

BARBIANA – MONTE SENARIO – VILLA DEMIDOFF

From **Vicchio** we drive across the **Sieve river** on a bridge in the small village of **Ponte a Vicchio**. This bridge was built by the Florentine Republic in 1295 but was destroyed during World War II and later rebuilt in accordance to its original features. Today the area is mostly renowned thanks to the restaurant “La Casa del Prosciutto”.



“Get inside and you will have in front of your eyes a culinary show not easy to forget: a bench loaded with salamis of above average quality (the soprassata, the prosciutto, the finocchiona literally melt in your mouth); a display of cheeses at different stages of maturity; fresh crostini (with mushrooms, tomatoes, pork liver fegatelli or Colonnata lard); bottles of local wine and an equally mouth-watering variety of home-made cakes and biscuits. The Casa del Prosciutto is the favourite destination of Sunday strollers or bikers, clients who stop by for an afternoon snack. Be it known that the snack is likely to become a banquet since it is extremely difficult to resist to the call of the products for sale there. On the week-end in the evening the Casa del Prosciutto also opens as a restaurant, it is a trattoria serving high quality meals (the rabbit is delicious!). The restaurant is very small so if you wish to have dinner there it is recommended to book in advance, and very early so!”

From there we take the direction to **Sagginale** and find, after a few kilometres, a road to the left leading to **Barbiana**, on the green slopes of Mount Giovi. There stands the church of **Sant’Andrea** where **Don Lorenzo Milani** was the priest. This is also where he ran his own school working with specific teaching methods. **Don Milani** (1923-1967) funded a “popular” school in **Barbiana**, operating full-time and based on work in groups. He is buried in the small cemetery in front of the church. The school can be visited on Saturdays and Sundays and keeps original texts, photographic and teaching equipment.



The encounter between **Don Lorenzo Milani** and the children he chose to teach and the fact that their daily work took place where there was no school initiated one of the most important teaching experiences in Italy. The Barbiana school disconcerted people but also stimulated a debate on education and its methods through various texts elaborated there and distributed around. Texts like “**Obedience is not a virtue anymore**” or “**Letter to a female teacher**” published in 1967. During these years, these texts met the expectations for a deep change in the education field and they became a new horizon for thousands of young students, teachers and social workers committed to finding a new way to “do school”. Without interruption, for the following decades and up until recently, the Barbiana school has shown a **strength of provocation**, has been a role model as well as a stimulation to pass on a critical knowledge in order to build “**sovereign citizens**” and to assert **equity and solidarity principles** against unfair selections and discriminations.

The memory of the experience conducted by the priest and his students, who always supported him, has been increasingly strengthened around Vicchio and Mugello, not to mention the awareness of its profound qualities as a social experience as well as a cultural and educational one. Despite the provocation, the Barbiana School was always seen as a **place for hope and commitment to the future**. Barbiana was renovated recently but even with modern services it is still a poor and severe environment full of messages able to trigger emotions.

As well as the natural heritage, healthy food lovers will also be able to appreciate the richness and genuinity of Mugello traditional produce. The regional gastronomy is perfectly adapted to today's lifestyle looking for **natural quality**.



At **Ponte a Vicchio** (*La Casa del Prosciutto*) and at **Sagginale** (*Da Giorgione*) we find restaurants where it is possible to taste exquisite Mugello dishes, like the famous **tortelli di patate**, cooked with cheap ingredients to obtain a “royal” result. **Tasty white potatoes** from Firenzuola, in High Mugello, are used for the stuffing. In the past, summer used to be the season when palmipeds were sacrificed: **geese and ducks** were the peasants' victims during festivities like the *battitura* (beating of the wheat). There are still lots of food festivals during summer. In some restaurants one can savour **boiled goose**, **duck cooked in Mugello style** or delicious dishes with chickens, capons and rabbits. Some “poor” recipes are a delight for the palate, like the **pappa con l'aglio**, a soup made with Tuscan bread cooked in water with garlic cloves and seasoned with olive oil, or the famous **ribollita** and the **zuppa rustica**.

Leonardo Romanelli wrote about the restaurant “*Da Giorgione*”: “*Giorgione*” is a renowned name among food lovers for his *tortelli di patate*, the local specialty. On Sundays there is a crowd of gourmets of all ages: near the parking area a small park with kids' games has opened and they can play around without trouble during the long Sunday lunches. You enter finding a bar on your left which also sells groceries and tobacco in a very long room; the tables are very close to each other, the television is on in the background, walls are decorated with photos, papercuttings and various paintings. The dishes cooked there are traditional. The antipasto is made of three different crostini and a selection of salamis. Not to be missed are the *tortelli di patate*, soft and flavoursome, the spit-roasted meat is also very good, with a tasty fegatello. The baked potatoes could be used as an example for young cooks, able to make complicated dishes but often neglectful of fundamental aspects. The desserts are simple. There is a limited choice of Tuscan wines. The service is thoughtful and friendly. Three dishes without wine: 25 euros.



After Sagginale we get to **Borgo San Lorenzo** and from there to **San Piero a Sieve** to take back the Via Bolognese towards Florence. Passed Campomigliaio and Tagliaferro, we find the village of **Vaglia**, an old fief of Florentine bishops who, in the 8th century, built the **Pieve di San Pietro**, located at about one kilometre from the village. The building, totally modified and enlarged in the 18th century, keeps precious paintings from this time, a **wooden Crucifix** traditionally attributed to **Giambologna**, some works by **Angelo Nardi** and a painting depicting the *Madonna col Bambino*, a Florentine work from the 14th century. The baptismal font in glazed terracotta from **Giovanni della Robbia** school is also important.

From Vaglia, we go to Bivigliano and then to Mount Senario (817 m) with its famous sanctuary, one of the most famous in all of Tuscany, located in an enchanting position.

SANTUARIO DI MONTE SENARIO



To reach the sanctuary you can either drive on a large road lined with high pine trees or walk on the ancient way, the **Via Crucis**, along which stand many **tabernacles**. Half-way there you see on the left the small but charming monks' cemetery, built in 1946. On the tarred road, on the left, you find the **edicola della Madonna Addolorata** from 1989 and further up, at 300 metres from the sanctuary, a small avenue leads to the **Monumental Cross**. On the large square in front of the convent-sanctuary stand two marble statues: the first one is of **San Bonfiglio** also known as "dei Monaldi", who was the first of the **Seven Founders** of the sanctuary and the other statue represents **San Filippo Benizi**, who continued the **Founders'** work.

On 8 September 1233, Saint Mary's Nativity day, seven Florentine men - **Bonfiglio, Amadio, Buonagiunta, Manetto, Sostegno, Ugucione** and **Alessio** - gave up their comfortable life as merchants to retreat and lead a hermit's life. They founded **l'Ordine dei Servi di Maria** (Order of the Servants of Mary). The original church was built in 1241 at the place where the **Seven Holy Founders** lived. The church-convent complex was made bigger and enriched by **Cosimo I de' Medici** in 1539 and then restructured in Baroque style in 1717 and 1888.



Walking up the stairs you reach a small rectangular square in front of the convent door with, on the left, the entrance to the sanctuary and, on the right, a small room used to accommodate guests. In front of the façade you find the Mount Senario's emblem: a cross on seven small mounts with the letters S.S.E standing for "**Sacra Senarii Eremus**" (Sacred Convent of Senario). The tower above is from 1843.

At the entrance of the church, the bronze door was designed by the female Florentine sculptor **Nella Aglietti** and unveiled in 1991 in memory of the first centenary of the Seven Holy Founders' canonization (1888-1988). Mount Senario's church underwent a number of restorations. On 21 September 1621, the church which had been totally rebuilt was dedicated to the Virgin Mary of Assumption. On 4 April 1717, following new renovation works, it was dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows and to Saint Filippo Benizi. The barrel vault has in its centre a 18th century fresco by **Domenico Gabbiani** depicting the Virgin among angels giving the Servites' habit to the Holy Founders kneeling in prayer. At the back of the apse, above the high altar stands a beautiful crucifix made in polychromatic stucco by **Ferdinando Tacca** (1619-1686). The high altar, the holy table and the small stone columns are from the 15th century. Both paintings by **Tommaso Redi** decorating the side aisles of the apse represent, on the right, Saint Filippo Benizi's first mass and on the left the same Saint leaving the Mount Amiata's hermitage. The first altar on the left is dedicated to Saint Giuliana Falconieri, the second to Our Lady of Sorrows, founder and main Patron Saint of the Servite Order, with a sacred image of the Virgin in the niche; the third altar is dedicated to Saint Pellegrino Laziosi. On the left, the second altar is dedicated to Saint Filippo Benizi and the first one, in front of the altar to Our Lady of Sorrows is dedicated to the mystery of Nativity: '**The Word became flesh and he made his dwelling among us**'. Above the side altars, six stained-glass windows represent the Seven Holy Founders. Going to the entrance of the church, towards the chapel of the Seven Holy Founders, we can see a painting of

the Seven Saints' vision with our Lady of Sorrows, by Niccolò Pillori (1687-1763); above the door of the sacristy there is an icon of the Madonna with Child between Saints from the 16th century Florentine school.

The Chapel of the Seven Holy Founders was erected in 1933 using characteristics of the 14th century Florentine Gothic style and it is entirely covered with frescoes. On the monumental altar in white marble is placed the golden carved brass urn containing the skulls and other relics of the Seven Holy Founders.



In the sacristy there are various paintings of the Seven Holy Founders. The **Capella del Santissimo** is in Baroque style, decorated with frescoes on the vault and with paintings on the side. Inside is venerated the body of Saint Ubaldo da Borgosansepulcro, a follower of Saint Filippo Benizi and the body of San Giustino, a young Roman martyr. The choir was built in 1707 in walnut wood, the wrought-iron gate was made in 1940 and the organ made by the Martelli Brothers' company in Genova dates from 1981. Under the organ is found a fresco attributed to Giandomenico Ferretti with Saint Filippo Benizi and Saint Giuliana Falconieri at the foot of Our Lady of Sorrows sitting down. To be noticed: the fresco of the *Salita dei Sette al Monte*, on the left wall of the choir, a work by the painter **Pietro Annigoni** from 1985.



The **Capella dell'Apparizione** must be regarded as the heart of the convent-sanctuary and was probably built by the Seven Founders soon after their arrival in Senario in 1241. The chapel draws its name from a later tradition attributing a vision of the Virgin to the Seven Founders. Recent works have allowed to recreate the environment in its most ancient simplicity. Some structures can be estimated from the 13th century: the wall at the back, behind the altar and the left wall with the brick lancet arches. The altar is covered with marble and in the niche above it we can admire a **very beautiful Pietà in polychromatic terracotta**, dated from 1629, made by Brother Giovannangelo Lottini, a servant of Mary. Under the floor, two graves keep the remains of hermits who lived there from the 15th century until 1870.

Through the door near the chapel, we enter the small 15th century cloister, with a well in its centre, then we walk to the terrace offering a vast panorama. The terrace was built in 1607 above a big water tank with a capacity of 9000 hectolitres. In the convent refectory is found a beautiful fresco of the *Last Supper* by **Matteo Rosselli** from 1634.



In the vicinity of the convent-sanctuary, we can visit two **caves** which were the Seven Holy Founders' first dwellings. **Saint Filippo Benizi's** cave is made out of big rocks with a small temple in the front. The temple was erected in 1629 for the pilgrims to be able to draw water and obtain the saint's protection. The next cave is Saint Alessio Falconieri's, who died in 1310 at the age of 110. It is a small cave with a stone commemorating the saint. A few steps hollowed out of the rock allow the public to access the ancient hermitage. On the slopes of the mountain, the Ghiacciaia is a monumental building with a cylindrical base and covered by a dome. Its function is to build up a stock of ice to supply Florence hospitals and villas.

At Mount Senario, there is a bar selling typical products prepared by the monks that can also be tasted such as the *Gemma d'Abeto*, the *Elisir di Cina*, the *Alkermes* and some bitter digestive liquors. There is also a souvenir shop.

From Mount Senario we go down to Pratolino on Via Bolognese and in the direction of Florence, we come across the **Medicean Park of Pratolino** with the **Villa Demidoff**.

II PARCO MEDICEO DI PRATOLINO – VILLA DEMIDOFF



The history of the **Park of Pratolino** began in 1568 when **Francesco I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany** entrusted the architect **Bernardo Buontalenti** with the task of building a villa with a big park for **Bianca Cappello**. A few years earlier **Cosimo I**, Francesco's father, had commissioned **Tribolo** to landscape various gardens in Florence (**Castello** in 1540, the **Giardino dei Semplici** in 1545 and **Boboli** in 1550). Pratolino's project started almost twenty years after the Boboli one (the park was completed in 1585) and **Buontalenti** organised it as a dream place where nature and technology were combined to create a symbolic journey through the Grand Duke's philosophical thoughts. The park aroused attention among the contemporaries and it was called "**the Garden of Marvels**" because of the man-made grottoes, water tricks and statues made out of nacre, hard stones and precious marbles, according to Buontalenti's ideas. After Francesco's death, the park had another fate since the Lorena family didn't show any interest for it and had many of the statues moved to the Boboli Gardens. It is only after the Napolonic era, with **Ferdinando III of Lorena's** return, that the Park found a new dignity. In 1818, **Joseph Frietsch** was put in charge of re-landscaping Pratolino. He made it bigger (from 20 hectares to about 80) but he principally gave it a new aspect as an English garden.

Today, in the Medicean garden, open to the public, there are still some basins, statues and grottoes remaining and especially the splendid statue of the **Apennine Colossus** made in 1579-1580 by **Giambologna**. There are also meadows and woods with oaks, cedars and plane trees with spectacular dimensions.



The Medicean villa is not there anymore. At the ground level there was a complex of artificial grottoes, water tricks and automatons. The **Paggeria** from the Medicean complex was renovated several times during the second half of the 18th century but was then transformed into a villa by prince **Paolo Demidoff in 1872**.



This place is also related to some of **Galileo Galilei's** trials: on 15 August 1605 **Galilei** was invited to Pratolino to present to the Court his geometrical and military compass, able to perform many geometrical and arithmetical operations, using the relative proportions between the homologous sides of two similar triangles.



The **Apennine Colossus** was made by **Giambologna** with gigantic proportions. The lower part is a hexagonal grotto giving access, thanks to a few steps, to a room hollowed out in the high part and in the head of the body allowing to receive light through the eyes. On the outside, the statue is decorated with moss and calcareous concretions from where the water used to pour into the adjacent pool. Behind the Colossus there was a big laurel maze, while in the front a large meadow was decorated with twenty-six antic statues along the sides. The various architectural elements in the park were easy to recognize as the senses were stimulated with water sounds and artificial rains.

Despite the fact that, over the centuries, several works of art originally found there had been taken away, the park still keeps a number of interesting ones, beside the Apennine Colossus. A copy of the original **Fonte di Giove** was placed there by the Demidoff family at the end of the 19th century. In the **Cappella**, which has a hexagonal plan and an external portico, the last Princess Demidoff was buried. The statue of the **Fonte del Mugnone** was sculpted by **Giambologna** (1577). The **Peschiera della Maschera** was also used as a swimming-pool and equipped with hot baths. Other interesting places are: the **Grande Voliera**, the **Fagianeria**, the **Grotta di Cupido** built by **Buontalenti** in 1577 and the **Casino** built in 1820 by the architect **Luigi De Cambray-Digny**. In the whole park we can find trees over one hundred years old, among which are oaks, cedar-trees and horse-chestnut trees, real natural monuments with exceptional beauty.

In **2012** the park is reopening on 25 April

From 25 April to 1 May, the park is opened everyday from 10.00 to 18.00.

Opening hours:

In May, September and October: Saturday, Sunday and Public Holidays: from 10.00 to 18.00

In June, July and August: Saturday, Sunday and Public Holidays: from 10.00 to 19.00

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