

Wanderlust

# A Tuscan Treasure Hunt

*Florence is famed for its cultural clout, but head out into the Tuscan countryside to find all the ingredients you'll need for a veritable foodie feast – whatever the season*

*Words: Tim Heap Images: Kirstie Young*

**S**uddenly, Gina's off, scampering to a patch of grass at the edge of the field, nose pressed to the ground, tracing a scent. She starts digging, sending mud flying backwards, and gradually unearths the treasure that we're hunting for.

To give some context, Gina is a dog – not just any dog, but a prized, specially-trained crossbreed (exactly which breeds is top-secret, it seems). The treasure she seeks is the underground fungus that's used in haute cuisine around the world and changes hands for thousands of pounds a kilo: the truffle. In Tuscany's undulating countryside, it grows in harmony amongst the roots of a host tree, trading phosphorous for sugars in a symbiotic existence. Truffles have been described as "the diamond of the kitchen", and, although more and more of them are being farmed in the UK, France and Italy corner the market when it comes to the rarer and more valuable varieties.

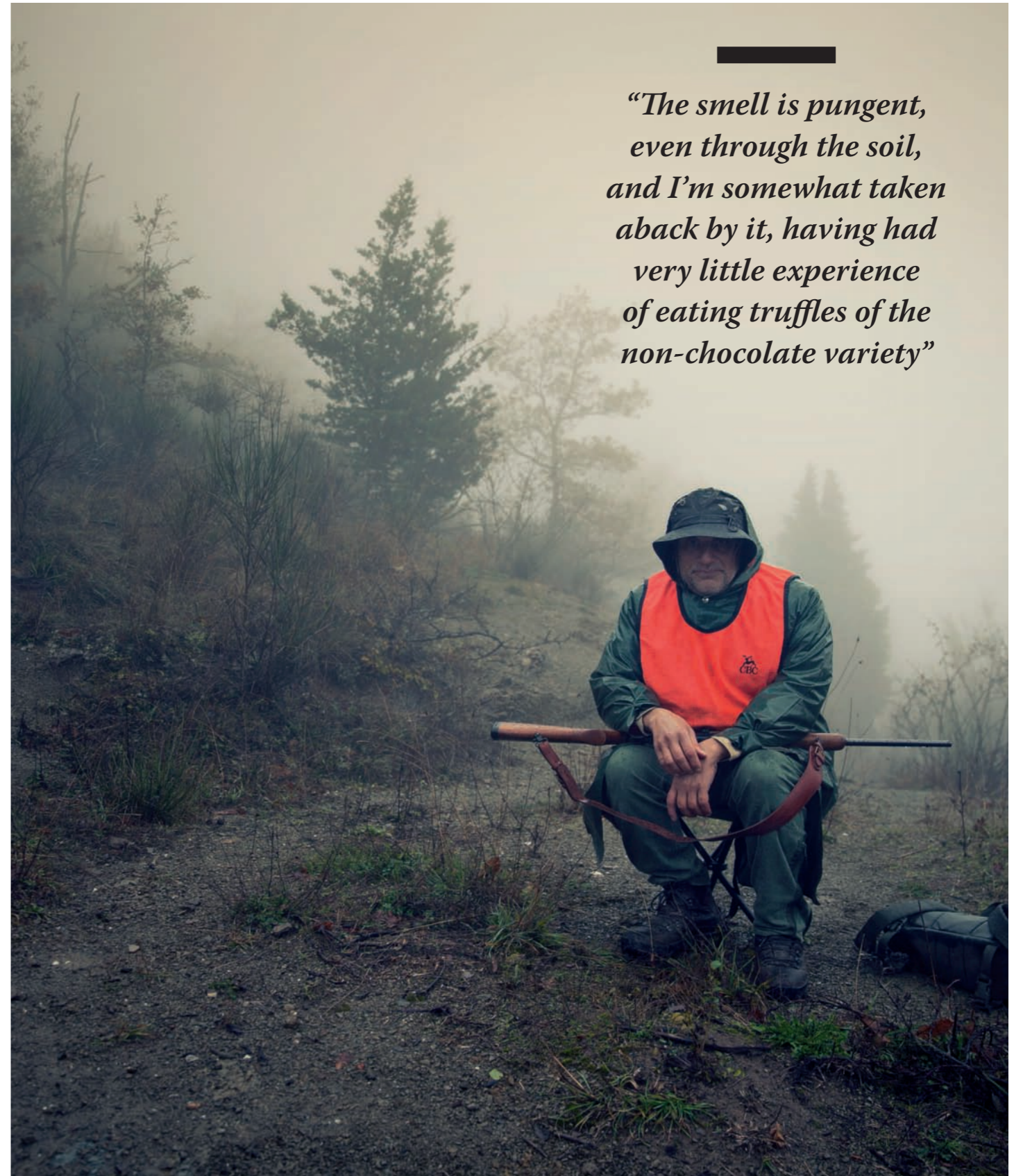
It's November, towards the start of the truffle-hunting season, and we've joined Cesare Profeti from Savitar Tartufi ([www.savitar.it](http://www.savitar.it)) on the vast Camugliano estate to hunt for the delicacy. It's much less involved than I had expected; a pleasant countryside stroll punctuated with bursts of activity from Gina instead of the swashbuckling adventure through dense foliage that the word 'hunt' might conjure. While pigs are more traditionally used to sniff out the little black mushrooms, the use of them has been banned in Italy since 1985. In any case, the ease with which dogs can be trained makes them good contenders for the mission. During our short loop around the estate – down autumnal tree-lined avenues and across slightly-boggy fields – Gina's clever nose tracks down a small handful of truffles, which Cesare skilfully collects before they're devoured by the canine.

As each truffle is unearthed, it's passed around the group, inspected by wondrous eyes and, of course, gently sniffed at. The smell is pungent, even through the soil, and I'm somewhat taken aback by it, having had very little experience of eating truffles of the non-chocolate variety. Our reward for helping to find the truffles is a special truffle-based lunch at the estate's traditional restaurant, La Locanda di Camugliano ([www.camugliano.com](http://www.camugliano.com)). As we knock back glasses of Tuscan red at a table in the cosy converted stable, we're plied with dishes including truffle fondue, truffle spaghetti, fried egg with truffle and squid ink and, to finish, truffle and honey ice cream.

## HAVING A BUTCHER'S

Appetites satisfied, the group clambers aboard the minibus and we head to our next calling point in Chianti. After a long drive, during which most of us fall into a food-related stupor, we arrive in Panzano, with the promise of seeing master butcher Dario Cecchini at work ([www.dariocecchini.com](http://www.dariocecchini.com)). He's something of a celebrity in the area and beyond, with a reputation for cleaving meat that precedes him – Elton John, Jamie Oliver, Jack Nicholson and Prince Charles are fans. He also has a flair for drama, it seems: we arrive at his butchery to the sound of blaring rock music, and he stands behind the counter ruddy-cheeked and beaming. While his employees serve canapés of bread, salamis and olive oil, and keep small tumblers topped up with more red wine, Dario's wife – the better English speaker of the two – tells us about his ethical approach to butchery. At the end, he pipes up in true showman fashion to share his work mantra: "To beef or not to beef!"

*"The smell is pungent, even through the soil, and I'm somewhat taken aback by it, having had very little experience of eating truffles of the non-chocolate variety"*







**Opening spread:** A hunter waits in the rain for boar to appear. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** A prized truffle hunter waits to be let out; a freshly-unearthed white truffle; the writer leads the way down a tree-lined avenue; canapés at La Locanda di Camugliano; the view from Castello di Nipozzano; Camugliano's chefs prepare truffle fondue; Gina the truffle hound strikes gold. **Right, clockwise from top:** Il Borgo di Petroio's main living room; the farmhouse seen from amongst the vines; one of the farmhouse's bedrooms.

Appetites whetted, we cross the street to one of Dario's restaurants, Solociccia. Another feast is waiting to be devoured, a showcase of fresh meat that's topped off with a slice of a traditional alcohol-spiked cake and, as we stumble out, a shot of grappa from the portly butcher.

After a slightly-queasy hour's drive gradually climbing up the Tuscan hills, we arrive at our accommodation for the trip. Il Borgo di Petroio ([www.tuscanynowandmore.com](http://www.tuscanynowandmore.com)) is a traditional stone farmhouse on a 900 acre estate in Rufina, to the east of Florence. Owned by Edoardo Robiglio, the 14-person accommodation has been restored and is now rented to holidaymakers as part of Tuscany Now & More's portfolio of properties in the region. We're split into rooms across three buildings within close proximity, each with farmhouse charm, lots of exposed stone, window shutters and cosy bedspreads. Needless to say, I sleep like a baby, but am up early the next morning to join a few of my fellow travellers on a different kind of hunt, this time for wild boar.

**WET AND WILD**

While most of the group remain tucked up in bed, a few of us don wellies and questionably-waterproof waterproofs to join the first hunt of the year. Wild boar have been increasing in numbers in the area for years, and private estate owners have a legal duty to contain the rising populations through organised hunts held between September and February each year. We set off in 4x4s up the bumpy track, climbing higher into the hills, with the rain getting heavier.

We're each paired up with a huntsman, who are individually spaced out along a ridge, waiting for the hounds and men down in the valley to drive the boar towards them. The hunt lasts for most of the day, but we only stay an hour or so before retreating back to the villa for warmth and dry clothes. Luckily, my hunter has an umbrella – though he can't hold it and be prepared to fire his rifle should a boar come charging towards us. It works quite well that I hold it for both of us, and we stand in comfortable near-silence – he doesn't speak English and my Italian stretches to little more than a few choice swear words I learnt while stretching pizzas in a Sardinian-

owned restaurant during my youth. Disappointingly, though, no boar appear through the foliage. We hear shots fired elsewhere, and every now and then a rustling sound brings false hope, but I leave none the wiser as to what it would feel like to see a charging boar cut down by a bullet – and I feel partly relieved. On the way back down, wedged into an old SUV, the estate ranger says that three boar have been shot so far; by the end of the day that's multiplied to 15 (the record is 60 in a single day), but we're also shocked to learn that one of the dogs died from a snakebite from a viper.

**DRINK IT ALL IN**

Tuscany is renowned for its red wine, and there are vineyards dotted all over the region, many of which offer experiences such as tours, dining and the opportunity to pick up their produce, along with other regional goods. We visit two: Castello di Nipozzano, a hilltop castle with a small, near-deserted village in its grounds, and Castello Pomino, which stands out from its peers due to its production of predominantly-white wine instead of red.

Both are part of the Frescobaldi company ([www.frescobaldi.com](http://www.frescobaldi.com)), which has 700 years of experience making wine at six estates in Chianti. At Castello Pomino, a castle owned by the same family since the 15th century, we meet Hospitality Manager Giacomo Fani. On a short tour of the winery, we learn about the production process and see the wine in its various stages, from a whole wall of drying grapes, used to make sweet wine, to rows of barrels each containing hundreds of bottles of the good stuff. Lunch is served in front of a roaring fire, and there are five rooms that can be booked should you wish to base yourself in the heart of the vineyard. There's also a small chapel near the entrance, with a stunning full-ceiling fresco that wouldn't look out of place in the Sistine Chapel.

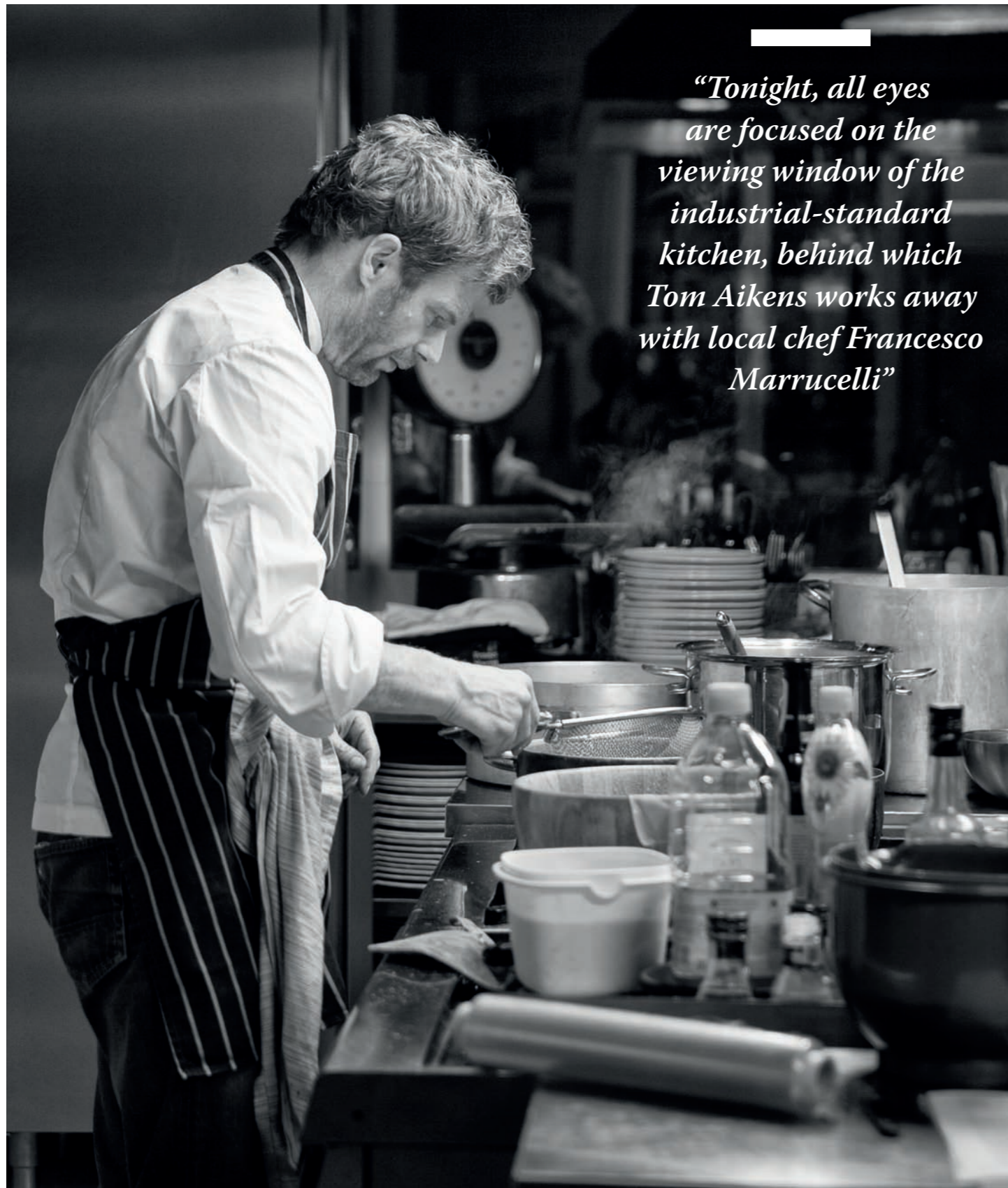
Slightly west towards Florence, Castello di Nipozzano boasts a commanding position with views stretching across the Arno river valley. Walking up the sloped street to the castle entrance, it feels like the village that time forgot: houses have been deserted for years since residents left en masse for the lure of larger towns, but

**STAY HERE**

Il Borgo di Petroio is available to rent on a weekly self-catering basis from £5,075 per week, based on 14 people sharing. Facilities include a large swimming pool, astro-turf tennis court, and all the activities mentioned in this article can be arranged for guests. Tuscany Now & More features a range of properties across the region and Italy, and can provide private chefs, excursions and other services upon request.







*“Tonight, all eyes are focused on the viewing window of the industrial-standard kitchen, behind which Tom Aikens works away with local chef Francesco Marrucelli”*



*Opposite: Michelin-starred chef Tom Aikens rustles up a Tuscan-inspired feast*

*Left, from top: Porcelain pigs in Dario Cecchini's famous butchery; the view from Il Borgo di Petroio at sunset; bunches of grapes hung at Castello Pomino*

the surrounding vineyard still yields plenty of wine each season. After a general tour, we're shown into the cellar, where rows of dusty bottles are stored, each section with a placard signalling the vintage. Many date back to the mid-20th century, but a gated-off alcove contains bottles from as far back as 1864! These, of course, are reserved for very special occasions – traditionally, family members and villagers would receive bottles when they came of age.

I jumped back aboard the minibus a little heavier than before, having spent a few Euros in the shop-come-wine-tasting-saloon of Castello di Nipozzano on a bottle of Frescobaldi Pomino Vinsanto, a delicious amber-coloured sweet wine that we had tried at Castello Pomino.

#### **THE LAST SUPPER**

For most of the weekend, we've been joined by celebrity chef Tom Aikens ([www.tomaikens.co.uk](http://www.tomaikens.co.uk)), who was awarded two Michelin stars aged just 26, making him the youngest Brit to accomplish the feat. He now has restaurants in London, Istanbul, Hong Kong, Dubai and Birmingham but for one night only, we've got his undivided culinary attention, as he brings together all the elements of a Tuscan-flavoured feast for us.

Usually, the dominating view in estate owner Edoardo's open-plan living room is across the valley of rolling green hills, but tonight, all eyes are focused on the viewing window of the industrial-standard kitchen, behind which Tom works away with local chef Francesco Marrucelli. We settle around the fire into easy conversations while the pair create a trio of delicious dishes. Mushroom ragu with pasta, Parmesan, vinaigrette, chestnuts and hen's egg is followed by a wild boar stew on a bed of polenta. Dessert is spiced rice pudding with red-wine poached pear, and a light red wine from grapes grown on the estate washes it all down. It's the kind of meal that's perfect for the season, and Tom joins us for each course to explain the dish and try it for himself.

After another good sleep, again aided by the copious food and drink, there's no time for a lie-in as it's time to head to the airport after a much-needed light breakfast. While Tuscany's cultural and historic cities of Florence, Pisa and Siena may be the selling point for many tourists, its rural charms are beguiling and addictive. And, as I've learnt, don't be put off by the colder months – as well as being able to hunt truffle and boar should you wish, you'll also find that the region's warmth shines through its food, drink and people. 🍷



**CityJet offers up to five flights a week between Florence and London City**