

Taste of Travel

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA TRAVEL WRITERS

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FOOD STORIES & PHOTOS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



Welcome to Tenuto Seliano, Home of the Water Buffalo Baronessa!

Juicy mozzarella at every meal, friendly water buffalo grazing next door, the best preserved Greek temples in the world where the goddesses of fertility and marriage were worshiped, the lapping Mediterranean a few minutes from your room and a charming Baronessa as your host. These are some basic ingredients for a delicious Italian adventure.

Welcome to Paestum and Tenuta Seliano, a southern Italian resort on a working ranch that dates back to the 16th century, on the Italian Mediterranean coast about forty minutes south of a newly invigorated Naples. Paestum is famous for its scarlet roses and salmon-colored temples, and is the *mozzarella di bufala* capital of the world.

I first met its owner, the Baronessa Cecilia Baratta Bellelli, and an entourage of her friends on a misty autumn morning 20 years ago, when I was walking on the beach in Paestum. They came cantering along at the edge of the sea on perfectly appointed thoroughbreds. She invited me to lunch at her family's ancestral estate, and I fell in love with its uniqueness, peacefulness, superb food and, most of all, Cecilia's warmth and fascinating life.

Although she comes from generations of Italian aristocratic lineage, the Baronessa is like a female Zorba. She enjoys running her ranch as well as having interesting people around, especially Americans.

Around 600 B.C., the Greeks founded a city here called Poseidonia in honor of the god of the sea, a sanctuary in honor of the goddess Hera and a temple to the Great Goddess Demeter. The resort is in the heart of the Campania region of southern Italy. Campania comes from the phrase *compania felix*, which means "happy" or "fortunate countryside." The sun is said to shine here 230 days per year.

Vineyards abound, producing excellent local wines that accompany the superb handcrafted meals. Guests from all over the world share long tables under a shaded grape arbor outdoors, or inside in the ancestral dining hall on mornings or cooler evenings. Breakfast consists of home-baked

bread and cake, freshly squeezed orange juice, ripe peaches, and other local fruits, eggs, cereals, and steaming coffee or tea. The ranch produces many of the ingredients for the kitchen, including capers, extra virgin olive oil, vinegars, limoncello, mushrooms, eggplants, olives, peppers, and orange, fig and strawberry preserves.

Only handmade pasta, pastries and breads are served, and endless varieties of pizza are baked in the wood oven. Of course, as this is the mozzarella capital of the world, fresh mozzarella is enjoyed at most meals as well as fresh ricotta made from water buffalo milk. Frequently the homegrown buffalo meat itself is served, prepared a variety of ways.

When Cecilia speaks of cooking, she lovingly explains how each item is selected and prepared, how to know exactly when to add it, and the precise blending, heating and timing. Finally, of course, she reaches into a pan, tastes, and most often serves you something delectable. Her 80-year-old mother added, "Cooking is one of our most important art forms." Often Cecilia is invited on cooking tours in the United States to demonstrate Campania regional foods and recipes.

Food preparation is a very special focus at the ranch. Internationally acclaimed chefs, including Alice Waters from Chez Panisse in Berkeley, have visited Cecilia to learn her recipes. Cecilia personally supervises meal preparation. Only naturally grown products from the estate are used. At times throughout the year, the Baronessa offers cooking classes. She specializes in the best of Campania and Neapolitan cooking, which includes ancient Greek and Roman influences. Some of Cecilia's special recipes include *Torta Caprese* from Capri, a heavenly almond and chocolate cake; *Pizza Rustica*, a savory ricotta pie; a dark and heady Genovese sauce specially made with hand-selected buffalo meat; and of course, *Insalata caprese*, fresh mozzarella accompanied by fresh basil, vine-ripened tomatoes and estate-bottled olive oil.

Nine-hundred doe-eyed, moist-nosed water buffalo graze peacefully in irrigated fields on the



ranch, providing the fresh milk that is brought daily to Casearia Barlotti, a cheese-making cooperative. The best mozzarella comes from water buffalo, not cows, and is preferably consumed within 48 hours. It has three times the fat and one-and-a-half times more calcium and protein than the cow's milk product. The workers heat the milk to just over 100 degrees. Industrial producers pasteurize it, especially for exporting. "Pasteurizing kills the flavor," says eldest son Ettore. "You can't compare handmade mozzarella di bufala with the industrial product. They put the milk in a machine and instantly have mozzarella. We prefer it made by hand." In fact, the name comes from the word to "break away," mozzare, as the cheese makers use their hands to literally tear cheese off from the larger mass. While visiting the cooperative, I watched the skilled workers form the many sizes and shapes of the finished mozzarella, the "little mouthfuls," cardinalini or bocconcini, which are less than two ounces. A more elaborate braided form is called trecce. A woman worker pulled a fresh bocconcini out of the foaming milk and popped it into my mouth. The sweet aroma, the delicate flavors and the special squeak truly fresh mozzarella makes

against your teeth made me stop caring what form it was in. I became lost in epicurean heaven.

In addition to the culinary delights offered here, there is much more to a visit to Tenuta Seliano.

The 14 rooms, in addition to a honeymoon suite and one apartment, contain all comforts as well as fascinating antiques from the Bellelli baronage. The beautiful stone buildings with red tiled roofs and decorative wrought iron date from the 19th century. A large, well-maintained pool is just a few steps across the garden, past some of Paestum's legendary rosebushes and scatterings of Greek and Roman ruins. The Amalfi coast, Capri, Pompeii and Herculaneum are all just day trips away.

It is dawn at Tenuta Seliano. Some fluffs of down from my neighbors, the doves who live in the dove cote in the roof of our 19th-century tower room, float by the window. The soft swish-swish of irrigation sprinklers wafts in from the surrounding cornfields, which provide meals for the 900 water buffalo. A fresh sea breeze flows through the windows. I think of how this land has provided nurturance and pleasure for so many people for thousands of years and how it will continue to do so. I feel so lucky to be part of this tradition here in *compania felix*, this happy countryside.

www.agriturismo-seliano.it

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