

UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN

Experience the enduring allure of Tuscany with three hotels offering varying perspectives on the Italian region, but with one thing in common—a quest to provide a culinary experience like no other



COMO CASTELLO DEL NERO CHIANTI, TUSCANY

There are places to which one yearns to return even after a single visit—or sometimes even when you're still there. For Christina Ong, the founder of Como Hotels & Resorts, the historic Castello Del Nero must have left such an indelible impression (she stayed at the elegant Terrace Suite a few years back) that when the opportunity of acquiring it came about, she decided to make it part of her growing hospitality empire as the group's first hotel in continental Europe.

It's easy to understand why once you see the 12th-century castle with your own eyes. Weaving through the charming small town of Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, you're greeted by a stately entrance and symmetrical Italianate gardens that have been carefully tended to throughout the generations. The structured greenery frames the majestic architecture of both the towering castle and a church, a place that comes with nine centuries of rich Tuscan history.

Castello Del Nero was first built by the prominent Del Nero family (hence the name) and was passed to another local family, the Torrigianis, in 1825. The structure and the grounds retain an aristocratic air, and its significance requires that restoration works be accredited by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities. In this incarnation, Como commissioned acclaimed Italian designer Paola Navone to reimagine the space, and she channelled her pared-back aesthetic in clever ways. The terracotta floors, original frescos and wooden touches remain, but she injected a fresher palette—whites, greys, light blues

and muted greens dominate—that results in a more contemporary appeal.

At first glance, one doesn't immediately see the expanse of the hotel's 740-acre estate, but once inside, you'll see that the architecture intently capitalises on the view. The terraces, restaurants and glistening pool all overlook the extensive estate, but apart from having a beautiful view, it also shapes the direction of all the dining venues. Its "estate to table" philosophy guides the culinary programme here, be it a casual summer salad at the Pavilion or an indulgent tasting meal at La Torre, a Michelin-starred restaurant by executive chef Giovanni Luca Di Pirro.

There's plenty of relaxed seating to take in the rolling green hills and vineyards, but should you want to get a closer look, the hotel also arranges free guided walking tours. This is but one way you'll be getting exercise; there's also yoga, meditation and more, which shouldn't come as a surprise, as wellness is a central tenet of the Como brand. While the spa has always been a draw of this property long before it was taken over by Como, it will even be more so, being positioned as the first Como Shambhala retreat in Europe. With eating well and being well on the agenda, leaving will be the only difficult thing.

Como Castello Del Nero, Strada Spicciano 7, 50028 Barberino Tavarnelle, Tuscany, Italy; comohotels.com/en/castellodelnero

TATLER TIP: Located a short drive from Siena and Florence, the hotel is well-placed to discover these beautiful Renaissance cities; a complimentary shuttle is even provided.



WORDS: KISSA CASTAÑEDA (BORGO SANTO PIETRO AND COMO CASTELLO DEL NERO) AND CHARMAINE MOK (CASTELLO DI AMIA); IMAGES: COURTESY OF RESPECTIVE HOTELS



REGAL RETREAT

(Opposite page) Soak in the sun and take in the unparalleled view from the hotel pool; (This page, top to bottom): Vaulted ceilings and terracotta floors were kept by designer Paola Navone, but subtle changes imbue La Torre restaurant with a spartan yet cool atmosphere; Chef Di Pirro champions inventive takes on Italian cuisine using locally sourced produce; the castle's 18th century frescos are a highlight of the hotel's Heritage Suites



CASTELLO DI AMA CHIANTI, TUSCANY

Walking the sun-dappled paths through this 12th-century hamlet, taking in the sway of the apricot trees and discovering the incredible artworks dispersed throughout the historic property is an experience that's only seconded by the discovery of the precious wines of this tiny powerhouse of a producer. Welcome to Castello di Ama, one of Tuscany's most acclaimed winery-hotels. Best known for its luxurious approach to hospitality that combines the twin passions of second-generation owner Lorenza Sebastì, the property is as synonymous with forward-thinking art as much as it is respected for its quality Italian wines. As the second-generation owner of the winery, Sebastì runs a tight ship that isn't without lashings of that inimitable Italian sprezzatura; on the drive into the property, you're met with the tumbling bucolic vista that is the Chianti Classico region, resplendent with rich, lush vineyards whose vibrant emeralds vie for prominence among the endless blue skies.

Described as "a microcosm of wine, art and hospitality", Castello di Ama plays its part flawlessly by immersing guests into a world

of stories. Much of the magic comes from the historic set itself, where you might discover contemporary Japanese art in a meditative chapel or sample a glass of Chianti Classico on the terrace surrounded by distant birdsong. Sebastì has ensured that all of the art on the property has carved out its own home for life, rather than being supplanted temporarily into its surroundings. From the Bella Vista suite, located on the first floor of the Villa Ricucci building, you'll be able to see the majestic mirrored wall by French conceptual artist Daniel Buren reflecting the beauty of the San Lorenzo vineyards from your double-arched window; deep underground, within the ageing chambers, the harsh red neon of *Revolution/Love* by South African artist Kendell Geers casts a powerful glow over the barrels of wine. While you could meander the grounds and allow serendipity to take over in the discovery of these immersive art pieces, the property also arranges tours and tastings for guests to savour the fuller context of the initiative.

Every guest is welcomed as though they are familia, and nowhere is that recognisable Italian hospitality more apparent than over a meal at Il Ristoro, which serves the rustic flavours of the region through a contemporary filter. It is here that you must try the iconic panzanella, the beloved Tuscan chopped salad that somehow transforms stale bread, ripe tomatoes and onions into an explosion



of tantalising flavour and texture, best washed down with a glass from the Castello di Ama vineyards—we recommend the 2011 Haiku, a truly poetic blend of 50 per cent sangiovese, 25 per cent cabernet franc and 25 per cent merlot. *Castello di Ama, Località Ama, 55, 53013 Gaiole In Chianti SI, Italy; castellodiama.com*

TATLER TIP: Apart from making excellent wines, Castello di Ama also produces its own premium extra-virgin olive oil, using hand-picked olives that are pressed the same day at its on-site mills. Made in extremely small quantities, it's a priceless souvenir for bringing back some of the flavour of Tuscany.



ARTISTIC FERVOUR

(Opposite, clockwise from top): A birds-eye view of the well-loved winery-hotel; meals at Castello di Ama come with plenty of wine; second generation owner, Lorenza Sebastì. (This page, from top): Modern art by Kendell Geers mingle with wine at the cellar; dining here is a casual affair, with guests being welcomed like family; installation art are woven seamlessly into the property, including this intriguing work by Daniel Buren



BORGIO SANTO PIETRO PALAZZETTO, TUSCANY

Pure serendipity allowed for the creation of Borgo Santo Pietro, a captivating Tuscan retreat owned and operated by Claus and Jeanette Thottrup. The Danish couple fell in love with this parcel of land in Tuscany's Palazzetto, which was once a "healing stopover for medieval pilgrims"; it was also the last property they viewed in search of a holiday home. Instead of pushing through with their original plans, however, they decided to transform the 800-year-old farmhouse and its grounds into not only a hotel, but also a thriving creative community.

Claus was formerly in the property development industry, while Jeanette worked as a fashion designer, but that didn't stop these accidental hoteliers from creating one of the most thoughtful hotels we've ever encountered. If the saying "il dolce far niente" were a place, this intimate 20-room hotel would be it. The couple conceived Borgo Santo Pietro as a "sanctuary for modern souls"—and it's exactly what it says on the tin. One can spend languid days lounging at the natural rock pool, learn how to arrange flowers amidst the romantic gardens, or wander through the perfectly imperfect surrounds until you find a spot to park yourself and take it all in (our pick: the enchanting ecru linen daybeds). Wherever you go, you're trailed by the scent of lavender and the sound of chirping birds, which perfectly set the tone for sheer relaxation.

Along with the hotel, Borgo Santo Pietro also has a spa and a farm, all set on a 270-acre organically cultivated estate that keeps on growing in size and ambition. The estate features culinary and vegetable gardens, an artisan cheesemaking dairy, an apiary and animals including chickens and goats, and two vineyards (with plans to release the estate's own wine in a few years' time). The farm-to-plate philosophy heavily influences the group's operations, with the gardens supplying produce to all of its in-house restaurants—including



BUCOLIC TREASURE

(Opposite page): Every nook and cranny of this hotel is full of personality. (This page, from top): Perfectly imperfect gardens abound here, and the daybeds near the spa are just the place to laze away; the estate raises goats, chickens, bees and more; a creative plate from Meo Modo, the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant

its outpost in Florence, the Michelin-starred La Bottega Del Buon Caffè—and providing ingredients for Seed to Skin, a natural skincare line it recently launched.

From the driveway lined with cypress trees to the candles that dot the hotel come night-time, everything at Borgo Santo Pietro is imbued with polish, but never pretension. The same can be said for the food. The breakfast, served in the patina-filled main villa, features a spread with artisanal meat, cheese, jams and more. Lunch is best spent at Trattoria Sull'Albero, a casual Tuscan restaurant built around a large oak tree, where everything on the menu is delicious (especially the pizza). Of course, take advantage of being a resident and book dinner at its Michelin-starred restaurant, Meo Modo. Serving a modern take on Tuscan cuisine, the experience is exhilarating and proof of how much this place is a labour of love for the Thottrups. Isn't that just the kind of place worth discovering? **Borgo Santo Pietro, Località Palazzetto, 110, 53012 Palazzetto SI, Italy; borgosantopietro.com** 📍

TATLER TIP: Another way to experience the Borgo Santo Pietro lifestyle is aboard its stylish yacht, Satori. The 41.5-metre vessel proffers an appreciation for the old-school way of life, with undeniably vintage decor like dining chairs that are the same as those in Harry's Bar in Venice.

