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WORTH A DETOUR: A Tuscan Culinary Adventure

My family and I had spent the previous month in a house we rented outside of Pistoia, and by the time we began the road trip that would wrap up our time in Italy, taking us through parts of Tuscany we hadn't visited during the previous four weeks, we were pretty much convinced that we'd eaten the best that Tuscany had to offer.

Then we had dinner at Ristorante Bracali, and all of that changed. This was one of the most profound meals we were fortunate enough to enjoy in Italy. If I'm being honest, it was one of the most profound meals I've had anywhere in the world. The Michelin Guide considers restaurants with two stars—which Bracali has—to be “worth a detour.” I'd agree with that distinction for Bracali only if by ‘detour’ the folks at Michelin mean “get a reservation as fast as you can and jump on the next plane to Italy immediately.”

It was that good.



Ristorante Bracali. Via di Perolla, 2, Ghirlanda, Massa Marittima, Italy.

Located in Ghirlanda, two hours southwest of Florence and half an hour from the Tuscan coast, Ristorante Bracali is a reminder of just how deeply the best chefs can challenge our perceptions of a particular regional or national cuisine and, indeed, of just how rich and life-affirming an experience world-class hospitality can be.

Every other summer, my wife and I rent a house in either France or Italy instead of sending our young daughters to camp. It's both less expensive—home rentals are remarkably affordable, and we use my miles on American to cover the cost of the flights—and provides the kids with the kind of international experience that will only become ever more important as they grow up in an increasingly globalized world. Our time in Tuscany prior to that final week's road trip from Pistoia to Bologna was exactly as we had hoped: Days full of exploring our own and neighboring towns, visiting wineries from the legendary to the hidden, and nights of tucking into endless bowls of pasta at our favorite restaurants or cooking at home with the ingredients we'd scoured the markets for that day. (And gelato—so very much gelato!)

I'm lucky enough to get to Italy several times each year for my work as a wine, spirits, food, and travel writer, and I've generally found that the dining experiences I've enjoyed most have been the most casual—the places where I can get up from the table at the end of a meal and not feel the least bit embarrassed that I have a caponata stain on my shirt.

Ristorante Bracali showed me that I was wrong. Or, at the very least, too limited in my beliefs.



The dining room at Bracali is as elegant as it is comfortable.

The space itself is beautiful, elegantly appointed, and wonderfully approachable—there's a sense of calm at the core that was even felt by our kids, who, at five and eight years old

this past summer, aren't really in the calm-while-fine-dining age bracket.

I attribute this to Luca Bracali, co-owner of the restaurant who runs the front of the house and is in charge of the glorious wine program. He's one of those deeply gifted restaurant professionals whose innate sense of what hospitality actually means—to make guests feel welcome and well taken care of—permeates every interaction.



Chef Francesco Bracali brings together creativity, whimsy, a fascinating juxtaposition of flavors and textures, and a tasting menu that tells a beautiful story.

I also attribute the feeling to the food: Chef Francesco Bracali, the co-owner with his brother Luca and the

mastermind behind the culinary program, has a stunning ability to not just create individual dishes that balance seriousness and whimsy—and always, always remarkable layers of flavor—but also to tell a vivid, propulsive story with the procession of dishes throughout the tasting menu.

At least once each course, one of us let out an audible giggle, or sigh, or even what can only be described as a primal hum of pleasure: Flavors that we thought we understood were made brand new; unexpected textures were juxtaposed in such a way that we were forced to reconsider ingredients that we'd had a thousand times before. Risotto, for example, was cast in a brand new and startlingly exciting light when paired with peanuts, cumin-smoked raw amberjack, green beans, and basil ice cream—my wife and I pored over each bite as if the key to the Rosetta Stone were hidden in it. Even our girls got into a deep discussion about the way that the foie gras pudding interacted with the gnocchetti and nettle. (Their unanimous verdict: "It's amazing! Can we have foie gras pudding at home once a week?" The answer, sadly, is no...)

Because Ristorante Bracali is a two-star restaurant, the wine list is studded with the kind of Tuscan and Italian icons that you'd hope for. If you're so inclined, verticals and horizontals of some of the greatest legends of Europe can be assembled. But I put myself in Luca's hands, and asked him to choose the wines that he thought were the most interesting or exciting to pair with our meal. His selections were those of a man who is deeply passionate, and as knowledgeable as anyone I've met before: Many of the producers he selected for our meal I'd never heard of, yet they were all unfailingly delicious on their own and matched perfectly to the food. Many of them were poured with a story of his own personal connection to the grower or winemaker, which only added to the profundity of the experience. He clearly loved all of them, regardless of how widely known they are, and that feeling was contagious.

The restaurant was founded back in 1983 by Francesco and Luca's parents, Luciano and Manuela. It was a modest place, where locals and people from nearby in the region could come. When the brothers took over from their parents, however, they ultimately had a different goal: To make their family's restaurant into not just a place of importance in the world of food and wine, but also to make it into the kind of place that would give the kind of heartfelt meaning to their work that they always wanted for themselves.

Which brings me back to the overarching sense of calm, welcome, and heart that we felt throughout the meal. It didn't happen by mistake, but instead was the sum of a million small decisions that the Bracali brothers and their expert team made throughout the meal, and have made throughout the years.



Even the most delicate-looking dishes contain flavors that linger in the memory for long after the meal itself.

If that's not "worth a detour," as the good folks at the Michelin Guide would say—or, as I'd argue, a flight across the ocean, no matter where you live—then I don't know what is.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Brian Freedman is a wine, spirits, food, and travel writer, restaurant and beverage consultant, drinks educator, and event host and speaker. He writes the Wines of the Week column for [forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com), as well as other wine- and spirits-focused articles and commentaries; contributes to Food & Wine digital; and is a contributing writer for John Mariani's Virtual Gourmet, among others. He has contributed to [JancisRobinson.com](https://www.jancisrobinson.com), created wine lists and beverage programs for top restaurants and for three dinners at New York's James Beard House, hosts beverage-focused events around the United States for corporate and private clients, and has traveled to nearly 50 countries to explore their culture and cuisine for his work. He was recognized three times by the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association's Keystone Awards for his ongoing food and drink coverage for Philadelphia Weekly, for which he was restaurant critic and beverage columnist for over five years, and in was awarded a fellowship to the prestigious Symposium for Professional Wine Writers 2019 in Napa, California.