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FROM FINANCE TO FUNGI

Once a wreck, the converted Tuscan estate of Potentito is now a mecca for city slickers keen to put urban life behind them and get back to the land – even if it means digging ditches for free.





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Rising above the unspoilt wilderness of southern Tuscany, Castello di Potentino dominates a silent emerald valley. The taming hand of humans is visible only in a few ordered fields of grapevines and olive groves. But a little less than two decades ago the soaring stone castle, with foundations dating back 1,000 years, was in ruins. That was until Londoner Charlotte Horton, a self-confessed former anti-Thatcherite punk who is now a vintner and rural evangelist, turned the castle into a destination for aspiring and like-minded agrarians. It's here on a hilltop in central Italy that many middle-class, white-collar city slickers have flocked in the hope of feeling closer to the land.

"This is agricultural punk," says Horton, without a flicker of irony, as we arrive at Potentino on a sunny afternoon. It's all a little surreal. Horton, who is sitting in a chandelier-lit foyer with her great dane, is dressed like an English gentleman in the country: straight blazer, tweed breeches, high riding boots. Baskets of freshly picked pears, yellow peppers, aubergines and fennel line staircases,



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Previous page: (x) Silvano Bartoli collecting mushrooms

This spread: (x) Scented-olive-oil workshop (2) Owner Charlotte Horton with her great dane (3) Castello di Potentino

looking like the over-dressed halls of an English village church during a particularly bountiful harvest festival. "The farmers I found here were truly anti-authoritarian," she says. "They hunted, they grew their own food, wine and oil. They were completely autonomous." And this is what seems to tempt so many here.

At just 26, Horton left London for the Tuscan countryside. She eventually stumbled upon an ancient castle bereft of windows, doors, a roof, plumbing and electricity – and founded Potentino. She got to work on the restoration, starting by scything through weeds that had overtaken the vineyard and replanting crops. For four years she slept with bubble wrap on the window frames and under umbrellas when it rained. The castle is now a breathtaking, antique-filled residence surrounded by fields – and properly sheltered from the elements. It is protected by Horton's non-profit, the Potentino Valley Project.

The renovation was a feat of her own labour and that of her brother, her new neighbours and a stream of volunteers





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- (1) Dinner menu (2) Fresh produce
- (3) Wine tasting (4) Barley and pumpkin soup (5) Lawyer Tim McIlwain tasting olive oil
- (6) Second-floor kitchen (7) Rustic larder (8) Feline resident

seeking an escape. This offer of free labour has come to define the participatory spirit in the castle.

Potentino is now, in part, a camp for urbanites who are disillusioned with the strictures of modern life – and able to afford to leave it behind for a while. So far more than 5,000 have volunteered through the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms programme. Zach White arrived for the grape and olive-picking season, taking several months off work: a high-stress job in international development based in London. “There’s something enormously satisfying about the physicality of the tasks here: digging a ditch or cleaning 500 olive trees,” he says. Eileen Lee, who is on hiatus from her San Francisco-based design career, took three weeks to try farm labour instead. “I felt crushed by my work,” she says. “I felt like there was more to discover.” And Said Noah Goodman, a Yale student, is on board for several weeks with his brother. “In the city, every choice you make is damaging,” he says. “In the country you can set up your own little world of how you’d like people to live.”

Most surprising of all is that these well-heeled visitors are volunteers. Many are the accomplished sort who one can imagine driving a hard bargain in boardrooms back home. Here, though, they seem content to seek transcendence through agricultural tedium. Some go back to their jobs with sore knees and enough dirt under their nails to prove that they’ve tried something new. Others, suitably inspired and sincere about changing their lives, set up vineyards.

Throughout the year the castle hosts events such as writing retreats, concerts and workshops in everything from cheese-making to perfumery. When we visit, 50 food-focused idealists are on hand for Terroir: a roving Toronto-founded culinary conference that has hosted participants in Vienna, Warsaw, Berlin and now here. Throughout the week there are discussions about the nobility of natural wine, the diet of ancient Etruscans and the nourishment we can gain from seaweed but often overlook. When a pig is publicly butchered, bled and prepared into its assorted deli cuts, few seem



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squeamish at the brutality; many say that the very reason they’re here is to see how sausages are actually made. There are brief forays into olive harvesting, making wool by hand and foraging, some of which takes place worryingly close to the carpark. There are massive dinners by illustrious chefs, such as Avinash Kumar of London’s River Café and Amanda Cohen of New York’s Dirt Candy, all put together with the help of a fleet of altruistic kitchen hands.

Terroir guests are bound together by a belief in a more transparent supply chain for food. Many express dismay at the food industry’s renunciation of seasonality, sustainability and flavour. There is a shared sense that we’ve got everything wrong in our mechanised modern world and, as with most cases of disenchantment, that a virtuous model existed in a rosy, long-lost past. Lots of people here express a belief that pre-industrial farming – handwrought, chemical-free, and low impact – maintained the proper equilibrium between farmers, food and land. Sadly the acquiescence and collective derision of a small group of well-off food folk in the Tuscan hills is unlikely to reverse the change. But that doesn’t mean that it’s not emblematic of a shift among a certain demographic.

“The view has long been that cities isolate you from the vagaries of climate, storms and drought, that nature is dangerous and big companies such as Nestlé keep danger away from you with sterile food,” says Eric Archambeau, a venture capitalist who funds technology start-ups working in sustainable agriculture. “But the reality is that we’re forced to use more potent chemical fertilisers and pesticides every year.”

The survival instinct that first drove us towards the reliable, antiseptic abundance of industrial food now propels us away from it – and back towards a hands-on relationship with the natural world. But how many of us have the resilience and confidence to drop out of city life and transform a patch of land? At Terroir, participants had surpassed the usual sanctimony; some, like Horton, turned their back on cities to try their hands at farm life. Albert Ponzio, previously an





executive chef at a top-rated Toronto restaurant, relocated to a 25-hectare property of wheat, vegetables, ducks, deer and cattle. Next year he'll launch a nearby farm-to-table restaurant for the Royal Hotel. "Farming is much harder than I thought," he says after a stint in the Potentino kitchen. "But the fact that I'm sustaining my life through things my hands do makes me feel human, it makes me feel alive."

Francesca Ruffaldi and her husband left Florence for the Tuscan countryside to launch cheese-making firm Caseificio Murceti. "I wanted to be emancipated," says Ruffaldi, stirring milk into curds. "We decided that a different sort of freedom was possible outside the city, even if it seemed old-fashioned." Poul Lang Nielsen, who sells produce to restaurants from Hindsholm Grisen, the free-range, organic pig farm he founded in 1995, agrees that change is afoot. "Young people are copying what I've done: buying a farm and making it work."

The Terroir schedule included a tasting of Horton's wine. Despite starting at

*Previous spread: (1) Main dining hall
This spread: (1) Francesca Ruffaldi
with her cheese (2) Zach White
visiting the wine cellar*



11.00, the dining room's long wooden table was packed with dozens of eager punters. "Civilization starts with our relationship to nature," says Horton, unfurling a chart showing the 70 additives used in commercial wine. Hers is the antithesis: its made with native yeast, minimal sulfites, no pesticides and no additives. In essence it's similar to the wine that the Etruscans made here at Potentino 2,500 years ago.

"The extraordinary biodiversity of Italy's food and wine staples is at risk of being lost," says Horton. "But we are a continuum. Everything we know about growing food and wine is based on thousands of years of accrued knowledge. If we lose that, we lose our humanness."

Like everyone else at the table, we sip our wine appreciatively. As we drink we feel as though we're a humble part of this historical imperative. We might never dig a ditch or turn a plot of land into a productive field of food. But we can raise a glass of natural wine to those who have enough of the punk spirit in them to do exactly that. — (M)

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