

( ITALY )

# THE COWBOYS OF TUSCANY.

In Italy's unruly Maremma,  
a handful of horsemen corral cattle  
at breakneck speeds.  
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In the southernmost stretch of Tuscany, known as the Maremma, wilderness still reigns. Beyond the manicured columns of cypress trees and pristine Renaissance villas that constitute the international image of this region, civilization exists in isolated clusters—the woodlands and marshes between them intimidatingly dense, and long considered inhospitable for all but the most tenacious souls. Where the wilderness meets the sea, rugged grasslands nourish the native Maremmana breed of broad-chested, lyre-horned cows, a species today protected by law, and guarded, in a tradition dating back to the ancient agriculture of the Etruscans, by Maremma’s own cowboys—the handful of working horsemen known as *butteri*.

“Tradition keeps this work alive,” says Stefano Pavin, head *buttero* at the Tenuta di Alberese, one of the few farms still employing the Maremman cowboys. “But very few people are cut out to be *butteri* today.” He explains, “The animals are more important than you. You have to love it as a way of life—you can’t think of it as work—or else it’ll be too hard.”

Pavin is acquainted with hard work. Before seven in the morning he mounts his Maremmano horse, riding at a full gallop out in the open fields for five hours, six days a week. There is no respite for holidays, rain or freezing cold. Dispersed across the 10,500 acres of Tenuta di Alberese, a primal terrain dotted with medieval watchtowers and umbrella pines, there are 400 Maremmana cows and 40 horses to be inspected and herded daily by Pavin and the three other men in his *buttero* contingent. The cowboys recognize each of the animals as effortlessly as the rest of us recognize our human friends. “We see them every day,” says Pavin.

The *butteri* corral the cattle droves to their daily grazing pastures. Each spring, they tag newborns and break in untamed horses—rough, fast-moving tasks that inevitably topple a rider from the saddle once in a while.

Pavin stands crooked like a tree grown on windy terrain. Now 55, he’s broken three ribs and a knee in his 34 years working as a *buttero*. His cartilage has been worn down along the length of his spine, and the last couple of years have turned his sandy hair a sun-bleached gray. Still, he says he’d like to keep riding well past the customary retirement age now looming on his horizon.

“I don’t find our lifestyle difficult,” Pavin says with a slanting smile. “Especially after this year when everyone was locked up in their apartments, and we were out in the fields on our horses every day. [We are] the luckiest people in the world.”

The Maremmano horses that Pavin and the other *butteri* ride are a tall, indigenous breed the color of molasses, with robust legs to carry them through the thorny, swampy brush, and a wide barrel of a body that bows the cowboys’ legs in a permanent arch. In a small barn pungent with the smell of rawhide, the *butteri* keep dozens of Maremmana saddles, each stitched like oversized baseball mitts and padded inside with horsehair to cushion riders on their long shifts. On the barn walls dangle tarred lengths of rope for controlling calves, and the cowboys’ hooked *uncino* staffs carved from dogwood. Leather gaiters and waxed cotton rain jackets hang in a corner, custom-made by area artisans and, in some cases, mothers of *butteri*.

The handcrafted gear is a testament to a heritage painstakingly sustained. The European Union funds a course to cultivate the next generation of modern *butteri*. (A

changing demographic: Of the last cohort’s eleven students, nine were women.)<sup>1</sup> The region of Tuscany took over operations at Tenuta di Alberese in 1979, in order to ensure the survival of the tradition. The massive cows, which can grow past 2,500 pounds, once served as beasts of burden; since the advent of farm machinery, the cattle have been raised for organic beef, but they roam these vast Maremman pastures freely and until late in their years.

Tenuta di Alberese also invites the public in—it’s the only place where visitors have the opportunity to ride through the fields with *butteri*, but Pavin warns: “Tourists have to be ready to adapt to the demands of our work.” So: Show up at 6:30 a.m., gallop until lunchtime. It doesn’t matter that your legs are aching. The animals are more important than you.

Where the iconic American cowboy is an agent of conquest, the *buttero* of Maremma is the guardian of these Tuscan creatures and the natural expanses vital for them to remain semiwild. It’s an arduous but plainly rewarding existence for those who prefer the arcadian landscape, with all its vicissitudes, to the common comforts of the city.

“It’s not easy to be happy in life—arriving at a sense of balance is always a problem,” says Pavin, his blue eyes contemplating the distance. “But there are moments out there when I’m alone and witnessing this marvel of nature and I find myself at peace with everything.”

(1) The Tuscan regional government’s two-month vocational training course, “Rediscovering the *Buttero*,” was inaugurated in 2019. It was the first time that women were actively encouraged to train for the demanding role.

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( previous ) Despite the vaunted position of Tuscany in the popular imagination, the Maremma remains one of the least visited regions of Italy.  
( left ) The regional park where the *butteri* work is built on reclaimed marshland. The region is so rural because, for centuries, it was uninhabitable.



( below )  
( right )

Chaps are worn by the butteri to protect them from the vegetation and insects of the rugged landscape.  
Maremmano horses have been bred over generations for solidity and their ability to adapt to bad weather and rough terrain.







( left )  
Much of the Maremma is dotted with umbrella  
pines, whose distinctive silhouette is common to  
several Mediterranean countries.





(right)  
(overleaf) The butteri use an *uncino* to herd cattle. The long, thin stick is also used to close gates without dismounting. The Maremma bulls have long and open lyre-shaped horns, while the cows have crescent-shaped horns.





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