



The art of classical riding couldn't find a better home than in the heart of Tuscany writes **Fiona Fleming**

Cristina De Marchi, one of the founders of Il Paretaio



Enjoying dinner in the large dining room



A bird's view of Il Paretaio

Classical riding in Italy

Proprietors, Gianni and Cristina De Marchi, set up their classical riding centre Il Paretaio over 20 years ago. It lies in the heart of Tuscany, only a stone's throw from the historic marvels Florence and Siena. Its central location is ideal for local tourism, but it is a peaceful and tranquil setting for a classical riding school. Originally from a show jumping background, Cristina and Gianni hail from Milano, but relocated to set up their dressage centre.

Introduced to classical riding by a French master they had the opportunity to train on Lusitanos in Portugal. 'We were very lucky to get this sort of training', said Cristina. 'We were also very fortunate to have an opportunity of training at the National Stud of Portugal under the supervision of Pedro de Almeida, who had been a pupil of Nuno Oliveira - a widely acknowledged master in the art of dressage. During this time in Portugal, we decided to leave the hectic world in Milano and increase our quality of life by moving to Tuscany.

'This is a beautiful region of Italy to live in, but finding a property proved difficult. We continued training with different people - it is important to update your riding and illuminate your equine experiences. Teaching is an evolution; the more you learn, the more you can teach. Now, even with 23 years experience we are still learning.'

Eventually they found a property in Tuscany dating to the end of the 1700s. The rooms were converted to guest accommodation and decorated in a traditional country style. Soft furnishings contrast with the rustic tiled floors and beamed ceilings creating a homely but authentic Italian experience.

Il Paretaio was founded as a classical riding centre where the horses are all

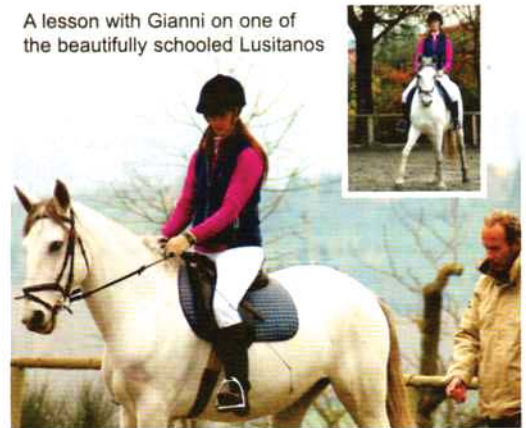
trained in a gentle and sensitive manner. 'We aim to have and teach a deep understanding of riding using old exercises that make a horse work softly, said Cristina, 'We use a system of exercises not to coerce, but to develop. Good knowledge of equine anatomy and psychology are essential to be able to work progressively. The aim must be harmony and this can only be reached with a proper balance between horse and rider.

'Trust is reached so the animal is happy to work with you and benefit from the experience - we look to activate endorphins to feel a sense that the animal has enjoyed and has trust in the rider - you cannot work properly with a frightened horse. Good gymnastics in a horse can be applied in any discipline. Training is never hard - always light and sensitive.'

The term 'centered riding' was used frequently and when asked for a definition, Cristina replied, 'Sally Swift!' 'She is the founder of the term and believes in expressing the classical principles of riding using body awareness, centring, and imagery.'

These qualities form the basis of the riding taught at the centre. In my lesson with Gianni, we worked through various movements including serpentines, leg-yields and shoulder-in. All were progressively worked up to by a warm-up to supple and collect and for me to adjust myself to their style of riding. 'Lightness' was beyond what I imagined - a small touch was a significant aid to my steed, demonstrating how beautifully these horses have been trained. Group lessons are available as well as private and will have a maximum of only three-four riders. 'If you want to give quality you need to work on details', said Cristina.

A lesson with Gianni on one of the beautifully schooled Lusitanos



Hacking in the Tuscan countryside



The Il Paretaio team



A group lesson



- Il Paretaio is situated a short distance from San Filippo and is in an easy driving distance of Florence, Siena, Pisa and San Gimignano
 - Extra facilities and activities include an outdoor swimming pool and hacking in the Tuscan countryside
- This trip was organised by the specialist riding holiday company "Zara's Planet".**
7 night breaks start from £725 per person, and short breaks also available on request. Non riding partners also welcome.
For more information, call 08444 870 300 or email info@zarasplanet.co.uk or go to their website www.zarasplanet.co.uk



There are approximately 30 horses at the centre including Italian sport horses, Lusitanos and Arab purebreds/crosses. Choosing horses is sometimes a matter of being in the right place, as Cristina explained, 'I went to a nearby farm to buy a radio and came back with a horse! When we drove in, there was a horse in the field and I watched her movement as we went past. I knew at once she was an Il Paretaio horse. We do have an element of a random buying instinct!'

The equestrian talent runs in the family; Cristina and Gianni's son Pietro is a successful competitor on the show jumping circuit. He rides using the same principles he was brought up with, which have taken him to such titles as twice silver medalist in the junior Italian show jumping championships and gold in the regional dressage championships two years ago.

Dining is an important and traditional part of life in Italy and is one of the highlights of a stay at Il Paretaio. The dining room on the second floor features a long dining table that can host up to 26 guests and is set in front of a large open fire once used for cooking. Cristina's mother oversees the dining experience: 'My mother keeps to traditions using ancient recipes that have been in the family for a long time. We only ever cook with extra virgin olive oil and use

seasonal local produce. Mother's passion for cooking equals ours for horses. She also believes in updating herself and regularly participates on cooking courses. Guests frequently ask us for recipes and we plan on making a book in the near future for guests to purchase with all proceeds going towards caring for our older horses.'

Cristina and Gianni travel to teach on occasions, which has in the past, included a trip to Scotland. 'We were in touch with fellow classical trainer Sylvia Loch (based in the Scottish Borders) who had bought a Portuguese horse that we had trained on. Sylvia is a lovely rider and an excellent trainer; we would very much like to have her here in Italy sometime. We trained at a clinic in Aberdeenshire and were made very welcome. It was an enjoyable experience and the standard of horses and riders was impressive.'

I hope that they will return to Scotland and host another clinic as their training and ethics are valuable experiences worthy of sharing. Their approach to riding as an art form reflects the aesthetic glory of the Tuscany locale and their passion mirrors that of the great artisans of Florence and Siena. Il Paretaio is truly worth a visit for those who wish to enjoy a destination that is close to nature and central to art in its many forms.



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'Il Paretaio' is a top class holiday & training destination, perfectly situated in the rolling Tuscan hills of Italy. Lessons are on forward going, responsive horses in fluent English, by Il Paretaio owners Cristina & Giovanni De Marchi

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