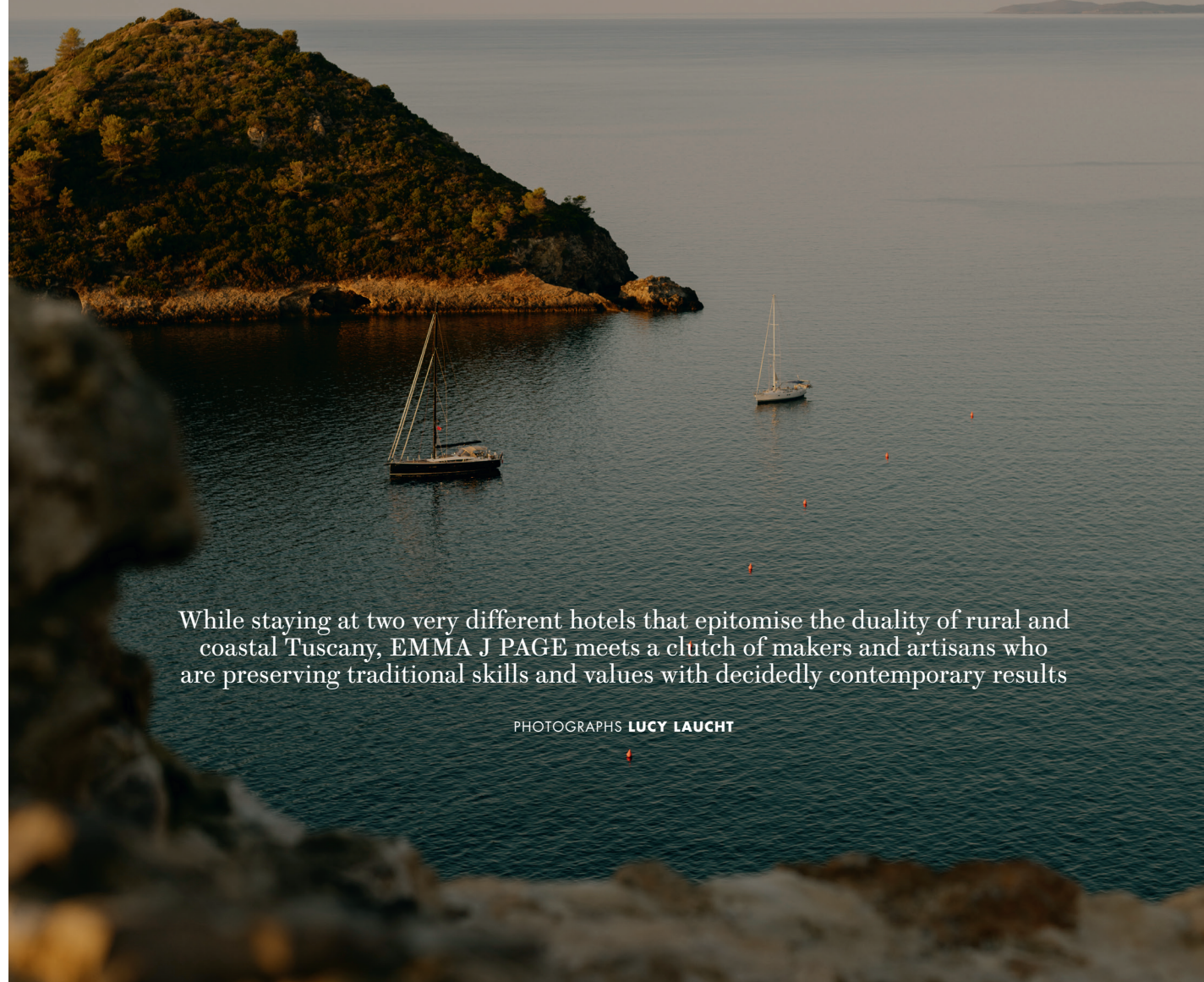


Tuscan at heart



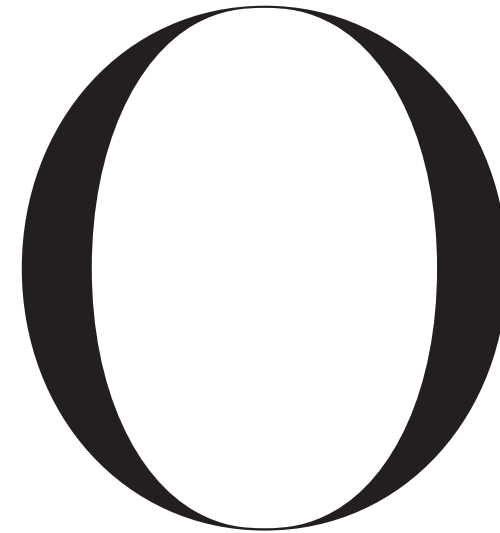
While staying at two very different hotels that epitomise the duality of rural and coastal Tuscany, EMMA J PAGE meets a clutch of makers and artisans who are preserving traditional skills and values with decidedly contemporary results

PHOTOGRAPHS **LUCY LAUCHT**



OPPOSITE A view from Porto Ercole of Isolotto, which translates as 'little island'. THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Weaver and designer Simone Falli with a selection of his Merino wool scarves. A view of the Tuscan countryside from Capalbio. A half-hour drive from Porto Ercole, this walled town is quiet even in summer. Chic Isolotto Beach Club in Porto Ercole





On a sweltering summer afternoon, weaver Simone Falli sits at one of his two self-built wooden looms, his feet poised above its pedals, his hands periodically smoothing the tautly stretched yarn as the machine swings into action. His live/work space, part of a *casa colonica* farmhouse in the rural outskirts of Certaldo, south west of Florence, features a smattering of his own pieces alongside books, artwork and ceramics. Hand-woven Merino wool scarves nestle among bags made from one continuous length of fabric folded origami-style. ‘They are distinguished by their minimalism,’ says Simone, who learned his craft from his uncle. ‘Weaving is something ancestral, deeply rooted in history. I strive to infuse the objects I make with a contemporary aesthetic.’

This approach is part of a recurring theme for makers in Tuscany who are currently bringing a new simplicity to a region more frequently associated with the opulence of the Renaissance. In turn, that quiet beauty is slowly revealing itself through a handful of hotels – both inland and along the coast. They are dialling down on more obvious luxury and are instead celebrating a deeper connection with their environment. Far from the high glamour of 1960s *La Dolce Vita* Italy, here there is a synergy between making and being, activity and appreciation. This is encapsulated perhaps by the name of Simone’s studio Ozio, which means leisure and is, he explains, ‘intended as a positive ode to the concept’.

At 9.30pm on a humid summer Monday night in Porto Ercole, that ode is in full swing. On the terrace of La Pinta fish restaurant, a large cross-generational family of Italians who have made the easy pilgrimage here from Rome have gathered to share platters of seafood and carafes of wine. Sitting at the next table, we order a whole white fish and freshly caught prawns, both of which are worth the leisurely half-hour wait. Dozens of boats bob on the inky-blue waters of the promontory, named after Hercules and noted for the remains of three 16th-century fortresses holding court in ▷

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Shuttered ochre buildings in ancient Capalbio. Striped awnings on a Porto Ercole apartment block. Porto Ercole harbour. Costanza Masini of Fornace Masini retouches a pot that has been removed from its plaster mould. THIS PAGE FROM TOP Claudio Campana outside his studio-shop in Castelfiorentino with one of his vessels. A finished piece with jars of pigments and a brass *cazzuola* (trowel) for mixing plaster





OPPOSITE The Filippo sea view terrace suite at La Roqqa, the interiors of which were designed by Milanese studio Palomba Serafini Associati. THIS PAGE FROM TOP One of the private terraces of the hotel's Caravaggio penthouse suite. Stefania Franceschi serving Spaghetti 8 Pomodori, made with tomatoes grown by local social cooperative L'Orto Giusto, at La Roqqa's Scirocco restaurant

the distance. Nearby, there is a patient, snaking queue at gelateria Creola. 'People are looking for local experiences,' says Giorgio Bonotto, general manager at recently opened La Roqqa, a terracotta-hued hotel and beach club that overlooks the harbour. 'It's about a low-key, Italian way of life – an evening passeggiata and a gelato.'

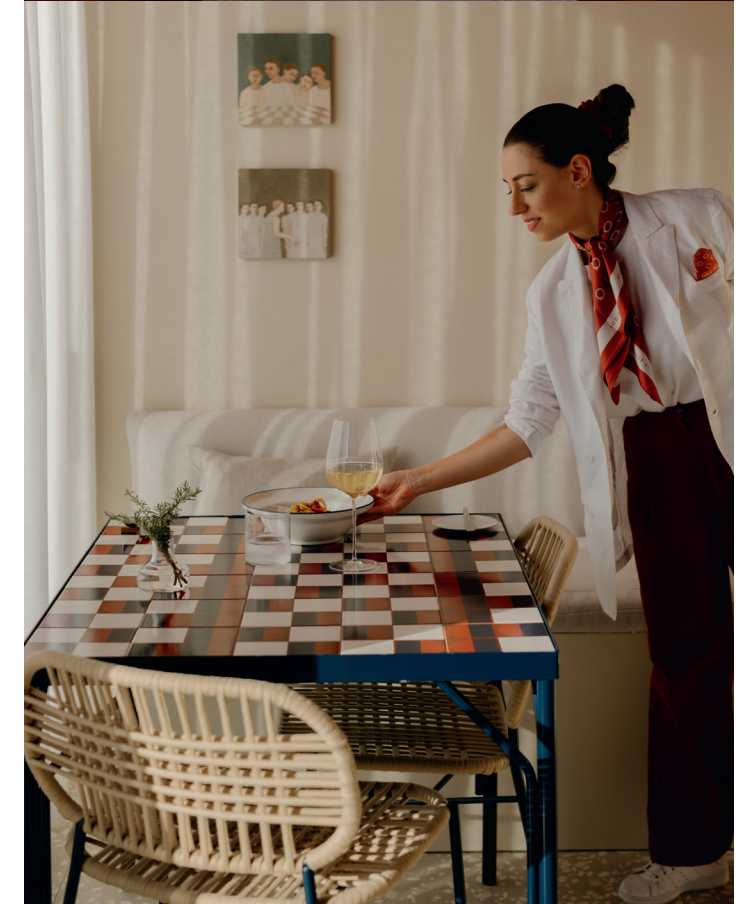
To that end, the five-star hotel, owned by the Jonsson family, has a decidedly straightforward philosophy. Having summered on this east coast of Monte Argentario for decades, the Swedish family has made a series of bold decisions aimed at allowing their guests an unfettered relationship with their surroundings. Staff can be reached via Whatsapp rather than a formal in-room phone and bidets have been banished from the bathrooms (much to the initial consternation of some visiting Italians). Instead of having a pool, the hotel encourages guests to head to its recently acquired Isolotto Beach Club, named for the island seen on the horizon, and lounge among its sculptural rocks and green waters.

None of this is a hardship. Service is impeccable and the interiors, courtesy of Milanese design studio Palomba Serafini Associati, combine artisanal pieces with 1960s and 1970s classics. 'We wanted to restore Porto Ercole's allure as a sought-after destination,' explains Anton Jonsson, creative director of Ercole hotel group. 'There are no grandiose features – nothing is overdesigned or complicated.'

Not far from Siena, at Castello di Casole, interior designer Alessandro Moriconi – known for his collaborations with fashion houses like Chloé, Nina Ricci and JW Anderson – has reworked a clutch of suites and villas. Some of them are a surprisingly welcome counterpoint to the medieval origins of this Tuscan-stone working farm.

In the hotel's Etruria suites, Vico Magistretti chairs sit under a vintage Flos 'Viscontea' pendant light, creating a strikingly contemporary vignette. In self-contained Villa Thesan, Alessandro has worked with the Italian terracotta manufacturer M.I.T.A.L. to devise an ambitious bas-relief chimneypiece, with a scale and shape that challenges the conventions of traditional earthenware production. 'These schemes allow for the discovery of an unexpected side of Tuscany, offering a less rigid countryside experience,' says the designer. 'I wanted to reframe the classic image that most people have of the region.' The Italian concept of *villeggiatura* (a prolonged period of rest and recuperation) is also actively celebrated at Castello di Casole, with nighttime stargazing and morning sound healing both integral parts of the estate's rhythm.

Returning to the earth in this way is in the DNA of Costanza Masini, 32, and her sister Gioia, 25. Both work for the family terracotta business in historic Impruneta, Fornace Masini, which was founded in 1932 and is currently headed up by their father Marco. 'My grandfather Osvaldo started working here aged 10 and fell in love with the craft,' says Costanza, who oversees the production of simpler pieces, from obelisks to spheres. 'We may be young, but we have an unshakeable >





OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The chimneypiece created by Alessandro Moriconi with M.I.T.A.L. for Castello di Casole's Villa Thesan. Enrico Mariani's family has produced terracotta at M.I.T.A.L. since 1914. One of Terry Davies' vessels. Terry shaping fresh clay at his home studio. THIS PAGE FROM TOP Maria Concetta Monaci's Il Frantoio is a restaurant, bar, bookshop and contemporary art space in Capalbio. An Etruria suite at Castello di Casole

connection to the clay and to the pots. For us, a thing of beauty is timeless.' That may explain why this utilitarian product remains prized centuries after architect Filippo Brunelleschi made the daily pilgrimage here from Florence to make sure every handcrafted tile was in perfect shape for the building of the roof of his beloved Duomo.

Inspired by the traditions of Leach pottery and Japanese form, Terry Davies has introduced a new kind of art form to Tuscany. In a restored farmhouse in Certaldo, the British-born potter produces pieces that strike a balance between utility and sculpture. He is said to have been the first to introduce these kind of ceramics to Italy, substituting the *sake* cup for self-invented *grappini* (vessels for grappa). Two decades later, the area's topography now infuses his work. He scours the Tuscan coast after winter storms, searching for slag washed up from Etruscan bronze-making sites to mix with the clay at the wheel. A hot kiln combined with cuts and scars in the pieces force these elements to the surface, creating a dry, textured look. 'The vessels have an archaeological feel,' says Terry. 'They tend to echo the life cycle of creation, destruction and rebirth.'

A few miles from Florence, at his studio in Castelfiorentino, another artisan is also engaged in pushing the possibilities. Claudio Campana specialises in scagliola – a Baroque technique developed to use cheaper materials to imitate the composition and surface of marble and stone. His creations derive from a mix of plaster, natural pigments and animal glue to imitate the more well-known, expensive materials. The skill fell out of favour at the start of the 19th century, but Claudio's deeply contemporary take is putting a historic craft back on the map with a selection of vessels, amphorae and mirrors. 'This technique is not an end in itself – it is a language for creating shapes and images,' he explains. 'My work is situated in the context of drawing from the past to create something different.'

Over tea in a delicate leaf-motif cup, that age-old tension between tradition and reinvention is something I contemplate on our last morning at Castello di Casole. Turning over the saucer to uncover its maker, I discover it is a piece by Ginori 1735, one of Italy's foremost porcelain producers, for whom Gio Ponti – a polymath who always returned to the idea of simplicity – was artistic director for a decade from 1923. I am reminded of his declaration that 'original ideas don't exist' but are 'received and re-expressed'. That may be the case, yet each maker quietly honing their craft in this pocket of Tuscany has truly proved to be one of a kind □

WAYS AND MEANS

Scott Dunn (020 3627 9878; scottdunn.com) offers a six-night holiday in Tuscany, with three nights at Castello di Casole, A Belmond Hotel, Tuscany (belmond.com) and three nights at La Roqqa (laroqqa.com), from £4,651 per person, B&B, based on two people sharing, including flights and private transfers.

