



TRAVEL

## Tuscan retreat

A secluded villa combines bohemian flair with immersive agritourism

Artist Charlie Duck at work. Below: Villa Lena's communal tables allow guests to share meals and ideas

**P**artway up a rough, steep track on a Tuscan hill, we lose our nerve. To the left is a sharp drop that reveals a vertigo-inducing vista of rolling greenery. To the right, a thick, fairy-tale forest. Our satnav insists this is the way, yet there are no signs that any other humans have been here recently. Then, peeking out of the treetops, we spot it: a smudge of terra-cotta that, as we get closer, takes form as an imposing 19th-century villa.

We later learn we traveled the old road to Villa Lena instead of the less hair-raising one we take on our descent. It's a common mistake according to namesake Lena Evstafieva, the willowy Russian art consultant who co-owns the villa and surrounding 500-hectare San Michele estate with musician husband Jérôme Hadey and entrepreneur Lionel Bensemoun,

of hip Paris nightclub Le Baron.

Italian aristocratic couple Augusto and Tereza del Frate originally owned the estate, which sits between Florence and Pisa. Thanks to its large population of deer, it was once a popular hunting ground for the residents of nearby Palaia. Olives and grapes were grown on the land and the family was renowned for the glittering parties held in the neo-Renaissance villa. However, by the time it was discovered by Evstafieva's family in 2007, it had fallen into serious disrepair. "Still, we saw something there," she explains.

The trio opened Villa Lena five years ago. Drawing from their illustrious backgrounds, they set out to create a bucolic *agriturismo* populated by resident artists and open-minded guests. Everyone would eat from the land and share





**THE CELEBRATED SEASON**

Five essential diary entries

**Elton John AIDS Foundation Oscar Viewing Party**

**Mar. 4**

Celebrities always crowd the singer's illustrious affair, this year at West Hollywood Park. Tickets start at \$5,500; top tables are \$100,000. [ejaf.org](http://ejaf.org)

**Saut Hermès au Grand Palais**

**Mar. 16-18**

Fifty riders compete in the ninth edition of the five-star equestrian trials, hosted by the luxury fashion house. Theatrical horse trainer Bartabas will perform. [sauthermes.com](http://sauthermes.com)

**Miami Open**

**Mar. 19-Apr. 1**

The world's top tennis players return to Key Biscayne. The Courtside StarBox experience includes an exclusive stadium tour and dinner at the Collectors Club. [miamiopen.com](http://miamiopen.com)

**National Cherry Blossom Festival**

**Mar. 20-Apr. 15**

In honor of D.C.'s 3,800 Japanese cherry blossom trees, The Ritz-Carlton in Georgetown offers cherry blossom pancakes and a Cherry Bounce cocktail. [ritzcarlton.com](http://ritzcarlton.com)

**Byron Bay Bluesfest**

**Mar. 24-28**

Australia's award-winning music festival features 200 performances ranging from country to blues. This year's lineup includes Lionel Richie, Kesha and Juanes. [bluesfest.com.au](http://bluesfest.com.au)



Above: The 19th-century Villa Lena sits on a 500-hectare San Michele estate

THE VILLA IS THE DOMAIN OF A SELECT GROUP OF INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS, DESIGNERS AND FILMMAKERS.

farm buildings converted into apartments, where high ceilings, bare walls and heavy wooden doors give the impression of a chic monastic retreat.

In the daytime, there are invigorating excursions to enjoy. Our visit coincides with truffle season, so we join an early-morning Range Rover ride with groundskeeper Donato Maselli, who generously points out the best spots to find the revered fungi. Later, we take part in a pasta-making workshop where we put our treasure to good use in a simple tagliatelle with butter and sage.

When night falls, Villa Lena really comes into its own, as everyone picks their way up candlelit steps to the central restaurant to gather at long communal tables. All guests eat the same menu, cooked by a rotating roster of guest chefs using seasonal farm-to-table ingredients. Dishes are simple but delicious—think roasted vegetables with fresh mozzarella and caper-lemon dressing, fava bean and wild fennel soup, and olive-oil cake with rosemary cream. Arty flourishes are everywhere, from the framed sketches on the walls to the Villa Lena label on the sparkling rosé produced on-site—all the work of former residents.

“We’re finally getting to the point we dreamed of now,” says Evstafieva. “Our vision is becoming a reality. It’s not been easy to manage such a complex estate, but we were right to follow our hunch about this place. There is a kind of magic to it.”

—NIONE MEAKIN

meals and ideas—a house party of the sort portrayed by filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci in his 1996 paean to Tuscan bohemia, *Stealing Beauty*. “We wanted to create somewhere laid-back, democratic and welcoming, and to foster an atmosphere where it’s easy to meet people,” explains Evstafieva.

The villa itself is now the domain of a carefully selected community of international artists, designers, filmmakers, writers and musicians, who work on monthlong residencies surrounded by oil portraits and ceiling frescos. Brit Benjamin Clementine dedicated his Mercury Prize-winning debut album, *At Least for Now*, to everyone at Villa Lena. “He spent a lot of time at the piano in the communal area,” Evstafieva smiles. Guests stay in a range of