

CLOCKWISE: Tenuta di Spannocchia estate, including a 12th-century tower, surrounded by forests in which pigs feast and grow fat; a Cinta Senese piglet, one of the breed that Spannocchia is working to protect from extinction; a dark-eyed Calvana cow, also part of the Noah's Ark project; accommodation for guests who wish to experience an Italian farmstay; Venetia helps with the grape harvest; an intern leads the sheep to new pastures.



An autumn in TUSCANY

EVERY YEAR, AN ADVENTUROUS KIWI TRADES HER CORPORATE LIFE FOR A STINT AS A VOLUNTEER WORKER ON ORGANIC FARMS IN ITALY

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MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with Riccio, the salumi-maker, is not reassuring. He is in the butchery, sorting and weighing meat for the farmers' market, where he will once again confirm his reputation as the best prosciutto-maker in the district. I have been assigned to help. Riccio knows the perils of the Saturday market. Italians are not patient people; there will be queues five deep, plus noise and confusion. "Parla Italiano?" he asks, glancing up while slicing through a dead cow's ribcage. I am toggled up against the brisk dawn temperature and must resemble Michelin woman. "Un po," I say. He shrugs.

We load up the van in silence. Riccio steers with one hand and talks on his phone as he lurches around blind corners, the meat swaying wildly on hooks in the refrigerated trailer. He seems to be explaining to the person on the other end of the phone that he is late because he has a nonna incompetente (a numbskull of a grandmother) as his assistant.

The market is in Sovicille on the outskirts of the affluent city of Siena and, while this is a small farmers' market by Italian standards, it is already packed with smartly dressed Italians stocking their pantries. Riccio tosses me a green apron and a plastic-covered calculator and points to the till, into which a previous demented assistant has hurled coins at random. Italians still have tiny one and two-cent coins and even on a normal day I have trouble differentiating between them. Also, the electronic scales don't work so we can't issue receipts, which is illegal.



As soon as the meats have been arrayed, a man who resembles Italian actor Roberto Benigni thrusts a €50 note across the counter. He wants three slices of prosciutto, price 89€. I give him change for €2. He raises one eyebrow and continues to hold out his hand. A woman with a lap-dog demands "tresalsiccariginolardo", a word which escapes me. The Roberto Benigni lookalike, who has stayed to watch my gig, winks and translates: "She wants three sausages and a kilo of lard".

Riccio appears oblivious to the chaos unfolding at his stall. He is deeply engaged in conversation about his salumi with a group of men in suits and dark glasses. Each is given a morsel of meat to try; they then debate its merits. Italians approach life at a different pace to the rest of us. Life is about connections and the quality rather than the quantity of experiences. I watch a woman at the vegetable stall opposite spend five minutes individually smelling, touching and considering the tomatoes she will eventually buy for her lunch. Other vendors explain their production methods, share their produce and handwrite receipts.

By noon, almost all the meat is sold. The woman with the dog returns to see if there are any leftovers for her companion; Riccio gives her the two remaining sausages. Then he takes a loaf of the bread-maker's crusty ciabatta, cuts two thick slices and adds a filling of prosciutto, handing me a perfect sweet and salty sandwich. He takes off his apron. "Finito," he says. "Buono. Molto buono." ▶





“THE GOOD THING IS WE HAVEN’T TURNED IT INTO DISNEYLAND. IT’S A REAL COMMUNITY”



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Guests and interns enjoy an outdoor feast at Spannocchia; the estate attracts artists, writers and sculptors from all over the world; the extensive terraced vegetable gardens feed guests and workers; heirloom Cinta Senese pigs forage for mushrooms, acorns and other delicacies; interns at work in the gardens; cured pork products made on the estate; Spannocchia produces about 4000 litres of wine annually, mostly for its own consumption; shelling peas for dinner.

I first became a WWOOFer in Italy four years ago, on the eve of my 60th birthday, and I have returned each autumn to lend a hand at harvest time. The acronym WWOOF has two translations: Willing Workers on Organic Farms or Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (to get around the problem with illegal workers). The philosophy is the same: workers offer their labour in return for food and accommodation. The idea was the brainchild of a British woman, Sue Coppard, who set out to provide Londoners with a rural experience. Today it is a worldwide organization involving thousands of farms throughout the world.

When I first applied to work in Italy my main worry was that I would be too old. I had an image of WWOOFers as young, bronzed backpackers, working in the fields and sleeping under the stars, which largely they are. But there are also many older people who are still physically fit. The oldest WWOOFer in Italy is 86. My criteria in selecting farms are simple: I like to be within walking distance of a village (some farms are very remote); I don't drive heavy machinery; I won't work on roofs; and I don't like sleeping rough. I have worked on eight farms in the past four years and while each has had its challenges, the work has been manageable, the food marvellous and the people warm and friendly.

The property named Spannocchia, (pronounced spah-NOCK-eyah) where Riccio is the farm manager and chief salumi-maker, was an obvious choice. The 445-hectare agricultural estate is a working organic farm which produces its own wine, olive oil and meat products and hosts agriturismo guests. The farm also operates an internship programme for young people who are keen to learn about organic farming and sustainability. The interns and WWOOFers work alongside the Italian farm staff for 30 hours each week.

Spannocchia lies about 19 kilometres south-west of Siena and is one of those fairy-tale places that move people to poetry and art. It is largely planted in forest through which you drive before coming upon Castello di Spannocchia, the operational centre of

the estate. Its buildings include a 12th-century tower, the main villa and surrounding castello apartments where paying guests stay. A short distance away are the ruins of the Santa Lucia monastery and a castle, appropriately named Castiglion Che Dio Sol Sa (The Castle that God Only Knows) because it is so hard to find.

For centuries, under the feudal mezzadria system, Spannocchia was home to share-cropper families who worked the land and sold their produce to the wealthy owners. Six of those families still live in the district and one descendant, Graziella, who was born on the property, is Spannocchia's head chef. In 1925 the Spannocchi family sold the land to Delfino Cinelli, a Florentine aristocrat and writer, who saw the property as a tranquil place in which to write. His granddaughter Francesca Cinelli and her husband Randall Stratton have run the property since 1992.

At Spannocchia our tasks include stacking firewood, weeding the vegetable garden, pruning fruit trees and trimming hedges. I am also assigned to scrape kernels from maize to make polenta, fill bags with lavender, make quince jam and tie little paper hats on jars of Spannocchia Thousand Flowers Honey. For two days I also hang the sweet vin santo grapes on a canopy of wire frames to dry. While I am hooking up the bunches of grapes, two paying guests walk past. Without thinking, I greet them in Italian. They stop to take pictures. "I bet her family has been doing this for hundreds of years," the wife whispers to her husband, but in a voice loud enough for me to hear.

Spannocchia is largely self-sufficient and most of the meat, eggs, whole grains, fresh vegetables, honey, olive oil and wine come from the estate. As well as the 364 hectares of forest (largely oaks), there are 2.5 hectares of grapes – sangiovese (red), malvasia and trebbiano (white) – and more than 700 olive trees. There is a cyclical system of production: the crops feed the animals; the animals produce manure that is used to fertilize the fields to grow the next cycle of crops; the animals and crops feed the human residents and humans provide the labour to make it all possible. ▶





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Venetia with Riccio (centre) at the market; Randall Stratton and Francesca Cinelli who run Spannocchia. Francesca is the granddaughter of Delfino Cinelli who bought the property in 1925; head chef Graziella (left) with assistant Gaetana. Graziella was born at Spannocchia.

HOW TO WWOOF

What is it? WWOOF stands for Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms or Willing Workers on Organic Farms. It is an international network linking people who want to work on organic farms with those looking for volunteer help.

How does it work? In return for voluntary labour, WWOOF hosts offer food, accommodation and opportunities to learn about organic lifestyles.

Who can do it? Anyone who can help their hosts with tasks for an agreed number of hours. Age is not a barrier but, for most farm work, you need to be physically fit. Many farms are happy to host workers with children.

What work do WWOOFers do? The work is varied and can include harvesting, pruning, planting, fruit-picking, scrub-clearing, weeding, haymaking, building, producing food and looking after animals.

What about accommodation? Some farmers offer room in their homes while others offer outside accommodation in caravans or tents.

How many hours do I work? That depends on the host. On some farms it can be as few as four or five hours a day, on others up to eight hours for six days a week during harvesting.

How long can I stay? Most

farms state a minimum of one week. Some WWOOFers stay on the same farm for several weeks or even months, depending on their host's needs.

Do I need to speak the language of the country?

Many WWOOF hosts are multilingual but WWOOFing offers a chance to learn or improve a new language.

How do I find farms?

Contact the WWOOF organization in the country you want to visit. For a small membership fee (around €30), you will receive a list of farm hosts and advice about WWOOFing, including visas, insurance, etc. Farm visits are arranged directly with farm hosts. Check international and independent websites for further details: www.wwoof.org/national.asp or www.wwoof.org/independents.asp The Italian WWOOF website is www.wwoof.it

Advice to new WWOOFers:

Choose a farm which matches your interests and capabilities. For your first experience, choose a location that isn't too remote (within walking distance of a town) and try to get a sense, in advance, of the people you will stay with. Be prepared to muck in and help where needed but let the hosts know your physical limits. For instance, if you don't like heights, you won't be able to climb olive trees.

Spannocchia also operates a Noah's Ark project, breeding and raising endangered species. There are Calvana cows with white porcelain coats and dark eyes, gentle Monte Amiata donkeys and a Monterufoli pony, a breed which is thought to have come from the now-extinct Selvina horse. But it is the Sienese belted pig for which Spannocchia is best known. This ancient breed (it can be seen in frescoes dating from the 13th century) was almost extinct by the 1980s. Today the pigs roam more or less freely in the forests at Spannocchia, eating a gourmet diet of acorns, chestnuts, mushrooms and truffles, supplemented by an organic mash. It takes two years for the pigs to reach slaughter weight and by then they have 10cm of back fat which produces the wonderful lardo. The salumi has elements of fennel, oregano, chestnut, olive and even roses – the result of the pigs escaping into the rose gardens.

Randall Stratton, whose vision drives Spannocchia, says when he and Francesca first came to manage the property they envisioned living in semi-retirement, home-schooling their three children and focusing on architectural preservation. An architect in the US, he has always had a passion for preserving old buildings. "But once we were living here, I realized the key to preserving it was the landscape, not the buildings, and the only way to do that was to farm it again." He says there is a lot of culture involved and "a lot of collective wisdom" from people who have lived there all their lives. Every year, he and Francesca and several staff – including Riccio – travel to the US to raise funds for their work at Spannocchia. Tourism now supplements their income but the primary purpose is to maintain it as the working farm it has been for 900 years. "The good thing is we haven't turned it into Disneyland. It's a real community."

On my last day, I return to Pulcinelli, the converted stables where the interns and WWOOFers sleep. Someone has pasted a sign on the bathroom door that reads, "The Toilet that God Only Knows". On my bed is a neatly folded green apron, embroidered with "Castello di Spannocchia". There is no note but I suspect the hand of the finest salumi-maker in the district.