

# A Tuscan Revival

Fulvio Di Rosa's Remarkable Restoration of a Medieval Italian Hamlet

Text by Christopher Petkanas/After Photography by Giancarlo Gardin

**N**O LESS AN AUTHORITY on the art of living in Tuscany than Frances Mayes endorses Fulvio Di Rosa as the go-to person for rescuing antique farmhouses in the region.

"He asks himself at every decision point, how would the original owners have solved this problem?" Mayes, the author of *Under the Tuscan Sun* and wolfishly popular books on the area, has written. "By that deceptively simple guiding principle, he stays true to the spirit of place that one feels so strongly in the village.... His



LEFT AND BELOW: It took Fulvio Di Rosa 10 years to restore Borgo di Vagli, a tiny village near Cortona, in Tuscany, now an exclusive 32-acre rental property.

is the best work I have seen."

Tucked away in the hills 20 minutes from the Etruscan town of Cortona, the object of Mayes's admiration is Borgo di Vagli, a 32-acre hamlet of

11 rustic, severely beautiful stone dwellings and converted outbuildings dating from the 14th century. Di Rosa, who earned a degree in civil engineering from Turin Polytech-

nic Institute before working with Pritzker Prize-winning modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer, rehabilitated and developed Vagli as an exclu-



AFTER



LEFT: Wisteria-covered pergolas shade the mosaic-topped tables and wrought iron chairs in an alfresco dining area. Visitors are greeted in the building at left. RIGHT: The living room of L' Antico Focolare.



orous swimming pools, wide-open views of the Niccone valley and the 10th-century Pierle castle, a minimarket filled with specialty products (including Vagli's own olive oil) and a trattoria with an exhaustive wine cellar. Folded into the base of a medieval watchtower, the trattoria *I' cche c'è c'è* serves bowls of *ribollita* and *panzanella* at antique tables from Arezzo.

"Rural architecture, partic-

ularly in Tuscany, has always been considered the most spontaneous and random of architecture," says Di Rosa. Farmers, he explains, added to their houses according to need: As families grew, they required more livestock, which in turn required another cart, more tools—and places to put them. "Houses expanded in this way through the years," he says. "This random devel-

To avoid dismantling the old ceilings, surgical repairs were made from above.

sive enclave of 21 rental properties. They range from homey studios to a luxurious three-bedroom penthouse.

Thanks to Di Rosa, it is now possible to experience a private residence, furnished and accessorized, in the most fashionable pocket of Italy—without the headaches of full-time proprietorship or the bother of making your bed. Sealing the deal are two glam-

"The structure is original," Di Rosa says of L' Uva Fragola, which dates to the 16th century. RIGHT: The kitchen. He restored the ceiling and designed the cabinets.



## Before & After



ABOVE: Medieval arches highlight the trattoria in the basement of the guard tower. RIGHT: Di Rosa relaid the flagstone floor and painted the plaster walls yellow.



To avoid dismantling the old beam-and-stone ceilings, surgical repairs were made from above using salvaged materials.

Most civil engineers, it seems safe to say, are uncomfortable placing a bud in a bud vase. But, relying on a practical low-maintenance mix of modern Italian upholstery fabrics and humble, pitch-perfect country antiques he found in shops in Arezzo, Siena and Florence, Di Rosa never imagined entrusting the furnishing of Borgo di Vagli to anyone but himself. He has a good eye for beds, and windows are

LEFT: "We preserved the dignity of the rural architecture," Di Rosa says of Il Salto di Gatto, which was rebuilt using stones and bricks found in the rubble. BELOW: A bedroom.

opment is one of the more fundamental charms of Vagli."

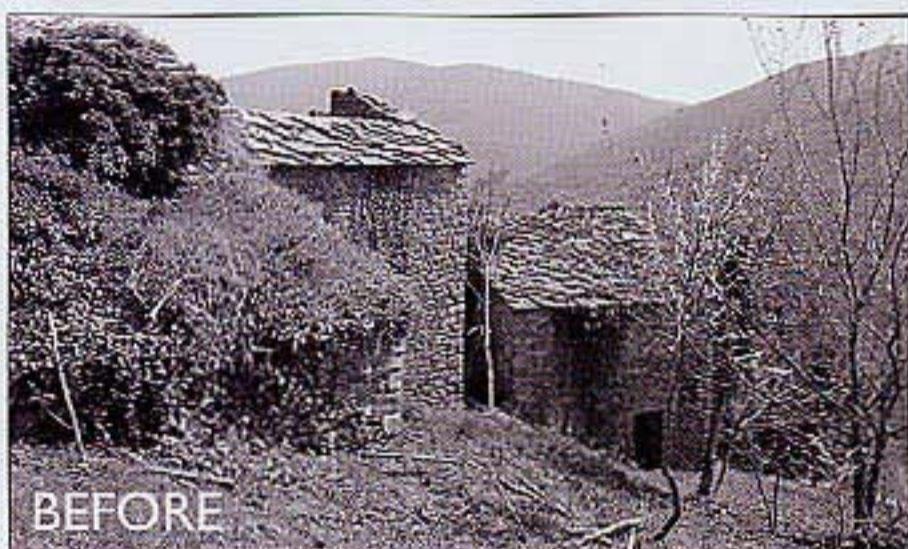
The land is another. "The restoration embraced the entire environment," he adds, "because the outside is an integral part of the hamlet's cultural and historical reality. We were very careful to only clean the terrain and to plant native species—rosemary, lavender and forsythia, as well as almond, cherry and fig trees."

Di Rosa also hewed to Vagli's past for the interiors. To achieve the slightly wavy effect he sought, multiple layers of plaster—tinted yellow, salmon, old rose, green or blue—were patiently applied to walls with a 15-inch trowel. Flagstones and handmade terra-cotta tiles are on the floors.



**BELOW AND RIGHT:** L'Eremo's units, which were reconstructed on the hillside, "appear to have been built randomly and over time," says Di Rosa. "That's one of Vagli's charms."

**BOTTOM:** A pool was installed on the hamlet's highest terrace "to be in the heart of nature," Di Rosa notes. "Guests like to walk up there to take in the breathtaking view."



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modestly draped in hand-embroidered linen.

"To own outright in Tuscany nowadays is virtually impossible," explains Di Rosa. "There's very little for sale, and artisans and materials are

at a premium. Even people who manage to find something and are able to commit to a restoration can't use their houses enough to justify the investment. The simple solution is a rental property."

Some will pay anything, of

course, to have someone else deal with the large cast of functionaries and miles of red tape involved in such a project. "All the heirs of Vagli's owners had to be tracked down—when we signed the notarial deed, there must have been 40 people in the room," recalls Di Rosa. "And it took me nearly three years to get all the approvals I needed from the town hall in Cortona—a long time, even for a famous-

ly bureaucratic country like Italy. But the waiting paid off, and not for the reason you might think. Vagli was an opportunity *not* to create my own architectural world. Everything was already there." □

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