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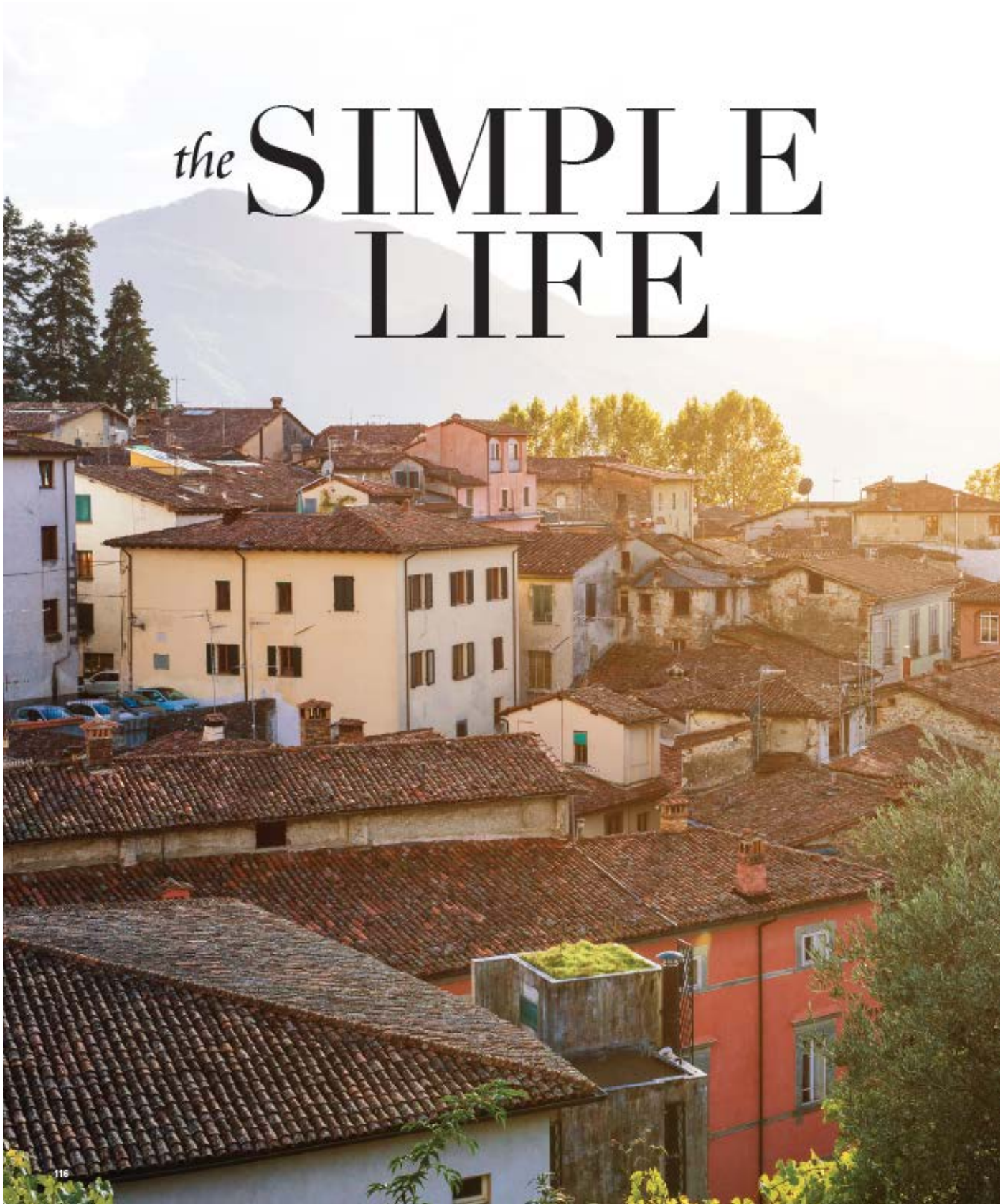
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the SIMPLE LIFE



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Tucked away in northern Tuscany, the small village of Barga offers a perfect base to slow down and explore the region.

BY CALVIN HENNING



The scenic townscape of the medieval Italian city Barga.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHUTTERSTOCK

On our first night at Renaissance Tuscany Il Ciocco Resort & Spa outside of Barga, I'm told that we'll be having a "light dinner," and I think that this must refer to the generous appetizer spread at the hotel bar. But then we are seated at a table in the hotel restaurant, La Veranda, for a big bowl of ribollita alla toscana—a filling and delicious soup made of bread, cabbage, and vegetables. Next comes a heaping plate of salmon and spinach with almonds. And then a rich homemade cheesecake.

"In Italy, we don't do like the French people, with their small plates," explains Georges Midleje, the general manager of the hotel and our group's guide for much of the trip. "What is the sense of living like a sick man in order to die healthy?"

Georges raises his glass of wine and teases me for drinking a club soda. "Water will make you rusty!"

It's my first trip to Italy. Normally, I would hop from city to city, whirlwinding my way through Rome, Naples, and Florence (and Capri and Venice and Sicily, too—and, who knows, maybe even a quick jaunt over the border to glimpse Germany), never giving myself a chance to catch my breath, let alone soak in my surroundings. But I'm here with a group, and the whole point of our trip is to slow down. Our itinerary will keep us within 25 miles or so of the winding, hilly roads surrounding the Renaissance.

I'm already getting in some good practice going slow. When I checked in earlier, I planned to explore the grounds of the 1,700-acre property, or maybe take a taxi into town. But instead I admired the spectacular view



Located about an hour outside of Florence and overlooking the village of Barga, the resort has 180 rooms, a wellness center with a heated indoor pool, a beauty spa, and 11 meeting rooms.

Guest rooms feature LCD HD televisions, Wi-Fi, and views of the Serchio Valley mountains.

Hotel staff can help guests arrange chef-led cooking classes, visits to surrounding attractions, and even helicopter rides from the property's landing pad.

The sprawling estate and rustic setting make the hotel a popular choice for weddings and corporate events.

The Renaissance Tuscany Il Ciocco Resort & Spa contains 180 guest rooms and can arrange chef-led cooking classes.

from my balcony for a few minutes, collapsed onto the comfy bed, and promptly fell asleep with the smell of wood smoke drifting through the open door from the valley below.

The next morning, we visit Podere Concori, a family farm that began producing wine in 1999. The shop sells colorful t-shirts emblazoned with the English phrase "I Just Drink to Say I Love You," and our group huddles under a canopy, looking out at the rainy vineyard as our guide explains winemaking and harvesting. After the tour, we lunch on salamis and cheeses, bruschetta made with salty ham and deliciously sweet tomatoes, and pasta. Here especially, my aversion to wine is met with, not so much derision, but more a kind of pity.

"But water is bad for your digestion," protests Gabriele, the proprietor, who seems genuinely concerned for my health.

I gave up alcohol two years ago for a number of reasons, but it's clear that, to the Italians, I'm simply living life incorrectly.

Georges explains that the pasta sauce contains nothing more than tomatoes and olive oil. "Wow," he says. "Fantastic. Back to what

life used to be." Georges is a bit of an evangelist for the region, referring to Tuscany variously as "authentic," "down-to-earth," and "a small piece of heaven." But the word he uses most often is simple. Life here, he says, revolves around food and drink and family, and everything else falls into place.

As my companions sip their wine, Gabriele explains the "biodynamic" processes used to grow the grapes, and I come to understand that the term encompasses not only organic agriculture but also elements of astrology and magic. He tells us how the phases of the moon affect the crops, and how he uses bulls' horns in his fertilizer because the horn "contains more energy than the entire rest of the animal."

Georges translates this for us, and then speaks for himself. "When Gabriele talks about this, I don't understand it, but I am tempted to believe, if this is the product. The fact that this is so simple and humble, and it



gets these results ... there must be something to it."

At dinner, we once again eat like kings, this time at a restaurant called Scacciai, where I order bistecca alla fiorentina. But the next day, it's our turn to make lunch. After a trip into Barga to buy ingredients, we take a cooking class with Alessandro, the hotel's friendly chef. Each of us is given a little volcano of flour with a tiny pool of olive oil at the center, and an egg. I've never made pasta before; I knew there wasn't much to it, but this is almost disarmingly simple.

One member of our group works on des-

sert, another stirs sauce, and the rest of us roll up our sleeves and knead and roll and cut the pasta. I'm usually not worth much in the kitchen, but this is too easy for even me to screw up, and before long we have piles of fresh noodles ready to drop into the water.

The next morning, we're supposed to ride bicycles around the walled city of Lucca. But the weather is bad, so we set out to explore the city on foot instead. Armed with umbrellas, we duck in and out of modern shops located in medieval buildings. I'm proud of myself when I order a light lunch of soup and roasted vegetables, but when we return to La Veranda for dinner, I think of the fact that I'll be leaving soon, and I wolf down beef carpaccio, tender veal, and chestnut flour pasta with chicken liver and sage sauce. Not to mention a delectable tiramisu for dessert.

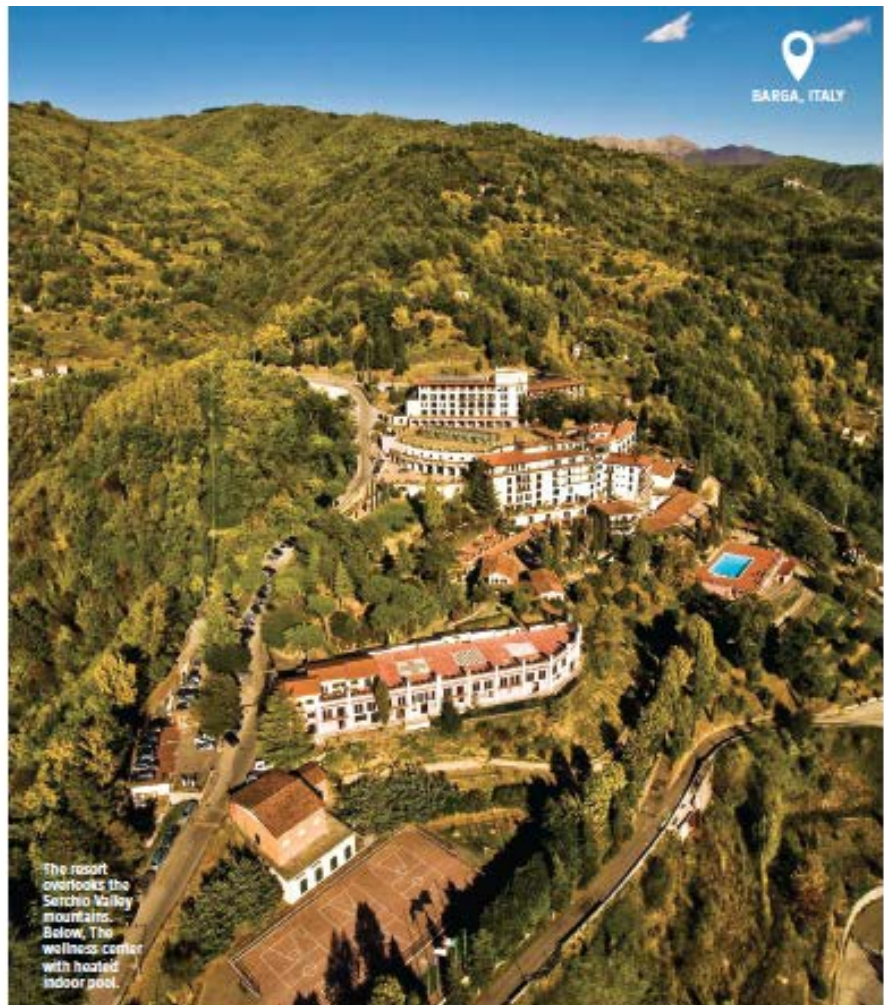
(But I'm still not fully living the Tuscan life. When I once again refuse wine, the waiter asks me if I'm sick.)

Our last day is entirely rained out, with howling winds like the staff say they've never seen. But my time in the countryside has lulled me into a sort of Zen-like contentment, and I'm happy to hang out at the Renaissance. I spend some time at the spacious gym and heated indoor pool, and then relax in my room until it's time for my massage. Something about being laid out on the table with the therapist rubbing oil into my back reminds me of the pasta-making class, and after the massage, I head downstairs to the sauna. It's 82 degrees Celsius—not quite the temperature needed to boil pasta, but not far off.

At dinnertime, we once again meet with Georges. We start with some appetizers by the fireplace, and then move to a table in La Veranda, where it seems as though the courses will never stop coming: steak tartare, a small soufflé, risotto with mozzarella, sliced steak, lava cake. After dessert, we sit sipping coffee and looking back on our trip. The moments that stand out for me, I say, are the little things: the burst of flavor from the tomatoes at the winery, a knee-bucklingly good gelato I had on our shopping trip in Barga.

"These are the old things," Georges says.

"The simple things. The simpler, the better." ♦
Renaissance Tuscany Il Ciocco Resort & Spa
renaissancetuscany.com



The resort overlooks the Serchio Valley mountains. Below, the wellness center with heated indoor pool.

