

Sort-of savouring an Italian "braycation"

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photos by Claudia Flisi

For an animal lover and erstwhile equestrian like me, the attraction was obvious — to be surrounded by 800 adorable jacks and jennies, enjoying great Emilian pasta and the affable company of the Borghi family of Emilia-Romagna, Italy. They own and operate Europe's largest donkey farm, set in the low-slung green hills southwest of the city of Reggio-Emilia.

Turns out there is more to digest than excellent papardelle and sangiovese at Montebaducco (hotlink to www.montebaducco.it). It is a rural restaurant, a B & B, a petting zoo, a country outing, a didactic exercise, and a shop. It is also a full-scale farm operation, and the authenticity is part of its charm. So was my guide — Giuseppe Borghi, the gravelly-voiced patriarch, though one might also encounter his son Davide, the actual CEO, or Giuseppe Iannella, their head of research. The latter speak English fluently; the founder no.



Walking around the many! paddocks of the sprawling 43-hectate estate, I was besieged by donkeys of all sizes and a range of ages that crowded the fences and tried to sniff me out with their velvet noses. They relished a good muzzle rub and tried to kiss me with their mobile mouths. A few are shy or skittish, but most are curious and sociable.

Mr. Borghi described life on a donkey farm and the characteristics of the eight breeds of donkey at Montebaducco: Amiata, Asinara, Martina

Franca, Pantelleria, Ragusana, Romagnolo, Sardo, and Viterbese. All these breeds are wholly or partly of Italian origin and many are threatened with extinction. Some are fuzzy, some are sleek, tough and tiny or tall and cuddly.



Giuseppe Borghi's affection for the Romagnolo is palpable, and no wonder, as it is an autochthonous breed from the area, as is he. His first donkey at Montebaducco was a Romagnolo, Dante, and Dante is the only donkey buried here "because I couldn't bear to take him away from his home," explains Borghi.

But Dante was not the first donkey in Borghi's life. He had grown up with them and was saddened when donkeys were no longer used for work in the countryside. What would become of them?, he wondered. Meanwhile, he became a successful blacksmith, and bought the land that is now Montebaducco (named for the nearby mountain) in 1990. He dedicated one building to his ironworking — doors, gates, and iron utensils —with five

full-time employees.

Still there was plenty of space for animals and by 1992 he had acquired 20 donkeys to keep Dante company. At this point Borghi said to his son, "Shall we go ahead with this business? Or should we stop now?" They decided to go ahead as a commercial enterprise.

Today that business consists of milk (fresh and freeze-dried), cosmetics, two liquors (Asinaccia = donkey milk + grappa and Asianccia Ciok = donkey milk + chocolate flavor), farm foodstuffs, donkeys for trekking, and donkeys for trade and sale.



Donkey milk is wildly expensive because of the low yield. It takes about 15 donkeys to produce a gallon of milk. (Cows are 25 times more prolific). Despite the price, parents are willing to pay when their children are allergic to cow's milk. For the record, donkey milk tastes light and fresh, like skim milk with a richer, rounder flavor.

Cleopatra had no allergy issues and she didn't drink the stuff but she swore by donkey's milk for its alleged beautifying effects in the bath. A visitor can try something similar with the face cream, body cream, hand + foot cream, and face serum on sale at the farm's little shop. I have tried donkey soap and it is creamy and rich with a pleasant natural smell. It didn't turn me into Cleopatra though.

Trekking has become very popular in the last 10 years and the Borghi's 14 stallions (about two per breed) are kept busy creating sturdy, smart, reliable animals for this growing market. Normally donkeys breed in the spring and drop their foals a year later. Here the breeding goes on year-round. Some of the paddocks you see are allocated to fertile females with a single stallion admitted to do his business. Borghi will not divulge how he manages to fool his animals into year-round procreation but the results are evident, with babies of all ages at any time of year.



The farm's B & B opened in 1998. It has four spacious rooms furnished in tasteful rustic style, sleeping two or three people, ideal for a family, and one dormitory-style space, created from the old *fienile* (hay storage area), which is popular with large families or groups of friends. It is open seven

days and serves breakfast only. Overnight guests during weekdays have a choice of several eateries in the local area. People staying here are close to Reggio Emilia (10 miles away), Parma (25 miles away), and Maranello, for a different style of equine power (20 miles away).



On the weekend, lovers of Emilian pasta will relish a meal at the farm's restaurant, which began operation in 1996. All food is cooked fresh by Giuseppe Borghi's wife and her staff and the tortelli, tortellini and the like are wonderful, and fairly priced, including local wine. However, there is an issue if you are vegan-leaning: the menu features donkey meat prominently. There is donkey salami, donkey mortadella, and donkey stew (*stracotto di asino*).

This underscores the underlying conundrum of Montebaducco, that it is a hard-nosed business, not a soft-hearted hobby. Borghi confesses that he tries not to be around on the days when the trucks come to load up donkeys destined for the meat market. He salves his conscience by selling direct to "humane" butchers rather than to intermediaries who prolong the final donkeys' journey, adding trauma to the animals.



A visitor who comes to Montebaducco with children for a day or a weekend might circumvent troubling questions by not mentioning this

detail. I am not a child, but I would have been better off avoiding the restaurant and the shop entirely, and spending my time happily petting those velvet noses.

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