

Paradise REGAINED

Images courtesy of
Landscape Properties

Fiona Tankard meets the owner of a house with a thousand years' of history

IN THE VAL D'ORCIA, that picturesque part of Tuscany featured on a thousand postcards and calendars, one house stands out from the rest, quite literally.

The house is a former convent, in part dating from the 11th century, and sits on its own hilltop with views of Pienza, Montalcino, San Quirico, Torrenieri, Castiglion d'Orcia, Siena and, when it is very clear, even Monte Amiata, the beautiful mountain which presides over this region. Set in five hectares, including a swimming pool, a lake and almost 1000 olive trees, the way the house is positioned means that, to use a term much loved by garden designers, you effectively 'borrow the landscape'. On that hilltop with its 360 degree views, you seem to be master of all you survey, owner of the most stunning back garden in the world!

I stand at the window of the first floor, looking out over views which have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. The owner, Mario Mezzi, stands beside me, pointing out various landmarks. The 'paradise' scene which conclude the film *Gladiator* was filmed just a

few hundred metres below us, as was part of *The English Patient*. The bleached, almost bleak, landscape punctuated by cypresses is a film director's dream. Signor Mario remembers the filming of *The English Patient* one long, hot summer in 1997. 'Did you see the film?' he asks me. I nod. 'They were down there all day, every day, for months,' he said. 'Faceva molto, molto caldo.'



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This summer is also *molto caldo*. The outside temperature is in the scorching high thirties but inside, the house is relatively cool, thanks to the thick walls. I comment on the internal shutters. 'My wife wanted external shutters,' says Mario, 'But I fought my corner. I've tried in the restoration to keep everything as original as possible.'

WOOD AND EARTH

The floor tiles throughout the house are of unglazed terracotta in shades of creamy-pink, a colour hard to describe and even harder to fake. In some rooms there are the merest traces of the old red paint that previous inhabitants used to varnish over the tiles many years ago. 'They did that kind of thing back then,' says Mario shaking his head ruefully. 'But we got the paint off eventually, thank goodness.'

As well as original floors and travertine marble staircases, the ceilings

have been preserved as far as possible. Downstairs they are beautiful, vaulted and in the original brick. Upstairs, as part of the roof had collapsed,

they have been rebuilt using local materials – blond poplar wood, rather than chestnut or oak. The trusses are stout and roughly hewn and, unusually, there is no wax or wood stain, just a freshly-cut look reminiscent of how the originals must have appeared in their prime.

It is clear, as we progress through the house, that Mario is a man who likes original features and who loves his house. He points out that where restoration was necessary, he used local artisans who knew how these old buildings are put together. 'Take the *stucco* (mortar) outside,' he says. 'I wanted it to match the original as closely as possible. Luckily the builder knew the exact colour of earth to mix in, which could only be found in the woods over there.' And he waves in the direction of a nearby copse. 'It's an almost exact match.'

FROM ROME TO HOME

Mario and his wife Giuseppa Rocchi have owned Podere Scanelli, as the house is known, since 1987. Based in Rome, they were looking for a holiday home in the country, although as inveterate world travellers, they hadn't settled on exactly which country! After scouring the globe they ended up in this small corner of Tuscany. 'After all,' says Mario, 'I've seen it all, and there's nowhere better than Tuscany.'

They had already put in an offer on another house in the area, but the sale fell through when the owner decided to take it off the market. Desperately disappointed, they were about to give up the search when a Tuscan friend persuaded them to have a final look round. They found the Podere almost hidden in a thicket of overgrowth. Its roof had partly fallen in and it was home to wild boar and other creatures. But the structure was sound and the couple were captivated. They decided to try and trace the owner and make an offer. They finally located the lady – a Spanish writer – in Spain. Her husband had died and she had returned





to her native country. They negotiated for a while and came to an agreement. Shortly afterwards the house was theirs.

As the house is huge at over 1000 square metres – the average Tuscan farmhouse is about a quarter of that size – the restoration was something that Mario (right) and Giuseppa undertook gradually. They were still spending time in Rome, where they both worked, so could not always oversee things in person. But thanks to a trusted team of local builders things slowly took shape. They helped when they could and made some interesting discoveries. As well as fragments of pottery, the shelves are dotted with fossilized scallop shells, testament to the area's prehistoric past when it was submerged under the sea.

More recently, Mario remembers when they were digging up the courtyard and came across a massive terracotta olive oil jar completely buried underneath it. Dated 1891 it now stands proudly in the sitting room, and is unscathed apart from a tiny break in the rim. They speculated on why something so huge and apparently unexciting had come to be buried. 'Maybe there was treasure in it once,' says Mario. We'll never know, but it certainly makes an interesting talking point.

They also started discovering more about the history of the house, which has been mentioned in several books. The earliest reference to it is in a document dating back to 1074. They also found out it had been home to over 30 people in the 1960s, and was one of a group of three working farms, of which only two remain. Mario shows me a page from one of his books. It is a black and white image of a group of smiling *contadini* and the background is quite clearly the courtyard of the house.



CHANGES

In 1992, the couple decided to turn the property into an *agriturismo* (farm holiday accommodation). They started with six guests, which was all the regulations would allow at the time, then increased that to 11. Nowadays, the house has six guest bedrooms, all ensuite, and can take up to 15 guests, although they rarely have that many at once.

They have welcomed people from all over the world. Mario points to some seasonal landscapes on the wall of the downstairs *salotto*. He tells me they were done by a French artist on a cycling holiday. 'Unfortunately he fell off his bike before he could complete his paintings,' he explains. 'So we had to send him photographs and he finished them from those. He sent us these paintings as a gift.'

The house is unique and has documented history, it is set in a gorgeous location, and yet it is for sale. I ask Mario why they decided to say goodbye to something that has been part of their lives for so long. 'We struggled with this decision for a long, long time,' he says. 'But now our children are grown up and sadly, we aren't getting any younger. The house is incredible, but it is quite a lot of upkeep and work for just two people. We need something smaller.'

And what kind of person do they hope will buy the house? 'Someone who will look after it and love it as much as we have done,' he says. 'It deserves that.' And with a sigh, Mario looks around the work of half a lifetime. There will be regrets when they move, but pride too. It is no bad thing to have given a house back its life. **Italy Podere Scanelli is available through Landscape Properties, Tel: (+39) 0577 281455. email: fcarlucci@landscapeproperties.com**

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