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## Respecting the Tuscan Land

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VAL D'ORCIA, ITALY — Castiglioncello del Trinoro, a medieval village in the heart of [Tuscany](#) set amid the pine woods of the Val d'Orcia, was once a thriving farming community.

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Paolo Codeluppi

Tenuta Valdipiatta produces 80,000 bottles a year of the prized Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. The estate follows sustainable, traditional viticulture and wine-making methods.

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It went into decline with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, but now it is being brought back to life, its ancient houses converted into environmentally conscious villas for vacation rentals by Michael L. Cioffi, a business lawyer from Ohio who is of Italian descent.

More than a catchy tourist trap, Mr. Cioffi said in an interview, the project, The Villas at Monteverdi, is a fully sustainable development bringing customers to local businesses and a renewed social life to the region.

“I stumbled upon the village, which was in ruins and totally forgotten,” Mr. Cioffi said. “It had the same [architecture](#) as 700 years ago. There was a sense of going back in time, which I decided to maintain by using ancient techniques and materials.”

Since 2006 he has bought five buildings, “piles of bricks essentially,” that he has restored using the same stones. These he has equipped with furnishings and works by local artisans and artists; the bedding is in regional linen, sewn by local seamstresses.

Initially, local people were suspicious. “They thought I wanted to make a Holiday Inn and Disneyland all in one,” Mr. Cioffi said. Attitudes shifted, however, as it became clear that the restoration had spinoff benefits. An ancient Etruscan archeological site, accidentally unearthed, is being renovated and will be opened to the public, and Mr. Cioffi is also working on installing a new water system for the

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area.

Everybody who works on the project lives within a few kilometers; food served in the rental houses is made from locally produced ingredients, grown in a rooftop vegetable [garden](#) or bought from neighboring farms and markets. “We are working on developing our own fields and farms so we can be as self-sufficient as possible,” Mr. Cioffi said.

“By connecting with agricultural techniques of the past we create a better life for ourselves in the future,” he added.

A cafe, opened in June, has brought new life to the community, said Paolo Coluccio, executive chef at the Villas, who is also the cafe’s manager. “The opening night saw 300 visitors, and throughout the summer, we had two full sittings every lunch,” he said.

The cafe serves simple dishes, like pecorino cheese from the valley on bread, or cured Cinta Senese, a Tuscan ham, with cheese on toast.

The cafe’s popularity is a reflection of Mr. Cioffi’s efforts to promote cultural tourism: regular concerts, operas, and artists’ residencies are organized throughout the year in a nearby church, renovated as part of the project.

He is also working to open a hotel in the village next year, with a restaurant and an outdoor swimming pool.

The project has brought a new appreciation of the region, said Miriam Caporali, owner of a nearby wine estate, Tenuta Valdiapiatta.

An economist by training, Ms. Caporali was living in Rome until she decided 12 years ago on a change of lifestyle. “The wine was calling me,” she said of her choice to move to Val d’Orcia and take over the management of the [winery](#), bought by her parents in the 1980s.

Over the past decade, she said, she has seen the area slowly repopulating. “It was much more boring, quiet when I arrived, but young people are coming back today,” she said. “There is also a new tourism, and a boost of sales of our high-range bottles.”

Valdiapiatta follows sustainable, traditional viticulture and wine making methods: to protect the estate’s 30 hectares, or 75 acres, Ms. Caporali uses “an ancient mechanical technique” instead of chemical pesticides. Modern fertilizers are replaced by the use of fava beans as a cover crop to feed the soil naturally.

“This means we produce less wine, but it is more respectful to the region,” Ms. Caporali said.

The estate produces 80,000 bottles a year of highly prized Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, half sold on the Italian market and half exported. Its wine was rated the best Vino Nobile tasted by the Wine Spectator in 1997. A bright ruby-colored wine with notes of red fruits and spices, Vino Nobile marries well with truffles, another of the region’s products.

“What makes me the happiest is to see young people drinking local wine,” Ms. Caporali said. “There is a sudden appreciation of the country’s tradition.”