

# Food & drink

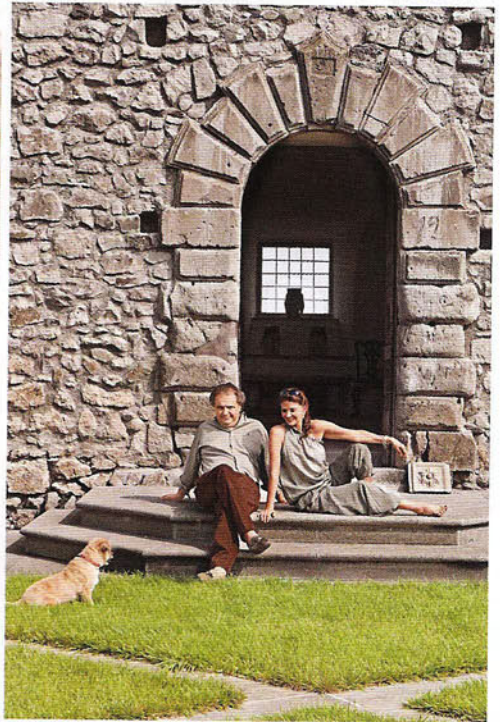
Global gourmet: Villa Tirrena estate, Lazio Plus 10 wineries to visit in Tuscany & Umbria

Clockwise from top: a terrace at Villa Tirrena; Paolo and Noemia d'Amico; the estate's Merlot

**N**ORTHERN LAZIO is an ancient land once settled by the Etruscans. It may not have the major sights of neighbouring Tuscany and Umbria, but leave the thundering traffic of the A1 Rome-Florence *autostrada* at Orvieto and drive a few kilometres south into the hills and you will find lush, rolling scenery, pretty hilltop villages and a genuine sense of having strayed from the beaten track. This corner of Tuscia (to give the area its ancient name) is characterised by *calanchi*, a dramatic landscape of deep gullies and sharp ridges caused by an uneven erosion of the soft, volcanic rock, exposing great gashes of milky-white clay. The phenomenon is at its most spectacular in the Valle dei Calanchi, a verdant valley virtually devoid of signs of modern life that runs roughly east-west from the village of Castiglione in Teverina.

It was the dramatic setting that first attracted Paolo and Noemia d'Amico to the Valle dei Calanchi in their search for a potential winery. They first saw the property, 90 hectares straddling the Umbria/Lazio border with a semi-derelict 16th-century stone farmhouse, Villa Tirrena, on a drab, rainy February day in 1985. 'It was love at first sight,' Noemia tells me when I visit on an unseasonably cool June morning. 'We were immediately attracted to the magnificent view, the silence and the history of Tuscia. We loved the fact that the area was unknown and in total contrast to the clichéd beauty you find in Tuscany.'

Paolo d'Amico is from Salerno, a gritty yet cultured port city south of Naples, and is chairman of ➤



## Mix the rough with the smooth

**ITALY** The search for a place to establish a vineyard brought the d'Amicos to a rugged volcanic valley in a little-known area of Lazio. Nicky Swallow visits a thriving estate where wine is only one of the attractions



“The atmosphere of Villa Tirrena is more relaxed country house than grand villa. In spite of being one of the couple’s seven homes, it has a lived-in feel”

➤ d’Amico International Shipping, the company founded by his great-grandfather, which today owns some 85 tankers and ‘bulker’ cargo ships and runs offices in Rome, London, Singapore, Dublin and Monaco. His wife was born in Rio de Janeiro of Portuguese descent and spent 15 years working as a representative for Dior, first in Rio and then Milan.

The couple are based in Rome, but spend as much time at their house in Lazio as schedules allow. Villa Tirrena is made up of a central tower with wings each side; much of the façade is hidden behind a spectacular climbing jasmine, its scent heady after an early-morning rain shower. Large it may be, but the atmosphere is more relaxed country house than grand villa. In spite of being one of seven homes, it has a lived-in feel, the rooms filled with sofas, piled with cushions, and interesting furniture and colourful textiles gathered from travels around the world, family portraits and vast photo albums. The house is often full of friends and family (the d’Amicos have four grown children), who gather around roaring fires in

the interconnecting living rooms or, on summer evenings, enjoy dinner on terraces lit by Tunisian lamps.

Part of the renovation project involved building a *cantina* (cellar) that could cope with the production of a large volume of wine. Noemia’s years at Dior have left her with a strong aesthetic sense, so it had to look good as well as be practical. The *barriccia*, a long arched gallery built of local tufa stone, may be lined with French oak barrels, but it is lit by flickering candlelight, and has oriental rugs laid on the tiled floor and Maria Callas playing on

the sound system. Wine tastings are held in a second *cantina*, where the more practical tasks of processing, storing, bottling, labelling and packing are carried out.

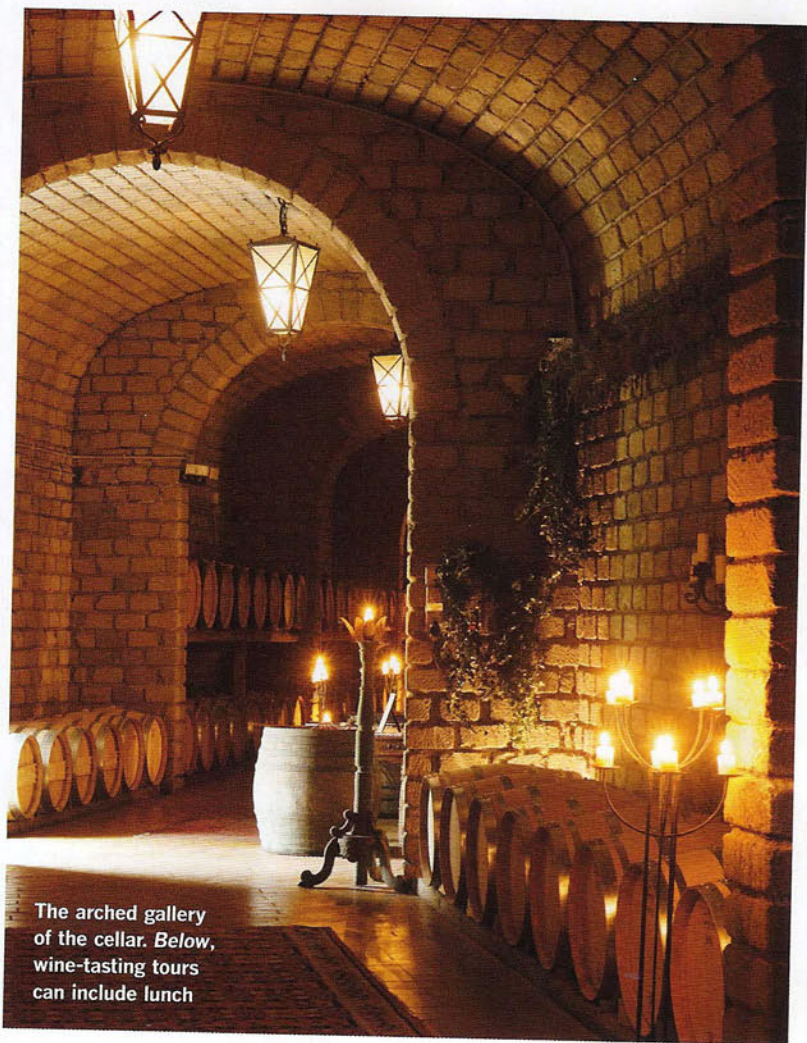
Although major decisions are taken with her husband, it is Noemia, a qualified sommelier, who runs the wine side of their business. We sit in armchairs before a crackling fire in a little snug off the *cantina* and she tells me how the first 4.5 hectares of Chardonnay grapes were planted on the hillside behind the house in 1985, taking root while building work was taking place.

Nearly 10 years later, the wines were ready to be marketed and the d’Amicos employed the late, great Piedmontese oenologist Carlo Corino (best known for his work at the Sicilian winery Planeta), who helped consolidate the estate’s reputation for its elegant white wines. Today, Noe, a delicious Orvieto Secco named after the lady of the house, is the estate’s biggest seller, but the two Chardonnays stand out: Falesia, an oaked, intense and complex wine, and the lighter Calanchi di Vaiano with its crisp, citrus overtones.

Satisfied with the whites, they turned to red-grape varieties. The ➤



Clockwise from top left: one of the interconnecting living rooms; the d’Amicos’ collection of modern sculpture is displayed in the garden; the pool



The arched gallery of the cellar. Below, wine-tasting tours can include lunch

► first Merlot grapes were planted in 1998 and after years of work to soften aggressive tannins, Villa Tirrena is a velvety wine with rounded plum and cherry notes. The estate's youngest wine, Notturmo dei Calanchi, is an elegant Pinot Nero, ruby-red and rich with berry fruits; the 2008 vintage, ready to drink this spring, promises to be outstanding.

**T**ODAY, THE D'AMICOS produce 100,000 bottles per annum from 21 hectares of vines, which benefit from a favourable micro-climate and the exceptionally rich, fertile volcanic soil that is typical of this area and which lends the wines a strong mineral complexity.

We leave the cool gloom of the *cantina* and continue our conversation in the garden. 'There was nothing here when we arrived,' Noemia recalls, 'not a single plant and no shade.' So she planted lorry-

loads of fast-growing trees to create the shadowy conditions ideal for the blue and white hydrangeas that remind her of Brazil.

Noemia had no clear vision of the garden she wanted, but was adamant that nothing should detract from the scenery. With landscape architect Luca de Troia, she has created a romantic, ►



## Food & drink

The vineyards have views of the volcanic rock *calanchi*

‘The dramatic setting first attracted the d’Amicos to the Valle dei Calanchi in search of a winery,’

➤ informal terraced garden that falls away to the valley below. I saw it at its blousy best, not yet sucked dry by the high summer heat. The borders, with their abundance of white roses and billowing clouds of lavender, cistus, perovskia, teucrium, rosemary and sage, were painted with the softest palette of blues, mauves, white and dusty grey-greens.

At the top of the garden stands the d’Amico’s collection of modern sculpture, including works by Banksy, Thayaht, Oliviero Rainaldi and Alessandro Twombly, each piece framed by a neatly clipped

bay hedge. Across the valley, the square 16th-century Torre del Sole stands out on the skyline. Once a defence tower, it has recently been restored and is awaiting a final decision about its new identity – certainly an exhibition space, maybe also a small *relais* and restaurant.

Paolo and Noemia are passionate about introducing their little corner of Lazio to a wider audience. They are setting up a cultural foundation and have opened their garden, the cellars and the Torre to the public, and the villa itself is now available for rent, either by the week or for one-off functions.

It’s time to leave. Noemia and Paolo have 50 fledgling shippers coming to dinner in Rome and I must negotiate the *autostrada* back to Florence. But not without a last look at those *calanchi*, by now glowing in the late afternoon sun. **T**



### GETTING TO ITALY

**EasyJet** ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) flies to Pisa from London and Bristol. **British Airways** ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) flies

from London Gatwick to Pisa, Florence and Rome.

**Journey time**  
 Two hours' flight to Florence, Pisa and Rome

The garden and sculpture collection of Villa Tirrena are open to visitors by prior appointment. Cellar and vineyard tours and wine tastings, which can be tailor-made to include lunch or dinner, can be booked for individuals and groups, and all the estate wines can be bought direct. Villa Tirrena has seven bedrooms and is available for rent, fully serviced, throughout the year. There are also four houses, decorated in modern rustic style, for rent on the estate (00 39 06 84561471; [www.paoloenoemiadamico.it](http://www.paoloenoemiadamico.it))