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Rustic Italy: places to stay for food lovers

Alastair Sawday, of Sawday's guides, picks 15 places to stay where the food is as wonderful as the surroundings

Try talking to a group of Italian foodies about French food, and you quickly unearth enough tension to create an international incident. There is little love lost, which is strange and sad, for each country has vast culinary strengths, enough for the rest of us to stand in awe.

I am one of the lucky ones who has been to Terra Madre (terramadre.org), the giant Italian Slow Food festival in Turin, and can vouch for the astonishing vitality in the world of artisanal food. The Slow Food movement began in Italy and has been responsible for rescuing threatened foods – such as Ligurian honey and Dominici apples – and beaten the drum for local and small-scale production.

Slow Food apart, why is Italian food so special? I am no expert, but perhaps part of the secret is a genius for simplicity – for which French food is not known. A glass of friuli and a plate of pasta, in the right setting, can make the heart race. I have eaten such meals a hundred times in the courtyards, kitchens and gardens of Italian B&Bs and small hotels, and have rarely been disappointed. Or is it also Italy's genius for adding vitality to everyday experiences? A pasta that comes with both pesto and panache, as well as the inevitable pepper, has added appeal.

Pasta is rarely expensive – a brilliant device for feeding the poor at low cost, it is now good enough for the rich too. Cheeses, salamis, meats, olives – they can be expensive, I know, especially in the hands of experts. But used sparingly, with salads, fresh fruits and good wine, they add joy to a good Italian meal. In Casa Isabella (near Vaglio Serra, Piedmont), for example, you can settle into an idyll of homemade breads and pasta, with local wines. It is a delightful and simple place, a village farmhouse with glorious vineyard views. L'Orto di Lucania (Montescaglioso, in Basilicata) is another place where you can enjoy food grown on the spot and as honestly as is possible – organic too, the final arbiter of high quality. And what value!

L'Orto di Lucania, Montescaglioso, Basilicata

Rare red aubergines are a treat in store at this organic family farm. Fulvio Spada and his brother Beniamino grow produce using time-honoured methods and serve farm-fresh meals by the fire, or out among gnarled olive trees. Apartments have full kitchens, terrace doors and open fires. Opt for breakfast and it's a homemade, homegrown feast. Swim up an appetite in the large parasol-ringed pool, borrow a bike or arrange horse riding. This area of Basilicata, on the Puglian border, is an undiscovered delight with heaps to see and do.

- tinyurl.com/lortodilucania, apartments for two from €100 a night, dinner €25