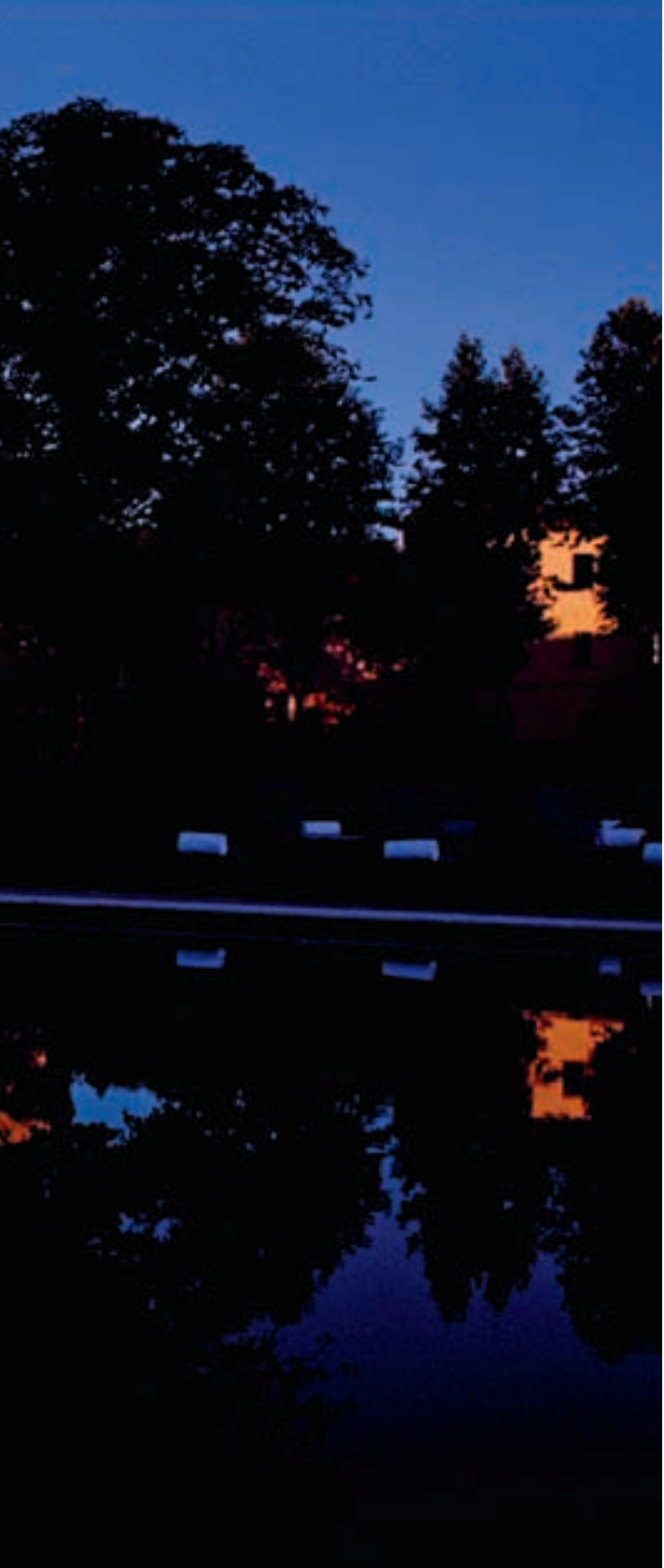


Splendor in Sienna

By Saxon Henry





Castel Monastero evokes storybook romance and age-old fairy tales

“You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover” is a cliché that’s stood the test of time for a reason. Case in point is Castel Monastero, a resort nestled into an 11th-century medieval village near Sienna, Italy. To be ensconced in such tranquil surroundings, the former nunnery – a collection of beautiful stone buildings surrounding an intricately patterned brick piazza – is a lively destination that includes spa experiences, two Gordon Ramsay restaurants, health and wellness initiatives and a cookery program created by the infamous chef whose claim to fame includes 10 Michelin Stars and dream destroyer for scores of knife-wielding-wannabes on his television show *Hell’s Kitchen*.

Chef Ramsay invented the cookery experience to emulate a journey into the true essence of Tuscan cuisine, highlighting the finest dishes and the freshest ingredients gleaned from the sunflower-dappled region. I, personally, have never tasted sun-dried tomatoes with richer flavor and olives with such piquancy anywhere else in the world.

Of the two restaurants carrying Ramsay’s stamp,





Contrada, reached by a dainty candlelit stairway, looks out over the piazza, while La Cantina unfolds within the castle's 13th-century barrel-vaulted wine cellar, where the nuns once aged the wine they produced. The restaurant, with its arched contours and aged stone floor, is a dreamy place to dine, the abundance of candlelight adding to the illusion that you've stepped back in time. Ramsay says of the property, "I suppose no matter what happens after me, after you, this place is still going to remain the same – it's steeped in history. The personality of the place is being nurtured and preserved."

Ramsay collaborates with Dr. Mosaraf Ali, who heads up the wellness program at Castel Monastero, to create meals in line with dietary initiatives when warranted. Dr. Ali also oversees spa treatment regimes, which are experienced in a serene setting with a minimalist vibe and whispery colors – perfect for getting lost from anything remotely resembling a normal (read "hectic") reality. The spa is an extension of the breathless surroundings that offer nourishment at every turn: even sipping a locally bottled wine in the piazza, awash in the patina of clay surfaces the color of the Tuscan soil, feels momentous.

Sunday mornings, the bell punctuating the village church tucked into a corner of the piazza summons locals and visitors to worship, a tradition that Ramsay celebrates: "At Castel Monastero, those who live nearby are as important as the visitors. They hold onto the rituals, to that service on Sunday. The village is part of them."

What's also real is the romanticism that emanates from every nook and cranny of the place. That's because the attributes are natural and have had ages to mature – rosemary bushes the size of boulders, and lemon and olive trees line the brick walkway from the spa to the main buildings of the resort, scenting the air with wafts of lush aromas. While dining in Contrada one evening, I overheard a bride-to-be planning her wedding ceremony, which would take place at Castel Monastero, and I thought to myself "What a lucky girl!"