

# fields OF GOLD

Il Palagio, the 16th-century Tuscan estate restored by Sting and Trudie Styler, is now taking reservations, writes *Josephine McKenna*.

PHOTOGRAPHY **SUSAN WRIGHT**



## CHIANTI CLASSICO

Alfresco dining is always on the menu at Il Palagio. Opposite, beyond the terrace cypress trees line the approach to the villa.



**S** Shelley once described Italy as the “paradise of exiles” and that’s exactly how British musician Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, like to describe their Tuscan estate, Il Palagio. A summer haven for their family for the past 18 years, it’s now open to the public.

Il Palagio has the kind of sensuality that would inspire the romantic poets of a bygone era. A sweeping driveway lined with cypress trees leads you past rows of neatly clipped vines and a jumble of olive plantings to a 16th-century Tuscan villa with views across the hills of Chianti.

Sting and Styler call this magnificent property their Italian home, but even they were surprised to have found such an idyllic getaway when they bought Il Palagio after a decade-long search in 1997.

“We’d seen many houses, many cavernous palazzos with beautiful frescoes that were quite grand,” says Styler, a film producer and philanthropist. “Everything we saw was really wrong. I said, ‘Let’s call the search off.’ “This was the last place on the list. When we got to Il Palagio, we stepped out of the car and came across that view and it took our breath away. Literally. The panorama was breathtaking.”

Situated near the medieval town of Figline Valdarno, 40 kilometres south of Florence, the 320-hectare estate encompasses dense oak forests, tranquil lakes beyond its vineyards and olive groves. It’s a part of Chianti sometimes dubbed Chiantishire by the British press because of its popularity with big-name visitors such as prime minister David Cameron, Tony Blair, Bryan Ferry and Sting and Styler themselves.

Figline Valdarno sits between medieval cities such as Arezzo, a short drive to the south-east, and Siena to the south-west. Vineyards roll into the distance and there are plenty of bicycle paths, horse riding, hiking



trails and the odd monastery hidden in the hills. Art lovers can examine the Renaissance masters at the Uffizi or potter around the monthly antiques market in Arezzo, one of Italy’s best. Greve, known as the gateway to Chianti Classico, only 20 kilometres away is a wine lover’s paradise and restaurants such as Da Padellina, a local institution, serve benchmark bistecca Fiorentina for those who want to indulge their passion for serious Tuscan beef.

The estate was a landmark in the area for centuries before being sold to the Countess Carlotta Barbolani of Montauto, widow of the Duke of San Clemente, in 1819. It remained in the hands of the aristocratic family until Sting and Styler fell in love with it on that first visit.

“After 40 minutes, Sting and I looked at each other and said, ‘this might be it,’” says Styler. “We made an appointment to go back the next day.”

Il Palagio, or the palace, soon became the summer retreat for Sting and Styler and their four children. It also became the setting for memorable family occasions, private concerts and downtime with famous friends, including Madonna, Bob Geldof and Bruce Springsteen.

Sting sees it as a place to “restore body and soul”. He has also recorded tracks for three of his albums, including *Songs from the Labyrinth*, at a studio he built on the property. “It’s been an inspiring place to be creative,” Sting says. “But it’s also the perfect refuge where I can switch off and enjoy the peace and the beauty that surrounds us.”

When the couple bought the estate from Duke Simone Vincenzo Velluti Zati of San Clemente, it was in a state of disrepair. Over the years they’ve not only



**NOTHING LIKE THE SUN**

Above: Sting and Trudie Styler at Il Palagio and a lake on the estate. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a guest room in the main villa; chicken fricassée with spinach from Il Palagio’s organic garden; a sitting room in the main villa; the terrace overlooks the pool.



## SECRET JOURNEY

Top left: the fountain once owned by Sofia Loren. Centre: tagliolini piccanti with fresh tomatoes, oregano and basil. Right: the estate's original cellar.

expanded and restored the property, they've turned it into a thriving agricultural enterprise, producing organic vegetables, olive oil, honey and critically acclaimed wine.

Now, as they have less time to spend in Tuscany, they have decided to make Il Palagio's historic villa, plus three smaller villas within the grounds and two others nearby, available for holiday rentals.

"We made a move to New York three years ago," Styler says. "That means that we are not nearly as close to it any more – we're 3000 miles away."

Styler couldn't bear to part with the property, and thought opening it up as an agriturismo of sorts was a perfect compromise. "The gardens are so established now and the vineyard is looking so healthy. It's a place of beauty."

The central feature of Il Palagio is the imposing sandy-coloured villa, which has commanding views of the vineyards, the olive trees and the Apennines Mountains in the distance. Along one side of the three-storey residence an ivy-covered loggia draws you through an archway to a huge chess set on a terrace, dubbed Sting's Café, where the musician and his friends gather for an evening aperitivo overlooking the large swimming pool below.

On the other side of the villa, French doors open onto a manicured garden lined with eight cypress trees, more panoramic views and a stone fountain that once belonged to Sophia Loren. There's a tennis court nearby and a winding path leads to where Styler's black Friesian horses graze on the hill. English gardener Trevor Hunter and his team manage the eight hectares of gardens, which contain centuries-old oak trees and two lakes. At Styler's request, they've planted roses and fruit trees, including plums and peaches, and added bridges and fences in the woodlands. "Sting and Trudie like little surprises when you walk around a corner," jokes Hunter.

Working with landscape architect Lady Arabella Lennox-Boyd and interior designer Alain Mertens, Styler and Sting have created an elegant yet comfortable haven that invites you to curl up with a book or explore the magic of the gardens.

In the main villa there are nine light and airy guest rooms with views across the gardens or the vineyards. Antique beds, Tuscan armoires and original paintings give several rooms a classic feel, while others have a funky Asian element that reflects the couple's flirtation with the Far East. All have large ensuite bathrooms with claw-foot tubs and classic fittings.

All roads lead to the kitchen where chef Alba Papi uses produce from *the estate's organic garden* to create tailor-made menus.

Downstairs, the sitting rooms are filled with plush sofas and ethnic rugs from faraway places. An antique walnut table is laden with books covering topics from ancient history to Leonardo Da Vinci, a guitar lies on a red velvet sofa where Sting sits and strums before breakfast, a small chess set sits in a nook filled with morning sun. Walls covered with intimate family photos and a famous face or two make you feel the family has just stepped out of the room.

"I thought of taking all the pictures down," Styler says, "but I don't want it to ever look like a hotel. I want our guests to feel that we are very near to them and that our genuine wish is for everyone to have a beautiful time where they can relax and feel they are in a home and not a hotel."

The dining room has a vaulted ceiling covered in a fine restoration of Renaissance grotesque and the nobles' chapel has been turned into a gym and yoga studio. But, as Styler herself says, all roads lead to the kitchen where chef Alba Papi uses fruit and vegetables from the estate's organic garden to create a menu tailor-made to every guest's dietary needs.

The effervescent Papi, whose family has been in the region for 300 years, says she feels like a nonna>



## HOME GROUND

Chef Alba Papi (top centre) runs a cooking school at the villa in the summer. The former chapel (left) is now used as a space for yoga.



to Sting and Styler's children. Occasionally she joins their personal chef, Joe Sponzo, in London to make pasta a mano for big occasions, and in the summer she runs a cooking school at the villa.

Specialties such as pasta al pomodoro, pesto lasagne, bistecca alla Fiorentina and pollo in fricassee are often on the hand-written menu. Tiramisù is a family favourite, along with Papi's pizza nights in the courtyard.

"We roll out the table and the guests get to put on their plates the ingredients that will go onto their pizze," Styler says. "They put their name on their plate and it's given to Alba and she makes that pizza to that recipe. So she can be making 30 different pizze that night."

Papi is not the only staff member who has a personal connection to the property. Estate manager Paolo Rossi and his sister, Bina, who runs the household and takes care of the house guests, were both born at Il Palagio. Their father began managing the property for the duke in the 1930s and their childhood was spent playing hide-and-seek in the days when peasants still toiled in the vineyards. Later Paolo worked for the duke himself, but he never imagined he would build a career at Il Palagio.

"When Trudie and Sting decided to buy the property, I was very tired," Paolo recalls. "I wanted to

take a sabbatical, but the duke said it was very important for me to stay. Trudie and Sting were so fantastic I continued to work – so I never had my sabbatical year."

Bina credits Sting and Styler for giving the property a future. "No one was living in the house any more, the peasants had abandoned it, the fields were neglected and so were the gardens," she says. "They brought it back to life without changing its character."

The rolling hills surrounding Il Palagio were once known as the "barn of Florence" for the grains, corn, fruit and vegetables grown there over the centuries. Sting and Styler had their own vision for organic produce and also turned their attention to making wine and olive oil.>

**MATCH POINT**

Clockwise, from top left: the dining room; the main villa; the estate's olives and honey. Opposite: the terrace is the setting for chess and aperitivi.



They worked with the late Alan York, a world-renowned consultant for biodynamic winegrowers, and hired Paolo Caciorgna, a respected Tuscan oenologist with experience in California and France. First they set about planting more than 11 hectares of new vines and replenishing the soil.

Now Il Palagio produces between 50,000 and 70,000 bottles a year, and they are sold in the US, Canada, Europe, Hong Kong and Australia. Sales have been boosted by glowing endorsements from big-name US critics, including James Suckling and Robert Parker.

Fans will recognise the names on the labels. Message in a Bottle is predominantly sangiovese, with a splash of shiraz and merlot, while When We Dance is 95 per cent sangiovese with a blend of canaiolo and colorino grapes. The jewel in the crown is Sister Moon, the first wine produced at Il Palagio. It's a fruity, spicy blend of sangiovese, merlot and cabernet sauvignon that's aged for 15 to 18 months in French barriques and refined in bottles for another six months.

Il Palagio oenologist Paolo Caciorgna says the estate is producing interesting wines that express the characteristics of the local terroir as well as those of Tuscany. He is not deterred by the competition in a region well known for its fine reds. "Certainly there is lively competition because Tuscany produces so many wines and there are famous areas such as

Chianti Classico and Brunello," Caciorgna says on a tour of the property's original cellar. "But the idea is that every territory, every terroir, expresses something different. If I can make a small parallel with music, each voice is different to another. This is what we are offering."

Extra-virgin olive oil, made from a blend of leccino, frantoio and moraiolo olives grown on the estate, is also produced at Il Palagio, and more recently, honey as well.

"I said to Paolo, 'How do you feel about honey?' and he said, 'But Trudie, I have never grown honey.' And I said, 'Do you want to try?' And he said, 'Si,' of course.

"We put about 80 hives around the acacia trees and then we went to the chestnut groves and put a bunch there near the lavender." Today the estate produces more than five types of honey including Thousand Flowers, a wildflower honey that has a rich caramel, buttery taste.

Whether it's the charm of the villa or its panoramic views, the atmosphere at Il Palagio clearly captivates the staff as much as Sting and Styler, even before you taste the freshly prepared food and fine wine, or go for a swim or a stroll. Paolo Rossi summed it up this way. "It is not just a restored villa – there's an energy that lives here. When everyone arrives they are tense, by the second day they are much more relaxed. Sometimes when guests leave I even see them cry." ●

## THE FINE PRINT

### STAY

#### IL PALAGIO

Within the grounds of Il Palagio there are four villas available to rent: the historic 16th-century villa and three smaller villas. The Red House is a converted carpenter's workshop that sleeps five; The Chalet sleeps two; and

Casa Colonica, which has the feel of a comfortable hunters' lodge and sleeps six. Rates range from \$20,095 to \$85,908 per week. Also available to hire are two villas located nearby (one sleeps 10, the other eight). These off-site properties start at \$8612 per week. Rates include a cook and a butler, general housekeeping and laundry, breakfast, afternoon tea, aperitivi, use of the pool and tennis courts and WiFi. *Il Palagio, Figline Valdarno, Florence, Italy, +44 20 7451 0600, palagioproducts.com*

### MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

Above, clockwise from left: the view over the vineyards from a guest room in the main villa; estate wines Sister Moon, When We Dance and Message in a Bottle; the lounge and dining room of Casa Colonica villa; Kath Lewis, stable hand at Il Palagio. Opposite: view from the upper balcony.