



CLASSIC RE MIX

Deep in Tuscan wine country, Castello di Ama offers hospitality that's as elegantly curated as its extraordinary site-specific art collection

Story MARIA SHOLLENBARGER

High on a hill in the heart of the Chianti region – a hill comprised of chalky, biscuit-coloured galestro schist; this is an important detail, and one we'll return to – there is a very old borgo known as Ama. Not unlike many other estate villages throughout central Italy, it's anchored by two patrician 18th century villas, though some of the surrounding buildings' foundations are 500 years older. But there are factors that distinguish this one – the vineyards that encircle it, for instance; sprawling across almost 80ha of hills and valleys, they are impeccably maintained. Or the scattering of brightly coloured flagstones – arsenic green, hot pink, traffic-light orange – that punctuate the steep, narrow lane that proceeds downhill through the borgo, past two chapels, a walled garden, the grand villas and a few humble stone houses. Or the long mirrored wall that snakes across a lawn just beyond it, broken here and there by square openings through which neat parcels of countryside can be glimpsed.

The wall, in particular, is as unexpected an addition to this pastore as could be imagined. Except, perhaps, by a very imaginative artist. And in fact it is a work of art – a one-off installation by the noted Swiss conceptual artist Daniel Buren. The flagstones, too, painted by the Cameroonian Pascal-Martine Tayou, their pattern dictated by a felicitous, loopy logic known only to him. These are just two of the surprises to be found at Castello di Ama, which produces some of Tuscany's most sought-after wines and is home to a clutch of world-class site-specific artworks that have made this little borgo a destination in its own right.

Fifteen artists in total – among them Hiroshi Sugimoto, Anish Kapoor, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Roni Horn, and the late Louise Bourgeois – have come to Castello di Ama to create legacy works at the invitation of its owners, winemaker Marco Pallanti and managing director Lorenza Sebasti, who have called it home for three decades. They started the Castello di Ama for Contemporary Art project in 1990 in conjunction with the esteemed Galleria Continua, based in nearby San Gimignano, and since 2015 has continued in collaboration with the New York based curator Phillip Lovatt Smith.

The works span the breadth of the estate's nearly 230ha, making exploration a discovery journey. Tayou's flagstones form a trippy, magical-realism path down to Buren's wall, their Day-Glo paint radiating subtly at dusk. Kapoor's work is semi-hidden away in one of the borgo's two 17th century chapels, a sunken red disc in its stone floor, thrumming almost imperceptibly with light. Sugimoto's contribution – two masses of marble and stainless steel that almost meet in a point the breadth of a pin – fills the apse of the other, down at the end of the steep





lane. The Louise Bourgeois – a slender, kneeling figure carved from rose-hued Carrara marble, part-girl, part-flower, suffused with both eroticism and vulnerability – resides deep in a cistern, hauntingly spotlighted and seen only from above through an ancient grate. In one of the original wine cellars, still lined with oak casks, is a delicate light installation by the late Chinese artist Chen Zhen, created when he was dying of cancer and completed and installed posthumously by his wife, Xu Min. The Kabokovs commandeered a tiny stone barn semi-hidden amid olive trees on a hill below the villas and installed their work – two figures, seated at a table, that can just be glimpsed through a window in the evening. This October, Sebastì and Pallanti will host an invitation-only vernissage, as has become their tradition, to unveil this year's contribution by the Polish sculptor and video artist Miroslaw Balka.

Though guests have long been able to visit Ama and its art by appointment, over the past few years Sebastì and Pallanti have quietly been making the estate more accessible. In 2014, they opened a small restaurant, Il Ristoro di Ama, in the ground floor of Villa Pianigiani, one of Ama's two villas in the borgo. The kitchen is manned by Giovanni Bonavita, a Sicilian culinary wizard and their longtime personal chef. (It was an intuitive step to go from cooking for the family and the intimate circle of visiting wine buyers and art-world cognoscenti they frequently entertained to doing so in an official capacity.) Bonavita majors in the *eccellenze toscane* – simple, rustic things done sublimely: rich, almost custard-y *pappa al pomodoro*; hand-pulled *tagliatelle* in a piquant *cinta senese*; faultless chestnut and hazelnut tarts. Guests can choose between a high-ceilinged, whitewashed dining room, a covered patio with long wooden refectory-style tables, or a sunny front courtyard dotted with umbrellas in which a huge, ancient elm holds pride of place.

More recently, the top floor of Villa Ricucci, slightly grander than Villa Pianigiani next door, was converted to a handful of suites – just three initially, expanded last year to five – for guests who wished to extend their immersion in borgo life. These are not high luxury in any conventional sense; rather, they are quietly genteel and utterly place-appropriate, with waxed cotto floors and burnished beam ceilings, antique wrought-iron beds and well-trod Persian rugs, hand-embroidered bed linens and sigh-inducing views over the Chianti hills from their bifora windows. A library and sitting room are on the ground floor (more extravagant, with a mix of 18th century frescoed walls and striking Edra lighting, than the suites upstairs), along with a kitchen with an enormous 200-year-old hearth, its wood fire lit on chilly days.



Top, clockwise from left: Works by Louise Bourgeois, Kendell Geers, Chen Zhen and Lee Ufan
Below, from left: Villa Ricucci, Ristoro Esterno, and a suite

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As a result of this careful, gradual curation, Castello di Ama has emerged as a singular intersection of art, culture and history. But it is not particularly well known, or particularly easy to reach (not a bad thing, adding as it does to the impression of a pilgrimage site.) Driving south out of Gaiole in Chianti, it's a sharp, easy-to-miss right and then a series of ascending hairpin turns through oak, elm and chestnut forest. At the ridge – almost 500m up – it's a hard left and there is the entrance: a dusty *strada bianca*, flanked by almost ridiculously picturesque vineyards, a landscape straight out of a Filippo Lippi canvas.

But the Castello di Ama wines, by contrast, are global superstars, with some 300,000 bottles a year produced exclusively with grapes from its 80ha of vineyards. This is in no small part down to the exceptional calcareous soil profile atop Pallanti and Sebastì's hill – that galestro schist, which renders wines of extraordinary finesse and balance that can sell for many hundreds a bottle (which income pays for much of the art project). Castello di Ama's Chianti Classico Gran Selezione vintages are cornerstones in the firmament of the regional tradition. Pallanti, a legend in these parts, has served two stints as president of the Consorzio del Chianti Classico, and introduced the single-vineyard *cru* system here (among dozens of other accolades, his 2010 Chianti Classico Gran Selezione DOCG San Lorenzo was named one of the 10 best wines in the world by *Wine Spectator*). The Castello di Ama merlot, *L'Apparita*, is consistently one of the two or three most highly rated in Italy, a cult Super Tuscan since its first vintage, the 1985, was released. Ama also produces several IGT red blends (including Haiku, an excellent sangiovese-cabernet franc-merlot), a French barrique-aged chardonnay, a pleasingly complex *vin santo*, and one of the freshest, grassiest *olio nuovo* harvest oils I've tasted. They are all offered in tasting in the enoteca, as welcome gifts for guests, and paired with Bonavita's cuisine.

"Unique in Italy" has to be one of the briefer categories in informed travel, but Castello di Ama tops it. To access a world that is so clearly the product of an extraordinary commitment – of time, of belief, of resources both energetic and monetary – and done out of a genuine passion for art, is many people's definition of bucket-list material. "Hospitality? What hospitality? We're doing it for the wine," Sebastì, whose Roman family was one of the original consortium of four that bought Ama in the early '70s, has been known to (half) joke. But the art, she will hasten to add in all seriousness, is for the land. She and Pallanti, she says, are merely Ama's custodians, there to link its past to its future by blending nature and culture, in a considered, elegant balance – one at least as memorable, she hopes, as their finest vintage. ☺

