-ecolodge.com.au](http://daintree-ecolodge.com.au)

**Galapita Healing Garden** / BUTTALA, SRI LANKA / In the heart of Sri Lanka's magical southland, glimpse leopards and wild elephants, explore caves and Buddhist relics, and eat vegetarian specialties from clay pots. [galapita.com](http://galapita.com)

**Inkaterra Machu Picchu** / MACHU PICCHU, PERU / Located in an Andean cloud forest in the Machu Picchu Historical Reserve amid a dazzling array of

372 native orchid species, 172 bird species, and 111 butterfly species. [inkaterra.com](http://inkaterra.com)

**Jungle Bay Resort & Spa** / DOMINICA, WEST INDIES / Cottages are perched like birds' nests, tucked away on a hillside among indigenous trees. Swim in the volcanic stone pool, hike the 55-acre sanctuary, take yoga classes, and gorge on Caribbean lobster. [junglebaydominica.com](http://junglebaydominica.com)

**Morgan's Rock Hacienda & Ecolodge** / NEAR SAN JUAN DEL SUR, NICARAGUA / Part of a 2,471-acre tree-farming and reforestation project along the Pacific Coast of Central America, it boasts beautiful beaches, Pacific sunsets, and subtropical wildlife. [morganrock.com](http://morganrock.com)

**Rogue Forest Bed & Breakfast** / NEAR MERLIN, OREGON / Micro-brewed beer, southern Oregon wines, locally handcrafted guitars; plus, the Class II rapids and beauty of the Rogue River. [rogueforest.com](http://rogueforest.com)

**Tassia Lodge** / LEWA, KENYA / A community-run ecolodge on a 60,000-acre Masai-owned group ranch with game drives and walks through a natural cedar forest. [letsogosafari.com](http://letsogosafari.com)

**Wadi Feynan Eco Lodge** / DANA NATURE RESERVE, JORDAN / Set among the arid mountains on the archaeologically rich western border of the Dana Nature Reserve, and run entirely by local Bedouins, at night it is lit by candles produced by Bedouin women in the candle workshop at the lodge. [tribes.co.uk](http://tribes.co.uk)

father Delfino Cinelli met his American wife on a ship sailing from New York City to Italy. They married and bought the property in 1925, when he left the family straw-hat-manufacturing business to become a writer. After decades of benign neglect, Spannocchia had fallen into a state of disrepair, where it lingered for almost 70 years.

Until Francesca and her husband, Randall Stratton, moved there in 1992. "The key to preserving this place," Randall told me, "was not the architecture, but the landscape. And the only way to preserve the landscape was to return to farming."

Erin claims that feeding the pigs that became her dinner and picking the grapes that made the wine she drank formed an eye-opening, life-changing experience. And she wants guests to have that same epiphany.

"Someone from California or Vermont who stays here might go home and start to recycle or to support their local farmers' market," Erin said.

Still, I can't help but wonder whether a week here can really have an impact on someone. Like me, for example.

ONE DAY, MY FAMILY SIGNED UP for a cooking class taught by Loredana Betti in the kitchen. Loredana grew up on the estate, under the *mezzadria* system, by which an estate was owned by one family, while the farm work was done by tenant farmers who gave half of what they farmed to the *padrone*. From their half, the farmers had to be self-sufficient. ▶



In the 1950s, when Loredana was growing up at Spannoccchia, most of Tuscany was frozen in time. Once modern technology arrived, families fled the hardscrabble farm life to work in factories and move to apartments in nearby towns. But Loredana loves and knows this land. "She knows where all the good mushrooms are," Francesca told me, "but she won't tell anyone. Not even her husband."

Before we began to cook, Carmen Zandarin, the gardener, took us on a tour of the impressive gardens. More than 500 tomato plants provide the tomatoes for the sauce that serves Spannoccchia all year. Capers, beets, onions, carrots, cardoons—all are used in the kitchen. Carmen paused by the radicchio. "Here," she said, "we live with the animals. A portion for the porcupine, a portion for me." She smiled, as if to say, "That is how the world works."

While Carmen explained crop rotation, I looked at the compost pile. There were the lemons for the limoncello, and the remnants of last night's dinner. I recognized almost everything in the compost pile, and it was thrilling. The pig I had watched butchered was about to become my lunch. Of course I knew this intellectually. But there it was, really in operation, really working.

Back inside, we donned aprons and joined Loredana. The large table overflowed with artichokes and mushrooms, and I began to feel nostalgic. I grew up with my Italian grandmother, and the smells and sounds in this kitchen reminded me of my own Mama Rose's kitchen. Soon I was stirring the bubbling polenta and stripping the tough leaves off the artichokes the way Mama Rose had taught me. Loredana tied a child-size apron on Annabelle, who stood on a step stool, rolling out cookie dough while Sam popped gnocchi off the tines of a fork to give them ridges.

At noon, everyone gathered in the living room for wine and appetizers, then moved on to the dining room to eat lunch. Great food, great wine, great company, and all in the name of helping the environment. Departing guests cried and hugged Randall and Francesca and each other. Those of us lucky to have a few more days left felt smug as we watched them go.

HERE IS WHAT YOU WILL NOT GET AT SPANNOCCHIA: designer bath products, Egyptian cotton sheets, or plush bathrobes. Instead, imagine that you have relatives in Tuscany who have lived on a centuries-old estate for the past 80 years. They make limoncello in white ceramic urns. They make their own wine and Vin Santo, a local specialty made from partially dried grapes. There are organic gardens, sheep, horses, and pigs. Their firewood heats the water (sometimes) and the house, and stokes the outdoor pizza oven.

Imagine that they invite you for a visit. They feed you and let you wander the farm. They teach you to cook and give you an Italian lesson. They open their arms and take you in. /■

*Ann Hood is the author of numerous short stories and eight novels, the latest of which is The Knitting Circle.*

*Guests at Spannoccchia learn to cook these classic and comforting dishes.*

## BAKED POLENTA WITH FONTINA AND TOMATO SAUCE / 6 SERVINGS

### SAUCE

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 cup chopped onion
- ½ cup chopped celery
- ¼ cup chopped carrot
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 28-ounce can peeled whole tomatoes with basil in juice
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh Italian parsley
- 1½ teaspoons dried oregano
- ¼ cup chopped fresh basil

### POLENTA

- 4 cups water
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup polenta (coarse cornmeal)\*
- 2 cups grated Fontina cheese (about 8 ounces)

**SAUCE** Heat olive oil in heavy large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion, celery, carrot, and garlic; sauté until vegetables are almost tender, about 5 minutes. Add tomatoes with juice, parsley, and oregano; bring to simmer. Reduce heat and simmer until reduced to 3 cups, gently breaking up tomatoes with potato masher, about 15 minutes. Mix in basil. Season sauce to taste with salt and pepper. **DO AHEAD** Can be made 3 days ahead. Cool slightly. Cover and refrigerate.

**POLENTA** Brush 8x8x2-inch glass baking dish with olive oil. Bring 4 cups water and 1 teaspoon salt to boil in another heavy large saucepan. Gradually whisk in polenta. Reduce heat to low and simmer until thick and cooked through, stirring often, about 10 minutes. Spread ¼ cup tomato sauce over bottom of prepared dish. Pour half of polenta (about 1½ cups) over. Sprinkle with half of cheese, then

¼ cup sauce. Spread remaining polenta over. Sprinkle with remaining cheese. Cover with ¼ cup sauce. Let stand 2 hours at room temperature.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Bake polenta until heated through, about 25 minutes. Let polenta stand 10 minutes and serve.

\*/ Sold at some supermarkets and at natural foods stores and Italian markets. If unavailable, substitute an equal amount of regular yellow cornmeal and simmer about half as long.

## PENNE ALL'AMATRICIANA / 4 TO 6 SERVINGS

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1½ cups chopped onion
- ½ teaspoon dried crushed red pepper
- 10 ounces sweet Italian sausage (about 3 links), casings removed
- ½ cup chopped pancetta (Italian bacon) or regular bacon (about 2 ounces)
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- ¼ cup dry white wine
- 2 28-ounce cans peeled whole tomatoes with basil in juice
- 1 pound penne
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Heat oil in heavy large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onion and crushed red pepper; sauté until soft, about 8 minutes. Add sausage and pancetta and cook until beginning to brown, breaking up sausage with fork, about 12 minutes. Add tomato paste and sauté 3 minutes. Mix in wine. Add tomatoes with juice and bring to boil. Reduce heat and simmer until reduced to 6 cups, gently breaking up tomatoes with potato masher, about 50 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. **DO AHEAD** Can be made 1 day ahead. Cool slightly, then chill uncovered until cold. Cover and keep refrigerated. Bring to simmer before continuing.

Cook pasta in large pot of boiling salted water until just tender but still firm to bite, stirring occasionally. Drain. Return pasta to pot. Add tomato-sausage sauce to pasta and toss to coat. Serve, passing cheese separately.