

In one of the most landlocked areas of Italy I'm eating some of the best seafood of my life. "That's because it's from the Mediterranean," says Emanuele Mazzella, who is the new chef at Eat, the poshest restaurant in Assisi. "I don't like Adriatic fish — it tastes totally different. The Mediterranean is more open, and I can taste it in the fish."

Mazzella is biased. The grandson of a fisherman, he grew up on Ischia, an island in the Bay of Naples. The dish in front of me is what his *nonna* used to make: hake boiled with olive oil, lemon and parsley. I taste cream, but there is none, he says — it's just the water from the fish. If the Med can make boiled hake taste this good, I'm sold.

Although Mazzella is from southern Italy, he has been one of Umbria's best chefs for years. He arrived at Eat in January from Orvieto, in the south of the region. Before that, he ran a Michelin-starred restaurant in Umbria's food capital, Norcia, to the east — now, sadly, better known for being devastated by an earthquake in 2016. Witnessing that quake, he says, is the reason he left.

Now, at Eat, he's branching out. Two of his tasting menus are based on typical Umbrian food — heavy on meat, cheese and truffles — but his third marks a return to his roots, with nutty hemp pappardelle slathered in mussels, and slabs of juicy red mullet on risotto. It'll be outrageous if he doesn't score the restaurant another star.

There is, of course, an irony to such gluttony in Assisi. This is the town of St Francis, a place where monks seem to outnumber locals and where the main church is resplendent with Giotto's sublime frescoes of the saint renouncing his possessions. What's more, Eat is situated in the gardens of the Nun Relais hotel, a restoration of the former Santa Caterina Monastery, built in 1275. These days Umbria is as upmarket as its neighbour, Tuscany. It just hides it better.

This has always been a quiet part of Italy, in part because of its location, as the only region on the Italian peninsula (south of the Po Valley) without a coastline. Instead of blue seas and golden beaches, Umbria is suffused in green, with rippling hills rising to emerald mountains and dropping into grassy valleys and thick forests in every direction.

The only things breaking up the green are the terracotta hill towns, tightly coiled around rock spurs and stacked up the steep slopes, with teeny chapels on seemingly every mountain. Drive from Terni to Perugia, and every few minutes you'll see settlements beckoning from the nearest hilltop. The problem is deciding where to stop. Umbria has its art-filled big hitters, of course — Perugia, Spoleto and Orvieto, for starters — but, like the hermits who were drawn here over the centuries, I've come to experience the stillness of the countryside.

It helps that I'm staying at Tenuta di Murlo, a vast renaissance estate in the shadow of Umbria's second largest mountain. The owner, Carlotta Carabba Tettamanti, has converted seven of the estate's 90 ruined houses into sumptuous holiday villas. All have pools and acres to themselves overlooking the astonishing valley, with Monte Subasio (the mountain on which Assisi perches) in the distance, and not a hint of the 21st century in sight.

In a neighbouring hamlet Tettamanti has established the newest villa, Castiglione Ugolino, from a conjoined church and vicarage, with fresco remnants from the medieval school of Cimabue on the walls downstair and an Escher-like set-up of floating staircases taking you to the six big rooms. An ancient staircase carved out of the rock, leading to an underground tunnel, pops up in one of the living rooms,



A property on the Tenuta di Murlo estate



The estate's new Castiglione Ugolino villa



A bedroom in one of the villas



Civita di Bagnoregio

## Luxury travel

# A peaceful foodie escape in rural Umbria

Julia Buckley takes a meandering tour of the quietly upmarket Italian region, finding sleek converted villas and a food scene that's more than a match for Tuscany

and the dining room opens on to the church. Next year they will add another four rooms by converting the big house on the other side of the infinity pool.

I'm staying in one of three "deluxe rooms" just outside the estate, by Murlo's roadside restaurant, Il Caldaro. In a chic bungalow-like block, they are stylishly done, with a Kit Kemp meets agriturismo feel. Don't expect the full Murlo experience, though — my otherwise lovely room

felt less than luxurious on the details (the towels were old and the toiletries mismatched), while the shared pool is within earshot of the main road. The much-vaunted WhatsApp concierge service was also underwhelming; sometimes it took hours to respond.

Murlo sits between Perugia and Gubbio, and the main conundrum is that there's so much in reach. Assisi, Spoleto, Arezzo and Montepulciano are no more than an

hour's drive, and Lake Trasimeno is 24km away. Ninety minutes' drive south-west, across the Lazio border, is the fairytale Civita di Bagnoregio. It was built on a hill of crumbly tufa stone, and the centuries have chipped away at its foundations; whole sections of the town have fallen into the depths as the rock disintegrated beneath them, forming a canyon between Civita and Bagnoregio, its "modern" (ie 18th-century) sibling.

A decade ago it was known as the "dying town", with virtually all its inhabitants having decamped across the footbridge to Bagnoregio. But a scheme to charge an entry fee for those crossing the ravine to Civita has brought millions of visitors and allowed locals to return. There are at present 12 of them; Maurizio Rocchi is one. His restaurant, Alma Civita, sits in an Etruscan cave and serves elegant modern versions of traditional village dishes — the kind of food you would expect in a top city restaurant that finds itself on a deserted pillar in the sky.

"Food is like a book," Rocchi says, bringing out umbrichelli pasta with amarettolaced boar ragu, and agnolotti stuffed with buffalo ricotta, pears and walnuts. "It speaks of the area and the people who produced it." His father grows the vegetables in the valley below, and also makes the wine and olive oil; everything else is local too. Later that day I catch Rocchi Sr at the foot of the bridge, quietly staring up at Civita. Dusk is falling, the tourists have gone and it's just the 12 of them left (well, them and 25 stray cats). "I used to come here every day when we lived in Bagnoregio," he says, and recites a poem to me that he has written about Civita, his eyes watering. Here, the link to the land is strong.

I feel this connection run even deeper in Dunarobba's Foresta Fossile, about 75 minutes east of Civita. It's a Tolkienesque grove of 40-odd "fossil" trees, which are

two million years old. They are from the sequoia family, my guide Daniela says, a thick 10ft stump towering above her. They grew beside the prehistoric lake that swamped most of Umbria, until they were buried alive by clay deposits. We're dwarfed by their bulk — one is 13ft in diameter, while another's roots power down through feet of clay beneath it. Unlike "petrified" trees (which are fossilised into stone), these are still real wood, with a cedary scent seeping out when I lean in for a sniff. Daniela caresses them as if they were her children. Perhaps it's this that lured all those hermits to the region.

Just a short drive to the east, this tranquility prevails at the archaeological site of Carsulae, a Roman town on the Via Flaminia, which once ran to Rimini. Archaeologists have likened this soulless administrative town to the empire's Milton Keynes. The forum still smells of money; one building is clad in pinkish marble over the brick, and an office building is paved with contrasting marble shades. Some 2,000 years on, it's just me and a cross-eyed cat picking our way through the ruins.

It's a misty winter morning as I take to the Via Flaminia, stepping over walnut shells cracked open by crows on the basalt slabs, and trying not to trip on the deep grooves left by Roman wagons. Tendrils of mist drift across the valley. Carsulae sits in a fold between two mountain ranges, and

its quake-prone location is thought to be the reason that it was abandoned in the 3rd century.

As I edge towards the Apennines, Italy's earthquake zone, the only names that jump out on the map are ones that I know from headlines: L'Aquila, Amatrice. About 65km east of Carsulae, having weaved around the base of the mountains, I reach Norcia — the epicentre of the 2016 quake. That morning Mazzella watched the church of St Benedict crumble in front of him. Three years on, it's still there, a pile of rubble with its rose-windowed façade propped up by scaffolding.

There's an ecclesiastical hush as visitors walk around. Norcia is famous for its prosciutto, salsiccia and truffles, and nothing — not even a devastating earthquake — comes between Italians and their food. On the main street some shops are open again. At Norcia Food the white-coated owner Alessandro feeds me boar salami, Norcia ham and three differently aged pecorinos. I buy it all — after all, supporting the locals is helping the recovery effort. (You can also order online at norciafood.it.)

Most of the restaurants have, understandably, moved outside the tumbledown walls, but at lunchtime they are all full. Fortunately at Cantina 48, in a swish, glass-walled building with a terrace and lawn outside, Mariano Agostini lets me in, even though the last table is paying up and the kitchen should be closed.

"This isn't my restaurant," he says, almost embarrassed. "Mine was in the city



### Need to know

Julia Buckley was a guest of Tenuta di Murlo, which has villas from £3,360 a week, and B&B rooms from £100 a night (murlo.com). Castiglione Ugolino sleeps 20 and costs from £12,600 a week. Fly from Stansted to Perugia with Ryanair (ryanair.com)

3 more upmarket stays in Umbria

#### Eremito Parrano

You'll experience the peace that drew the secular to Umbria at this new-built, saunter "hermitage" in the forested hills north of Orvieto. Your room is far from an extravagant affair and worthy of the region's forebears, with a single bed, and sackcloth as the bathroom door. Don't worry, though — the sheets are antique linen. A vegetarian and homegrown dinner is enjoyed in silence, by candlelight. There's no wifi, little phone signal and absolutely nothing to do but relax. Small doubles also available. All-inclusive singles from £175 (eremito.com).

#### Palazzo Bontadosi Montefalco

This renaissance palazzo in the hilltop wine town of Montefalco comes with wildly frescoed interiors, painted beams and antique fireplaces. There's modern art dotted throughout, and a spa in the medieval cellars below. Stretch out in the hammam, or try a watsu massage — like shiatsu, but underwater — in the little pool that occupies the old rainwater cistern. B&B doubles from £91 (hotelbontadosi.it)

#### Palazzo Seneca Norcia

Relais & Chateaux is behind Norcia's ultra-luxe hotel, which is up and running post-earthquake. This is where Emanuele Mazzella won the restaurant Vespaia its Michelin star, which it retains to this day. The building dates from the 16th century — look out for the Seneca family crest over the stone fireplace. Rooms are modern, with exposed stone walls and wheat-coloured furniture. B&B doubles from £114 (palazzoseneca.com) Julia Buckley

walls. The council gave me this." I look up at the plywood roof and realise it's a prefab. This was an industrial wasteland, but he has landscaped it to look like southern California between the malachite hills. "On Sundays people come to Norcia to eat, but outside town we're suffering a bit," he says. No wonder he let me in.

There's only one way to help Norcia: by eating. So I dig in to calamata alla Norcina — wide pasta loops slicked in cream-and-pecorino sauce, topped with Norcia sausage; fettuccine heaped with black truffle (not the usual miserly shavings, but chunks big enough to crunch the grit inside); and Norcia prosciutto with buffalo mozzarella that tastes of the farmyard. "It's ugly," Mariano says, pointing at the lumpy surface, "but that means it's pure buffalo. Cow milk makes it smooth."

After this there's the bruschetta with truffle sauce; intense, nutty, crunchy and, of course, it's homemade. Mariano's wife, Monica, is the chef here. "You don't need a white hat and a big beard to be a chef," he says. "You just need the ingredients." And, boy, does Norcia have them.