



Italians have been flocking to this resort town for generations. Now there's a new regime in town.

BEAUTY AND WELLNESS

Eye of the Beholder

Eat, Pray, Love? More like *Fast, Hike, Lament*. When a celebrated Malibu retreat opens a new location outside of Rome, our brave wellness guru can't help but lace up her boots and try out this contrarian way of European life

About 12 minutes after arriving at the Ranch Italy, a wellness retreat near Rome, the conversation turns to food.

"I hear the snack is six almonds."

"Can you get seconds at dinner?"

"I hid a bunch of Kind bars in my room."

"What if I pass out?"

Are we here at an Italian palazzo to lose weight? No one discusses it. We are indeed weighed, measured, EKG'd, and assessed upon arrival, and, optionally, urine-analyzed and our blood drawn. But all 16 of us at the opening week of the Ranch Italy—what some call a luxury boot camp and what I call my fat-farm vacation—want to believe we're here to clear our minds, reset our priorities, detox, de-stress, disconnect, reconnect. In other words, we're here to lose weight.



At the Ranch Italy, swimming is one of the few indulgences allowed.

Actors, singers, and models have been making pilgrimages to the Ranch's original location, in Malibu, since it opened 12 years ago, readying themselves for various forms of exposure. The rest of us come without that particular threat, jagged from insomnia, shoulders up to our ears, popping Extra Strength Tylenol, in long, intimate relationships with pasta and wine. Italy might not be the most logical place to break those habits, but we're here to stare temptation in the face.

You know how some resorts greet you with a tropical cocktail? Ours is a brown smoothie that looks like sludge. It could be a warning, a harbinger, a repudiation. Still, it's oddly satisfying.

The Ranch Italy airlifted the American work ethic of sweat, dirt, and effort and dropped it in the middle of Palazzo Fiuggi, an ornate European medical spa that also takes guests who don't participate in the Ranch program. At times, the cultures clash. The Ranchers wear black Lycra and Nikes; the palazzo guests shuffle around in white robes and slippers.

We, the Ranch guests, wake every morning at 5:30 and charge up various mountains for four-hour hikes. The palazzo guests sip the healing waters from Fiuggi's springs, sun by the pools, lounge on the lounges. The spa's medical staff offers a menu of diagnostics and treatments that fills 34 pages. There's Botox, injectable fillers, psychotherapy, and things that defy translation. (Spirometry? Airnergy?) The Ranch guests are having none of it.

We're instructed to remove our dirty hiking boots before entering the immaculate marble-floored palazzo. We dunk our aching muscles in the icy plunge pool, gasping. It's a form of self-flagellation. The spa massages are feathery, polite, more like the application of lotion than the tear-inducing manipulation that Ranch guests prefer. We're wary of anything too soft, too easy.



A hike with a view.

On our hikes, we encounter a sprinkling of people following the path of Saint Benedict. But mostly we see horses with bells around their necks, white cows, donkeys, and a fox as friendly as a house pet. We hike through forests of beech trees, past mossy rocks, up stone steps, through meadows, by a waterfall, and along a riverbank. There's wild asparagus, wild strawberries, wild orchids, and trees with yellow flowers as bright as egg yolks. The birdsong sounds like it's right out of a Disney fairy tale. Actual cuckoo birds actually repeat, "Coo-coo, coo-coo." Are they trying to tell us something?

The Ranch gives us birdseed crackers. During the hike, I drop one of my carob energy bites and immediately pop it into my mouth. Even the dirt seems purified here. Coo-coo, coo-coo.

We're wary of anything too soft, too easy.

We are never late for dinner, a high-wire act of gluten-free, dairy-free, sugar-free vegan dishes. There's eggplant "parmigiana," a euphemism topped with scoops of "ricotta" made from fermented macadamia nuts; thimbles of green soup; pizza crusts made of cauliflower and frittata crusts made of sunflower seeds. There are heaps of lentils, slabs of cauliflower, and acres of kale. Some people whisper that the three-Michelin-starred palazzo chef is displeased. We, on the other hand, are mostly awed, and when we're not we still clean every grain and leaf from our plates.



The food may be austere, but the setting is not.

I once went to a spa in Mexico that served local wine on the last night. One guest, enchanted, ordered multiple cases delivered to her Chicago home. Later, she told me, she opened a bottle for guests and promptly spit it out. Apparently, it only appealed after a week of hunger and abstinence. Context is everything.

Each day, we talk about food. It starts with modest wishes. "Could you imagine this with a small piece of salmon on top?"

"Wouldn't you just die for a slice of fruit?"

"Just a bite of dark chocolate, a tiny square."

The woman with the stash of Kind bars left early, not realizing that the Ranch was meat-free and the hikes were grueling. We miss her.



The Palazzo's Roman spa has an infrared sauna, steam, salt room, and cold plunge with a view.

People start to act on their fantasies. Someone slips into town and returns with two bananas. We go to the village pharmacy for the required coronavirus tests, and one man peels off. When he returns, he's actually licking his lips. "Did you just have a gelato?," I ask him. "Sure as hell did."

On the last night, one couple heads to the village for dinner. The next day at breakfast, we sit in reverential silence as they recite their meal: charcuterie, buffalo mozzarella and tomatoes, spaghetti carbonara, *bucatini all'amatriciana*, roast chicken, tiramisu, two bottles of wine, grappa, and sambuca. They are beaming.

At the airport in Rome, I join a guest at a café, and she's drinking a Diet Coke. Another guest sits with us and blurts, "I ate half a panini before going through security."

Before we left the Ranch, though, we were weighed and measured once again, and, once again, no one discussed their outcomes. We may have come here to lose weight, but most of us genuinely didn't seem concerned about that anymore. We were rested, patient, at peace. At our last meal together, each person told the group what the experience had meant to them. One man's eyes filled with tears as he struggled to articulate the depth of his transformation. Just for a moment, for as long as it lasts, we were restored. @

JOLLY RANCHERS



The Ranch

\$10,650 SINGLE FOR SEVEN NIGHTS

Italy

Includes room, hikes, fitness classes, daily massage, all meals, diagnostic testing and a medical consultation, access to the Palazzo Fiuggi's elaborate spa, laundry, and a return ride to the Rome airport. A 16 percent charge is added for gratuity and tax, bringing the total to \$12,354.



The Ranch

\$8,900 SINGLE FOR SIX NIGHTS

Malibu

Includes room, hikes, fitness classes, daily massage, all meals, body-fat assessment (gee, thanks), laundry, and return ride to LAX. The 16 percent gratuity and tax brings the total to \$10,324.



Sue and Alex Glasscock

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The Ranch at Live Oak Cookbook

Many of these recipes are actually doable and satisfying. I particularly like the quinoa salad with spring vegetables, buckwheat-and-flax pancakes with walnuts and maple syrup that you make in a blender, Brussels-sprout Caesar salad, the hearty cauliflower steaks on a bed of cauliflower puree, and the gut-clearing Detox salad.