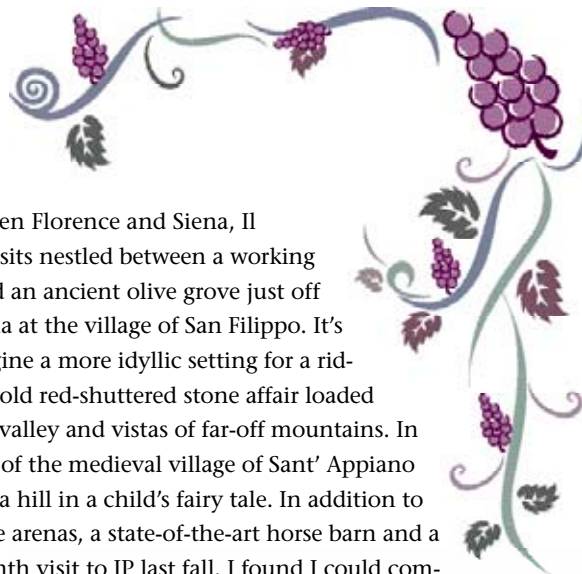




Dressage in Tulla Toscana

An American amateur finds that dressage becomes clearer in the picturesque landscape of rural Italy.

By Cecelia Marcus



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idway between Florence and Siena, Il Paretaio (IP) sits nestled between a working vineyard and an ancient olive grove just off the Via Cassia at the village of San Filippo. It's hard to imagine a more idyllic setting for a riding center. The guesthouse, an old red-shuttered stone affair loaded with charm, overlooks a green valley and vistas of far-off mountains. In the middle distance, the tower of the medieval village of Sant' Appiano appears, suggesting a castle on a hill in a child's fairy tale. In addition to the view, there are two dressage arenas, a state-of-the-art horse barn and a swimming pool. I made my ninth visit to IP last fall. I found I could combine unsurpassed dressage training with great food and wine. And, because of its unique location, visiting the art and architectural marvels in nearby towns is easy, with both Florence and Siena less than 30 miles away.

Proprietors Gianni and Cristina De Marchi, both fluent in English, studied and trained horses under dressage master Pedro de Almeida at Portugal's national stud, among others. They relocated to Tuscany from Milan more than 20 years ago to found Il Paretaio. Their 15-year-old son, Pietro, won the regional dressage championship. IP is home to some 30 horses: Arabians, Lusitanos, warmbloods and other European breeds, all trained in a gentle and sensitive manner.

The Training

Cristina says the words of Col. Alois Podhajsky, head of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna for many years, summarize the concept of all the training at Il Paretaio: "The object of the classical art of riding is to train a horse not only to be brilliant in the movements and exercises of the High School but also to be quiet, supple, obedient and by his smooth move-

Pietro De Marchi studies dressage with his parents at Il Paretaio. He won the 2007 regional dressage championships.



Photos courtesy Il Paretaio



Courtesy, Il Paretato



Courtesy, Cecelia Marcus



Courtesy, Il Paretato

Cristina De Marchi (left) schools a young mare; the garden and stallina at IP (center); Cecelia Marcus takes a lesson (right).

ments to make riding a true pleasure. These qualities are the basis [of all] riding." She says there is no definite rule for putting these principles into practice. Masters of the past have studied them thoroughly and have accumulated knowledge that instructs the riders of today and prevents them from wasting time with unnecessary experiments. "There are no rules for [dealing with] any difficulties that may appear," she explains. "Remedies that are successful with one horse may prove unsuccessful with another. These principles are our guide for all our work in the training of horses and their riders at IP."

I have seen riders of all levels here. Lessons are individual or semi-private. Gianni and Cristina carefully match riders with both horses and other group members. Private lessons are also available. We start with a warm-up at the walk to supple and collect the horse. At trot, we might do 20-meter circle work, alternating with using the entire arena for serpentines, voltes and changes of direction. Exercises include leg yield, shoulder-in, haunches-in and, if one is able, half pass. Canter work is done

individually. Gianni speaks of having the horse "in vibration," which I understand as the horse willingly accepting the contact, moving from behind and almost dancing with eagerness to do whatever the rider asks. I have actually experienced this blissful state a couple of times.

Currently, I ride in Long Island, New York, on school horses with some degree of dressage training and ability, and I am able to maintain a degree of consistency. But, when I first came to IP in 2002, I did not own a horse, and my equitation skills were almost nonexistent. I was clueless with regard to contact with my hands and my legs were all over the place. After a couple of frustrating lessons, I began to understand that hands should be down and still, legs back and still and that I was to gently squeeze rather than kick. I clicked with Plinio, a then 18-year old Arabian stallion. At the end of the week, Cristina said I deserved an award as the most improved rider.

Today, at IP, I often ride Fiona, a Spanish mare, who, after initial stiffness, becomes quite round for me and is occasionally "in vibration." I also ride some of the more forward-going, sensitive Lusitano mares, working on gentle collection, even though a jump-

ing accident six years ago left me fearful and tense on more forward horses. With Ciocca, a large, dignified, forward-going Maremma mare, I work on using more half halts and less hand. My most thrilling experience came when I was allowed to ride Baluarte, a beautiful grey Lusitano in his 20s who is trained to Grand Prix. Cristina's proviso was that I sit still. After my 45-minute private lesson, she mounted him and pronounced that I had done better than she had expected, since the horse was still soft in the mouth. I was walking on air.

Accommodations

The guest rooms have beamed ceilings (the real thing, actually holding up the roof), white stucco walls and private baths. They are charmingly decorated with Italian country-style simplicity. An apartment suitable for groups or families is available. Some come with spectacular views. The *stallina*, also great for families, is a separate little house with kitchen, living room, sleeping loft and a patio overlooking the valley and paddocks. In the main house, the unique tower room has panoramic views, and a second floor dining room features a traditional Tuscan hearth, once used for



Dressage riders can also be tourists.

cooking, and a long dining table where up to 26 guests may dine family style.

Super cooks Gabriela and Rosetta serve traditional pasta and meat dishes (wheat-free pasta is available) with local wines, salads and desserts. Rosetta creates memorable fruit tarts; Gabriela, *torta da nonna*. Upon request, the duo will create unique dishes for vegetarians. There are also restaurants nearby, or one can find fixings at the local supermarket in Barberino.

Be a Tourist

When in Italy, I never rent a car, relying on local buses for trips to nearby towns in the middle of the day when I am not riding. A bus stops at San Filippo, a short walk from IP, and goes to Poggibonsi, 8 kilometers away where you can find high-fashion boutiques, an *herborista* featuring natural beauty products and excellent outdoor restaurants in a leafy piazza. From Poggibonsi, buses leave for Siena (a 40-minute ride) and other nearby towns. A train goes to Certaldo (10 minutes).

In the other direction, the bus to Florence takes about an hour and drops you within walking distance of the Duomo, the Uffizi, the Pitti Palace, the Ponte Vecchio, Santa Croce and streets teeming with shops offering the finest of “made in Italy.” Here are just a few

of the towns close by:

San Gimignano is a unique, ancient walled city with towers and stunning views of the Val D’Elsa. In the Church of Sant’Agostino, you can see a cycle of frescoes from the 1400s on the saint’s life by Benozzo Gozzoli, the painter of handsome princes astride gorgeous horses in the Medici Chapel in Florence.

Colle di Val d’Elsa has a saddle shop, delicious pizza and gelato in the main piazza. A public elevator whisks you to Colle Alta, the old town center, built within the ruined walls of a hilltop castle destroyed in 1260.

Siena is a medieval jewel with its magnificent black and white marble cathedral, museums containing masterpieces by Duccio di Boninsegna, Ambrogio and Pietro Lorenzetti and Simone Martini (large fresco from the 1300s featuring a horse and rider, both dressed in gold with black diamonds). Siena has more stylish shops than you can possibly visit and is also home to the Palio, the famed annual horse race.

Volterra, once an Etruscan capital, has the Guarnacci archeological museum located in a palace built over an Etruscan tomb. It houses an unsurpassed collection of artifacts. Old-fashioned cafes feature chocolates and gelato.

Getting There

Air France, Lufthansa and Meridiana land at Florence’s small airport. For less than nine euros, take the shuttle bus to the downtown bus station (20 minutes) and the local Poggibonsi via Cassia bus to San Filippo (one hour), where an IP staff member will meet you. You can also take a taxi from the Florence airport (100 euros round trip) or rent a car. Air France also flies directly from the United States to Pisa, an hour from Poggibonsi by train. 🚆

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Il Paretaio and traveling to Italy, go to DressageToday.com.



