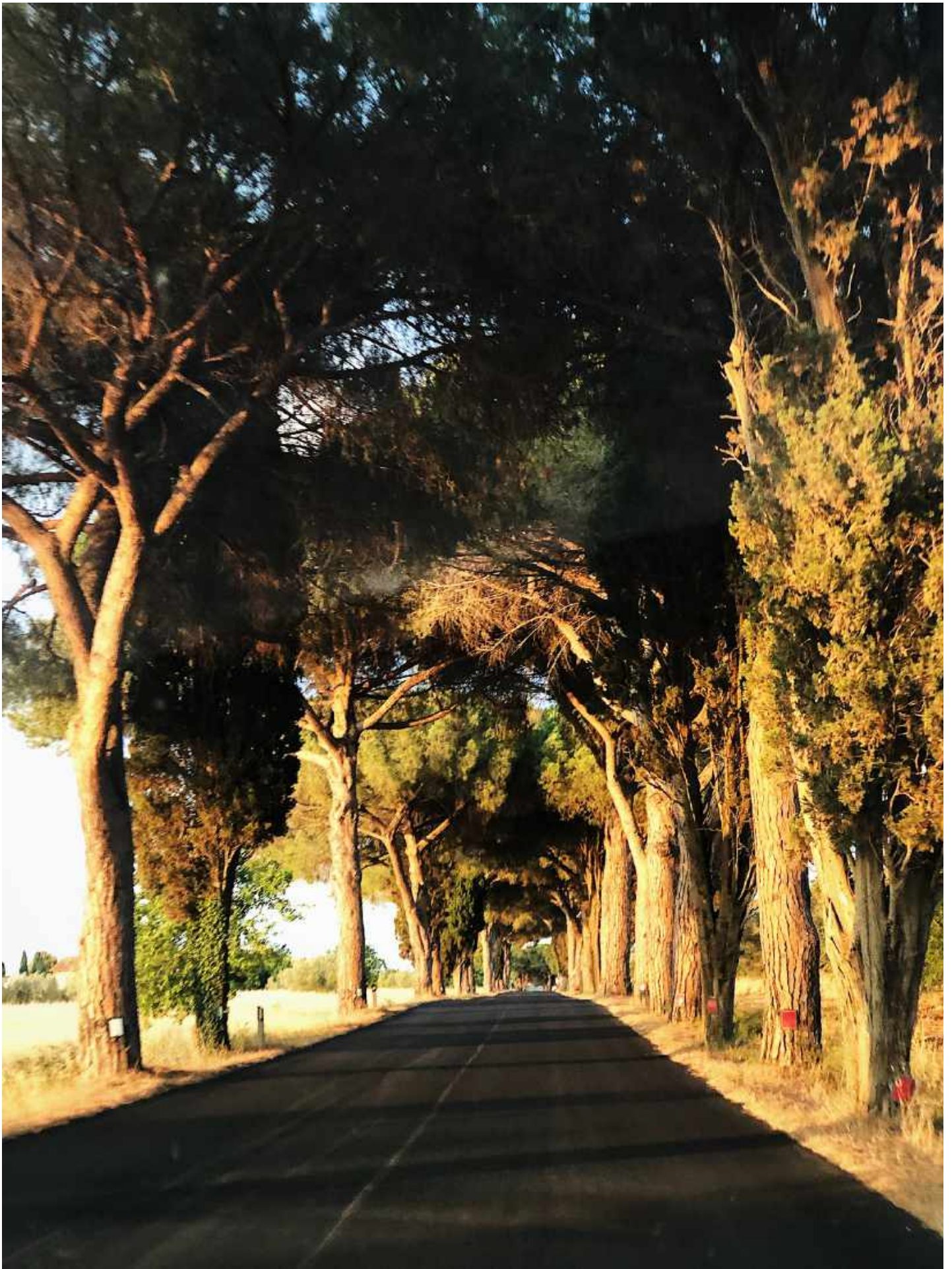


SIMPOSIO



MAREMMA

ITALIAN RECIPES, TRAVEL, AND CULTURE





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MAREMMA

CLAUDIA RINALDI

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WELCOME TO MAREMMA

Ciao,

Welcome to Maremma, the Tuscan land of cowboys, brigands, and family-owned trattorie!

Another Tuscany, far from the beautiful Medieval or Renaissance cities. Untamed, wild. Colonized and freed. Forgotten and celebrated.

We will meet a variety of personages: from eternally hunted outlaws to celebrated grand dukes. Fierce noblewomen defending their family possessions or seducing sultans. Corsairs, monks, deli and café owners, butchers, street market vendors, travel agents, and winemakers.

We will climb up perched towns to see breathtaking sights and maybe catch a witch flying by or guarding a millennial olive tree.

We will follow the traces of Etrurians, of their cults and gods, and try to uncover the secrets they've left behind. Then we will travel through the eras: the Middle Ages, the Spanish domination, the left-wing...

On the shores, we will encounter the Italian crowds in search of "la bella vita", ladies bent over the sand to collect Telline (clams), and anglers at work to preserve their traditional fishing practices.

We will gather herbs to make delicious authentic dishes and regenerate our tired limbs in thermal springs born of a god's bolt.

Through food, we will witness the outdoor life and cuisine of the Butteri (horsemen) of Maremma. The still vivid heritage of the Italian-Jewish communities. How the smallest town exported a recipe that became the national food of... France! How terrible memories can become delicious treats. And the way scraps and unsold cuts have combined into clay pots to give birth to extraordinary triggers for our taste buds. From wild boar to seafood, from ricotta to nutty Christmas sweets, we will learn how to cook like a Maremman.

There's so much to discover about this beautiful land's past and present, so much to enjoy! So let the adventure begin!

Benvenuti in Maremma!

Claudia





COOKING NOTES

Recipes are in grams, ounces, and cups whenever possible. Servings are primarily for two, but you can double the ingredients if desired.

Remember to read the recipes all the way. It helps a lot. First, you are conscious of the ingredients and the tools that you will need; second, you will behave intentionally, knowing, in broad terms, what's coming next.

I also recommend gathering all the ingredients in your workstation before starting to cook. I try to indicate peeling, chopping, and dicing at the best time, but you can prep them before to make things easier.

Restock your pantry with lentils, walnuts, hazelnuts, dried figs, salt-cured anchovies, and 00 flour. Don't forget a bottle of good quality extra virgin olive oil. Cold-pressed would be marvelous. As always, when cooking Italian, aromatic herbs are fundamental: parsley, marjoram, rosemary, and sage. May I suggest you buy tiny plants and keep them in your garden/balcony/window? Spices have their special role, too. This time, the new entry is dried fennel flowers, but you can substitute them with seeds.

Most of the ingredients are easily gatherable, and I try to give you substitutes whenever I consider it feasible with decent results. I've seen Guanciale, pancetta, Pecorino, parmesan, tomato paste (Passata, not sauce), and canned tomatoes (Pelati) in many supermarkets abroad.

You might need to search a bit for candied orange peels. Bottarga might not be common, but you can try Italian delicatessens or online. You can substitute fresh baker's yeast with the dry version; the proportion is 3:1 - divide the fresh grams/ounces per three.

Finally, use good quality wine for cooking. It goes in your body just like the one you drink, and it does change the flavor of your food! You won't regret purchasing a bottle of Vin Santo to dip cookies "a fine pasto", to end the meal, nor sipping from a tiny glass of Alchermes, like Lorenzo il Magnifico did in his gardens.

Finally, find yourself a great butcher: you will need chicken liver, wild boar, and more conventional meats and cuts, but nevertheless good quality! A good fishmonger would be a benefit as well.



MAREMMA GROSSETANA

Maremma is a western coastal area of central Italy. Mainly occupying the region of Tuscany, boarding, and overlapping, Northern Lazio.

The heart is the so-called Maremma Grossetana, in the province of Grosseto. When it extends north it becomes Maremma Livornese, when south Maremma Laziale.

We will explore the heart.

In ancient times, the illuminated Etrurian lived this land and kept its marshy territories under control with advanced hydraulic systems. They also made them florid and outstanding for diverse cultivations, including their favorite: vineyards.

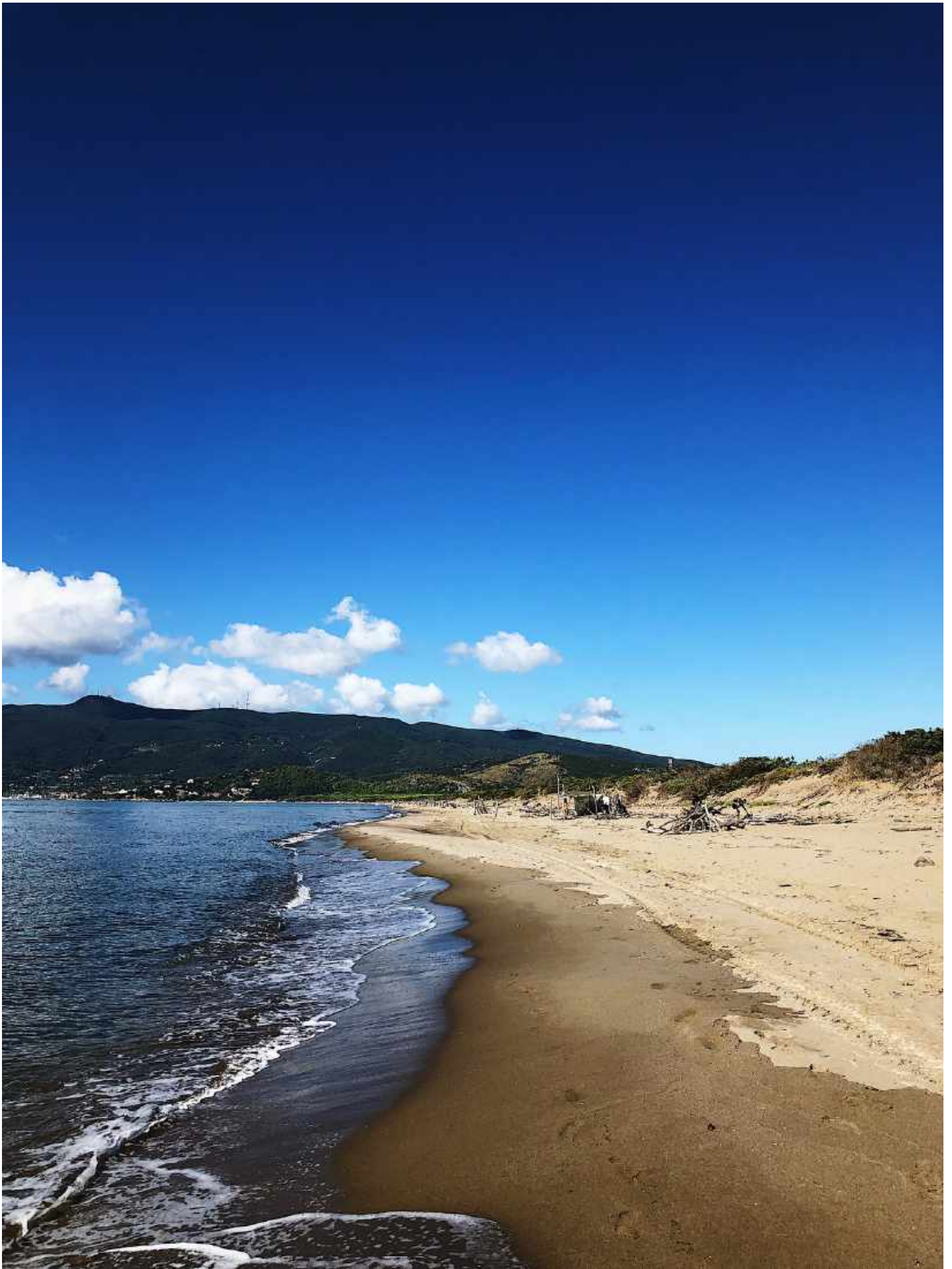
When the Roman Empire took over, all those innovations, upkeep, and technology were dispersed, and the brutal - although today it is studied and protected - swampy conditions permitted to dominate the area.

"Maremma maiala" (pig), "Maremma ladra" (theft), "Maremma bucaiola" (untranslatable from Tuscan dialect, but imagine something very offensive), are all imprecations still in use nowadays. The name Maremma, which came from the Latin word "Maritima", maritime, was associated with unhealthy living conditions, extremely harsh weather, and in sum, a place to die or in the best scenario, fall ill. Malaria, literally bad air, was its curse. Both for men

and animals. But necessity pushed transhumance down to these desolated but public and with milder winter pastures. From every corner in Tuscany - and Emilia Romagna, Veneto, and other regions - shepherds and herds advanced to the fields during the winter and hastily left before the summer season attempted to take their lives. Often, and always because of necessity, leaving behind a wife, children, and a community. A local saying assures that a real Maremman has a father from Veneto and a mother from Grosseto. The few locals or the left-behind also escaped the malarial season, sheltering in perched towns like Sorano and Pitigliano, where the chances of surviving increased. The abandoned territory became the land of no one, or better, the land of brigands. The situation worsened when the Republic of Siena took control of Maremma, in the thirteenth century, and extracted a price over the use of pasturelands.

The first signs of recovery appeared when Leopoldo D'Asburgo Lorena, Grand Duchy of Tuscan, initiated a majestic work of drainage in the late 1800s.

Even if slowly and having to wait for further intervention during the fascist regimen, Maremma reawakened from its centuries-long

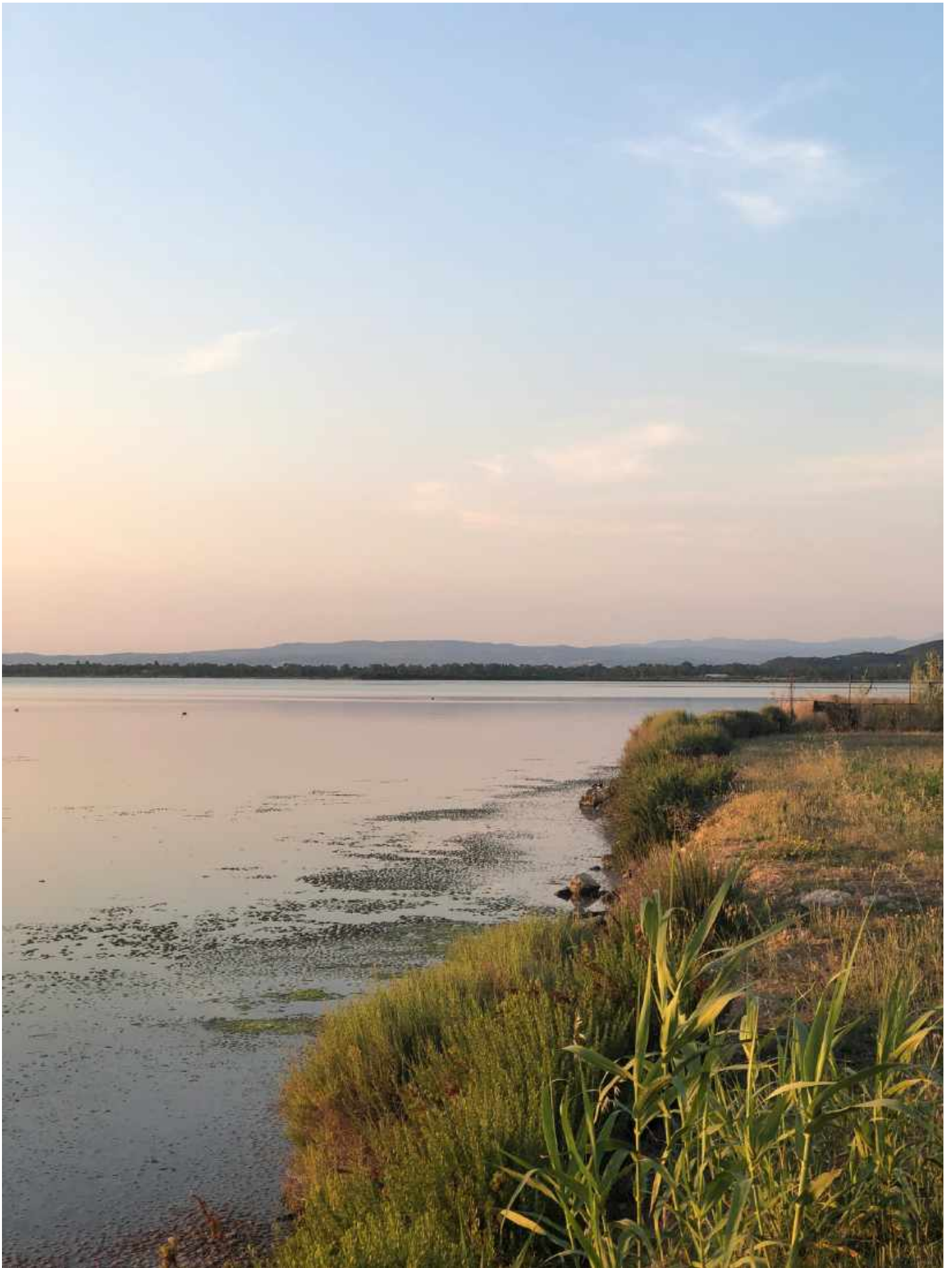


numbness.

Nowadays, the cursed past has been relegated to folklore. Maremma seems to have fulfilled the flamboyant destiny Etrurians bore for it.

Money circulates copiously. Winemakers sell great and expensive bottles to Italians, Germans, and English. Local cultivations supply the nearby regions and even abroad. Deserted Julys and Augusts are a mirage. Finding an empty spot on any of the equipped beaches is a forlorn hope. Booking a restaurant a week in advance is mandatory, not only for those on the sand, but also for the ones you must climb steep slopes to reach. A week in Maremma is a goal for many. A daydream for Italophiles and lovers of good food, good wine, and undomesticated nature!

Follow me into the dream.



GROSSETO

There's a statue in Grosseto's main piazza, Piazza Dante. A vigorous man is dressed in a toga. His beard is unrealistically curvy and perfectly frames his face. The hairstyle reminds of Ancient Rome but has something modern in contrast, like it was blow-dried and styled with gel or something of the kind. His features are modern too. Remove the - sincerely funny - beard, and he'd look more like any young man of this modern time than a Hellenistic philosopher or a Roman emperor. Even the arms and the pose appear contemporary.

At his feet, there's a woman. He holds her by the arm. In her, the past and the present coexist as well. She holds a dying baby.

On the man's other side, a toddler looks up at him; he is healthy and serene. At their feet, there's a snake, squashed by the man's mighty, fleur de lis-sандаled foot and clawed by a griffin.

The woman and the dying child represent the lands of Maremma destroyed by malaria. The serpent is the illness, the toddler a brighter future, and the griffin is the symbol of the city of Grosseto.

The man is Leopoldo D'Asburgo Lorena, Grand Duke of Tuscany since 1761 and promoter of a thirty-year-long process of reclamation of what he called an "ill daughter in need of rescue".

To him and his most close collaborator, the engineer Alessandro Manetti, Maremma owes four hundred kilometers of streets, one hundred and twenty-six bridges, innumerable drainage canals, sixty-one pharmacies, and one hundred doctors. It owes them life.

Leopoldo experienced exile at a very young age, following his parents in Vienna and then Salzburg. Soon he expressed a strong interest in humanistic, literature, and philosophy. He even published an edition of Lorenzo il Magnifico's poems, for which he was admitted to the prestigious Accademia Della Crusca. The world's oldest linguistic academy.

He was also a great traveler and observer. When, at only eighteen, he assumed the role of Grand Duke of Tuscany, his first accomplishment was to travel and visit the whole territory. Falling forever in love.

His mild and tolerant character was very appreciated by Tuscans. His government was the most tolerant of the Italian states. Freedom of print was granted even when it nicknamed him "Broncio", pout, because of his slightly protruding lower lip or "Canapone" referring to his faded blond hair. "Canapa" is the Italian word for hemp.

Even when the intellectuals Niccolò Tommaseo and Giuseppe Giusti dedicated a satire to him.



"Il re Travicello" made fun of a feckless ruler. Dumbbell, wishy-washy, and lightweight were some of the teasing attributes in the rhymes. Although this time Broncio was up to his nickname, at least for a while, he then reacted by gracefully smiling and letting it slide away.

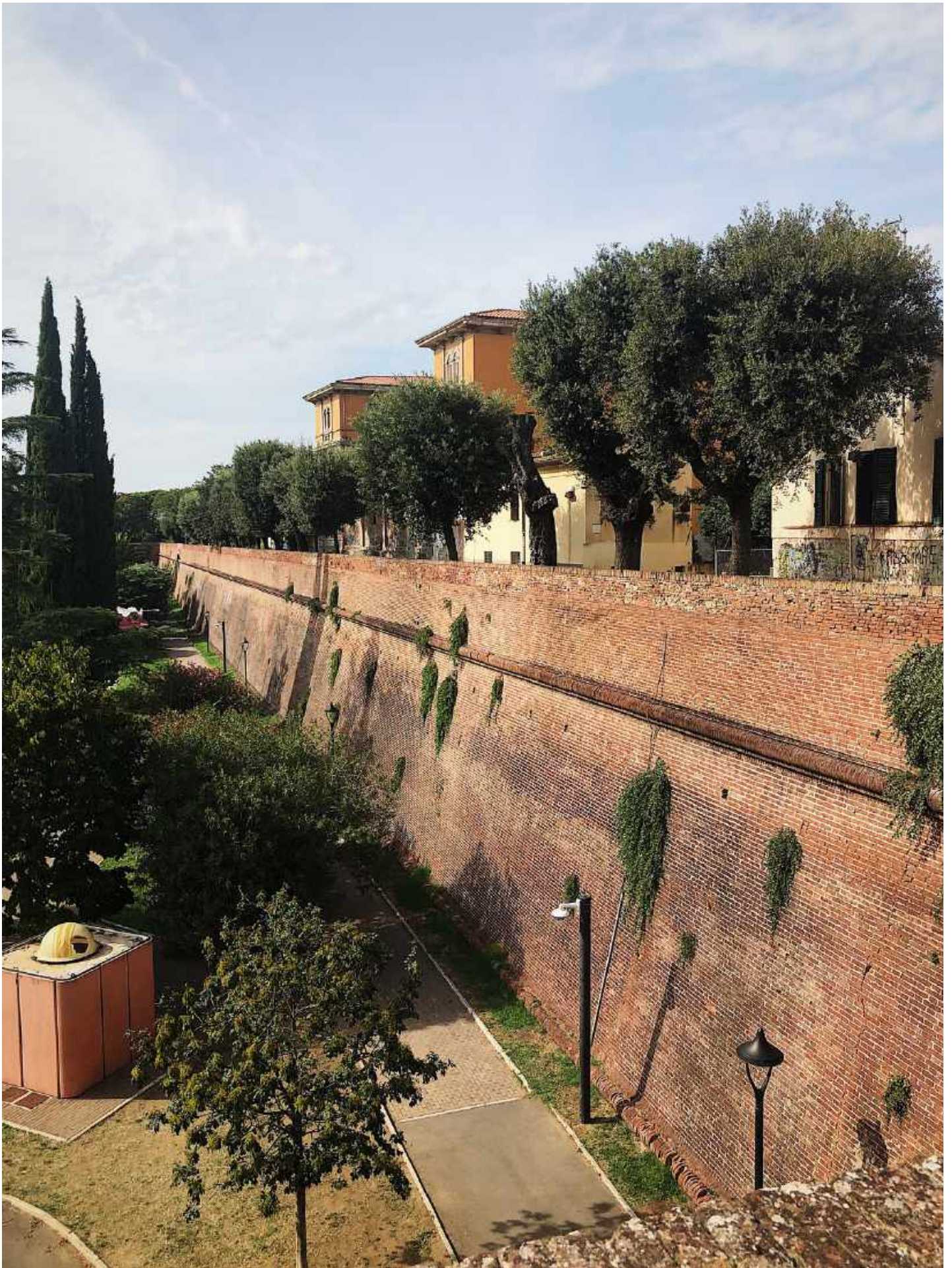
Only once, and under the pressure of the Austrian, his government had to suppress the antirevolutionary magazine "L'Antologia" by Giovan Pietro Vieusseux, which had published an article criticizing the country's politics. But no civil or criminal results were charged to the founder.

The "prince philosopher," as he was also called, aimed to raise the condition of his land and his people. He was undoubtedly influenced by scholars and writers of his time. Many exponents of the Italian culture had found asylum in Canapone's Tuscany: Giacomo Leopardi, Alessandro Manzoni, Guglielmo Pepe, and the same Niccolò Tommaseo. Following the thesis of his contemporary Cesare Beccaria, Leopoldo abolished the death penalty and torture, describing them as unusual and barbarian. It was the first state in the world to do so. His intervention was one of the early signs of Italy's Illuminism.

Canapone believed in economic liberalism, free speech, and experimenting with reforms. But

gradually, first applying them to small territories and expanding them subsequently. One of these experimentations was the "allievazioni": the fractioning of latifundia and redistribution of the land to those willing to work it.

His labor, perseverance, and good nature gave birth to the lively and happy child of the statue: what historians call Maremma's Risorgimento. If it wasn't for him, who knows if we would have, today, the fortunate and wealthy land that welcomes us with sunny winters, sweet falls, and breezy summers.



MANCIANO

When we arrived in Manciano, our bellies were grumbling. It was definitely time for lunch. As usual, we hadn't consulted the web for a good restaurant, neither had we asked around before driving towards our destination. Luca was worried - he always is when he's hungry and/or doesn't have a plan -, I was confident. The best places we've eaten in were found at the very last moment, once in the area, by looking or asking around. The worst too, but I tend to look at the glass as half-full. Of wine, when in Maremma.

We began to climb the uphill main street, Luca growling and me doubting my good luck.

We passed by an old man, but he didn't have a friendly face. So, I let him go. Then we crossed a young man with glasses, puffy cheeks, and a genuine smiling expression. I have this conviction I can tell my kind of people by a glance. Well, this was easy.

I stopped him, ignoring Luca's dubious expression, and asked which were the best places to eat in Manciano. He named a few.

I added my secret formula: "Where do you go when you want to eat real food?"

"There!".

We turned our heads and scrutinized the restaurant entrance behind us. The first we had seen when stepping out of the car but thought

it was too easy: Da Paolino. An authentic trattoria. Wood everywhere, a tiny window, paintings of cypresses, and lots of memorabilia. Those places you instinctively know you'll be offered real, delicious food. And so, it went. Goose breast carpaccio and tuscan crostini. Wild boar pappadelle and, my absolute favorite, Guanciale, leek and pecorino Pici. The beautiful and lively owner Sabrina gave me - and you - the recipe!

The real challenge came after lunch when instead of a quite indispensable digestive-aiding Pisolino (nap), we continued climbing the town.

At the end of August, Manciano celebrates the "Palio Delle Botti", the barrels race. One or two couples from each district roll down barrels colored with their distinctive colors and filled with water. The first, or perhaps more appropriately said, those who don't smash the barrel or themselves against the walls win.

Since 2015, there's also a parallel contest for the best-painted barrel by local artists. If you miss the race, you can admire the painted barrels showcased at a shortly after-held celebration: La Festa Delle Cantine, the feast of the cellars, in mid-September. When every wine cellar offers tastings of their wines -



imagine the tipsy, colorful, and happy context - and there's a suggestive torchlight procession, on horseback and oxcarts, with participants traditionally dressed as Butteri, Maremma's cowboys, and the godmothers in the districts' colors.

While climbing, all I could think was, if I let go, I'd rolled down like a barrel. Without winning any prize.

Luckily these places are full of exciting spots and details that make you wonder and forget the physical fatigue.

Like the stemma of this or that district. District? This tiny town is furtherly divided? Or a Florentine emblem.

A ribbon tied to a doorknob - the colors of the district?

A classic fountain with ugly dolphins. I'm sorry, I don't like the classical representation; they're so much cuter than that!

A marble plaque with a phrase I've read many times and finally found the author: "Ti amo Maremma fin dove al mar ti sposi e ti vesti di tramonti".

"I love you, Maremma, as far as you marry the sea and you dress with sunsets" are verses by the Sienese painter Bruno Vannucci.

And then, old mailboxes, walls painted with the Virgin Mary or climbing plants... the magic of

these small towns: the unexpected, the care for details, the pride to keep your place tidy, clean, and adorned.

Or maybe there's another kind of magic going on.

Many little towns in Italy are said to be somehow linked, if not inhabited, by witches. Historically, this happened because witchcraft survived longer inland and in the isolated countryside, far away from catholic institutions and formal welfare. In places where midwives and herbalists were very much needed.

Culturally, it happened because we needed explanations to the unknown and to add a hint of mystery and sensationalism to our everyday lives.

Manciano isn't exempted. When you reach the top of the hill and you view the whole of Maremma; when you can see, three hundred sixty, everything happening and anything moving, you understand why they say: "Manciano delle streghe, dove si va si vede". Manciano of the witches, where you go, you see.



EATING IN MAREMMA

Maremma is the wilder side of Tuscany. And probably even the poorer, at least in the past. Many ingredients have fallen out of favor but are still vivid in the memory of the elder. Turtle might have been used to make broth or a soup and a porcupine stewed with tomatoes.

"Musciame" was the dolphin meat near the spine. It was rinsed with the water of the sea and dried for months. Then thinly sliced and served with a drizzle of olive oil and a few grinds of black pepper.

Of the traditions that survived, many have to do with soups or stews poured over stale bread that would never, ever be thrown away. Be it beef, wild game, or fish, the ingredients were tossed in a clay pot and simmered. Longly and on the lowest heat because it wasn't the finest cuts or the most delicate fishes ending in the saucepan. Scraps and the unsold needed to be refined with the help of other ingredients gathered in the countryside: herbs, onions, garlic, and vegetables. An egg from the henhouse and wine from the barrel.

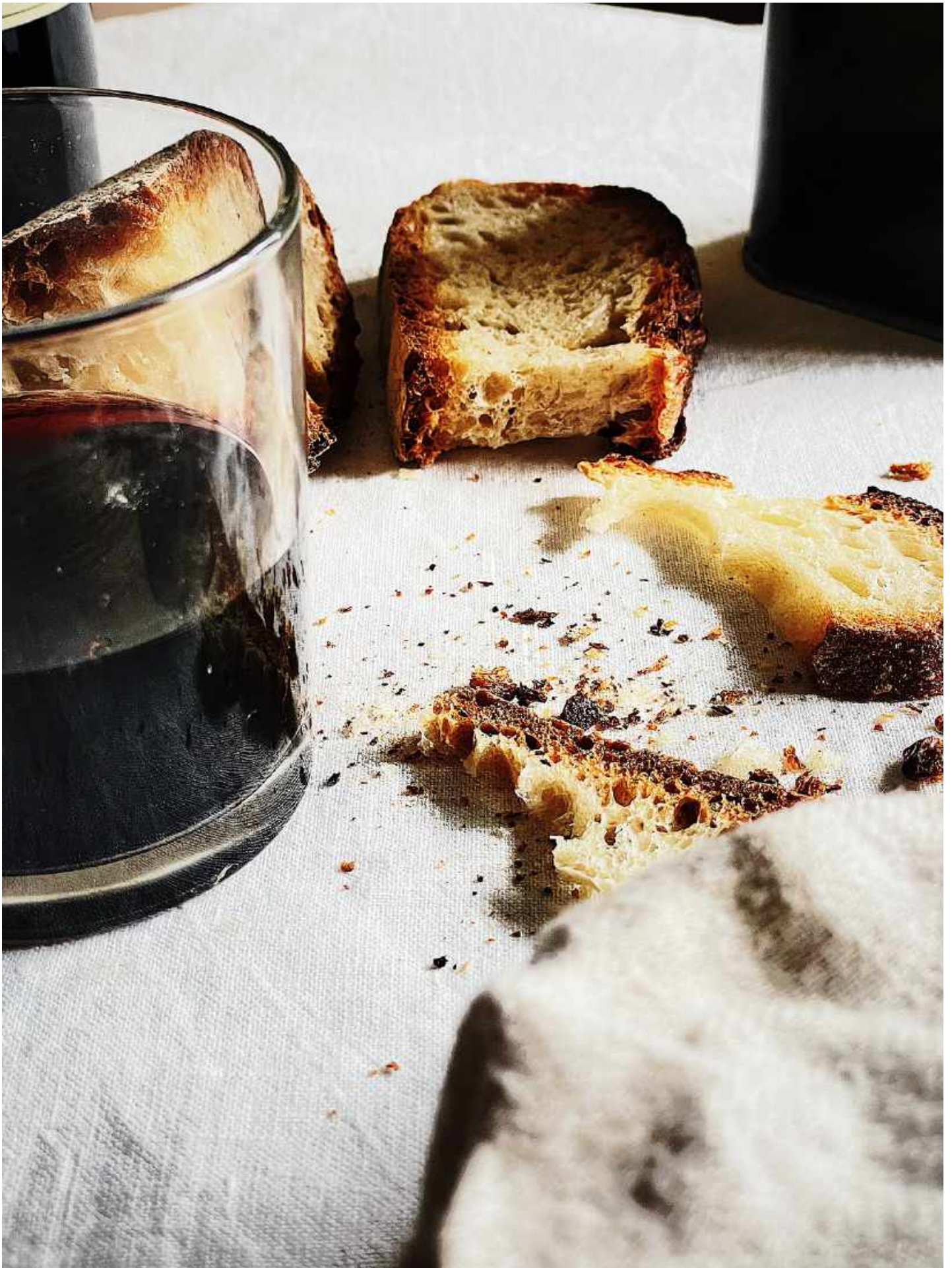
Spices, sugar, and honey converged into the recipes for the special occasions. Christmas in the first place, but also Sukkot and the New Year. As a significant Jewish community has enriched, for centuries, the local cuisine.

I've left a few dishes outside this collection.

The territorial specificity was too strong and, well, a pity to force it into something else. We will have to drive - or fly - to Maremma, sit at a table, and experience them in situ. But I'm sure none of us will complain.

In the tuff area, where Sorano, Sovana, and Pitigliano lazily rest, we will try the Cialdino Dei Tufi, a thin wafer flavored with anise and white wine. The Bollo, a sweet bread anise flavored as well. Or the Frittelle Di San Giuseppe, sweet rice and raisin fritters offered in the main Piazza on March 19th for the Torciata Di San Giuseppe. Forty hooded men walk through the Via Cava Del Gradone, taking with them bundles of wood and rods. Upon their arrival, they fire up a meters-tall straw puppet called "Invernacciu" representing the winter. To celebrate the end of winter and the return of spring, the same men dance tribal steps around the giant falò. People take home the dead fire's ashes to ensure prosperous harvesting and good luck. And the remaining fritters, of course!

In the Argentario promontory, we will have a passeggiata in Porto Santo Stefano snacking on pizza by the slice with anchovies and onion. Then with Stinchi Di Morto (dead shanks): tough meringues with walnuts. On the other side of the mountain, we will order a fried



Ficamaschia, a local, very intense bluefish. Or, if by any chance we visit during the winter, we will enjoy a soup of Femminelle, Orbetello's lagoon's crabs. On the Giglio island, we will be offered Pesce in Scaveccio, fried fish soaked in vinegar, rosemary, and raisins. Dozens of Acquacotta, the Tuscan bread soup, recipes will be waiting for us in each perched town, restaurant, or family-run trattoria. And many boar and other wild game dishes too. Months of food trotting through the Sagre, the food festivals this region is famous for, would be barely enough. But that's the good part: there's no end to the gastronomic adventures waiting for us in Maremma, in Italy, in the world!



PICI PORRO, GUANCIALE E PECORINO

Grazie Sabrina!



Ingredients for two:

160 gr (5.6 oz) of spaghetti or other long dried pasta

50 gr (1.8 oz or about a thick slice) of Guanciale or pancetta

2 tablespoons of grated pecorino cheese

4-6 tablespoons of leek - coarsely chopped

Bring a big pot of salted water to a boil - about two liters (half a gallon) and one tablespoon of salt.

Dice or julienne the Guanciale. Place it in a medium pan and sauté it over medium heat, until crunchy, about five minutes.

Toss the pasta into the boiling water and set the timer.

Remove the Guanciale using thongs - leave the fat - and add the leek. Cook it, mixing it every now and then, for about five minutes.

Transfer the leek to a blender, add four tablespoons of the pasta cooking water, and pulse until creamy.

Drain the pasta but save a quarter/half a cup of the cooking water.

Transfer the pasta to the pan; add the leek cream, the grated pecorino, and a quarter cup of the cooking water. Mix well, turn the heat to high, and sauté the pasta until you get a creamy film that covers the pasta. If needed, add the remaining water.

Add the Guanciale, mix well, and serve your pasta hot, sprinkled with more grated pecorino if you please.



CIAFFAGNONI

Here I am, one more time, timidly reminding you that many - many, many, many! - French dishes have Italian roots. When Caterina De Medici, in 1533, relocated to France, she brought her copious entourage, which, being her a great gourmand, included chefs, recipes, and ingredients. In Manciano, for Carnival, housewives and cooks of the great families used to make Ciaffagnoni: thin fritters of a mixture of flour, water, and eggs. Traditionally served with pecorino cheese or lard, later with sweet jams or spreads, but also with tomato sauce and ricotta, or meat ragù and bechamel.

Before putting on your apron, let me remind you of a few fundamentals to get great crepes. First, brush the pan - possibly nonstick - with olive oil; it works better than butter. If you sift the flour, you'll get smoother crepes. Always let the mixture rest for at least thirty minutes. Flip the crepes on the other side when the edges begin to curl up. Finally, if you want to make them ahead of time, place the Ciaffagnoni on a plate, separated by a piece of plastic film, cover them with a second plate and refrigerate for a couple of days or freeze up to a couple of weeks.

Ingredients for four crepes:

1 egg

40 gr (1.4 oz or 1/4 cup + 1/2 teaspoon) of 00 flour

75 ml (2.5 fl oz or 1/4 cup + 1 tablespoon + 1 teaspoon of room temperature water)

a pinch of salt

1 teaspoon of extra virgin olive oil

4 tablespoons of grated pecorino cheese

Beat the egg, flour, water, and a pinch of salt until completely amalgamated. Cover the bowl and let sit for about thirty minutes.

Pour the olive oil into a small pan and brush it to grease the bottom. Heat over medium/low heat for a couple of minutes. Pour in one-fourth of the batter - about half a regular ladle - and rotate the pan for it to spread evenly. Cook each side for one to two minutes. This depends on the size and heat: approximately, when you see the sides coming off, it is time to flip the crepe on the other side.

After cooking them all, but still hot, sprinkle each with a tablespoon of pecorino cheese and fold it in four. Serve hot and enjoy the cheesy melt!



SORANO

We arrived in Sorano on a cloudy day and were welcomed by thick vegetation and tuff, giving the perched town a surreal look. It was early September and midweek, so we met just a few other wandering visitors, contributing to the out-of-this-world atmosphere. It was like an aura enclosed the town and kept it in another temporal dimension.

The Orsini fortress was the first to greet us; the decadent tuff walls and an arcade led us down some rocky stairs. We had to stop every few steps to see the panorama and rebalance our descending efforts. Dark green and tufaceous marks and a maze of tiny aisles were swallowing us down and downer. Every now and then, evidence of a rockslide contributed to a general state of instability. But it was a state that also gave us a thrill, pushing us to proceed. To find out more, instead of cautiously abandoning a fate that might put us into trouble. Maybe taking the car, going somewhere else, and coming back with a guided tour was a better idea. But we didn't have the time to consider the option - and I'm quite sure it would remain a pending suggestion. In all its majesty, it appeared to us: an inviting opportunity to resurface from the down going. The Masso Leopoldino - the place where the local population sought shelter when intruders

poured out their fury on them, materialized to offer us, modern pilgrims, a bit of respite. How can a place contain such contrasting emotions? The terror of those menaced by Sienese soldiers and the awe of those who come today and, if left alone, would genuflect in submission to the beauty and magnificence of mother nature.

A few minutes later, it was time to go down again. Again, my enthusiasm had to cope with that other sensation. Descending felt like being led somewhere mysterious. Like commencing a journey without knowing your destination or even the reason why you embarked.

But there's a sensation that is always prevalent when roaming around Tuscany. It saves you from your rabbit holes, from any never-ending introvert trip. It brings you back from wherever the sceneries, stories, and legends might have taken you. Slamming in your face the simple truth: after all, you are but a body, and you have straight animal necessities. Sooner or later, your instincts will take you, no matter the meanness, to a place where you can get fed. Home for locals, a restaurant for visitors.

We followed our intuitions and landed on a terrace facing the tuff cliff. Traditional well-



done cuisine and an astonishing view; when a site has this combo, it can sedate any torment. Crostini with lard, olive, bell pepper, and chicken liver patè, the local black beans superbly cooked, Tortelli Maremmani with beef ragu and Tortelli di Sorano did the job. Assisted by a "quartino" (quarter liter) of the house wine. All crowned by an apple pie with Crema Pasticcera on the side.

And still, between a bite and the other, a silent force constantly drew my sight to the cliff walls. What were those tiny holes I saw? Amidst the exchange of recipes and compliments to the chef, I asked the waiter/owner about them. "Those are the Colombaie: artificial grottos. Excavated in the tuff by Etrurians, inhabited in the Middle Ages, and shelter for the Partigiani during the war."

My discovery of Sorano's underworld began. Colombaie is the name given by Ancient Romans that used them as dovecotes - Colomba is the Italian word for doves. But their origins are earlier and a bit more mysterious. Etrurians for sure, maybe Villanovan, thus even before the first century BC. Each cubic room has walls completely pitted, like wasp nets. Hence the hypothesis that their function was funerary: ashes stored in every pit. But the residing option is too strong to be ignored. In a time

when menaces were a constant, the impregnability and the surrounding natural resources would be reason enough.

And, there's more: the Vie Cave.

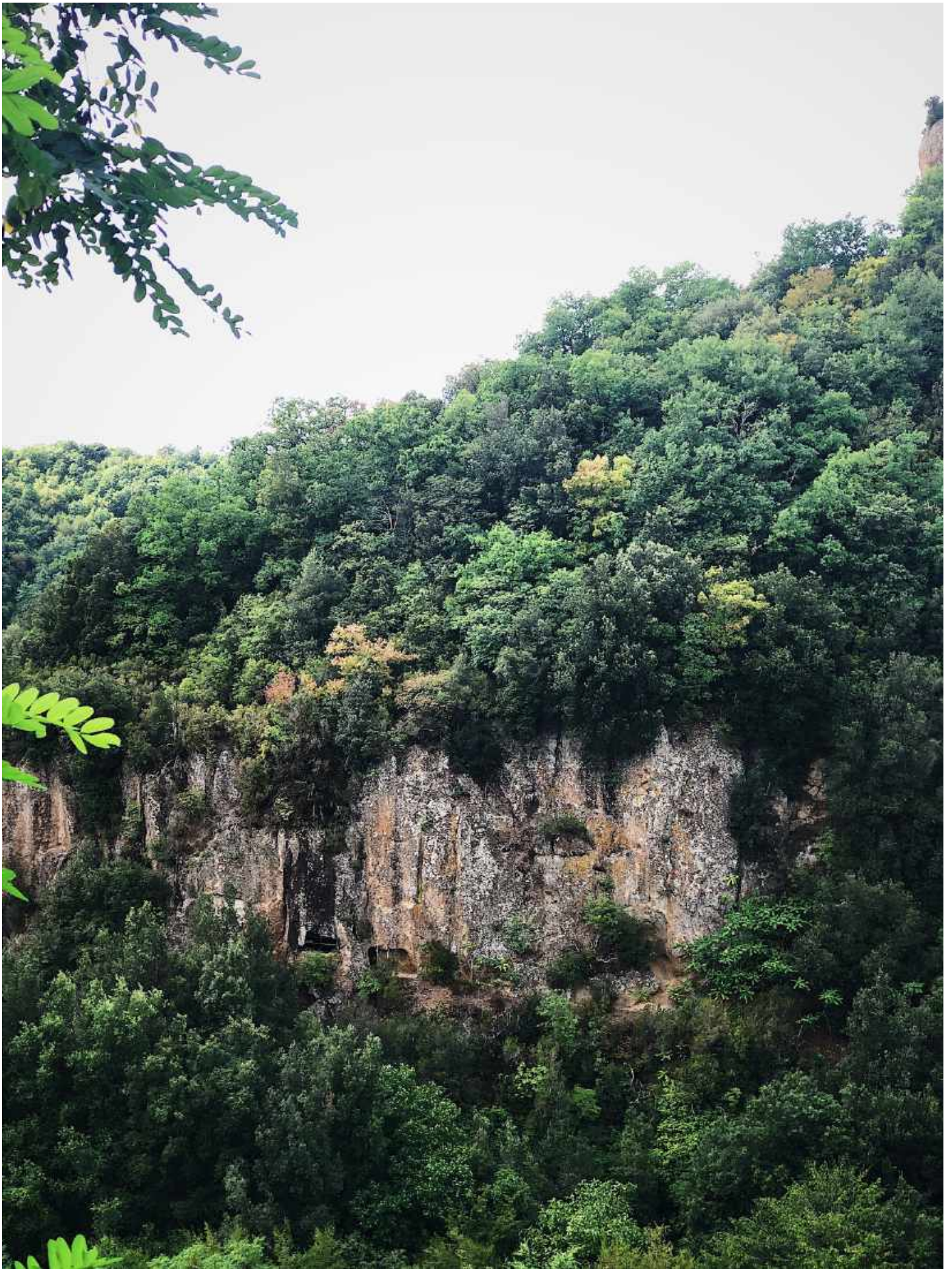
Sorano, together with the near Sovana and Pitigliano, forms the so-called Area Del Tufo, the tuff area. One of the greatest attractions is the Vie Cave, roads excavated in the tuff, large from two to four meters, long up to a kilometer, and walled by up to twenty-five-meter vertical cliffs. There are many hypotheses to their origins. They could be, simply, connecting roads. They could have a defensive function. They could also be for water runoff.

Or they could have had a sacred role in rituals that took the initiates on a journey to the underworld and towards Illumination. According to Etrurians, many divinities dwelled in the underworld, holy and impregnated with magic and supernatural energies. Indeed, the name of Sorano derives from the Etrurian god Suri (or Soranus), the divinity of the underground, mounts, and wolves. The priests of the cult, the Wolves of Soranus, dressed in the sacred animal skins. Only a few were admitted to this strong and close brotherhood devoted to war and robberies. During the winter solstice, they



faced a very challenging rite: walking - or better, ritual dancing - on coals. They carried from one side to the other goat innards that they then deposited on the god's altar. Remember that the divinatory art through innards was all Etrurian, later incorporated by Romans. They repeated the passage three times. But historians say they might have rubbed a numbing drug on their soles. The coil represented the dark side of the sun, the one that burns and dries. Even so, this god was not only worshipped by the Etrurians but later adopted by the ancient Romans with the name of Black Apollo, the obscure side of the divinity. The priests that dressed as wolves were also said to have the capacity to transform into these animals. While learning this, another folkloristic aspect of Maremma came to my mind: werewolves. Until not even a few decades ago, stories ran about these semi-human creatures that, on full-moon nights, disrupted the peace of the night, reveling around pits, springs, and wash houses. It was uncertain if their transformation was voluntary or not. But for a fact, they couldn't climb further than the third step. For those confident it was an illness, there was only one way to cure them: prick them with a needle and let a drop of blood spill out. The trickier part was the creature mustn't

recognize you, or he would've hated you forever.



FAGIOLI NERI DI SORANO

As mentioned, after the visit of Sorano, our appetites began to roar. We had no reservations, as we rarely do when on a road trip. The fact of having a car is kind of reassuring. But at the same time, it often means missing opportunities because good restaurants are usually fully booked. Still, I don't mind giving fate a little trust and accepting what it brings. That day in Sorano, the blinded goddess was on our side. We found a restaurant and diligently waited in the queue. Praying for a good table, counting how many people were waiting with us, how many tables there were, and how many parties were almost ending their meal. I had eyed a tiny, empty corner of the terrace and told my husband we could suggest placing a table for us there. But he, who is very respectful of procedures, people, and cosmic order, replied with a doubtful face. I was in love with the corner: it was perfect, facing the green-covered tuff rocks, secluded, out of the way but not of the sight of waiters. Sometimes the seating is as important as the food. Occasionally, it is cold comfort, the cherry on top when you're lucky.

Everything was delicious, but what I enjoyed the most - and begged for the recipe - was a side dish: the black beans of Sorano. They're black beans, only smaller and tenderer. Uncomplicated to cook, simply done with the perfect aromatic bouquet.

Grazie Hostaria Del Borgo!



Ingredients for two:

160 gr (5.6 oz) of black beans, from Sorano if you can find them

1 white or red onion

1 garlic clove

2 bay leaves

2 sage leaves

extra virgin olive oil

a teabag



Place the beans in a bowl and cover them with three times their weight in water. Peel and cut in two the onion. Peel the garlic and place it inside the tea bag together with the sage, bay leaves, and half the onion. Add it to the beans bowl, cover and let rest overnight.

Transfer the beans, their soaking water, and the spice bag to a medium pot. Bring to a boil and simmer, covered and at the lowest heat, for about an hour and a half. The water should be enough, but check it now and then, and add, eventually, hot-tap water to terminate the cooking.

Once the beans are perfectly cooked and fork-tender, add a teaspoon or two of salt, according to your taste, and mix well.

Finely chop the remaining onion. Heat a couple of tablespoons of olive oil in a large pan and sauté the onion until translucent, about five minutes. Add the beans - careful with splatters - mix well, and sauté five minutes more.

Serve the beans hot.



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