

Zeneba Bowers
Matt Walker



WHERE TO EAT
WHERE TO STAY
WHAT TO SEE
WHERE TO SHOP

Tuscany

ITALY

Small-town Itineraries for the Foodie Traveler



SECOND EDITION

ADVANCE REVIEWS

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Tuscany, Italy
Small-town Itineraries for the Foodie Traveler

Zeneba Bowers & Matt Walker

S E C O N D E D I T I O N

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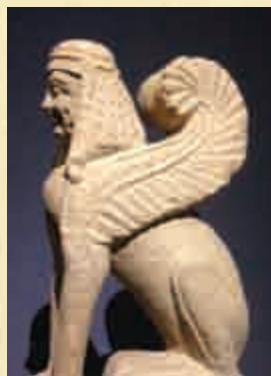
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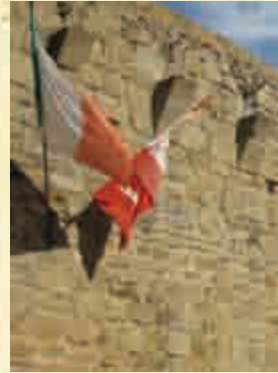
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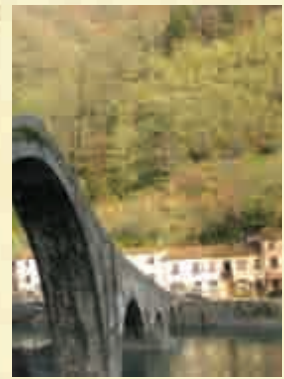
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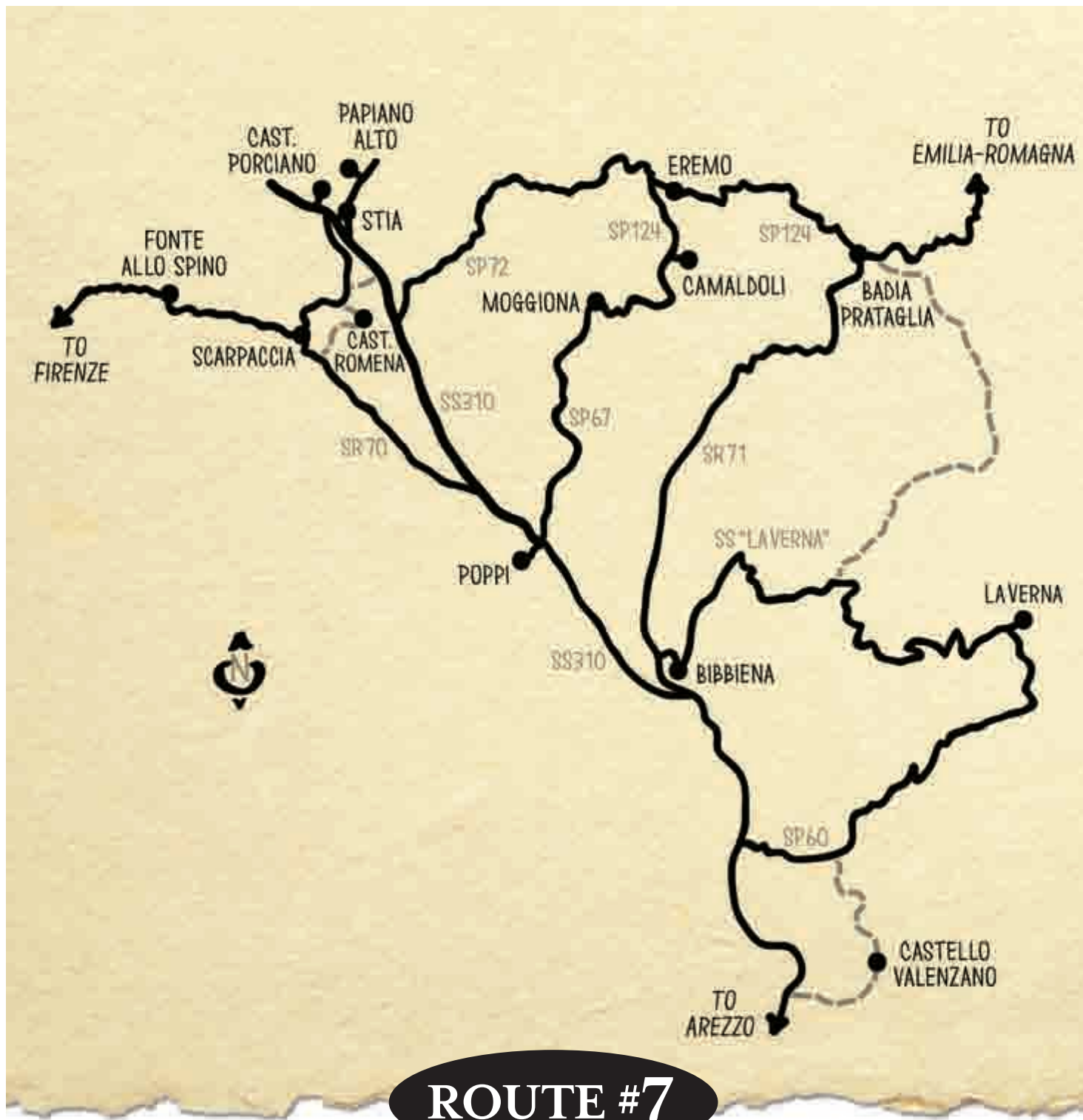
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ROUTE #7

Northeast Tuscany the Casentino

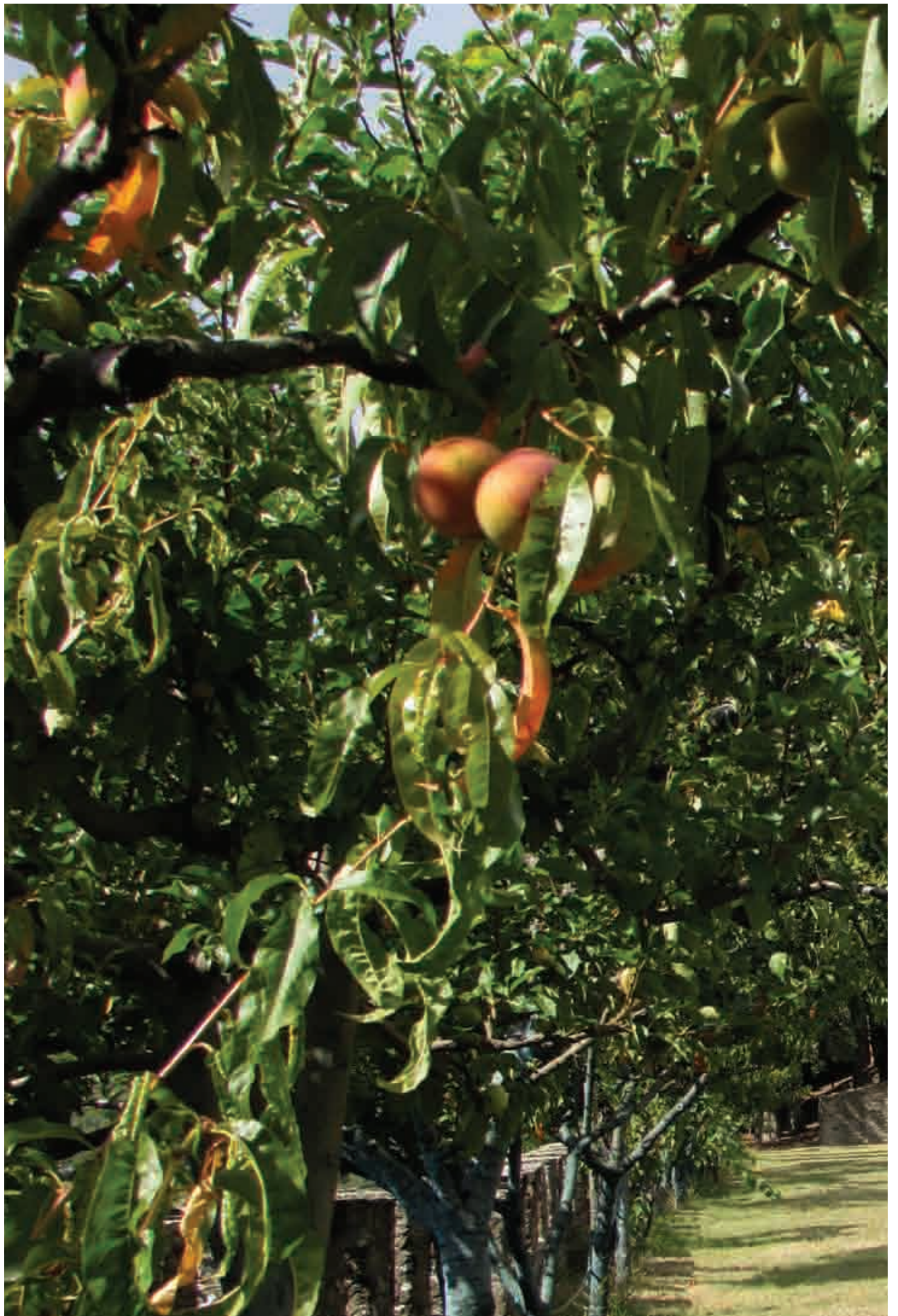
Almost as overlooked as the Garfagnana are the mountainous, forested northeast reaches of Tuscany's Casentino region.

At the top of this immense valley is the source of the Arno River, the same one that snakes south and then back north and west to bisect Firenze before continuing west all the way to Pisa and the Ligurian Sea. Some of the Casentino's Apennine peaks are more than a mile high. The smaller, more manageable hills became strongholds for the powerful families of the medieval era, most notably the Counts Guidi, longtime rivals of the Florentines.



Begin this drive at the southern part of the Casentino. Off of the SR 71 north of Arezzo, a winding tree-lined road leads to the stunning **Castello di Valenzano**. More than a thousand years ago, a fortification was established here to overlook the ancient road along the Arno River. It was built up over subsequent centuries, falling into the hands of various factions as wars determined local power. It has been in the Rondinelli family since the 18th century, when major renovations and design created the present building – a neo-Gothic storybook castle. Take a magical stroll through the grounds, admiring the mixed architecture, taking in the aroma of the fruit trees and wood smoke from the restaurant's grill, and enduring the glares from the gargoyles adorning the walls. Look for the recurring crest featuring a flock of swallows – the sigil of the Rondinelli family. Visitors can lodge in the castle for reasonable rates and enjoy a romantic restaurant on-site. It serves up beautiful plates of traditional regional cuisine, specializing in wood-grilled meat dishes.

Continuing north, we visit **Bibbiena**, one of the few medieval hill towns of any size in the area without a castle. Consequently, most tourists skip this town, giving visitors the chance to experience an authentic feel for life in this region. Its central Piazza Tarlati (named for a local power family of





yore) bustles with local color. History and archaeology buffs will want to amble through the small but enlightening **Museo Archeologico del Casentino**, which displays eons of history, from prehistoric times to the Roman era. Several churches dot the town and showcase well-preserved Renaissance and medieval artwork. The **Church of San Lorenzo** contains two tableaus by the famous Renaissance ceramic artist Andrea della Robbia. His work can be found all over the Casentino and throughout Tuscany.



Andrea della Robbia

Visitors to sacred sites all around the Casentino and throughout Tuscany will get used to seeing the distinctive blue and white ceramic artwork of Andrea della Robbia. He was the apprentice of his uncle Luca, and he became the undisputed master of this art form. His students, including his own son Giovanni, carried on his artistic methods, creating a “della Robbia” tradition that influenced generations of artists in this medium.

Down a little side street in the medieval centro, seek out the excellent **Ristorante Il Tirabusció**. This place is part of the “Slow Food Presidium”, a loose network of restaurants devoted to presenting high-quality food from local, organic producers, who are highlighted in the menu. For specially marked dishes on Tirabusció’s menu, like seasonal *testaroli e pesto*, (a thick, pancake pasta), a portion of sales supports the Slow Food movement. This cozy, casual, relaxed place caters to tastes of the locals with great ingredients from the surrounding countryside.

Just a 5-minute drive from the Bibbiena *centro* is the **Santuario di Santa Maria del Sasso**. This 14th-century church was built following a purported vision of the Virgin Mary on this site.



The church contains a ceramic piece by della Robbia, but the real interest here is the way the church was built around the living rock; one stone juts out of the floor behind the altar. The walls of the crypt below are raw stone as well; one area is a shrine where devout visitors leave notes of prayer for loved ones, in hope that the Madonna who once appeared there will grant their wishes.

For those interested in religious history, an excursion east into the hills is a must. Winding and climbing through the forest for a half hour or so leads to the remote, 12th-century **Santuario Franciscano de La Verna**. An extensive village in itself, it seems to have been piled precariously on the rock mountainside. The site marks an important

religious pilgrimage destination and makes a fascinating tourist stop, so get there early or in the off-season.

The sanctuary has several churches, chapels, and shrines as well as lodging for the resident priests and nuns in charge of its care. At the top, a stark wooden cross dominates a cobbled *piazza*





overlooking the valley to the west; a walk down a few dozen steps leads to a cold stone cave. Saint Francis of Assisi resided here for some time and is said to have received the stigmata here while meditating in his grotto. His room and one of his tattered monk's robes have been preserved for visitors to see.

Scattered all over the sanctuary walls are more

ceramic pieces by the aforementioned della Robbia and his artistic heirs, as well as a long hallway with frescoes depicting different episodes of St Francis' life.

Returning to the Arno River and continuing north, the **Castello di Poppi** soon comes into view. This is the central town and castle of the Casentino. Built in the 12th century, it was the stronghold of several generations of Counts of the powerful Guidi family during medieval times. It was eventually taken over and expanded by the Florentine power structure. Inside this architectural marvel is a treasure trove of medieval and Renaissance art, ancient manuscripts in the library, the obligatory bleak prison rooms, and stunning views from the top of the bell tower. The inner courtyard walls are covered with the coats of arms of the various Florentine governors who took up residence here over the centuries. One room houses a museum piece displaying the Battle of Campaldino, a huge-scale military action fought in 1289 AD, which was a key battle between the rival political factions of the Guelphs & Ghibellines. The taxing climb to the top of the main tower offers 360-degree views of the countryside. Keep an eye on the time when you're up here: the tolling bells can be powerfully loud when they ring out the hour for the entire valley to hear.

Guelphs vs Ghibellines

In the 11th and 12th centuries, two of the dominant factions in the conflict between the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire were the Guelphs (Team Pope) and the Ghibellines (Team Emperor). These conflicts began as a classic clash of Church and State, but the two groups continued their animosity for several more centuries, leaving their mark on Tuscany's history in the Casentino, as well as other places in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna to the north. Many historic sites saw bloody power struggles between the two groups who attempted to control the strategic riverways and hilltops of the region.

For high quality and affordable lodging in Poppi, the excellent **Albergo San Lorenzo** sits at the foot of the castle, outside the old walls. The building is built on the hillside around an 11th-century chapel, which is used today for events and art exhibitions. Many of the hotel's rooms overlook the valley to the south and east. The best room has a lovely, expansive balcony, perfect for a snack and a bottle of wine in the evening. In good weather, a typical Italian breakfast is served on a beautiful covered terrace.

Just below the castle, Poppi's *centro* is small and tight, with a porticoed main street and many shops and restaurants. Tucked down a side street is **L'Antica Cantina**, an establishment built, as the name implies, in an ancient wine cellar. The low brick walls and ceilings make this a romantic place



to enjoy traditional and seasonal fare, with hand-made pastas and (of course!) an extensive and varied wine list.

Other sights include the **Oratory of the Madonna del Morbo**, a hexagonal building in the middle of the central *piazza*. The 10th-century **Chiesa di San Fedele** houses ancient artwork and, in the crypt, the remains of Torello, a favorite son of Poppi. On the road up the hill to the town is a





large World War II monument whose pillars are reminiscent of buildings in the Roman Forum.

Still farther upriver from Poppi is another hill-top castle, this one in ruined splendor: The **Castello di Romena**, another Guidi stronghold. Its ghostly remains still have an aura of the power and nobility. Its two towers,—one a prison, the other a keep—at either end of a large cypress-lined courtyard overlook the valley in all directions. Some say that Dante Alighieri was a guest here (in the keep, not the prison!), and he writes about it in his *Inferno*. A “Master Adamo” was a resident of Romena, where he was hired by the Counts Guidi to make fake Florentine coins. The dukes of Flo-

rence discovered the plot and executed Adamo, hence his presence in Dante's hellscape.



From the castle it's a short drive or a moderate stroll down the hill to the stunning **Pieve di San Pietro di Romena**. This church was built in the 12th century on the remains of an earlier (8th-century) religious site. Remnants of the older one can be seen in the church's crypt space under the sanctuary. Take particular note of the capitals of some of the columns, depicting people, animals, and otherworldly creatures. One capital commemorates the *Tempore Famis*, the Time of Famine of 1152. The date is inscribed in Roman numerals on the column. This historic calamity inspired the religious-minded (which, back then, was basically

everybody) to even more piety. The church sits on the edge of a tiny village, the *Fraternità di Romena*, a religious pilgrimage retreat. The church's stunning location in the heart of the Casentino valley makes it easy to see why it is such a destination for the devout.

Meander to the SR70 and head west along the road to Consuma, back in the direction of Firenze. This is another winding rural road with stunning views of the Casentino forest hills at every turn. Make a stop at **Bar Scarpaccia**, named for the village that is just a cluster of buildings at a crossroads. This all-purpose bar-restaurant —*salumeria-tabaccheria*-post office is a popular meeting place for the locals. It is also regarded as one of the best sources of locally produced cured meats, especially *finocchietto* (fennel salami) and *prosciutto* made from wild boar (*cinghiale*) of the Casentino. Enjoy a drink and a *panino* for a real taste of the local food coupled with an authentic feel for the local life here.

For a more standard, sit-down restaurant setting, the **Locanda Fonte allo Spino** is just a bit further west on the same road to Consuma. After miles and miles of woods and valleys, you'll be sure you missed it, but don't turn around; it finally appears from seemingly nowhere. This is the kind of place that locals come for a special Sunday





lunch. Given the out-of-the-way location, it's clear people take eating here seriously. The Martini family, in the restaurant business for several generations, offer traditional local dishes in a light and cheery atmosphere. The adjacent shop sells all manner of locally produced foodstuffs.



Returning yet again to the Arno river valley, continue north to the mill town of **Stia**. Situated directly on the river, this town used water-power to become an economic powerhouse, producing the region's famous cloth in its wool mills. The extremely durable and strong Casentino cloth has been made here for some seven centuries. Initially

the Franciscans used the cloth for their monastic robes and other mundane purposes, but today it is a hallmark of high fashion to wear a colorful coat or cloak of this material. A central source for these products now is **Tessilnova Wool Merchants** in the old mill building. It offers plenty of high-end materials such as mohair and cashmere in addition to goods made of Casentino cloth.

A short drive north from Stia leads to another tiny hilltop hamlet and the tower of **Castello di Porciano**. Originally another Guidi outpost protecting the river and Stia, this 11th-century tower is now a museum and residence. The first three floors are devoted to exhibits on local history and culture, spanning antiquity to recent times. Many residents of nearby farms and homesteads have brought old family artifacts for display here — ancient farming equipment, household tools, and weaponry — to show a slice of family life in the Casentino. Dante was famously a guest at this castle as well, as several displays attest.

The upper floors house the owner's residence. Martha Specht is the daughter of George Specht, an American officer, and Flaminia Goretti, an Italian nurse, who met in the aftermath of the Second World War. (George was from North Dakota; one display case contains items of Lakota origin, very incongruous in a medieval Italian castle.) George

and Flaminia's love story is featured in the museum displays, and the tower stands as testament, casting its shadow across their gravesite in the family cemetery just outside the walls.

The Specht-Goretti family has recently converted many of the surrounding buildings — on the remnants of the old castle walls — into vacation rentals. They make for an out-of-the-way stay in this beautiful region. The tiny village lacks bars and restaurants, but a scant 10-minute drive takes the hungry traveler to another nearby village, **Papiano**. It's home to the big dining room and lovely patio of **Trattoria da Loris**, one of the region's most popular restaurants. It offers an assortment of handmade pastas with various sauces, but don't miss the house specialties: "*scottiglia*", a spicy stew of beef, rabbit, pork, and chicken, falling off the bone; and "*acqua cotta*", a traditional soup that varies depending on what's in the kitchen at any given moment. Both are typically served to large tables of boisterous locals, so eating here feels like a true Italian experience. It's casual and relaxed, and steeped in the traditions of generations of residents. The menus are only in Italian and the staff speaks little or no English. But don't worry, if you're not that comfortable speaking Italian: Everyone here is very friendly, and eating here is worth any amount of pointing and gesturing. Just



remember three words: “*Scottiglia, per favore!*”

Departing from the path of the Arno, climb east through more forested hills to reach another local food destination, in the tiny hamlet of **Mogiona**. Here the owners of **Ristorante Il Cedro** serve local and seasonal dishes, prepared according to their *Casentinesi* family traditions. Specialties are

funghi (mushrooms, common in these forests, served on *crostini*) and handmade pastas with sauces made from the daily spoils of the local *cacciatori* (hunters). They also stock several *liquori* from the nearby monastery, so it's a good place to sample a couple (but not if you're the driver) before continuing to their source, just a little farther up the hill.

Scottiglia and Acqua cotta

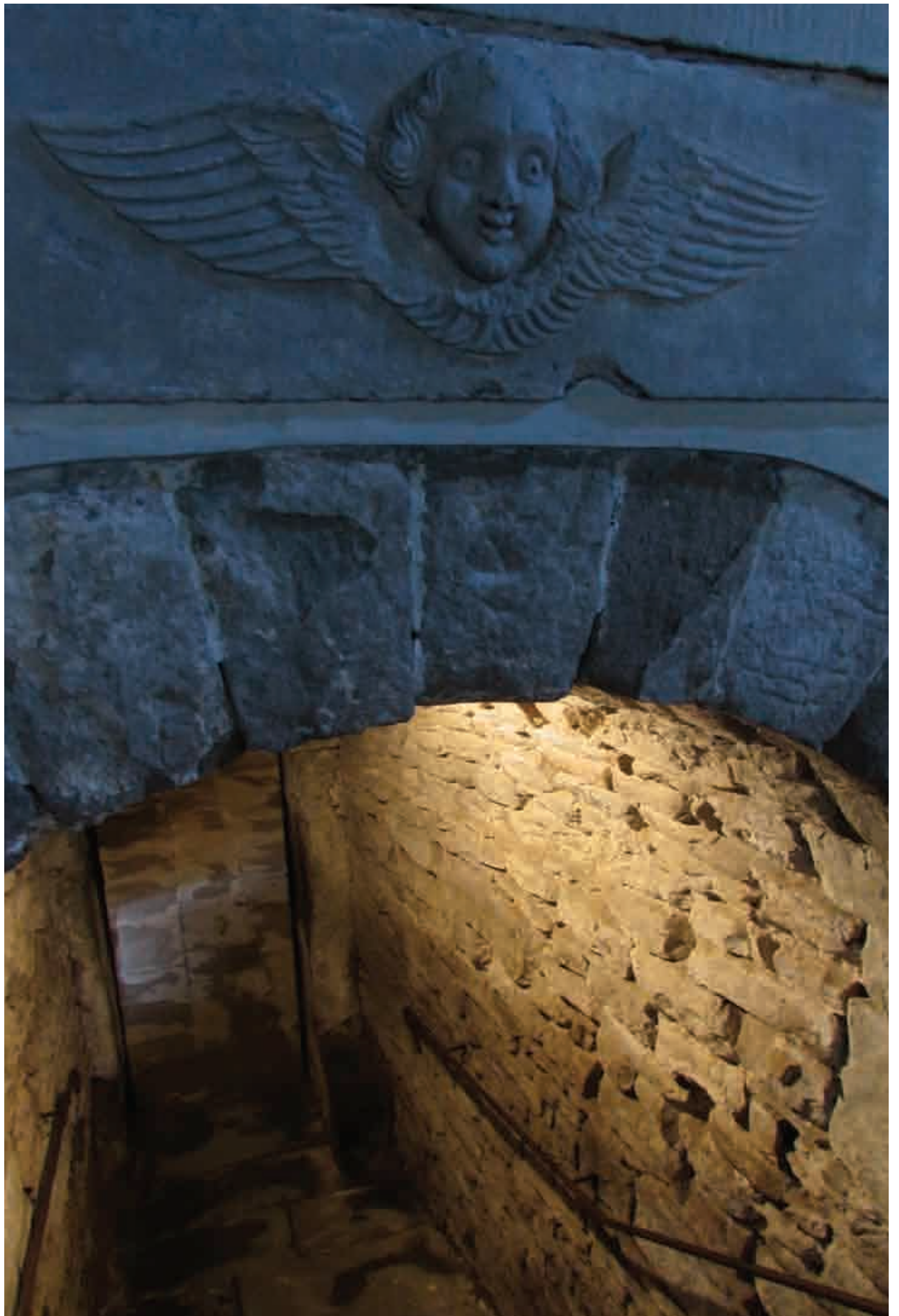
These are two of the most popular “peasant dishes” of the Casentino: *Scottiglia* is a delicious savory stew of multiple meats, including beef, chicken, lamb, and sometimes wild boar, or even rabbit, or venison (depending on what the forest hunters have been up to lately). The meat is served in a dish with *bruschette*, which are “*fare la scarpetta*” — to sop up the spicy, flavorful sauce. *Acqua cotta* — literally meaning “cooked water” — is a hodgepodge of various ingredients in a brothy soup. Both dishes exemplify the *cucina povera* of Tuscany — simple, local, seasonal, delicious.

The **Monastero di Camaldoli** was founded in the 11th century, and the monks here are doing things much as they did a thousand years ago. They produce honey, *liquori*, and many other foods, while attending to their ancient devotions. Set deep in the dense and fragrant woods, this is a beautiful and quiet setting. It's a destination for many religious travelers seeking refuge and solace, as well as a fruitful stop for those looking for

a bit of unspoiled history. The church here is stunning, ornately decorated with frescoes and various artworks from across the centuries, including work by the famous Renaissance artist Giorgio Vasari.

A must-see is the **Antica Farmacia**, the old pharmacy. A great stop for stocking up on many monastic products, the shop also has a museum component. On display are antique machinery, intricately carved wooden doors and walls, centuries-old anatomy texts with drawings of internal organs, and a stuffed alligator. (Yes, an alligator. Why?) We love the *liquori*. here; our favorite is





“Laurus 48,” an aromatic herbal *digestivo* made from an ancient recipe — the ingredients on the label are listed in Latin!

Camaldoli’s village has a small bar/restaurant, as well as modest lodging, making it not only a pilgrimage spot but also a waypoint for hikers and campers traversing the many footpaths of the expansive Apennine mountain range.

Just a mile or so north of the monastery, even more remote in the forest hills, is the **Eremo di Camaldoli**, the Hermitage where many of the monks and acolytes reside in modest and quiet solitude. This is the original settlement founded by San Romualdo in 1012 AD.

Next, delve even deeper into these mountains, over to **Badia Prataglia**, a small town that grew up around a monastic settlement founded in the 10th century, even older than that of Camaldoli. (“*Badia*” is short for *abbadia*, meaning abbey or monastery.) Though the abbey here was eventually disbanded a few centuries later — the monks of Camaldoli evidently had more influence with the Pope at the time — the original 10th century **Church of Maria Assunta** remains intact. Underneath the church lies a crypt dating back to the 8th century. A walk into this dark, rocky space feels like the first few steps into the underworld. Today a beautiful arboretum is carefully maintained

where the rest of the abbey once stood. Here, look for the entrance to the **Museo Forestale**, the Casentino Forest Museum. Inside, a series of rooms with elaborate and fascinating displays highlight the region's geography, flora, fauna, and history. Volunteer guides are on hand to offer a tour, though the chance of having an English-speaking one is pretty slim in this remote spot. But even non-Italian speakers will find this museum informative and interesting — and free!

From these remote forest towns of these last two chapters — Badia Prataglia, Stia, Borgo a Mozzano, Barga — various little roads wind their way north into and over the Apennines. They lead travelers towards the vast plains beyond — the breadbasket region of Emilia-Romagna, and yet more Little Roads adventures with fascinating history and great food. You can experience those adventures in our book, *Emilia-Romagna: A Personal Guide to Little-known Places Foodies Will Love*.



Thank you!

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— Zeneba & Matt

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