

# My dream of Tuscany

**TYPICAL TUSCANY:** A medieval hilltop hamlet undulating, vine-clad hills and a cypress-lined avenue

Vintage convertible, check. Beautiful companion, check. Good food and better wine. John Norton's Italian road trip exceeds his daydreams

**M**ovies like *Eat, Pray, Love*, *A Good Year* and *Letters To Juliet* have stirred even the most dormant romantic and have surely made every foodie quiver with excitement. Getting lost in the Tuscan countryside and hap-

pening upon a picture postcard setting or being welcomed by wizened locals and invited to join an idyllic gastronomic scene are the stuff of dreams for anyone interested in travel and food.

Long ago, when daydreaming of a road trip through this part of Italy, I knew I would need two things to complete the trip; a beautiful woman, and

a classic Italian convertible. I had one of these in the form of my girlfriend Siobhán, a passionate traveller and foodie. My search for the perfect convertible led me to Sprintage Classic Car Touring. With seven days to discover an area the size of Munster, the car was an integral part of the trip.

I spotted the perfect little red ►



**CONVERTIBLE:** John with girlfriend Siobhán O'Connor and the Alfa Romeo Spider

Our next stop was the hilltop Castello Banfi. Driving up the cypress-lined avenue overlooking the estate's 7,000-acre vineyard fulfilled much of my Tuscan dream. The sprawling estate was once a village and, despite its size, consists of just 15 rooms. They felt like the real deal with just the right amount of modern comfort married with mosaic tiled floors, giant wooden framed beds and large windows flung open to the vineyard below. It soon dawned on me that the hotel is secondary to Banfi's world-renowned winery.

**F**or dinner we shared various dishes comprising scallops, quail, wild boar with home-made pasta and herb-crusted John Dory before settling on a range of Italian cheeses and a warm chocolate pudding for dessert. A bottle of Riserva Banfi Chianti complemented the meal perfectly and really gave us a sense of the marriage of wine and food that Tuscany is all about.

A Tuscan cooking course with the head chef the following day was a highlight of the trip. I must admit I was not, initially, so keen. Siobhán is an avid cook and was genuinely excited, whereas I had resigned myself to chopping vegetables and guzzling wine. But the chef's genuine passion was intoxicating and I found myself getting carried away with the experience – the wine helped, I'm sure. There were several bottles of prosecco and wine on hand to ensure the craic flowed all day.

Castello Banfi gave us the feeling of having truly experienced Tuscany. This feeling was reinforced when, on

our last night there, we ventured to a nearby village and were warmly welcomed at its sole restaurant where we dined with locals who even drove us back to the hotel when the battery died in the Alfa Romeo.

## Castello Banfi, Montalcino, Siena

Medieval hilltop village at the heart of the Banfi winery. Its 15 rooms offer a blend

of the modern and traditional – think mosaic floors, lots of ancient wood and vine-clad hills as far as the eye can see. Has a restaurant, vast cellar, wine museum and tasting courses. Heaven for wine buffs.



A breeze through the windy city  
Page 77

# TRAVEL