



BUON APPETITO: Grape harvesters at Castello Vicchiomaggio leave the vineyards for their lunch break.

family run, and many take reservations on the Internet.

Our room at Casa Nova was in a converted old barn and consisted of a loft with a sitting area, a comfortable double bed and a breathtaking view of surrounding vineyards. Casa Nova's vineyards, where the *vendemmia* was in full force, were five minutes from our rooms. I walked there along muddy trails, past plants of rosemary, sage, lavender and wild blue- and blackberries.

Wines by the barrelful

THAT night we drove to nearby Panzano in Chianti for the *Vino al Vino* festival, a three-day celebration of the best wine production of that region (scheduled this year for Thursday to Sept. 21).

Of the 16 wineries pouring samples, only a handful, such as Le Bocce, would be easily recognizable to American aficionados. For \$8, we got a glass and holder and as much wine as we wanted. Wines weren't for sale — just for tasting. But after we lingered at the booth of Vecchie Terre di Montefili, praising the Bruno di Rocca, Maria Acuti, the sales manager and daughter of the proprietor, invited us back to the vineyards.

She scribbled directions in my notebook that seemed cryptic at first but were enough to guide us: "*Passi Panzano, Direzione Mercatale San Casciano. Circa Km 5.*" (Pass Panzano toward

Mercatale and San Casciano. Go about 5 kilometers.) As we pulled into the winery, the sun was just beginning to set, and Rocco Acuti and his wife, Franca, greeted us warmly. Maria had called ahead. Rocco showed us around his small *azienda* and the *cantina*, a three-room building where the wine was pressed, bottled and boxed for distribution.

His description of the process was poetic, from the careful preparation of the vines, which are trimmed to expose the grapes to the maximum amount of sun, to his choice of oak — usually French — for the barrels in which the wines age. Franca was more direct. "We make a wine of quality," she told us. "We must do that."

The next morning, as wine pickers from France, Germany and Italy gathered at our *agriturismo* armed with garden shears and plastic kitchen gloves, the foreman looked up at the overcast sky, then down at the muddy fields. He clicked his tongue. "Not a good year for wine," he said in Italian with a French accent. "Rain."

After breakfast at Casa Nova — we had stiff espresso *con latte*, cereals, bread and *cornetti*, the Italian version of croissants — I watched as the pickers went about their work, reaching up and down and snapping the bunches of grapes off the vines as they swarmed efficiently down row after row, quickly filling the red baskets they kept nearby.

I could have lingered all day, but we had called ahead for a tour at Castello Vicchiomaggio, one of the major wine producers in the region. Cristina, who speaks English, gave us a tour of the Renaissance-era castle where the winery is based. Then, as a special treat, she drove us down to the grapevines, where a small group of young Italian men and women were picking, to show us the differences between the Sangiovese, Canaiolo and Cabernet grapes that are used, in varying percentages, to make the winery's different varieties of Chianti and Super-Tuscans. I tasted a grape off the vine; it was sweeter and more complex than the California table grapes I was used to.

Later that afternoon, we wandered back into Greve to pick up a picnic for dinner. But it was impossible to ignore the wine's clarion call. Everywhere, it seemed, there were *enoteche* — wine shops that allowed us to sample a variety of regional bottlings for a small fee. The best we found was Le Cantine in Greve, a few blocks off Piazza Matteotti. Le Cantine is a surprisingly automated sampling cellar that boasts more than 140 wines to taste at any given time. We bought a wine card — available in \$10, \$15 and \$25 increments — and then walked around to a series of round banks and inserted our cards. Machines dispensed shots of the wines of our choosing, deducting money from our card depending on the quality of the wine. (Most prices ranged from \$1 to \$4). Olive oils and grappa also were available to sample, as were snacks like salami, bread and cookies.