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FOOD AND WINE

If you're yearning for a taste of the warm south but time is tight, the **Taste of Puglia** cookery tour offered by the The Discovery Collection (0871 666 1622; www.discovery-collection.com) builds two half-day cooking classes into a three-night package (from £429 per person, including transfers but not flights) based at pretty historic town house Corte Altavilla in Conversano, where Francis Ford Coppola once dropped in for lunch.

Alternatively, book a stay at agriturismo farm Fattoria dell'Uliveto in rural **Abruzzo** via Long Travel (01694 722193; www.long-travel.co.uk). Co-owner Luigi Lello sent one of his Ventricina hams to Charles and Camilla for their wedding feast – the home-cooked food here is exceptional. It's also great value at £50 per person per night, half board (three-night minimum stay).

It's not surprising that the truffle hunters of **Piedmont** are so secretive about their stamping grounds with prices reaching €2,500 (£2,200) a kilo. But book a stay at British-run La Villa hotel (0039 0141 793890; www.lavilla.hotel.net; doubles from €155/£137), an elegant 17th-century palazzo in the Monferrato hills that was turned into a warm and welcoming boutique hotel in 2005 – and you get exclusive access to Mario the truffle hunter.

Mario doesn't need to blindfold his guests or swear them to secrecy as he has the run of his own private truffle wood. The hunt costs €30 (£27) per person, and if Mario's star dog Rocky finds a *tartufo*, you get the chance to buy it at cost price. That's still around €60 (£53) for a conker-sized lump – but a small piece of the aromatic tuber goes a long way.

In her youth, Mamma Agata was the personal cook for a rich American *signora* who had a villa in aristocratic **Ravello**, perched high above the Amalfi Coast. Among the guests she catered to were Fred Astaire, Humphrey Bogart, Liz Taylor and Jacqueline Kennedy. But it's not just her brush with stardom that makes Mamma Agata's cooking school (0039 089 857019; www.mammaagata.com) one of the best of its kind in Italy – it's also the fact that she specialises in the kind of unfussy, tasty recipes that you might actually want to make at home. Day courses take place in Agata's Ravello farmhouse and cost €190 (£168) – a price that includes lunch on the panoramic terrace.

You'll have to wade through the dodgy English translation on the website of **The Wine Train and Wine Station** (0039 0577 832975; www.winestation.it) to find out more about this new Tuscan wine tour, which takes you on a specially fitted-out oenological train

from Siena to little Torrenieri station below Montalcino and back. Now owned and run by winemaker Roberto Cipresso, the Torrenieri "Wine Station" features a restaurant, a bottle shop and a tasting room – the last two housed in restored railway carriages. The worthwhile day trip costs €89 per person and includes lunch, a cellar tour with wine-tasting, and a visit to the magnificent, isolated abbey of Sant'Antimo.

The **Cinque Terre** in Liguria is a walker's paradise, but good places to stay are scarce. Instead book in at Agriturismo Villanova (0039 0187 802517; www.agriturismovillanova.it; doubles from €95/£84) in the charming, low-key resort of Levanto, one train hop west of the Cinque Terre village of Monterosso, and included on the Cinque Terre Treno pass (see www.parconazionale5terre.it).

Set above the town, this 18th-century farm estate still makes its own wine, olive oil and honey. There's something bright and Provençal about the décor of the rooms, which spread out between the main villa, a farmhouse with great views, and a series of self-catering apartments (for up to six people) in the grounds. Served in the garden, breakfast consists of organic farm produce and homemade cakes – just the thing to set you up for a serious Cinque Terre trek.