

CHECK OUT VILLA BORDONI

So good they booked it twice

South of Florence, **Sophy Roberts** enjoys a small hotel that's big on luxury but still makes you feel as if you're staying with friends

In recent years, Italy has been targeted by luxury hotel brands. Orient Express has opened in Ravello, Rocco Forte has plans in Sicily, and at the end of the year, Four Seasons makes its debut in Florence. So frankly, any squeak of rebellion – a small, independent hotel prepared to fight for the moneyed customer – is going to pique interest.

Villa Bordoni is well located++, 40 minutes drive south of Florence and 50 minutes from Siena. The approach is rustic consisting of two miles of cypress-lined track that threatens to rip out the belly of your hire car. These are the Florentine Chianti hills where tractors still roam laden with the grape harvest. They call the region Chiantishire after the concentration of Home Counties' English who have bought up property. I'm not so sure; Villa Bordoni, whose nearest town is Greve-in-Chianti, seems to be true to its location, even if – and herein lies the oddity – it's owned by a couple from Scotland.

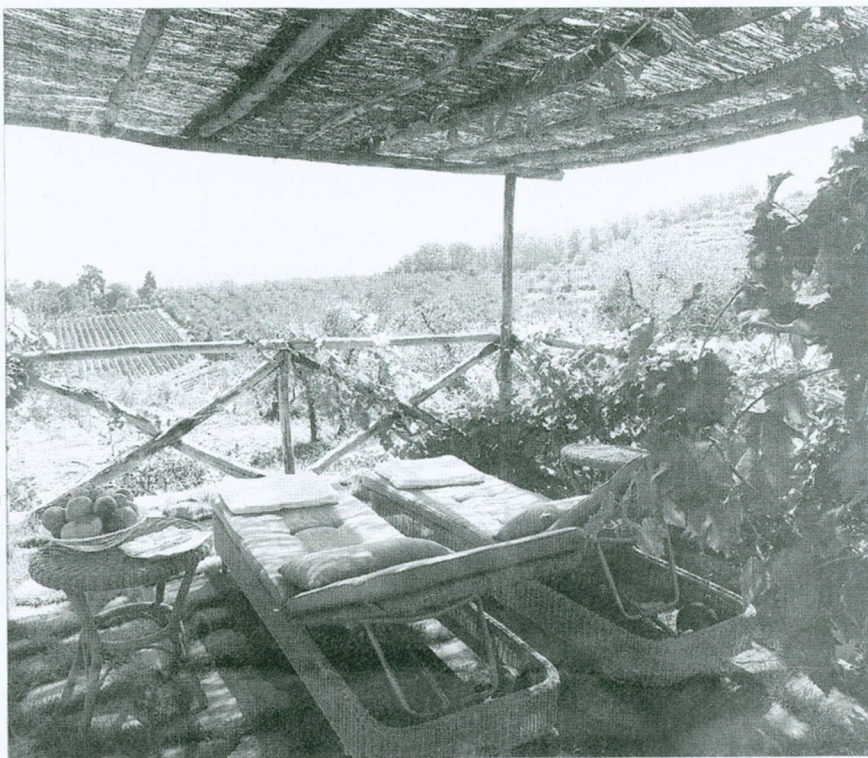
David Gardner is the restaurateur behind one of the three best trattorias I've ever found in Florence (Baldovino, now in its eleventh year, in the shadow of Santa Croce) as well as the eminently popular gastronomic Beccofino. Yet he's essentially an outsider who's just a little bit partial to Glasgow's unique run in chip shops. Yet he gets it – an astute businessman (in jeans) who appreciates the resonance of a luxury hotel that is both professional and easy-going. Gardner is also a man totally devoid of pretension.

At Villa Bordoni, which is his first hotel project, Gardner has

put himself and his wife, Catherine, front-of-house. Both are charming (I was travelling as a fully-paid, incognito guest with my husband and son). He's just as comfortable carrying bags as she is knocking up an unctuous Tuscan stew. The combination conspires to make you feel like you're staying with friends – with a uniformed housekeeper for turndown and the family's nanny (availability dependent) if you need to book some childcare. That said, the real key to Bordoni's success, for those of us who judge it by our stomachs, is the talented Pugliese chef, Francesco Fineo.

Fineo is a serious player, 30 years old, and apprenticed under Francesco Berardinelli (formerly of Beccofino). At Villa Bordoni, he's master of his kitchen, catering to only 10 rooms and suites and a restaurant of 30 covers. Such a platform gives his talent raw immediacy (the open kitchen, where you can also take cookery lessons, ensures you are connected with the action). Yes, breakfast is simple – a spread of cold cuts and croissants. Lunch is generally modest – what you want, when you want – with salads and pastas in the walled garden in summer and a Tuscan spread of antipasti. But dinner, which costs €40 for three courses, €50 for four, hits a different note entirely.

Classic local dishes include chestnut gnocchi stuffed with wildboar ragu. Fineo also revives lesser-known recipes, such as a Renaissance-era, Medicean technique for roasting guinea fowl with nuts and grapes. The result is uniquely succulent, and a dish that tastes of the winter (I vis-



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ited in December, for off-season Tuscany is, to my mind, a relative steal). Portions are small, gastronomic and there's an original sense of pacing, for next in the line-up comes the moment of modern flair, the sophisticated ingredients allowed to speak for themselves. There's the meltingly good brandade of bacalla served with radicchio purée, fried "black" polenta and white

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truffle shavings. Or the sea scallops roasted with lardo di colonnata accompanied by braised endive and orange. The salt and tangy sweetness combine in a sensational riot of opposites.

The wine list is 100 per cent Italian (excepting the champagnes). To help you navigate

the cellar, which occupies Bordoni's 11th-century fortress-dungeon, is Paolo, the maître d'. Local wines include those of the Antinori, Querciabella (€27 a bottle) and Fontodi (€25) vineyards.

Because of the first-class gastronomic experience – and the fact Villa Bordoni can switch from simple to complex, as per your mood swing – we found little reason to leave the property except for the odd lunchtime trattoria (the best place is a five-minute drive, La Cantinetta di Rignana, where the wood-grilled veal chop is so memorable, I cannot write about it without salivating). There's lots to do, with the Prada and Gucci outlets within a 50-minute drive, and a smattering of medieval hilltop villages, such as Montefioralle, Lamole and Volpaia. This is all very well in winter when the roads are empty. But in summer, when Villa Bordoni's lavender-bedecked gardens are alive with honeybees? When the pool is warm and the sunbeds are beckoning you to forsake culture? I wouldn't want to leave it.

This has everything to do with the aesthetics of the place, and the fact it's so comfortable. The

three-year project saw a tumble-down 15th-century Renaissance villa with olive mill and chapel turned into a duck-egg-blue beauty, all 10 rooms spacious (some with showers, not baths). The styling by interior designer Riccardo Barthel combines classic Tuscany with a little bit of rustic, country house England.

I never usually return to hotels – there's too much out there – but in July, we're booking the Frantoio Suite for a week's summer holiday (two rooms, so good for families). I also never book this far in advance, but with Villa Bordoni, which is now approaching its first birthday, I suspect it's soon going to be essential.

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Bordoni & lodgings

Villa Bordoni. Tel: +39 055 884 0004 or +39 329 986 5927; e-mail: info@villabordoni.com; Web: www.villabordoni.com. Rooms cost €170 - €395, inclusive of tax and breakfast.