



# ROOMS V





This picture: one of the luxury vineyard lodges with private garden at Leeu Estates in Franschhoek, South Africa. Inset bottom left: the estate's winemakers Chris and Andrea Mullineux of Mullineux Family Wines. Right: the Wine Studio dedicated to private tastings



The new face of fine wine tourism – from vaunted Bordelais châteaux to the cult vineyards of South Africa – is all about first-person encounters, breathtaking lodgings and exclusive behind-the-scenes experiences. **Alice Lascelles** reports

**T**he first time I meet Giovanni Bulgari, the 43-year-old heir to the Bulgari jewellery empire, it's on a scruffy lay-by in southern Tuscany. This is because Podernuovo a Palazzone, Bulgari's winery, is the kind of address that tends to defeat Google Maps. And you get the feeling he rather likes it that way. "I love this part of Tuscany," he says, climbing into his mud-spattered estate car. "It's intimate, with lots of small producers of olive oil and wine. It's more wild; you need to get here, if you know what I mean."

For the past 10 years, this diffident Italian has been quietly cultivating his own vines among the many surrounding San Casciano dei Bagni's gently sloping hills. Working out of a breathtaking slice of glass-and-concrete modernism by the Puglian architect Massimo Alvisi and his wife Junko Kirimoto, Bulgari (pictured overleaf) finalised the three Podernuovo reds, which debuted in the UK this summer: Sotirio 2012, a 100 per cent Sangiovese with nettle-y, hedgerow fruit; Terra

# VITH A CRU



2012, a dry, Sangiovese/Cabernet Sauvignon/Merlot/Montepulciano blend; and Argiro 2014, a Cabernet Franc packed with vibrant, pepperyassis.

Many estate owners in Bulgari's position would be content to direct proceedings from afar. But he's remained hands-on, living on-site in a modest four-bedroom house (pictured below) overlooking his beloved 26 hectares of vines. Recently, however, he moved to an ancient townhouse across the valley. The reason? To make room for more guests; because a stay at Podernuovo a Palazzone has become something of a hot ticket among Bulgari's friends and clients.

"Private as I may be, I enjoy having small groups of people from all over the world come here, to see the work and passion we put into this project," says Bulgari, as we crunch our way up the track from the house to the winery. "I like my guests to live their very own experience of it, in my home in the middle of the vines."

Accompanied by Bulgari and one of his consultant oenologists – currently Michele Bean – guests can take a deep dive into the finer points of vinifying in oak, concrete or steel; watch a harvest; or simply spend their days admiring the panoramic vineyard views from the huge terrace on the winery's roof. One guest from Singapore even swung his own, bespoke blend – "although this doesn't happen often," demurs Bulgari. "It takes a lot of time, with a special procedure for every stage."

Il Palazzone is designed for fun, with an eclectic mix of vintage and contemporary furniture, plenty of comfy sofas and a film projector for holing up with on rainy days. A large kitchen opens onto the lush garden, where a wisteria-swagged pergola offers the perfect spot for long lunches. By the end of 2018, there will be another five-bedroom villa in the vineyard, with a pool and a small spa. "If people want to see Etruscan tombs, go for a swim in a nearby lake or have a day in Rome or Florence, we can do all that," says Bulgari. "Everything is tailor-made."

This is what makes a stay at Podernuovo so special. It has an intimacy, a backstage-ness, to it that goes well beyond any ordinary wine tour. Increasingly, this is what oenophiles seek – that chance to immerse, however briefly, in the life of a working wine estate. Across Europe and as far afield as South Africa, savvy winemakers and estate owners are making such experiences a reality.

In Italy, another venerable family inviting guests to play house in some style among the vines are the Florentine Corsinis. Since 1363 they have presided over







**Clockwise from left:** guests at a cookery class at Villa Le Corti, in the Corsini family vineyard in Chianti Classico, Tuscany. Villa Gugliaie, a luxury seven-bedroom guesthouse on the estate. Giovanni Bulgari, heir to the Bulgari jewellery empire who owns the Podernuovo a Palazzone winery in Tuscany. Bulgari's former home on the estate

wine. Guests have the opportunity to be exceptionally hands-on here: in addition to wine-matching dinners, cellar tours and vertical tastings of Fessina's signature Nerello Mascalese, Il Musmeci Etna Rosso, they can in very small groups take part in an October harvest.

The same spirit of authenticity runs through Fessina's stylish eight-bedroom guesthouse, which blends ancient stonework and tiles with sharp contemporary details in a pared-back retreat that can be rented by the room, or hired in its entirety. Whether one is lying in bed, doors thrown open onto vineyards on two sides, or breakfasting in the communal dining room on fruit from the garden, nature is always just steps away. "I want my guests to live the full experience of winemaking on the volcano," Maestrelli tells me, just days before Etna embarks on a particularly vigorous eruption.

The hottest name to drop this year in the wine world, however, is down in Swartland, the South African near-wilderness that's the preserve of cult wineries including AA Badenhorst, Porseleinberg and Eben Sadie Family Wines, recently named Winemaker's Winemaker 2017. As yet, there's no smooth ride into this dustbowl, but the luxurious Leeu Estates, in neighbouring Franschhoek, offers exclusive access to one of the region's leading lights: winemakers Andrea and Chris Mullineux

(pictured on opening pages) of Mullineux & Leeu Family Wines, an outfit highlighted by the FT's own Jancis Robinson as "one of the most admired addresses of the South African new wave".

Leeu Estates is the fruit of a four-year partnership between Andrea and Chris

Mullineux and Analjit Singh, the Indian entrepreneur behind a new portfolio of top-drawer retreats. Set at the lush foot of Dassenberg Mountain, Leeu's clutch of whitewashed Cape Dutch lodges boasts its own winery, which last April launched its hotly anticipated new label, Leeu Passant. Blended by Mullineux from a handful of old vineyards round the Cape, these wines pay homage to the "age-worthy" South African greats of the 1950s, '60s and '70s: "We wanted to reassert what's unique about South African wines," Mullineux explains. By the time you read this, they'll have been snapped up (they're produced in tiny quantities), but one place that's certain to have a supply is Leeu's handsome Wine Studio (pictured on opening pages), a leather- and oak-clad affair dedicated to private tastings – with Mullineux herself, if you're very lucky, or you ask in advance – and all-round oenophile enjoyment.

But even without a first-person Mullineux experience, Leeu is a pretty dreamy hotel. Bordered on all sides by manicured vineyards, each lodging (example pictured opening pages) is kitted out with huge marble bathrooms,

## Guests at an award-winning winery on the slopes of Etna have the opportunity to be exceptionally hands-on and can, in very small groups, take part in an October harvest

Villa Le Corti, a Renaissance villa in the north of the Chianti Classico region. Endowed with an extensive art collection and splendid gardens, the Villa is also home to a winery that has been dramatically renovated in the past 25 years, thanks to current scion, Duccio Corsini. This summer, the estate opened to visitors for the first time, offering tailormade tastings and cookery classes (pictured above left) and the chance to dine with Duccio himself at the Villa's osteria, sunk deep in the ancient wine cellars. (Although Villa Le Corti is not for hire, partners Tuscany Now & More operate other luxuriously appointed rentals on the estate, including the seven-bedroom Villa Gugliaie – pictured top right – set in the midst of the eponymous vineyard.)

In Sicily, the trailblazing winemaker Silvia Maestrelli recently put the finishing touches to new lodgings at Tenuta di Fessina, her award-winning winery on the slopes of Mount Etna. Fessina is at the forefront of a Sicilian wine movement championing a return to native varietals and low-intervention methods – a return, in many senses, to a more authentic way of making







**Clockwise from top left:** Bernard Magrez, proprietor of four grand cru classé châteaux in Bordeaux. Magrez's splendid two-suite Château Fombrauge on his St Emilion vineyard estate. Guests blending wines at one of the B-Winemaker experiences, held by Magrez's Château Pape Clément winemakers

private gardens bursting with jasmine, open fireplaces and vast beds. The spa is exquisite, the food delicious, and the art by turns witty, beautiful and surprising.

The rather starchy region of Bordeaux has historically been a harder nut to crack unless you are armed with the right contacts. But its upper echelons are lately much easier to access, thanks to Bernard Magrez (pictured top left), the proprietor of not just one, or two, but a full four grand cru classé châteaux, including Château La Tour Carnet in the Haut-Médoc, Château Fombrauge in St Emilion, and the prestigious Château Pape Clément in Graves. Each of these striking châteaux is now available for private hire to oenophiles looking to create the ultimate vino-centric house party. There's no denying Magrez likes to make a splash: Château Pape Clément features white peacocks, Baccarat chandeliers and a Gustave Eiffel-designed glasshouse. But my pick would

## Four of Bordeaux's most prestigious châteaux are now available for private hire to oenophiles looking to create the ultimate vino-centric house party

be the serene two-suite Château Fombrauge (pictured top right) planted all around with box topiary, ancient olives and cedars alive with birdsong.

Behind-the-scenes visits are encouraged across Magrez's châteaux: as well as private vineyard tours with a top sommelier, vertical tastings of Pape Clément and exclusive wine-and-caviar pairings, he's devised what's known as the B-Winemaker experience, whereby guests try their hand at blending their own cuvée under the guidance of a Pape Clément winemaker

(pictured left). The result is bottled with a personalised label, to be enjoyed at a later date (or stored discreetly at the back of the cellar, depending on the result).

To the east, in Alsace, is Villa René Lalique (pictured overleaf), a six-bedroom, five-star hotel with a two-Michelin-star restaurant and one of the largest wine cellars in Europe. Above ground, this plush hotel – the original villa was built for René Lalique in 1920 –

looks like something out of a fairytale. But down in the cellar, past the Damien Hirst glass panels, it's state-of-the-art, with a glistening black granite floor, a tasting table accommodating 26 and an inventory of over 60,000 wines, in cases stacked neatly in two temperature-controlled, glass-fronted chambers bordering the room. Napa wines are a favourite of

the owner, Lalique CEO Silvio Denz, but you'll also find all the first growths, including Yquem dating back to 1855, and an unsurpassed selection of Alsace wines.

Navigating such a vast cellar would be daunting, were it not for the guidance of Villa René Lalique's multi-award-winning sommelier Romain Iltis (pictured overleaf), a local with an engaging tableside manner – and expertise beyond the Villa's walls. In his company, I spent a fascinating day visiting the wineries of Mélanie





Clockwise from above: Romain Iltis, the award-winning head sommelier at Villa René Lalique, the six-bedroom, five-star hotel in Alsace (right). Vita Sackville-West's White Garden at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent. The new Wine Sanctuary tasting bar at Chapel Down winery in Kent



Pfister and Frédéric Mochel, two dynamic winemakers raising the profile of northern Alsace. While the Villa doesn't officially organise wine tours, I'd recommend putting in a quiet word to see if you can steal Iltis away for the afternoon: the access he offers is second to none.

Oeno-tourism is even acquiring a new air of glamour in the UK, thanks in part to Kent winery Chapel Down, which recently unveiled a new tasting room and private dining space with a bespoke bar that was designed by A-list jeweller Stephen Webster. Dubbed The Wine Sanctuary (pictured below), it's the focal point of a high-end experience programme that includes one-to-one vineyard tours. The wines include the new Kit's Coty Cœur de Cuvée 2013, a 100 per cent Chardonnay, single-estate cuvée priced just shy of £100. Low-key but charming accommodation is sewn up too, given that Chapel Down CEO Frazer Thompson and his wife Sue also live in Sissinghurst Castle Farmhouse, the picturesque B&B in the grounds of nearby Sissinghurst Castle. Famed for Vita Sackville-West's ravishing gardens, Sissinghurst attracts around 180,000 visitors a year. But if you're a B&B guest, and you ask Sue nicely, you might just be allowed to slip in after hours and sit in Sackville-West's famous White Garden (above right), oiled by some really top-notch English fizz. ♦

#### GRAPE ESCAPES

Alice Lascelles travelled as a guest of **Leeu Estates** (+2721-492 2222; leeucollection.com), from £477 for a double room including breakfast; **Podernuovo a Palazzone** (f.zanoni@podernuovoapalazzone.it); and **Villa René Lalique** (+333-8871 9898; villarenelalique.com), from €385 for a double room including breakfast. **Chapel Down**, 01580-766 111; chapeldown.com, tours from £15. **Château Fombrauge, Château La Tour Carnet and Château Pape Clément**, +335-3538 1616; lagrandemaison-bordeaux.com, from €300 for a room; from €2,500 per night to rent the château. **Sissinghurst Castle Farmhouse** 01580-720 992; sissinghurstcastlefarmhouse.com, from £150 for a double room including breakfast. **Tenuta di Fessina**, tenutadifessina.com, from €180 for a double room; from €1,000 to hire the guesthouse; wine matching dinners and tastings €50; attending harvests, €250. **Tuscany Now & More**, 020-7684 8888; tuscanynowandmore.com. **Villa Le Corti**, principecorsini.com, tastings, from €150; cookery classes, €160. **Villa Gugliaie**, from £4,280 per week based on 14 sharing, see Tuscany Now & More.



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