

Not Only in Chianti

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Introduction

Foreign students attending study abroad programs in Italy for an academic term should also explore the not so obvious destinations. Paradoxically, while the number of international students grows (and Italy stands out as their favorite European country), the number of places they visit tends to decrease. It is becoming increasingly rare for those students to explore new sites on their own and — so to speak — go off the beaten path. In this regard, the routes taken by US students while abroad (especially when traveling with large groups of peers) are becoming overtly commercial and, consequently, predictable. This article tries to highlight some short, simple, and yet not so obvious trips in one of the regions that US undergraduates like best when it comes to studying abroad – Tuscany – as well as the pride the local inhabitants take in preserving its terroir and traditions.

Go to your Google Maps, type “Valdarno”, tap on it then jump in your car and take a drive from Florence along the Strada Setteponti, “Seven Bridges Road”. Stop a little further and from the hills of Cavriglia, Montevarchi or Figline Valdarno look ahead and gaze at the Pratomagno, those magnificent mountains of the Appennino, which divide Tuscany from the Emilia Romagna region. Alternatively, if you are already traveling in Chianti, continue and follow the road along the Chiantigiana route towards North-East. Either way, you might spot a particular and unique physical conformation of the valley standing before you: the Valdarno, literally Valley of the River Arno.

Not everyone may know that, up to a hundred thousand years ago, the Valdarno was a lake. To recount the geological history of this corner of Tuscany, we must go back around 5 million years ago. At the end of



Trekking in Valdambra Rapale.



Cycling in Le Balze.

the Pliocene era, when the humanization process of the Earth began, the Apennine ridge of the Pratomagno and the Chianti mountains had already formed. Between the two mountainous reliefs, a depression was created. Surface runoff water, unable to flow away, formed a large lake.

It was located in the area near the Chianti mountains and extended to where the Arno riverbed is now. During that period, the climate was much warmer and more humid. Dense vegetation grew along its shores, which were inhabited by large mastodons and tapirs. Plant deposits, along with animal carcasses that ended up in the basin and the clay acting as insulation, initiated the formation of fossil coal. After millions of years, it would become Italy's largest lignite deposit. It was the Castelnuovo dei Sabbioni deposit, exploited until the early 1990s.

Later on, the Valdarno territory underwent further lowering, lead-

ing to the formation of a new basin larger and deeper than the previous one. It extended from Laterina to Rignano sull'Arno and from the Chianti Mountains to the Pratomagno. The Valdarno was a lake that measured 40 kilometers in length and 10 in width. The various watercourses descending into the valley (carrying clay, sand, and later coarser materials such as gravel and pebbles) caused the lake to fill, thus leading to the formation of a new large plain. The climate became less warm and more temperate. The new environmental conditions favored the extinction of the previous fauna and the arrival of animals typical of the tropical forest such as elephants, hippopotamuses, rhinoceroses, and monkeys.

Today, at the Paleontological Museum of Montevarchi (a small town located in the Valdarno only 45 km from Florence), a skeleton of a large mammoth – the most important in Italy of its kind – can be seen. Among the various findings are the remains of saber-toothed tigers, masterpiece and symbol of the museum itself, cheetahs, giant hyenas, and many other fascinating finds.

Only about a hundred thousand years ago, the Valdarno lake ceased to exist definitively. There was a rupture of the earth's crust in the area of Incisa Valdarno (from which its name derives, as Incisa literally means "cut") due to seismic activity that caused the outflow of water. Thus, a network of watercourses was created, flowing from the highlands into a large river downstream: the Arno, that beautiful river millions of people today know very well, being the lifeblood stream of Florence.

Billions of tons of mud and clay material were removed from the center of the lake. This led to the formation of small valleys, hills and hills, creating a more varied landscape than before. The new habitat favored the extinction of large tropical mammals that no longer found ideal living conditions. The erosive activity of the waters caused the formation of the Balze del Valdarno in the stratified bottoms of this valley, which is an immensely attractive touristic area today.

It is whispered that Leonardo da Vinci was the first to realize that the Valdarno was a lake. His notes in the Hammer codex testify to this. In those notes, he perfectly describes the area and he was so impressed by

those eroded hills, Le Balze, that he depicted them in the landscape of the Mona Lisa.

The lacustrine origin of the Arno valley has made it one of the most fertile lands in Italy. This was recognized as far back as the time of the great Roman historian Titus Livy and still today great wines and olive oil are there produced.

All this demonstrates that the Valdarno Superiore or Valdarno di Sopra (upper Valdarno) has a very fascinating history that deserves to be known and appreciated more. You have undoubtedly heard of Chianti many times, but quite possibly most of you have never heard of the Valdarno. So, if you visit this area, its hills, its valleys, and especially its cliffs, remember that you are not facing simple solidified clay reliefs but rather a still tangible cross-section of Tuscany's geological history filled with fascinating history.

The Valdarno Superiore has been a crossroads of historical and political turnovers since medieval times. Today it is a very well-known productive area for both technology and fashion industries, like PRADA. Despite this, it has managed to preserve its magnificent nature, along with its traditions and the eno-gastronomic peculiarities associated with this splendid territory.

Many of its cities have been built by the Florentine Republic such as Castelfranco di Sopra, Terranuova Bracciolini and San Giovanni Valdarno. They were all conceived with the same layout: parallel streets, a central square with a main church or cathedral and defensive walls. They have given birth to illustrious masters, like Masaccio (the famous painter), who was born in San Giovanni Valdarno, or Poggio Bracciolini, great humanist and historian, after whom Terranuova was named.

You can drive along the provincial roads up into the hills or take a footpath to discover unique medieval churches or mineral water springs. You can swim in the cool waters of natural waterfalls, or take your bike and follow the circuits of great cyclists and eventually get lost elsewhere among beautiful vineyards and olive groves.

This unique territory, located only 40 kilometers away from Flor-

ence, roughly 30 minutes by train, must thank its industrious and attentive inhabitants who do their best to care for their own land and precious history. Among them, Nicola Benini, current mayor of Bucine, stands out together with Enzo Brogi, former mayor of Cavriglia, and Costantino Cattaneo, young entrepreneur who left Milan to change his lifestyle, but above all, to breathe new life into the Valdarno territory by betting on smart investments.

We managed to entertain ourselves with all of them. Here are some excerpts from these interviews:

Nicola Benini

Nicola Benini was elected mayor of Bucine in 2019. Bucine is a lovely town located in Valdambra, the little valley of the Ambra river which includes a quite widespread area where many other pretty villages are situated. He's the main promoter of the project VisitValdarno.

A few months after his election, COVID broke out. It soon became particularly violent in the municipality of Bucine. During the year and a half of lockdown he began to dream of the future and study a new tourist project in the hopes that sooner or later everything would return to normal and perhaps even better:

“The VisitValdarno project involves eight municipalities in the Valdarno: Bucine, Cavriglia, Castelfranco Piandiscò, Laterina Pergine Valdarno, Loro Ciuffenna, Montevarchi, San Giovanni Valdarno and Terranuova Bracciolini.

We wanted to make ourselves known, without focusing on just tourism. Our goal from the beginning was above all to find the right key to developing within our communities the awareness of those who live here.

The main problem that we became aware of is that the general cultural impoverishment has consequently led the citizens to distance themselves from their own roots. The natives did not know their own history. They did not know about the museums of the Valdar-



Nicola Benini

no, the history of the Balze, the history of the Tower of Galatrona and the Pieve di Gropina, which is a medieval jewel next to Loro Ciuffenna.

So, we started collaborating with tour operators – activities that we are still carrying out – on Enogastronomy and culture, which led to involving all trade associations.

We can now proudly say that, as a result, a network of companies was born, initially made up of ten companies that came together collaborating with the public entity and the tourism sector for the commercialization of the territory.

Last but not least, we created the CLOSE TO HOME program to involve our young people, who are the real protagonists of this whole process. In this regard, by including students from various high schools in the studies program, from scientific to linguistic, to graphic advertising, we have launched this initiative.

The project came out as a surprise. It wasn't just "talking about tourism". Thanks to our collaborators from DEDE (Destination Design, a network of business created to combine functions of destination marketing and management), the students were able to create a real advertising agency by working together and doing teamwork.

This allowed them not only to learn while having fun but also to understand the value of what they study every morning in school, which until the day before might have seemed useless and boring.

Tourism was ultimately the pretext that became an accessory to creating something of real value. This nourished and enhanced the personalities of each student, our citizens of tomorrow, who now finally know their territories inside out.

And we did not stop here. There is a large and very old olive tree in a little district of Bucine's municipality, more precisely in Montebenichi: thanks to our project, it is now listed in the repertoire of autochthonous cultivars. It has been scientifically proven that it is a native plant of Valdambra. Forty genotypes have been studied and reproduced in a nursery, all of which have been planted in the sorting field.

The "Montebenichi Olivone", located just below the town, was officially confirmed through genetic investigations in collaboration with the CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - National Research Council) of Florence. There are four other cultivars on the list that could have autochthonous characteristics.

We stumbled upon this treasure somewhat by chance. The olive tree had fallen ill; it's over three hundred years old. So, by calling the CNR to come and conduct tests, thanks to the studies and treatments the plant underwent, it was noticed that this olive tree did not have the same leaves and flowering as other olives in that area. Generally, in Tuscany, there are four or five types of cultivars in the various olive-growing areas. However, with each trip the CNR made to the Montebenichi Olivone, researchers began to notice that the olive trees in our area exhibited a huge variety, with up to for-

ty different species. Perhaps this is due to the presence of an ancient abbey whose monks skillfully, over time, through grafting and crosses, contributed to this varied landscape.

At this point, specialists from the CNR decided to delve into the matter. So, we asked all the growers to start reporting if they had any strange or ancient plants in their fields or ones that did not fit exactly into the norms.

From this data collection, a scientific research project was launched. The cultivars were reproduced in a specialized nursery in Pescia and replanted in the sorting field. This also allows us to constantly have updated data on the performances of the various types of olive trees and their resistance to various climatic effects or pathogens.

The Olivone now has also been reproduced and even multiplied, in the hope of producing a monocultivar! Experts say that the blend is the best oil, but the charm of the unique monocultivar in the world exists only in Bucine.

Later, we participated in calls for innovation, with the aim of building an innovative mill to produce our own olive oil. Our mill is already active and has some unique elements. For example, in the phase of separation between the leaves and the olives, all the parts destined for oil can already be used for other sectors, such as cosmetics.

The mill has been entrusted to a network of companies, eight companies specifically, so that the entrepreneurial realities of the territory can collaborate with each other, and the activity is not the prerogative of a single entrepreneur. The mill is open for visitors, tastings and lunches highlighting only local oils.

Every year, companies produce their crushings, keep them separate, and then these are submitted to the expert's opinion, Professor Parenti, who tastes them and selects the best ones. With the best crushings, the blend is produced and sold as *Olio Nostrum*."

Enzo Brogi

Enzo Brogi was born in 1952 in Loro Ciuffenna and is the former mayor of Caviglia. He began his involvement in cultural and political activities at a very young age, joining Lotta Continua. In 1973, he started working at the ENEL (Ente Nazionale Energia Elettrica) lignite power plant, which used the same lignite deposits we mentioned above. He was elected municipal councilor in Caviglia and in 1991 he became mayor, a position he held until 2004.

“This is a land of struggle”, he says. “But of many satisfactions also. When we say *struggle* we talk about the reopening of the coal mines, because they had been closed at some point and by occupying them, staying inside the tunnels, miners fought to get their jobs back. Their women contributed too: they organized a presence in San Giovanni Valdarno to which people from all over the Valdarno, but not only, came to bring food and money to the miners so they could continue their strike. Many were volunteers.

In this area, journalists and politicians suddenly began to gather: Pietro Nenni and Enrico Berlinguer, a young leader at the time and secretary of the Communist Youth Federation, arrived along with Giuseppe Di Vittorio, historic secretary of the CGIL labor union and one of the greatest personalities of the country.

Lignite began to surface in the area of Castelnuovo dei Sabbioni and Santa Barbara at the beginning of the last century, and by surfacing that ignited with the air, it created sulfurous emissions, which even Grand Duke Leopold (1797-1870) spoke about, saying that these outflows negatively affected the wine, giving it a bad burnt taste.

That is how the locals began to use this kind of fossil as domestic fuel. Lignite is a relatively young coal, four or five million years old, not like coke coal, which is 15 to 18 million years old.

Only later mines were opened, turning this area in a small Wild West to which people came from everywhere, a kind of Eldorado for seeking coal. The mines were many, and so were the small mining

owners who were born here.

The business was huge and entrepreneurs began to join consortia. This is why MIVA, Mines of Valdarno and the Lignites of Valdarno started, as well as projects that became increasingly larger until the 1920s, when there were about four or five thousand miners at work. From all over the Valdarno, these miners who woke up at dawn

walked to Caviglia to stay there from Monday to Saturday and return home on Sunday. They dug in the tunnels.

Consequently, the first workers' associations were born here. The life of the miner was hard, a life of hardships. All men crowded into these dark galleries to dig coal.

Farmers and shepherds, or small local industries, such as hat makers, certainly fared better.

When the Italian Communist Party was established in 1921, very strong communist cells arose in Caviglia. One particular event is worth mentioning, a bloody event: it marked the beginning of Fascism, and this event indeed caused the scattering of the union aggregation.

It was in Caviglia that the eight-hour workday was obtained for the first time. Struggles and trade union actions in this area were truly powerful.

It is also worth mentioning that back in 1917, a small but important thermoelectric power plant was established, powered by fossil fuels, which operated until the end of Fascism. It was the first power plant that brought electricity to Florence. When the gas lamps were removed from the Lungarno to put light bulbs in, that electricity came from here, from the Santa Barbara plant.



Enzo Brogi

During Fascism, the mines continued to work, and Mussolini came from time to time to visit the miners.

However, the plant was bombed in 1944 and in Castelnuovo dei Sabbioni, especially in Meleto, there was a Nazi roundup comparable to that of Sant'Anna di Stazzema or Marzabotto. In July '44, the Germans killed everyone they saw passing by. It was a massacre. Two hundred people died in just one day.

Right after WWII lignite began to become of little interest. This caused local discontent; work was scarce, protests were on the daily agenda. Plants were shut down. Violent protests arose. One of these worth remembering was the "mortadella strike".

Workers in the area received news from London that the conditions of their colleagues overseas were far better. One night, the miners of the Valdarno decided to strike to get something to put between the slices of bread that cost them 200 Lire a day, when they earned 700 Lire a day only. There were many workers and the managers initially rejected the request. 50 grams of mortadella each multiplied by two thousand five hundred workers made 125 kg of cold cuts a day! A crazy expense, which would have raised the selling price of the product. But the miners didn't give up and they opted for a whole month of strikes.

Suddenly they saw a load of 125 kg of mortadella down in the tunnel, arriving every day.

Despite the victory over mortadella, the sector remained in crisis.

The first cooperatives arose, like the Carpineta mine, which continued to dig. Opinions were divergent: some argued that keeping them open could be profitable, while others held the opposite opinion. These lands, grown all around the mines, seemed to have their destiny marked. At some point, the German Krupp family arrived in Cavriglia, the same family who shortly before was producing the V1s missiles that bombed London.

They converted the industry and started producing excavators instead of weapons.

Two converging ideas were born: to build a new power plant (which would then come into operation at the end of the 1950s) and to dig lignite with the excavators.

Betta 1 and Betta 2 (the two machineries that were named after Krupp's daughter Elizabeth) began to work.

Until that moment, the territory, which had remained mostly intact to the eye as the mines were nothing but underground tunnels, completely changed its appearance. Entire villages were displaced, whole communities relocated to totally new villages, and everything was built and financed by ENEL, the national power company.

Faced with these great changes, it must be said that nobody resisted anyway.

At the time, the idea of living in a new and modern house was certainly more appealing than continuing to live in old rural houses. The excavators appeared as big dinosaurs, and people said that the large reptiles of the Pliocene had returned.

Hills disappeared, valleys appeared, small mountains suddenly popped up elsewhere. It is so that in the late 1970s the project of the park started, the Parco di Cavriglia that no longer exists today. The park covered several hectares. It wasn't exactly a project based on environmental sensitivity, but a more aesthetic-oriented one, given the turmoil caused by decades of excavations. This park was dedicated, in full traditional style of the communist area, to Soviet companion Nicolaj Bujanov, who was killed in Cavriglia by the Nazis back in 1944.

The project started during the years of the Cold War, and the ties of the Italian Communist Party with the USSR were very strong at the time. Incredible donations of animals began to arrive at the park from Russia. Bisons, bears, elk, eagles, horses of very rare breeds. So, we were forced to make cages, and we were quite sorry about it. After a while, we started to worry every time the delegation arrived for a visit. 'Oh no, what will they bring us this time?'. The initial idea for the park would have been to have local cows, some chickens,

horses... but nothing, it looked like a Siberian safari! Unfortunately, when they brought us a Predjamski's horse, an Icelandic and very rare horse, we realized that the poor thing had crossed dozens of borders to get to Cavriglia and of course he was very sad. So, we asked for a female to be delivered to us. We thought it might be a good idea.

In the meantime, we had to regularly report to the embassy on the conditions of the animals. In turn, we received instructions on treatments. Initially they told us to put the mare in a neighboring enclosure, not next to the stag, so they could gradually sniff each other and become familiar.

One morning, however, we found the mare dead. The moose, apparently enraged by the heat of the mare, disemboweled her. We were simply devastated; we didn't know what to do. All we could think of was to lie on the reports to be delivered to the embassy, as we were too ashamed to say that the mare had died... Well, we kept her alive for a few more years, until the Berlin Wall fell and, believe me, that was a great sigh of relief!"

Costantino Cattaneo and the Tenuta San Jacopo

"What prompted me from a busy city like Milan to choose Valdarno instead? Well... City life was no longer for me. I studied design and grew up in the center of Europe's creativity, working for the most prestigious brands. But I also breathed the worst air, stress, and competition. Over 10 years, it all became much less fun and emptier. My family had purchased a XVIII-century estate in Cavriglia in 2003, in semi-abandoned state with the idea of making wine and providing hospitality, enjoying a project of agricultural and real estate redevelopment. They asked me to help with marketing, and from there I discovered this unknown world. I became passionate very quickly, and slowly let this thing take hold of me. The night before coming

home from work at the company, I started going around Milan promoting the wines and the oil, even though I had never dealt with sales before. In 2017, I decided I wanted to delve deeper and give a new direction to the quality of my life. So, I moved to Cavriglia. From there a new phase of my life and the company began.

I knew little about agriculture and winemaking. So, I bought all technical books and started studying hard. I am surrounded and supported by irreplaceable people like Yuri Iacopini, the enologist who joined the team as an in-house winemaker, and, with Maurizio Alongi as a consultant, we created a great working team that soon bore fruit.

Valdarno Superiore emerged as a contested territory between Florence and Siena/Arezzo, just like Chianti. The configuration of the territory, throughout history, has traced a completely different socioeconomic development. While Valdarno developed industry and manufacturing, in Chianti life remained much more rural until the English arrived in the 1980s. This led to the explosion of “Chiantishire”. But the vastly different souls of the two territories are held together by a very important common event: the edict of Cosimo III de’ Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who in 1716 defined for the first time the boundaries of the most suitable territories in Tuscany for the production of quality wine: Pomino (now Chianti Rufina), Carmignano, Chianti (Classico) and Valdarno di Sopra. Before then, from the diaries of Sante Lancerio, the Pope’s butler in the 1500s, it emerges that among the most appreciated white wines was the Trebbiano from the Valdarno. This ancient tradition is now being enhanced by the Valdarno di Sopra consortium, which includes various wine companies, all of them organic. Fresh news: the new consortium guidelines have just been approved, which provides that the peak of quality, namely wines with the “vigna” (vineyard) designation (the so-called French crus) must be certified organic. This is a unique feature in Italy, which will probably make this small revolution much talked about.



Costantino Cattaneo

My philosophy is to continue making wines of great freshness and drinkability because that's what our terroir wants. We want to carry on the Tuscan tradition of Sangiovese in its most immediate and juicy form with Chianti and its more evolved form with *Vigna Mulino*, where we push ourselves with very long macerations in amphora, or like our Bordeaux blend (Super Tuscan) *Orma del Diavolo*. Yet we also wish to express our creative flair with more unusual wines in Tuscany like our *Caprius* made from 100% Montepulciano grapes. In the end, what truly interests me the most is the development of the territory from a human, social, and economic point of view and being part of this new renaissance in which I feel deeply involved."