

Frances Mayes - excerpt from “*Bringing Tuscany Home*”

Frances Mayes, author of the best selling book “*Under the Tuscan Sun*”.

“As you leave the splendid Etruscan hilltown of Cortona, driving toward Borgo di Vagli, you quickly enter a wilder Tuscany. The groomed olive terraces surrounding the town gradually give way to a rugged landscape of chestnut and evergreen forests. You might spot a family of wild boar or, at night, a barn owl might fly above your headlights.

I'm always dazzled at the turn for Vagli, when the *castello*, La Rocca di Pierle, rises before me. This looming stone relic catapults you into thoughts of princesses and knights. You take the road to the left, wind around the *chiesetta*, little church, of San Biagio, and then the pavement stops. You're on a more secret, serpentine road into the hills above Pierle. The first time you navigate the narrow road it seems like a challenge. Within a couple of days, it's part of the enchantment of living deep in the Tuscan countryside. Soon you see off to the right the Borgo di Vagli, a cluster of twenty stone houses nestled on a hillside. Vagli - the name means “between the valleys” - abandoned after World War II by the farmers who lived there for centuries. Just now it has reawakened from its long sleep. As you climb and dip, we're looking down onto the Rocca's crumbling three towers, where Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, and Briar Rose all must be hiding. There may be a more mystical view in Tuscany, but I don't know where.

This entrance to Vagli speaks directly to the pleasures of the place. Although only 20 minutes from Cortona's lively *piazza* life, and within easy driving distance of many of the great Tuscan towns, you feel immediately a curtain of time drop between you and the hectic world. Vagli is not only secluded, it's isolated. All the neighbours are on four legs: deer, porcupine, boar, jack rabbits, and foxes. Birdwatchers will find the exotic *upupa* (hoopoe) flitting among the olives. You may come to appreciate the beauty of a small black scorpion (harmless) scurrying under a rock. What you hear is silence.

You become aware of the blue air at evening, the angle of the sun on a stone roof, a vine-covered *pergola* where you want to sit and read those books you've not had time to touch for months. Borgo di Vagli's houses are tastefully curated with local antiques and traditional textiles. With its bright pool, sunning terraces and private patios, you enjoy the amenities of other luxury properties. But Vagli has the real luxury: peace. Those seeking bright lights and nightlife had best look elsewhere. Here, at night, you'll find only the aromas of Dina's pasta sauce wafting out to the pergola where you will dine under the stars, only the gurgle of good wine pouring, only the sound of laughter among your fellow voyagers.

I came to know Vagli through my friendship with Fulvio Di Rosa, who restored the Borgo with great sensitivity. He asks himself at every decision point, how would the original owners have solved this problem? By that deceptively simple guiding principle, he stays true to the spirit of place that one feels so strongly in the village. I've watched and learned from the restoration at every stage. His is the best work I have seen. Recently I spent an afternoon photographing architectural details: carvings over doors, stone roofs, deftly placed steps, and corners of buildings against the sky. Fulvio Di Rosa has the artist's eye, so the deep pleasure that draws me over and over to Vagli continues to come from its beauty and harmony with the land.”