

TOURS

Tuscan Treasures will shine the spotlight off the well-worn path in Italy

By Christi Milligan

Walking along the Val d' Elsa countryside of his native Tuscan homeland, former Philadelphia resident Ugo Petrillo said he was once again captivated by the essence and history of the region.

It was not a popular tourist destination, yet its beauty, artisanal and culinary contributions yielded a historical authenticity Petrillo felt was unmatched, and simply needed to be shared.

This year, Petrillo and two partners will launch Tuscan Treasures Tours, a menu of high-end tours of the Tuscan region that marries the essence of Italy with the destination experience hungered for by tourists.

It's something Petrillo calls the "benessere nell' essere," the wellness of being. And he calls Val d' Elsa the centerpiece of the tours, the heart and soul of Tuscany. **Val d'Elsa** is a magical place where great thinkers realized important discoveries, literary giants were inspired to write their masterpieces, and celebrated artists achieved their greatest works of art.

The goal is to introduce you to an undiscovered region of Tuscany, a treasure chest of art and architecture, the birthplace of a culture of beauty, literary and historical significance, and culinary excellence. It's not the most known and crowded sites of the magnificent city of Florence.

"I walked for 26 kilometers a day," said Petrillo, a former U.S. intelligence officer who now lives in Italy full time. His travels through the countryside took him from Firenze south through Siena and Montalcino and provided the substance of the tours. "I decided to do something unique to give the contribution of our culture."

Petrillo's goal was to showcase the castles, churches and villas with their vineyards, as well as artisans and architecture in a variety of tours that overlap in their offerings: Arts

and Culture in Val D'elsa; Il Viaggio Del Maestro (Voyage of the Master); CulinArte (Culinary); Via Francigena, a journey along the same pilgrimage of former crusaders, pilgrims, and even Saint Francis of Assisi; and a biking tour. "We try to create a new destination and to give something unique to the American people," said Petrillo. "Because Florence is not Tuscany and Tuscany is not Florence." For instance, "CucinArte" the artisan "contadini" farmers with passion and dedication preserve dishes brimming with scents and flavors that seem lost in today's world. This tour relives the rhythm of nature and seasons including the harvest of the grape ("la vendemmia"), bottling of the wine, picking of olives, hunting for white truffles, picking fragrant saffron and making bread from flours derived from ancient grains. In February, Petrillo took his concept to the Philadelphia market at an event sponsored by the Italian Consulate. Last month, a test group from Philadelphia took the first specialty tour under the Tuscan Treasure Tours name.

According to Teresa Gail Sosby, Petrillo's Miami-based business partner, the company's target

market includes travelers who may already be familiar with Italy, but seek a deeper connection and understanding of its history.

"There is no tour company like this in the area with this type of caliber," said Sosby, who runs the company's American headquarters. "We use four and five-star hotels, private villas; we provide mini buses, even chauffeured limousines."

Open to groups of 12 to 16, Sosby said she and Petrillo plan to market to existing groups and private clubs, and expands their targets through social and print media. Stefania Tielli, a third partner with a travel agency in Venice, covers the logistics and coordinates the high-end contacts and events that feature wine tastings, dinners with local Italian officials, and tours.

The company hopes to offer some of the artisanal products through their website later this year.

Booking tours through Tuscan Treasures tours will begin in June, with travel dates running from April through November, according to Sosby. (www.tuscantreasurestours.us). **IAH**



Top: Val d'Elsa, deemed the heart and soul of Tuscany, is the focal point of the tours. Above: Cyclists explore the lush verdant countryside.