

# Casa San Gabriel

UMBRIA



The seclusion, so high, will clear your head; the valley setting and the feeling of space create a deep sense of peace.

Neighbouring towns, such as Perugia, Gubbio, Cortona and Assisi, have the sort of multi-layered history that can startle the unwary. They tell you in Tuscany that Gubbio was one of the first five towns to be founded after the Flood.

"There is not a building, a stream, a tree, an odd-looking hillock or a strangely shaped field that was not the scene of some story." Thus wrote H V Morton. "The moment a peasant leaves his cottage he steps into a library of fiction for which a weekly newspaper seems a poor substitute."

From the house you can see the Basilica di San Francesco at Assisi perched at the bottom of Mount Subasio. But if the tranquility of Casa San Gabriel gets to you, you may want nothing but the simple pleasures of gathering a lettuce from the veg patch for lunch, watching the hoopoes foraging for their young, and snoozing under a tree.

Christina and David bought the Umbrian farm buildings in November 2002, began work the next February, got married



in August and opened, albeit in a low-key way, in October, less than a year after setting eyes on the ruin.

"We came here for peace and beauty, spurred on by our love of the Italian countryside and of the Italian people. Our lives here couldn't be more different: in London I was an accountant in a city firm, away from home 12 hours a day. I met David when I was working in Australia – he comes from Victoria – and decided that if we had a family I didn't want to do what I was doing; I would hardly have seen my children. We both wanted to carve out a life that put family at the centre."

Their two girls, Lucia and Elisabetta, are well-integrated – happily attending the little local school and nursery. Says Christina: "One of the things I relish is the introduction they have had to mealtimes as being happy, unrushed, shared occasions. Eli has a three-course lunch with her classmates and teachers. Everything served will be the sort of food that the cooks prepare for their families. It costs €4 a day; I think that is good value." Compare that to the budget given for English



school lunches – 52p. What could better demonstrate the different approach to food taken by English and Italian governments.

The property is built on a 13th-century road and the main house dates back to the 16th century. It is said that Hannibal's army camped at the bottom of the valley next to the River Tiber that flows on from here and weaves its way right into Rome. They inflicted the worst defeat suffered by the Roman Empire at Lake Trasimeno, where they lured the Roman army into a narrow defile, so tight that the Romans couldn't properly wield their weapons, and slaughtered them. But Lake Trasimeno is beautiful, a vast watery oasis beside, and upon, which you can shake off the dust of a hot Umbrian summer.

Wild Asparagus Risotto

- 500g (1lb) wild asparagus tips
- 2 onions/large shallots
- olive oil
- 1 bottle Umbrian Grechetto or other dry white wine
- 2.5 cups risotto rice
- vegetable stock
- parmesan, freshly grated
- handful chopped parsley

- Trim asparagus keeping only juicy bits. Add to boiling water and cook until tips are tender. Reserve drained liquid
- Heat veg stock. Saute onions in oil until soft. Add rice and stir until shiny. Add 2 glasses of wine and stir until liquid has been absorbed. Add one ladleful of the hot asparagus water. Stir until absorbed
- Continue, adding small amounts of liquid each time. Add veg stock in same way. There is about 20 minutes of stirring to pour yourself a glass of wine. The rice is ready when it is cooked but still has bite.
- Add the asparagus right at the end and sprinkle with parmesan and parsley to serve



Three farm buildings were converted for self-catering holidays and each has its own terrace. You feel part of something yet have privacy, too. David and Christina cook for guests on Tuesdays and on request can deliver three-course meals to each apartment for private suppers; on Thursday nights you can create your own pizza using the original bread oven and eat with everyone else in the garden. "David shops in Pierantonio for seasonal stuff; we pick wild asparagus and make good risottos and he will always pick up local wine for guests to try."

There is a small, cosy library with soft seats, and lots of books on travel and cookery and a table on the garden terrace for a group of friends to use. Magnificent views are at their best from the pool at the top of their land next to the little vineyard. You look down and may spot the girls pottering among the lettuces, David attempting to tame nature in the garden, Christina chatting to guests. The densely wooded valley seems to throw a cloak of silence around Casa San Gabriel.

"For us the beauty of a Slow life is having choice. We work hard but if we want to take the children to the lake for a sunny afternoon we can, and will maybe work in the evening instead. The children stay up late to join in with village life, festivals and fairs. 'How do they cope?' people always ask us. A siesta does the trick. We are always together," says Christina. "We do miss seeing friends and family regularly but I do know that we will never leave."

Christina Todd & David Lang

- Casa San Gabriel,
- Vocablo Cal Zolari, Santa Giuliana 114, 06015 Pierantonio
- 3 apartments: 1 for 2, 1 for 2-4, 1 for 4.
- B&B: €85. Self-catering: €400-€1,025 per week.
- Dinner €25 (Tues); pizza €15 (Thurs).
- +39 0759 414219
- www.casasangabriel.com
- Train station: Perugia Pierantonio