

Part of the “Inside Tuscany: A Second Time Around” Series

Central Tuscany: Casentino and Valtiberina

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Scott Tiezzi Grabinger



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VERSO

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Cover Photos:

- A cross on the piazza at the Santuario della Verna
- Early October in the Casentino forest
- Bottom left: Industrial wool carding machine at the Wool Museum in Stia

Dedication

For Addison, Luke, Bailey, and Grace.

May they be wanderers.

Crostini Neri

Traditionally this *antipasto* is always a part of a Tuscan antipasto. It's hard to imagine a meal where it isn't served. Each cook has his/her own recipe joining in a quiet long-term competition for the best *Crostini Neri*. Or it's available in most Italian grocery stores.

Ingredients

1 fresh baguette
 1/4 lb chicken livers
 2 oz butter
 1/2 onion, minced
 1 tablespoon of capers finely minced
 4 anchovy fillets finely minced
 chicken broth
 salt and pepper

Directions

- First, clean the chicken livers before starting this preparation. Find the tiny membrane connected to a small central vein and wash away any blood and remove any yellow fat.
- Mince the livers. How fine the mince depends on the cook. Some purée the mixture, others use finely or coarsely minced livers.
- Sauté the onion in the butter until soft and translucent. Then add the chopped chicken livers and cook on low heat for about 20 minutes.
- Remove the chicken livers and then add the capers and anchovies. Continue to cook on low heat adding a little broth if the mixture begins to dry out.
- After about 10 minutes, spread the mixture on toasted pieces of bread. You may use toasted or untoasted. In Tuscany the bread is almost never toasted for *Crostini Neri*.
- Options: use small pieces of pickled vegetables like carrot, celery, or cauliflower on top. Or add fresh tomatoes. Some cooks use *vin santo* instead of chicken broth. (Some very rich cooks.)

NOTE: Vin santo is expensive. You could use another sweet dessert wine like port, Madeira, or sherry — or not at all.

Acknowledgements

Thank you friends and relatives, American and Italian

None of this is possible without my wife, Jill, who funds my junkets and books and tolerates my long absences. She is my proof reader and takes on the job with far greater patience than I do. Blame the errors on me.

Second cousin Giovanni Tiezzi, his wife Antonella, and daughter Valeria have taken me around Tuscany, showing me some of the lesser known gems including San Giovanni d'Asso, Lucignano, Chiusure, Montefollonico, Chiusi, and great pizzerias in Foiano and Cesa. They house and feed me for several days each year. Angela and Daniele always graciously accept and help me. Maria Caldi, husband Valfrido, and daughters Gabriella and Alessandra have shown me around the Val d'Orcia, Pienza, and Monticchiello, taken me to fine restaurants, and hosted my whole American family to wonderful meals.

Thanks also to the patient teachers of *La Cultura Italiana Arezzo*, who take on the impossible goal of teaching me Italian every year with patience and smiles. They have become close friends as well as teachers: Paola, Laura, and Monica.

The *Tenuta il Palazzo* houses me each year for several weeks. The family operated *agriturismo* and *cantina* shows me great patience and acceptance. Thank you Isabella, Primo, Anna, Alessio, Lorenzo, and little Allegra.

Sections, Maps, and Recipes

BOOK SECTIONS

Central Tuscany: Casentino and Valtiberina.....	i
Dedication	iii
I Ah Tuscany!.....	13
II Casentino Territory.....	47
III The Valtiberina	129
IV Travel Information and Hacks.....	201

MAPS

Map of Tuscany	14
Heart of Tuscany.....	27
Casentino Map.....	48
Casentino Ecomuseum Network	58
Valtiberina Towns.....	130
Anghiari Map.....	134
Sansepolcro Map.....	164

RECIPES

Crostini Neri.....	iv
Pasta alla Carbonara con Funghi	32
Odore	68
Pasta with Ham and Leeks.....	96
Bringoli Pasta (Pici)	147
Marisa's Sautéed Peppers.....	200
Roast Pork Loin Fiorentina	220
Naked Mushroom Pasta	226

Table of Contents

<i>Central Tuscany: Casentino and Valtiberina</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Dedication</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Sections, Maps, and Recipes</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Books by Scott Tiezzi Grabinger</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>I Ah . . . Tuscany!</i>	<i>13</i>
1 Book Basics	<i>15</i>
Returning to Tuscany	<i>15</i>
Basic Assumption: You've Passed European Travel 101	<i>15</i>
GPS	<i>15</i>
Costs, Getting Money, and Debit Cards	<i>16</i>
Credit Card Strategies	<i>16</i>
Italian Oddities	<i>17</i>
Free Museum Days	<i>17</i>
Photography Practices	<i>18</i>
Photo Credits for This Book	<i>18</i>
Following My Descriptions of Churches	<i>18</i>
Compartment in Churches	<i>19</i>
Recipe and Food Information	<i>19</i>
2 Inside Tuscany's Principles for Slow Travel	<i>21</i>
Principle 1: Go slow and easy. Plan to return	<i>21</i>
Principle 2: Adapt and learn new things	<i>21</i>
Principle 3: Travel cheap	<i>21</i>
Principle 4: Come to "tour" and to "live."	<i>21</i>
Principle 5: Put your camera down and look around	<i>22</i>
Principle 6: Fly under the radar	<i>22</i>
Principle 7: Does €25.00 really matter?	<i>22</i>
Principle 8: Pack light, walk easy.	<i>22</i>
3 Set Up a Base and "Live" for a Few Days	<i>23</i>
"Live" for a couple of days	<i>23</i>
What should I consider in South Central Tuscany?	<i>23</i>
It's All About the Caffè	<i>24</i>
4 Tuscany	<i>25</i>
History	<i>25</i>
Land and Economy	<i>28</i>
Lasting Cultural Contributions	<i>29</i>

	Cuisine	30
	Mercati, Sagre, e Festive	30
5	<i>Decoding Religious Art</i>	33
	Themes	33
	Saints and Their Symbols.....	39
	Church Classifications.....	44
	Relics of Saints.....	46
<hr/> <i>II Casentino Territory</i>		47
6	<i>Casentino Area</i>	49
	The Land.....	49
	History of the Casentino.....	50
	Cuisine	55
	Folklore and Cultural Events in the Casentino	56
7	<i>Ecomuseums of the Casentino</i>	59
8	<i>Subbiano — Gateway to the Casentino</i>	69
	Background.....	69
	River Walk.....	71
	Subbiano Ecomuseums	71
	Alpe di Catenaia.....	71
	Castelnuovo di Subbiano	72
	Corte dell'Oca	72
9	<i>Santuario della Madonna del Sasso</i>	77
	The Mother of God Apparition	78
10	<i>Poppi</i>	81
	Castello dei Conti Guidi (Poppi Castle)	81
	Castle Description.....	83
	Courtyard and Ground Floor.....	84
	Battle of Campaldino	89
	Propositura dei Santi Marco e Lorenzo	90
	Badia di San Fedele	92
	Oratorio della Madonna del Morbo	94
11	<i>Stia</i>	97
	Ecomuseums near or in Stia.....	97
	History	97
	Museo dell'Arte della Lana	98
	Museum Visit	99
12	<i>Camaldoli Hermitage and Monastery</i>	105
	Camaldoli Monastery Complex.....	107
	Church of Cristo Salvatore.....	110
	Oratory of St. Joseph.....	110
	Oratory of St. Anthony Abbot.....	110

Bookstore	111
Antica Farmacia and Museum — Apothecary	111
Ermeo — Camaldoli Hermitage	112
13 Santuario della Verna.....	115
The Piazza or “Quadrante” with Sun Dial	118
Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta	118
The Chapel of the Nativity	120
Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli.....	122
Chapel of the Pietà.....	123
Chapel of the Votives	124
Hall of Frescoes — Corridor of the Stigmata	124
Chapel of the Stigmata	124
Grotta di San Francesco.....	125
Museum of the Sanctuary of La Verna	125
Ancient Pharmacy	127
Pilgrim’s Refectory.....	127
Foresteria: Guests Quarters	128
Dormitory/Hostel	128
More	128
<u>III The Valtiberina.....</u>	<u>129</u>
14 Valtiberina Territory	131
15 Anghiari.....	135
Museo della Battaglia di Anghiari	136
Badia di San Bartolomeo Apostolo.....	139
Museo della Misericordia	141
Museo di Palazzo Taglieschi	142
Chiesa e Convento di Sant’Agostino	148
Anghiari Bringoli Festival:.....	150
16 Battle of Anghiari.....	151
Battle Phases	151
The Lost Leonardo Painting	154
17 Caprese Michelangelo	157
Museo Michelangiolesco	157
Ticket Office and Bookstore	158
Il Palazzo del Podestà.....	159
The Old Rocca	160
The Sculpture Garden.....	161
Events of Michelangelo’s Life by Painters.....	162
18 Sansepolcro.....	165
Museo Civico di Sansepolcro	167
Chiesa di San Rocco e Oratoria della Misericordia	178
Chiesa di Sant’Antonio Abate e Sant’Eligio	180

	Cattedrale di San Giovanni Evangelista	183
	Chiesa di Sant'Agostino.....	189
	Fortezza Medicea di Sansepolcro.....	191
	Piero della Francesca	191
	Events.....	192
	Best Gelato — Ever!	192
19	<i>Monterchi</i>	194
	Musei Civici Madonna del Parto	194
	Museo delle Bilance	199
	<i>IV Travel Information and Hacks</i>	201
20	<i>Travelling Smart</i>	203
	Water, Wine, and Picnics	203
	Transportation.....	203
	Using Phones	205
	Electricity and Battery Charging	205
	Internet Access — Hotspots.....	206
	Medical Help	207
	Strikes (Sciopero).....	207
	Overnight Options.....	207
	Cash, Banks, and ATMs	208
	Before You Leave Home: Packing	208
	Documents for Traveling in Italy	209
	Automobiles	209
	Opening Hours: Sites, Shops, and Restaurants	210
	Post Office	211
	Polite Cultural Practices when Shopping	211
	Kinds of Restaurants	212
	At the Restaurant	213
	Basic Courtesies.....	213
21	<i>Author Scott Tiezzi Grabinger</i>	217
	The Writer	217
22	<i>Index</i>	221

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Travel Adventures in Tuscany and Italy

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Preface

I fell in love with Italy upon our first family visit in 1992. I found several cousins in Arezzo and Foiano della Chiana (my maternal grandparent's home). As my visits multiplied I kept showing up like a bad penny to tour Tuscany and study Italian. I studied Italian to be able to speak with my family who only spoke Italian — or so I thought. I found out several years down the road that they would rather listen to my bad Italian than use their English. I got serious about studying the language in 2004 when I began attending immersion school for two or three weeks at a time each year, slowly forcing my old mind to learn.

The idea for a series of books on central Tuscany came after I retired from the University of Colorado Denver. I sat down and thought about what to do. I asked, “What do I know best?” The answer: Arezzo and Tuscany. So, I started on my first book of a planned series, *Central Tuscany: A Guide to Arezzo*. I had a lot to learn and it took a couple of years to finish the first book, which I published in May 2010.

The world needs more guidebooks on the major sites of Tuscany like Europe needs more air pollution. I needed a different concept, so the “Second Time Around Series” was born as I focused on repeat visitors.

Few in America know about the “inner Tuscany.” They take a one week vacation to Tuscany and race to visit the grandest sites like Florence, Siena, and Pisa. They eat great food, see the beautiful landscapes, and meet a few friendly people; but they learn little of the day-to-day culture. Those who catch the “Tuscany Bug” want to return and learn more about the art, people, festivals, markets, hill towns, and food. They need a guidebook focused on them — the repeat visitor — that helps them get into the Tuscan world.

I've also included recipes from my relatives to give you something to read or cook from in the evening.

Enjoy! Checkout my website at www.insidetuscanybooks.com.

If you'd like to talk, write to: Scott.Grabinger@gmail.com. If you have any suggestions or find any errors, please let me know.

*Without new experiences, something inside
of us sleeps. The sleeper must awaken.*

Frank Herbert

4 Tuscany

HISTORY

During the late Bronze Age (roughly 1350 to 1150 BC), Tuscany was inhabited by people who traded with the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations of the ancient Greeks. Following this came the Iron Age, 1100–700 BC, leading into the Etruscan era.



ETRUSCANS (900 BC TO 300 BC)

The Etruscans were the first highly developed civilization in the Tuscany-Umbria-Emilia Romagna regions, then called Etruria. They created a complex transportation infrastructure, developed agriculture, mined for iron ore, built the smelting industry, and produced tons of cinerary art. After reaching its peak during the seventh and sixth centuries BC, they came under Imperial Rome's control in the fourth century BC.

ROMAN ERA (300 BC TO 400 AD)

The absorption of Etruria into the Roman Empire was not a one way process; both societies learned from each other. For example, the Romans took the purple toga as a sign of royalty and used the flights of birds, entrails of animals, and weather as omens of the future.

After taking control of Etruria, Rome brought in new technologies for building roads, aqueducts, sewers, and dwellings. Rome ensured local prosperity by keeping the peace, *Pax Romana*. After the Imperial Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century AD, the area was plagued by successive invasions from northern European tribes (the barbarians) including the Goths and Lombards tearing apart the sophisticated infrastructure and civilization.

MIDDLE AGES

As the Roman civilization was torn apart by the invading tribes, the pope looked for help to preserve Rome and the Catholic

Ponte Buriano, the bridge in the background of the Mona Lisa. It is near Arezzo in the Valdarno.



Charlemagne, a war king bent on capturing all of Europe, saved the papacy from being destroyed by the Lombards. (WCM, Red Devil 666)

church. Help came from a northern warlord, Charlemagne. He came down from France to Rome and pushed the Lombards from Rome to the north-west region of Italy (today Milan is in the province of Lombardia). The Pope rewarded him with the title “Holy Roman Emperor.” Later, the Emperors came from Germany beginning with Otto I in 912. Within a century the alliance fell apart and Tuscan city-states aligned either with the Pope or the Emperor.

A common historic theme links the hill towns of Tuscany: periods of peace and prosperity interspersed with longer periods of intercity warfare, famine, and destruction. The largest city-states were constantly jockeying

for control of Tuscany; the smaller were subject to whomever was their latest conqueror.

The intercity conflicts between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries were between two loosely defined factions: the Ghibellines, supporting the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Guelfs, supporting the Papacy. The most powerful *comunes* fought for control of Tuscany: Arezzo, Florence, Lucca, Pisa, and Siena. Wars needed financing and this came from different sources: Pisa, a port; Siena, banking; Lucca, banking and silk; Arezzo, communication and transportation infrastructure; and Florence, the merchant class. By the latter Renaissance (16th c.), Florence, under the Medici family, won the battles and became the *de facto* religious, political, and cultural capital of Tuscany.

The period was not all about conflict, however, for it brought about the Renaissance with its great advances in technology and art. Technology initially focused on warfare, enabling towns to sit on hills for defensive purposes with castles and high, thick walls with corresponding advances in canon and weapons. As Catholicism spread, pilgrims traveled along the *Via Francigena* between Rome and Canterbury, England fostering the development of settlements with churches, inns, taverns, and other services for pilgrims.

Heart of Tuscany





Chestnuts and the chestnut tree form an important part of the Tuscan economy. The nuts are a great treat in the fall, roasted over charcoal or wood fires on every street corner. (WCM, Wildfeuer)

RENAISSANCE

Tuscany, especially Florence under the Medici, is the birthplace of the Renaissance. The Medici family dominated Florence from 1434 onward and supported the arts. Lorenzo Medici supported a struggling young sculptor, Michelangelo, who completed his *David* as a young man in 1504. The Renaissance spread

throughout the area creating many of the greatest artists in the world including Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Bartolomeo della Gatta, Pietro Aretino, Sodoma, and Luca Signorelli.

MODERN ERA

Italy considers the seventeenth century as the beginning of modern times.

Medici control ended after the War of Polish Succession in the 1730s. In the early nineteenth century, Napoleon dismantled the Holy Roman Empire putting Italy in the hands of Austria. After Austria, France and the Duke of Lorraine returned and, finally, during the Italian Wars of Independence in the 1850s, Tuscany became part of the newly unified nation of Italy.

Benito Mussolini and the fascists took control in the 1930s. Italy was practically burned and bombed into the ground as the Allies fought the Germans from the toe of the boot to the Austrian border. Following the war, Italy once again became a republic and now has one of the most dynamic economies and confusing political systems in Europe.

LAND AND ECONOMY

Tuscany is a bit larger than Arizona. Mountains cover 25% of the area and easily farmed plains make up only 8% of the land. The climate resembles that of the USA Midwest, generally mild in the coastal areas, and harsher and more humid in the interior.

Agriculture is a major contributor to the economy and the Valdichiana in Tuscany is one of the “breadbaskets of Italy.” Every arable acre is planted with grapes, olive and fruit orchards, sunflowers, vegetables, grains, corn, potatoes, and tobacco. Most of the Valdichiana’s arable land was reclaimed from malarial swamps with one of the most complex drainage systems in the world. Other areas are rich in mineral resources, with iron, copper, mercury, and vast marble quarries in Versilia and Carrara.

Mining dominates the industrial sector, but there are other industries including textiles, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, glass and ceramics, clothing, leather works, furniture production, automobiles, and printing and publishing.

And, of course, Tuscany would be crippled without tourism. Every town and city in Tuscany has important museums, churches, art, and architecture. Visitors support these and, more importantly, gelato shops.



Dante Alighieri was one of the most influential people in Tuscan history. The first to write in the vernacular and a skilled political maneuverer. (Painted by Sandro Botticelli, 1495, Photo from WMC, telegraph)

LASTING CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

- Florence has the largest collection of Renaissance art and architecture in the world.
- Gothic painters such as Cimabue and Giotto are the fathers of Italian painting.
- Dante Alighieri championed the use of Tuscan vernacular over Latin in literature, changing the linguistic history of Italy. Today, “Tuscan Italian,” is the *lingua franca* of TV, movies, schools, politics, and youth all over Italy.
- People still study Leonardo da Vinci’s inventions and art.
- Michelangelo’s frescoes and sculptures set a standard for representing passion, strength, and movement.
- Botticelli’s magnificent paintings of mythological themes, graceful human bodies, and nature helped move art from the realm of the religious to the secular. Sadly, Botticelli destroyed much of his work during the reactionary reign of Savonarola in Florence in the 1490s.

- Building the huge duomos and basilicas pushed architectural engineering envelopes. The dome of the Florence Duomo was finished only after Brunelleschi won an engineering contest.
- Tuscan wines go back centuries and are some of the most sought after in the world.
- Tuscany's cuisine is the subject of countless cookbooks and cooking schools.

CUISINE

Simplicity, freshness, and seasonable offerings are central to Tuscan cuisine — it bears little resemblance to Italian restaurants in the USA. Most of the areas of Tuscany grow food year round, and the Grosseto and Maremma provinces along the sea have many greenhouses to grow fruit and vegetables throughout the year. Each region has specialties including legumes, bread, cheese, fresh vegetables, wild boar, wild mushrooms, chestnuts, and fresh fruit. They produce their own wines and olive oils. Centuries of hard times have taught the Tuscans to be frugal and they create great dishes out of leftovers. A local classic is *ribollita* in which stale bread (all Tuscan bread comes from the bakery already stale) is combined with vegetables and beans and made into a thick soup.

*Brunelleschi,
builder of
the dome on
Florence's
duomo. (WCM,
Sailko)*

White and black truffles and *porcini*, the king of mushrooms, come from the high oak forests in the fall. The *chianina* beef from the Valdichiana provide the classic *bistecca Fiorentina*. *Cinghiale* (wild boars) are popular as meat and a base for pasta sauces. The succulent roast *porchetta* comes from pigs in the Valdichiana and Maremma regions.

MERCATI, SAGRE, E FESTIVE

Every weekday there is a market somewhere in Tuscany and every weekend there are special festivals and food festivals called *sagre*. Rigtantino has a polenta *sagra* festival in October. Other food festivals include *ciaccia* (fried bread dough), *cinghiale*, *bistecca Fiorentina*, hare, rabbit, *porcini*, *porchetta*, wines, and on and on.



Feste include antique fairs, reenactments of medieval jousts and battles, the Siena Palio (horse race), Foiano *carnevale*, Arezzo *La Giostra di Saraceno*, Christmas, and harvest celebrations. If you talk to Tourist Information (TI), you'll find one or more events somewhere near your town in Tuscany, especially during the summer and fall.



Sangiovese grapes in September right before harvest. The Sangiovese forms the basis of most of the red wines in Tuscany.

Pasta alla Carbonara con Funghi

Carbonara is an Italian dish from Rome created in the middle of the 20th century. It is based on eggs, cheese, bacon (or guanciale or pancetta), and black pepper. Traditionally, cooks use long forms of pasta but I find that the shorter more complicated designs carry the sauce better. The mushrooms and cream are my deviation from tradition. In this dish, like many Italian pasta dishes, you add the pasta to the sauce, not vice versa. This recipe is for four to six as a main dish.

I use an electric skillet because I can keep the mushroom and bacon mixture warm before adding the pasta. This helps cook the egg.

Ingredients

16 oz (500 mg) of pasta
1/2 lb of thick slice bacon, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
3 eggs, room temperature
1/2 c heavy cream
6 oz parmigiano or pecorino toscano (NOT pecorino romano, see page 19)
8 oz of chopped white mushrooms
2 to 3 garlic cloves, slightly smashed
handful of chopped fresh parsley
1 to 2 t of coarsely ground black pepper
salt and lots of EVOO

Directions

- Sauté the garlic, chopped parsley, and mushrooms. Cook over medium low heat until the mushrooms have expelled their water.
- Remove the mushroom mixture from the pan (or use another) and fry the bacon with a couple of tablespoons of EVOO. Don't make the bacon crispy. Add the mushroom mixture and remove the garlic cloves and hold on low heat.
- Put the pasta water on and cook the pasta.
- While the pasta is boiling, combine the eggs, cream, pepper, and half the cheese. Beat well with a fork.
- Before draining the pasta, reserve 1/2 cup of pasta water. Drain and add the pasta to the warm mushroom mixture (page 20). Pour in the egg and cream mixture. Stir well, always moving your spoon from the bottom of the pan. The egg will cook from the heat of the pasta but remain creamy.
- Sprinkle with the rest of the cheese and some more parsley to the top. Serve with fresh parmigiano reggiano or pecorino toscano.