

# TUSCANY

By JIM SANO

Tuscany is a triangular-shaped region in the heart of Italy. Tuscany borders Liguria and Emilia in the north, Marche and Umbria in the east and Lazio to the south. The long stretch of coastline to the west borders the Tyrrhenian Sea and contains the Tuscan Archipelago National Park with Elba being its largest island. The Apuan Alps and Apennines can be found in the northern and eastern parts of Tuscany. Tuscany is the 5th largest in terms of area with 8,877 square miles and ninth most populous region out of the twenty regions with 3,692,828 inhabitants. It is also 5th in economy with a GDP of 106,013 million euros. Tuscany is divided into 10 provinces: Massa Carrara, Lucca, Pistoia, Prato, Firenze, Pisa, Grosseto, Arezzo, Siena and Livorno. Florence is the main city and capital of the region.

Tuscany is known for its landscapes, history, artistic legacy and its influence on high culture. It is regarded as the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance. Tuscany is a popular destination in Italy; the main tourist spots are Florence, Pisa, Lucca, Siena, Versilia, Maremma, and Chianti. The village of Castiglione della Pescaia is the most visited seaside destination in the region with seaside tourism accounting for approximately 40% of tourists.

Tuscany is one of the most prosperous agricultural regions in Italy, specializing in cereals (especially wheat), olives, olive oil and wines, notably those of the Chianti district near Siena. Vegetables and fruit are also grown and cattle, horses, pigs, and poultry are extensively raised.

The mineral resources in the region are iron ore, lead, zinc, antimony, mercury, copper and the marble of

Carrara which is world famous. Tourism is important at the coastal resorts and the historical centers of the region. Increasingly, Tuscany is also a retirement center of choice for well-to-do people from around the world.

Tuscany is a special land, an almost open-air museum unlike anywhere else in the world. There are more UNESCO World Heritage sites in Tuscany than in Australia or South Africa. UNESCO has declared 7 places in Tuscany as World Heritage sites. They are the historic center of Florence, the Cathedral square of Pisa, the historical center of San Gimignano (City of the 100 Towers), the historical center of Siena, the historical center of Pienza, the Val d'Orcia, and the Medici Villas and Gardens. Tuscany has over 120 protected nature reserves making Tuscany and its capital, Florence, popular tourist destinations that attract millions of tourists every year.

## A Brief History

Inhabited in prehistoric times mostly around the lakes and rivers which were far from the marshes of the coast, the region was occupied in the 11th century BC by the Etruscans, who originally occupied a great part of central Italy including Tuscany, Umbria and Marche. The Etruscans were artisans and merchants who established an organized civilization in the region, founding cities like Chiusi, Volterra, Cortona, Arezzo and Fiesole.

Like the Greeks, their political organization was based on federations of independent cities united by national and religious identity. Even though this was the source of their rich culture, it was also the reason for their



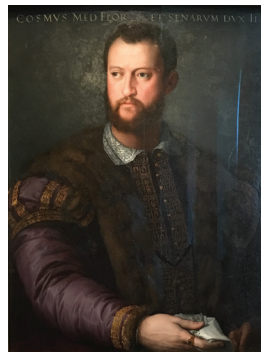


defeat by less civilized but better militarily organized people like the Romans. By the 3rd century BC, Romans occupied the region which was still called Etruria and included Umbria. Later as the Septima Regio of the Empire, it came to be called Tuscia and its capital city became Florentia.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the region was occupied by the Lombards who established the Tuscia Dukedom in the early 7th century AD and then by the Franks who founded the marquisdom of Toscana with its capital, Lucca. In 1115, Countess Matilde left all of her possessions to the Church, which was at the origin of the conflicts with the Empire and the rise of the two parties, Guelphs (followers of the Pope) and Ghibellines (followers of the Emperor). Wars were fought between the Tuscan cities until the Guelphs, at whose head was Florence, finally prevailed.

In Florence, wealth and independence gave rise to culture, art and the supremacy of the Tuscan dialect which centuries later would become the model for the Italian language and, therefore, to strong feelings of national identity for Italy though it would remain politically divided until 1860 and beyond.

Tuscany was the starting point of the Revival of Learning and the Renaissance, long before the conventional date of the end of the Middle Ages in 1492. The Tuscan cities, that for centuries had enjoyed independence, economic wealth and freedom, were gradually suppressed first under the Medici rule and then in 1569 when Cosimo I Medici was appointed by the Pope as Grand Duke of Tuscany. Once the Medici dynasty died out, the region passed in 1718 to the Spaniards and then in 1737 to the Habsburgs of Austria. Apart from the Napoleonic period, the restoration of Grand Duke Leopoldo II marked a



period of liberalism and tolerance and Tuscany was united to the Italian Kingdom through a referendum in 1860.

The late 19th century through the early 20th century marks a period of social unrest due to social inequities such as poverty, high taxes, no universal voting rights, strikes, unemployment, food shortages, etc. Tuscany was not spared any of these woes which combined with the WWI deaths (Italy was on the Allies side) ushered in Benito Mussolini. In the 1930's, Mussolini hastily agreed to an economic and military alliance with Germany. Contrary to the bold claims of Mussolini's propaganda machine, Tuscany and the rest of Italy was ill-prepared for the war it entered in 1940. Following the fall of Mussolini and the armistice of September 8, 1943, Tuscany became part of the Nazi-controlled Italian Social Republic and was conquered almost totally by the Anglo-American forces during the summer of 1944.

Today Tuscany is a major cultural center with museums, galleries, and churches full of great sculptures, paintings, and frescoes and magnificent monuments built by the greatest masters of all time. Tuscany attracts millions of tourists each year.

## Cuisine and Wine

Wine runs deep in Tuscany, woven deep into the cultural identity of this central Italian region. The medieval poet, Dante, sang the praises of the white wine, Vernaccia of San Gimignano. Sangiovese is the main red grape of Tuscany and it appears throughout the region in everything from 100% Sangiovese wines to minor roles supporting modern-styled wines made of Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Tuscany is home to some of the world's most notable wine regions. Located in the central region of Tuscany, the Chianti zone is Tuscany's largest classified wine region and produces over eight million cases a year. The Chianti zone was established in 1932 and there are now eight sub-zones: Classico (generally regarded as the best), Rufina, Colli Fiorentini, Colli Senesi, Colline Pisane, Colli Aretini, Montalbano and Montespertoli.





Photo by Steven Depoto@Flickr.com

Chianti (which must contain at least 70% Sangiovese), Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano are primarily made with Sangiovese grape whereas the Vernaccia grape is the basis of the white Vernaccia di San Gimignano. Tuscany is also known for the dessert wine, Vin Santo, made from a variety of the region's grapes. While Tuscany is not the only Italian region to make the passito dessert wine, Vin Santo (meaning "holy wine"), the Tuscan versions of the wine are well regarded and sought for by wine consumers. It was in Tuscany that the first DOC and DOCG zones establishing criteria for quality wines, like the French appellation system, were established. Tuscany has forty-one Denominazioni di origine controllata (DOC) and eleven Denominazioni di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG). In the 1970's, a new class of wines known in the trade as "Super Tuscans" emerged. These wines were made outside DOC/DOCG regulations but were considered of high quality and commanded high prices. Many of these wines became cult wines.

Tuscan people worship their bread, their olive oil and the traditional bruschetta which in Tuscany is known as fettunta. Torta di ceci is a type of thin, unleavened pancake or crêpe made from chickpea flour, crisp on the outside with a soft inside. It is naturally vegan and gluten-free. Eat the torta with a good sprinkling of black pepper or add grilled eggplant for a delicious meal.

Ribollita is a recipe to use up stale bread. "Ribollita" (shown here) means "reboiled" and was traditionally made by re-boiling left-over minestrone. It is a hearty, filling soup containing different kinds of cabbage, beans, onions, and carrots. A perfect mix to face the cold season.



Photo by Joy@Flickr.com

Acquacotta, which means cooked water, is a vegetable soup enriched with a poached egg.

Pappa al Pomodoro is another thick bread-based soup prepared with tomato and basil among other seasonal vegetables. It is often served as a warm winter-time comfort food. But since it can also be served room temperature or chilled, it is a popular choice for buffets and appetizers!

In addition to spinach and ricotta filled ravioli, another typical recipe for fresh filled pasta is potato tortelli which is usually served with a hearty game meat sauce.

Pappardelle al Cinghiale is a long, wide, flat pasta that is usually paired with a heavy ragu like sauce. This dish has a few variations regarding the type of meat in the ragu. Cinghiale is wild boar (traditionally wild, but now usually made with farmed free-range boars) but the sauce can also be made with wild hare, goose, or rabbit.

If you are keen on trying quirky street food, do not miss Lampredotto which is a sandwich made with thinly sliced tripe (intestines) that's been boiled in broth, seasoned, and served either on a plate or in a sandwich. You can order it with spicy red sauce or herbal green sauce from outdoor markets or street vendors.

Crostini Toscani is bread, like a baguette, where chopped chicken liver sauce is spread. The pate is typically prepared with butter, anchovies, capers, onion, and broth and the crostini are served as an appetizer or snack. Something similar for a starter is an Antipasto Toscano which is a cutting board full of the meats and cheeses of the region.



Acquacotta



Pappardelle al Cinghiale



Lampredotto



Since Tuscan bread goes stale within a few days if not eaten, Panzanella is yet another way to make use of this leftover. The bread is soaked in water and vinegar, squeezed dry and mixed with fresh chopped cucumber, onion, tomato and basil. It is perfect for summertime since it does not need any cooking and is served refreshingly chilled.

Lardo di Colonnata is cured pork lard (which has been awarded the IGP quality certification).

Florence's most famous dish, Bistecca alla Fiorentina or Florentine T-bone steak is taken from the loin of the young steer (vitellone) and has a "T" shaped bone with the fillet on one side and the sirloin on the other. T-Bone steak is served exceedingly rare, or "al sangue". True to the Tuscan tradition of simplicity, it is typically enjoyed with just a bit of olive oil and salt to let the natural flavor shine.

The most classic of desserts comes from Florence. Cantucci are known all over the world simply as biscotti, but in Italian, this is the generic word for cookies. These small almond cookies can be found anywhere and have modern variations including being made with hazelnuts or pistachios in place of almonds. As a dessert, the classic almond cookies are served with a type of thick amber-colored dessert wine called Vin Santo. Tuscans say you must soak the cookies into the wine to soften them, then enjoy.



**Cantucci**

Schiacciata Fiorentina is a spongy, rectangular, one-layer flat yellow cake that is covered in powdered sugar and is easily identified by the large fleur-de-lys stenciled in cocoa powder on top. Traditionally eaten more around the time of Carnevale, this cake can be found in just about every Tuscan bakery at any given time of year and it has become a staple of Tuscan desserts.

Castagnaccio is a traditional cake made with chestnut flour. It can be eaten all year round because it is good both warm and cold.

Truffles are a specialty in Tuscany because they are much more attainable here than they are in other parts of the world. Truffles cannot be cultivated so they must be hunted for in the woods using a dog or pig to sniff them out. Truffles can be saved and used year-round but October and November provide the perfect truffle-friendly climate making them a traditional autumn ingredient. They are perfect with fresh handmade pappardelle. A must-see event in November is the White Truffle Festival in San Miniato!

*(Note: There will be a more in-depth article regarding truffles in further editions of the Siamo Qui.)*

## Did you know?

Tuscany was the trendsetter for paved roads in Europe. In 1339, Tuscany decided to pave their roads and this innovative measure expanded throughout Europe making the cities more accessible and bringing an exciting new level of prestige to Europe.

Tuscany is where the Italian language was born. The official Italian language spoken today is based on the Tuscan dialect that dates back to the Renaissance period.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa is not the only leaning tower. The Leaning Tower of Pisa leans because it was built on unstable marshland and it weighs almost 15,000 tons. However, there are other towers that lean in the area including the bell towers at the Church of St. Nicola and the Church of St. Michele dei Scalzi.

Some of the most precious artwork ever created came from Tuscany with many housed here. Botticelli's famous painting, "The Birth of Venus", is housed in the Uffizi Gallery and Michelangelo's David can be found in Florence. Also, you can find many amazing frescos, sculptures, paintings and much more in the churches and cathedrals around the region.

This region was the birthplace of the western musical tradition. In Florence in the mid-16th century, the Florentine Camerata, a group of poets, musicians and intellectuals, got together and started experimenting with putting ancient Greek myths to music on the stage. This was the origin of the very first operas which lead to early classical forms such as the symphony.

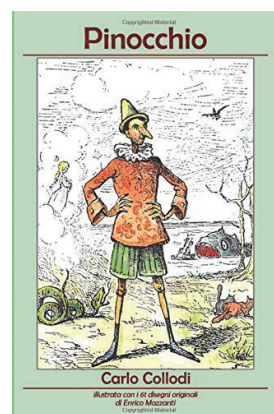


Many celebrities live in Tuscany. Some of the famous people who own property here include the musician, Sting, fashion designer, Giorgio Armani, author, Francis Mayes, actor, Richard Gere and actor, Antonio Banderas.

One of the greatest Italian singers/songwriters of all time, Andrea Bocelli, is from Lajatico, Tuscany and is famous the world over for his incredible voice. Blinded

at age twelve following a football accident, he continues to surpass the sale of over 100 million records worldwide.

Pinocchio hails from Tuscany. Most people associate Pinocchio with the 1940 Disney film but the original story was written in 1826 by Carlo Collodi who hailed from Florence.



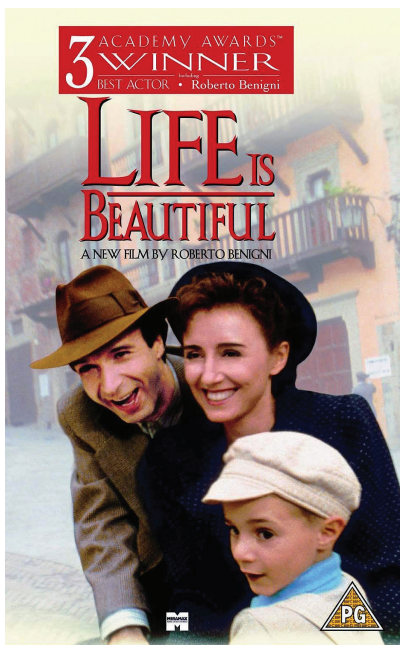


## REGIONS OF ITALY

The Grand Duchy of Tuscany was the first state in the whole world to abolish the death penalty. It happened in 1786 during the Lorena rule.

The Arthurian legend of the sword in the stone meets Medieval spirituality in the Montesiopi Chapel near Chiusdino which is dedicated to San Galgano. This is where the knight-turned saint, Galgano Guidotti, thrust his sword into the stone to renounce violence and embrace God. Today we can still see it and it reminds us that the Medieval past is never far away in Tuscany.

Arguably one of the most famous Tuscan/Italian actors (that I adore), Roberto Benigni, is best known for his 1997 film 'La Vita E' Bella' or 'Life is Beautiful'. A beautiful story about an Italian Jewish man who tried to protect his son's innocence using humor and wit in the most horrible of places, a Nazi concentration camp. He won the Oscar for his role and has a star dedicated to him in Palm Springs, California on the Walk of Stars.



Dante Alighieri (depicted here) was born in the year 1265 in Florence. He was a poet, writer and political thinker – his poetic trilogy, The Divine Comedy changed the world with its tale of a human trip through purgatory, heaven, and hell, and p.s. it is considered the greatest work in Italian literature. I also should mention he is known for being the father of the Italian language.



Florence was the birthplace of Catherine de Medici, daughter of the famous Lorenzo de Medici, who later became Queen of France and mother to three kings.

Everyone knows the name Leonard DaVinci but not many know that he was born on April 15, 1452, an illegitimate son whose last name was simply the town where he was born-Vinci, Tuscany.

Galileo Galilei, the father of modern astronomy, was born in Pisa in 1564 and is buried in Santa Croce Church in Florence.

Niccolo Machiavelli, born in 1469, was responsible for the famous handbook for power-hungry politicians, The Prince. His work inspired the term "Machiavellian" (using clever lies and tricks to get or achieve something). He is known to be the "father of modern political theory."

The city of Florence is a blend of the modern and the ancient. Narrow streets, Renaissance-era churches merge with modern architecture, designer outlets, fantastic open squares, museums, and so many sites to see, it will earn a future article that will just hint at its singular beauty and value.

The Palio di Siena, Tuscany is a horse race that is held twice each year, on July 2nd and August 16th, in Siena, Italy. Ten horses and riders, bareback and dressed in the appropriate colors, represent ten of the seventeen contrade/city wards. Huge communal dinners are held before the race days and the winning contrade gets bragging rights and their colors displayed throughout the next year. The opening scene of the James Bond film, Quantum of Solace, begins with the Siena Palio festival.

