

## New Florence festival

Florence will host a new three-day classical music festival from 31 August, featuring young talent. The New Generation Festival will be held in the gardens of the Palazzo Corsini al Prato.



PHOTOGRAPH: ERIC VAN DEN BRULLE/GETTY IMAGES

# Bringing back the bacon

Two powerful earthquakes laid waste to parts of central Italy last year, but producers in fabulously foodie south-east Umbria are winning back visitors with their culinary magic, says Liz Boulter

Would you like to meet the pigs?" said Giuseppe Fausti. It seemed a strange

idea, popping in on friends and relations of the animals that had just provided a wonderful lunch of chewy salami and differently flavoured summer and winter prosciuttos. But Giuseppe's must be among the planet's happiest pigs, and we were keen to see them doing their contented thing.

Until last year, jolly and welcoming Giuseppe and Ada Fausti could probably have been called the planet's happiest pig farmers: with very little hands-on work they produced lean, deeply flavoured pork prized even here in Norcia, south-east Umbria, a town that's synonymous with pork (literally: in central Italy, the word for butcher or salami shop is *norcineria*).

But last autumn was a terrible one for them and this 2,500-year-old Apennine town. In August, an earthquake centred on Amatrice, several miles to the south, destroyed much of the farm where the Faustis live with their children. And then on 30 October, a further quake severely damaged, among other things, Norcia's 13th-century basilica and the Faustis' shop, slaughterhouse and the warehouse where legs of quality pork mature into finest prosciutto.

Today the couple have done lots of rebuilding and are keen to have tourists back. Their most prized assets were not damaged in the quake - because the Faustis specialise in *maiale brado*, wild pig. Their livestock fend for themselves outdoors - rooting for food

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in 300 hectares of field and forest (well away from falling buildings). “All we do is butcher them - and make the ham and salami,” said Ada.

Giuseppe headed off up a rough meadow rattling a bucket and a group of sleek porkers emerged from the woods. “They keep cool by wallowing in the spring,” he said. Pigs with their own mineral spa - no wonder they taste good!

But vegetarians and pork-avoiders shouldn't dismiss Norcia. As if some foodie force-field is in operation, this area is known for all manner of culinary treats: truffles, cheeses, EU-protected lentils and saffron.

Just getting there feels magical. Where we entered the three-mile Forca di Cerro tunnel south of Assisi was quintessential Umbria: golden hillsides, olive groves, cypress trees. We emerged in a thickly wooded gorge under high mountains. It was cooler, birdsong drifted through the car windows, and mist hung over fortified villages high on the valley sides. This was the Valnerina, carved by the short but powerful Nera river, which rises

in the Sibillini mountains and empties into the Tiber 80 miles to the west.

Just past the tunnel, in Castel San Felice, the Balli family run an agriturismo in a 15th-century farmhouse, with cool en suite bedrooms in former cattle sheds. The wise and gentle Ballis have led the revival of saffron cultivation in Valnerina - it was huge here in medieval times. While preparing dinner, mum Rita showed us some of the labour-intensive process: sorting thousands of bulbs for hand-planting on individual mounds (so water runs away and fungus can't grow).

I'd always thought saffron overrated, but that's probably because of the rubbish stuff we're sold in the UK. I was converted when her daughter, Marta, opened a jar of their golden spice and a heady aroma filled the room. Our main course of Nera trout with saffron cream was delicate and pungent at the same time.

Next day we headed into Norcia. The basilica is at present covered in scaffolding, with the untouched statue of Saint Benedict gesturing at the damage from the middle of the square. But the equally old Palazzo Comunale next door can still be visited, and its tidily repaired main street feels like a porky Disneyland, with wild boars' heads outside shops selling prosciutto and sausages including “donkey testicles” and nobbly “grandpa's balls”.

Bangers go with mash in Britain, but a classic accompaniment is often lentils, and Norcia happens to be down the road from Castelluccio, home of what cooks including Jamie Oliver regard as the world's finest lentils.

Even without lentils, Castelluccio would quicken the, er, pulse: at 1,452 metres it is the highest village in the Apennines, on the side of a huge crater. Sadly the village was so badly damaged in the earthquake that it is still uninhabitable, but earlier this month the road was reopened briefly so lentil farmers could sow their crops. And the authorities have guaranteed that the road will be open to tourists by June.

This is important because Castelluccio's plain is magical in early summer, when millions of flowers turn the lentil fields into a carpet of red, blue, yellow and purple, and attract some 250,000 visitors every year.

To complete our gastro tour, we headed to a hillside near Norcia to meet Nicola. He's a licensed *cavatore* (truffle-hunter), but the hunting is actually done by his valued associates Lulu and Nina, cocker and Belgian spaniels respectively, who dig up truffles in the roots of oak, juniper and hazel trees.

Within five minutes Lulu ran up with something black held delicately in her jaws. Nicola took the treasure from her, rewarded her with a biscuit then inspected it. It was a good'un, solid, with a seductive woody smell. In the bag it went.

After an hour's glorious sunset walk we, or rather the tireless dogs, had a dozen truffles, from apple- to walnut-size, for Nicola to sell to restaurateurs.

Nicola made us a present of a medium truffle and that night we cooked some pasta perfectly al dente, then grated over our knobbly prize. It was the supper of a lifetime, subtly fungal, with notes of honey and spice.

The October quake was Italy's worst since 1980, and although no one died, up to 100,000 people were displaced or saw livelihoods ruined. But these are hardy resilient folk, determined to look forward, not back, and tourist euros will help them do just that.

▲ Umbria in bloom ... in early summer, millions of flowers turn Castelluccio's lentil fields red

## Way to go

The trip was provided by development agency Svilupumbria. Doubles at Agriturismo Zafferano e Dintorni from €65 B&B. The Faustis welcome visitors for tastings and 'meet the pigs', and offer an adopt-a-pig scheme (+39 333 417 8434, [maialebradodinnorcia.com](http://maialebradodinnorcia.com)). Truffle hunting costs €95pp for two (cheaper for larger groups) including transfers from Norcia and interpreter (book at [exavel.com](http://exavel.com))

