

# Italian style

Escape the stress of city life in Tuscany's Montalcino, where great wine, good regional food and relaxation are always in fashion **WORDS SARAH JANE EVANS**

Have you ever had a fantasy about living in a Tuscan castle with a handsome prince (or princess)? If so, Il Borgo is the place for you. You may indeed meet your prince there – when I visited, Formula 1 driver Felipe Massa was staying there. But to be on the safe side, take your loved one with you – and spend a long weekend pretending to be lord (or lady) of the manor. There are hill towns to visit, classic Renaissance views, wines and grappas to taste, and home-grown balsamic sauce and olive oil to buy.

Il Borgo stands proudly over the Castello Banfi wine estate, one of the most renowned in the wine zone of Brunello di Montalcino DOCG. The Mariani family, who created the Castello Banfi winery and then opened Il Borgo in 2007, has made this a place for indulgence. Even for the wasps. There's nothing so crude as fly spray here. At breakfast the wasps have their own little bowl of Parma ham to lure them away from the pastries and jam served to guests. The 14 bedrooms and suites of Il Borgo are located outside the tiny village that grew up beside the castle in the 17th and 18th centuries.

## Castle magic

After breakfast the hotel manager will try and tempt you into planning a flight in a hot air balloon or a mountain biking expedition over the rolling slopes and woodland. He'll suggest a cookery class, or plan a wine tasting and a trip to some local wineries if you'd like to learn more about the region's top wine: Brunello. Or – as a tennis-playing Spaniard – he'll talk about Rafael Nadal and Andy Murray. If football is your thing, then this Barça fan will discuss the finer points of the Premier League and Gareth Bale's recent transfer to Real Madrid. Frustratingly, he is very discreet, given the celebrity guests.

Felipe Massa had come with his family for a wedding nearby – and there could not be a more lovely place to be married than this countryside, hardly changed, except for the cars, since the 15th century.

The wedding party had dinner one night in Sant'Angelo in Colle, a tiny hilltop town. You sit out in the square, with the town's two restaurants vying for your business, while the locals are perched on the walls eyeing up the flood of cars parked perilously on the slopes. Next day Massa was again hard to miss in his shiny Ferrari tourer with its Monaco number plates. He was visiting Montalcino, a town that is inevitably touristic but remains picturesque despite the visitors.

Montalcino has a splendid small fortress, which was the last stronghold of the people of Siena in a savage stand-off against the Medici of Florence in the 15th century. There's a fabulous view of the countryside beyond from the battlements. Below you at the foot of the castle is a film-set of a medieval Italian village, and forests. The Romans were here, too, and the Etruscans before them. Montalcino gets its name from Ilex, the Latin for the holm oak, a tree that still blankets plenty of the area.

## BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

In the past, the Sangiovese grape – the variety that makes Chianti and Vino Nobile de Montepulciano great – was named differently from one region to another. In Montalcino, it was known as Brunello, and today Brunello has to be 100 per cent Sangiovese by regulation. It's a late arrival to the fine wine scene, first making itself known in the early 1960s, but it is now up there with the best Pinots and the best Barolos in the world.

The region is roughly square, bounded by three rivers. Within this small zone there is a wide variety of microclimates, and of soils. Banfi mapped 29 different soil types on its own vineyards alone. What makes Montalcino so special is that when the mountains were created, the sea retreated and then covered Montalcino again, several times, building up very diverse layers of soils of different ages. If the best wines reflect their terroir – and they do – then Montalcino has terroir in spades.







The castle is perfect for children to clamber over, while parents will want to linger in the Enoteca on the ground floor. You'll find a brilliant display of Brunellos – walls of them – plus grappas and salumi. There's also an Enomatic for sampling and really helpful English-speaking staff who are ready to organise shipping. After that, stroll down to Alle Logge di Piazza in the piazza, for a late lunch.

### Living rituals

Near the end of the day a visit to the Abbey of San'Antimo, founded in the year 781, is a must. Today a group of monks live next door to the abbey and have revived the Latin liturgy throughout the day. The day I visited, I was able to attend vespers – there were just four monks bringing the ritual alive.

As the fabulous sunset begins its dramatic show, thoughts turn to the chef at La Taverna at Il Borgo, a glass of vibrant Brunello and a large bistecca alla Fiorentina.

## Try the Wines

### 2007 Brunello di Montalcino, Castello Banfi, Brunello di Montalcino DOCG, £25.83

Bold, full-bodied, typically Sangiovese, with notes of plum, leather and liquorice; aged in casks and French oak barrels. Drink now or over five to eight years.

### 2009 Belnero, Banfi, Toscana IGT, £16.33

The slight dash of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot in this Sangiovese means that it can't be classified as Brunello. Also it spends less time in oak – just a year. The result is a youthful, black cherry and dark plum fruit with a firm grip of tannin, making it just right as an accompaniment for Florentine steak.

### 2012 Rosa Regale, Banfi Piedmont, Brachetto d'Acqui DOCG, £12.75

A delightful sparkling red, packed with strawberry fruit. This is lovely with chocolate desserts. Serve chilled.

### San Angelo Pinot Grigio, Banfi, Toscana IGT, £10.82

For those occasions when only a white wine will do, Banfi's San Angelo is a ripe and fruity Pinot Grigio. Serve it cool.

**Stockists:** [raouls gourmet.com](http://raouls gourmet.com), [winedirect.co.uk](http://winedirect.co.uk)



## FACT FILE



### HOW TO GET THERE

Easyjet, Ryan Air, British Airways and Alitalia fly to Rome from London, from £120 return (flight time, 2 hours 25 minutes). From Rome Leonardo da Vinci/Fiumicino airport to Montalcino it is 140 miles – about 2.5 hours by car. Easyjet, Ryan Air, British Airways and Alitalia fly to Pisa from London, from £100 return (flight time, 2 hours 10 minutes). From Pisa Galileo Galilei airport to Montalcino it is 140 miles – about 2.5 hours by car. [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com); [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com); [ba.com](http://ba.com); [alitalia.com](http://alitalia.com)



### HOW TO GET AROUND

Car hire is available with Budget, Hertz, Avis, Europcar and Sixt. Five-day Mini (Fiat 500 type) or Economy (Ford Fiesta) special offer costs from £100 at Rome airport, or £125 at Pisa airport.



### WHEN TO GO

June sees several musical and theatrical festivals. In July, there's a major jazz and wine festival in Montalcino, which Castello Banfi helps to organise. At the beginning of September, the castle becomes the honey capital of Italy. Later that month, there's the grape harvest festival. The last Sunday of October is the Sagra del Tordo (festival of the thrush), which coincides with the start of the hunting season.



### WHERE TO STAY

Il Borgo: rooms from £350 and suites from £520. Three-night B&B package, with morning cookery class and lunch, wine tasting, five-course dinner, 21 March–30 April, from £1,580 per room plus VAT; three-night B&B package, with wine tasting and five-course dinner, 1 May–26 October, from £1,680 plus VAT. The hotel closes for winter at the end of October, reopening on 21 March 2014. [castellobanfilborgo.com](http://castellobanfilborgo.com)



### WHAT TO EAT

Ribollita, the local bread and vegetable soup; Monte Amiata bread made with chestnut flour; local Chianina beef; white truffles in autumn; baccala – salt cod; pappardelle al sugo di cinghiale – there are plenty of wild boar in the forests.



### WHAT TO BUY

Salumi – cured meats from the local pigs, cinta Sinese, with a black 'belt' round their tummies; Pecorino cheese; panforte di Siena; salsa Etrusca, the Banfi version of balsamic vinegar, which is intensely syrupy and sweet/sour; grappa.



### OTHER PLACES TO VISIT

Spend a day in the cities of Pisa, Siena, or Florence or add on a weekend in Cortona.



### FIND OUT MORE

[prolocomontalcino.com](http://prolocomontalcino.com)