

FOOD & WINE



*photographs by Jacques Dirand*



The Bianchis relax in their living room, which is peppered with Renaissance art.



# a lunch to remember

DANIELLE PERGAMENT LEARNS THE ART OF ITALIAN ENTERTAINING AS SHE LUNCHES WITH ONE OF FLORENCE'S MOST IMPORTANT FAMILIES.

**T**ODAY, AS EVERY OTHER DAY, the Piazza San Lorenzo in Florence is bursting with an outdoor market. Street vendors stand with their limbs draped in fake Gucci bags. Elderly couples examine pint-size alabaster Davids. Art history students haggle over wallets with toothless Italian women. In the thick of it all, my fiancé, Devin, and I are walking—no, sprinting—through the crowds to get to number four. Palazzo della Stufa. We're late for lunch.

This promises to be the kind of lunch you read about in, well, glossy magazines—a lengthy and gluttonous affair with the Bianchi family, in their fourteenth-century palazzo, catered by a Florentine chef. In other words, you don't want to be late.

Like the Agnelli, Medici or Frescobaldi families, the Bianchis are one of those epic Italian families that transcend time and place. Renowned as Milan's leading textile manufacturer for the past half century, the family company produces embroidery and lace for prestigious brands, including Armani and Etro. The Bianchis have proven that they place quality over financial gain—and they are respected for it.

In 1962, Aldo Bianchi gave his son, Fabrizio, the Castello di Monsanto winery in Tuscany's Chianti region as a wedding present. The Bianchi name is as recognized today for its Chianti *en* as it is for its linens. Then, in 1999, Fabrizio and his wife, Giuliana,

bought Palazzo della Stufa. Here we are, arriving at the front door.

"*Piacere, signorina.*" Fabrizio Bianchi, the family patriarch, rises from an ornate yellow sofa to greet us. A tall, grey-haired man, he has a warm, easy smile that pushes his eyes into wrinkles. Next we

meet Giuliana, his wife, with a quiet, sweet smile. Laura, their daughter, is tall like her father, and has long blonde hair, a gentle manner and stacks of silver and gold rings.

In typical Italian style, our lunch is preceded by an *aperitivo*. In this case, it's a chilled glass of the family's full-bodied Chardonnay. It's accompanied by warm bruschetta with tomatoes and eggplant. "An Italian can't drink without food," laughs Laura.

The five of us sit on the family's antique chairs and make small talk—about the traffic from Rome (*molto brutto*), the weather (*troppo caldo, sì?*) and the wine (*buonissimo!*). But soon, also in keeping with Italian style, conversation is loosened by a glass of wine in the middle of the day.

"We're not very formal," says Signor Bianchi in Italian, which is a funny declaration coming from a man wearing a bespoke cashmere suit sitting in his centuries-old palazzo. "In Italy, it's customary to avoid discussing politics and religion at formal meals. But our family talks about everything. If there's something to laugh about, we laugh," he says.







"My parents moved in six months ago," says Laura, who divides her time between the Monsanto winery in Chianti and an apartment in Rome. Renovations on the palazzo have already taken four years, which is no surprise considering its size: the garage, sitting rooms, dining rooms, three floors of bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens (plural) and a garage, not to mention the rooftop *terrazzo* overlooking Florence. "We wanted to keep the feeling the house had over the centuries, but still fix it up," Laura says. In its heyday, visitors at the palazzo included Winston Churchill and the Queen of Holland, but when the previous owners could no longer afford the upkeep, they put it on the market. "Elton John and the Ferragamo family were interested in buying it, too," says Laura. "My mother convinced them to sell it to her with her patience." Signora Bianchi smiles, closes her eyes and nods.

Lunch in Italy is usually a simple affair: *spaghetti alla carbonara*, a small cut of *bistecca*, a glass of *vino rosso*. What happened at 1 P.M. with the Bianchis was something else entirely.

Enter Arturo Dori, a close family friend and chef at Cavolo Nero, one of Florence's best restaurants. Bald and grinning, he comes in from the kitchen balancing plates filled with *caprino* (goat cheese) in pastry shells with olive tapenade and honey. Our wine glasses are refilled with Bianchi Chardonnay. "The order of the wine is very important," Fabrizio explains. "When we serve several courses, we always start with younger, softer wines. If you begin with heavier ones, they will mask the taste of the others. I prefer to start with white, then move to Chianti Classico and finish with a cabernet."

As if on cue (because it probably is), our plates and glasses are swooped away and we're served bowls of handmade *strozzapreti* ("priest strangler" pasta), tossed with fresh eggplant and *mozzarella di bufala*. A waiter pours the Bianchi Chianti Classico, a smooth, elegant Sangiovese.

"The older the wine, the larger the glass you need because it has been in a bottle longer and needs to breathe more," Laura explains. "I usually don't decant





wine," she says. "You lose flavor that way. Drink the wine and see how oxygen affects it after ten, twenty, thirty and forty minutes; it will change with every sip. That's the only way to understand an older wine."

Next up is a filet of lamb with roasted zucchini and eggplant. "We serve vegetables from the garden, nothing that has been preserved or flown in from across the world," says Laura. "That's why the food always tastes so fresh." To match the lamb, Arturo serves Bianchi Tinscvil, a Super Tuscan consisting of sangiovese, cabernet sauvignon and merlot.

"We like to use natural elements, in decoration as well as in food," Laura says. "In the winter, we might use winter branches or *corbezzolo*, a plant with small red and orange berries."

Italians don't import cheese from France. Or grow peonies in a greenhouse in December. Or churn out fluffy powder to sprinkle on their Alps. To reap the pleasures that are just outside the window is to be truly Italian.

"È buono, Daniella?" Fabrizio teases, looking at

my empty plate. Then dessert arrives: vanilla gelato with caramelized peaches, served with the estate's *vin santo*. *Vin santo* is usually served with *cantucci*, biscotti for dipping in the wine. But this *vin santo* is so smooth and light, it is served alone. "This wine is for sipping—slowly," Fabrizio says.

Four hours after arriving, it's time to leave, and there's nowhere to go but bed. Full of delicious food and more than a little wine, Devin and I say our *arrivederci* to our hosts, who continue cheek-kissing and joke-telling until we're out the door.

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From left to right:

Fabrizio, Giuliana, and their daughter Laura taste the family Chardonnay.

The Bianchis and their guests come together for a four-course lunch with wine pairings.

Laura enjoys the family's Chianti Classico with "priest strangler" pasta.

Arturo Dori, chef of Florentine restaurant Cavolo Nero, prepares lunch in the palazzo kitchen, beneath a Murano glass chandelier.



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## LIVE LIKE A BIANCHI

During your next trip to Florence, take a day trip to the Castello di Monsanto winery. Tour the cellars, wander through the vineyards and taste the wines. (Reservations required.)

via Monsanto, 8  
Barberino Val d'Elsa  
+39 055 8059000  
www.castellodimonsanto.it

Arturo will be your chef, too, at Cavolo Nero. Hidden down twisting alleys, the restaurant is hard to find, but you'll forget the trek once you're relaxing in the jasmine-filled garden, drinking Bianchi wines and tucking into "priest strangler" pasta.

via dell'Ardiglione, 22  
Florence  
+39 055 294744  
www.cavalonero.it

Top it all off with a night at the Villa La Massa, one of the loveliest hotels in Florence. Perched on a quiet bend of the Arno, the gorgeous pink property is surrounded by outdoor terraces and pristine gardens.

via della Massa, 24, Candeli  
Florence  
+39 055 62611  
www.villalamassa.it

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## SAVOR THE BIANCHI WINES

Enjoy the taste of Bianchi wines back home. Try their Chardonnay with its pear and citrus aromas, and fruity, ripe Monsanto Chianti Classico Riserva, which pairs well with hearty pastas and meat dishes. Finish with Vin Santo La Chimera, with notes of honey, toffee and almond. Monsanto wines are imported exclusively by Moët Hennessy USA and available at fine restaurants, retail and wine stores nationwide.

Recipes on pages 86 and 87.







left: Vin santo dessert wine is made from grapes dried on cane mats and aged for at least four years.

this page: Chef Arturo Dori caramelizes peaches for dessert.