



Top Ten Affordable Rural Restaurants in Tuscany



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As long as you avoid the *bistecca fiorentina* (T-bone steak) and extravagant seasonal ingredients such as truffles and porcini mushrooms, eating out in Tuscany is not as expensive as you might think. The choice of wine will influence the bill considerably, but the *vino della casa*, more than drinkable and positively delicious in most country eateries in Tuscany, will only push the bill up a few euros.

While some of the places listed below could not be classed as "budget" restaurants, a pasta dish or a main course plus either an antipasto or a dessert would come to around €15. At others, you can get a full meal for that price.

#1 Officina della Bistecca, Panzano in Chianti

Dario Cecchini's Antica Macelleria, on the edge of the medieval village of Panzano in Chianti, is not your typical butcher's shop: music (Puccini or AC/DC depending on his mood) blares from the sound system while flasks of wine and snacks keep waiting customers happy. Above the shop is the contemporary-rustic Officina della Bistecca, a carnivore's paradise where Cecchini serves his version of fast food at lunchtimes. At €10, the MacDario, a whopping great patty of prime minced beef served with herby roast potatoes, sweet red onions and in-house



sauses, is one of the best bargains in the area. For another €5, the Super Dario comes with all the above plus *pappa al pomodoro* (Tuscan bread and tomato stew), beans and crudités. And you can even BYOB with no corkage. Via XX Luglio 11, +39 055 852176, dariocecchini.com. Closed Sunday

#2 Locanda Apuana, Colonnata

Situated 532m above sea level (approx. 1745 feet) among the world-famous marble quarries of the Apuan Alps, the tiny stone village of Colonnata is synonymous with the production of *lardo*, a tradition that goes back many centuries. Layers of fat from the pig's back are laid in marble troughs and cured in a mix of salt, herbs and spices: sliced wafer-thin, the result is a milky-white, aromatic and surprisingly sensual palate teaser. At the Guadagni family's *locanda*, their own *lardo* (of which Heston Blumenthal is a fan) is served with juniper-infused fig jam or with a biting watermelon *mostarda* pickle (€6), wrapped around stuffed rabbit loin for a savoury, salty hit (€9) and used to give depth to roast potatoes. If you don't fancy eating raw fat (although round here, they extoll its health-giving properties), try the *tordelli*, half-moon-shaped ravioli filled with a mixture of meat, spinach and ricotta (€7).

* Via Comunale 1, +39 0585 768017, locandaapuana.com. Closed Sunday evening and Monday

#3 Bar dell'Orso. Monteriggioni



The setting for this roadside bar isn't very inspiring, but it lies on the edge of Monteriggioni, one of Tuscany's prettiest hilltop villages, and is a useful stop-off on the Florence-Siena superstrada. Open from 5am until midnight seven days a week, it does a roaring trade in *panini e merende*, or sandwiches and snacks. There is also a menu of hot dishes, but many people come here for the platters laden with cheeses and *salumi*: pecorino from Pienza, Monte Amiata and the Casentino, and top-notch cold cuts include fennel-flavoured and wild boar salami and the

salty local prosciutto. All these are sold by weight, but a generous mixed platter for two including marinated artichoke hearts and sundried tomatoes comes in at about €20. The local Chianti Colli Senesi at €7 a litre is a perfect accompaniment. Avoid weekends: the place is always packed.

* Via Cassia Nord 23, +39 0577 305074, bardellorso.com

#4 Da Rosanna, Casal di Pari

An ancient village high in the Maremma hills above the old Siena-Grosseto road (now bypassed by a four-lane superstrada), Casal di Pari is one of those sleepy, step-back-in-time places way off the tourist radar. The village bar, on a little piazzetta, doubles as a no-frills *osteria* where Signora Rosanna dishes up hearty portions of home-made tagliatelle with with garlicky tomato sauce, spinach and ricotta ravioli, *cinghiale alla cacciatora* (hunter's-style wild boar) – and garlic-spiked *arista* (roast pork loin). A two-course meal with a flask of gutsy local Montecucco red will cost around €15 a head, and you may even be able to fit a homemade dessert into the budget too. * Piazza Milazzo 1, +39 0564 908810. Closed Monday.



#5 Osteria Cassia Vetus, Loro Ciuffenna



Set just back from the old Roman via Cassia between Florence and Arezzo, and overlooking the wide Arno valley, this rustic place has a lovely shady terrace, a dark, wood-panelled interior and an owner who wouldn't look out of place in a slightly seedy 1980s nightclub. The menu proudly showcases local produce and Slow Food-endorsed ingredients that go into dishes such as *trofie* pasta with rocket and almond pesto (€10) and the Renaissance-inspired chicken with lemon, ground almonds and saffron (€12). But the real draw here is the fantastic ice-cream, homemade from

seasonal organic ingredients. In winter, expect chili-spiked chocolate, liquorice or Sicilian cassata and, in summer, fruity sorbets such as Amalfi lemon, peach and apricot (€5 for three flavours). *Via Setteponti Levante 18c, +39 055 9172116, osteriacassiavetus.com. Closing days vary - check before you go.

#6 Dopolavoro La Foce, Chianciano Terme

The Dopolavoro was built in 1939 as a social club for workers on the Unesco-listed La Foce estate. Newly restored, with an open-plan country-chic look, a lovely big terrace at the back and views of Monte Amiata from the front, the bar and restaurant makes a good stop-off in the magnificent Val d'Orcia. Cheap eats include *bico*, (a kind of focaccia), or panini filled with interesting combos such as mortadella with marinated artichoke hearts and mint, or prosciutto, "drunken" pecorino and truffle cream (from €4). The menu changes with the seasons, but dishes that will tempt you to stretch the budget a little include vegetable lasagne (€12) and beef cheek slow-braised in Sangiovese wine (€13). If you come on a Wednesday or at the weekend, forgo dessert in favour of a guided tour of the magical La Foce garden (€10, lafoce.com): it's food for the soul. * Strada della Vittoria 90, Località La Foce, +39 0578 754025, dopolavorolafoce.com. Closed Monday



#7 Locanda Paradiso, Chiusure

The whimsically named Locanda Paradiso stands on the edge of the tiny village of Chiusure, its terrace offering an eyeful of the *creti*, eroded folds of chalk cliff that characterise this area south-east of Siena. Here you'll find simple local cooking at its best, remarkably low prices and the sort of authentic atmosphere that is increasingly rare in Tuscany. Start with a plate of *bruschette* topped with a swizzle of olive oil, tomatoes or chopped chicken livers (€3) before digging into superlative hand-rolled pici (fat spaghetti) with a *ragù* of Chianina beef (€7) (continued on page 4...)



or an exemplary *ribollita* soup (€6). They don't serve meat (unless you count the platters of excellent salumi), but seasonal veg dishes include moreish deep-fried artichoke hearts (€4). * *Via Porta Senese 25, +39 0577 707016. Closed Monday*

#8 La Casa del Prosciutto, Vicchio

The signature dish of the green, relatively undiscovered Mugello region to the north of Florence is *tortelli di patate* (soft, potato-filled pillows of pasta), and this cosy, family-run riverside trattoria is one of the best places to try them. Apart from hand-rolled tortelli, the menu offers spinach and ricotta *strozzapreti*, (literally 'priest-stranglers') and tagliatelle with mushroom sauce (all €8). Mains include stuffed rabbit, grilled pigeon (both €8) and roast chicken (€6) and, if you are lucky, there will be deep-fried artichokes or courgette flowers on the menu too. Finish with one of Maurizio's legendary desserts €4). If you don't mind eating from plastic plates, carry your food out to one of the long tables by the river for half the cost. This place is a real locals' hang-out, so be sure to book. **Via Ponte a Vicchio 1, +39 055 844031, lacasadelprosciutto.it. Open lunchtimes only Wednesday-Sunday*



#9 Trattoria Bonini, Vaglia

Another useful address if you are heading from Florence towards the Mugello along either Via Bolognese or Via Faentina is this modest place where, on weekdays, €12 will buy you a two-course *pranzo di lavoro*, or working lunch, that includes wine, water and a plate of fresh fruit to finish. You'll find yourself in the company of locals and canny passersby who come for the delicious lasagne (pasta is rolled out on a marble slab in the kitchen), spinach and ricotta *gnudi* (like gnocchi) and spicy grilled sausages. On Thursdays there is *bollito misto* (mixed boiled meats) served with piquant salsa verde and on Fridays *baccalà* (salt cod). The delicious bread, fresh from the family bakery, is an added bonus. At weekends, steaks, roast meats and festive *pollo fritto* (fried chicken) push the prices up to a still affordable €25/€30 a head. * *Via di Caselline 771, +39 055 40901. Lunchtime only, closed Wednesday*

#10 Dai Pescatori di Bocca d'Arno, Marina di Pisa

The service may be a little gruff and the *menù fisso* inflexible, but the fish on offer at this simple, wood-panelled trattoria near the mouth of the Arno is hopping fresh and prices, if you go at the right time, can't be beaten. Run by the fisherman's co-op that supplies the kitchen, it sits right on the water, so you get dreamy river views with your spaghetti. On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday evenings, the *cena a sorpresa* offers antipasti, pasta and a main plus wine, water and coffee for €15: there's no choice and no menu (you take what comes in off the boats) but expect the likes of marinated anchovies, panzanella salad with fish, pasta *alla trabaccolara* (with a tomatoey seafood sauce) and grilled catch of the day. The two-course lunch from Tuesday-Saturday is also a bargain at €12. * *Viale d'Annunzio 164, +39 050 36982. Closed Monday*

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