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LA MONTECCHIA

AN IDYLL FOR THE
RESTLESS TRAVELER



PREVIOUS PAGES: Villa La Montecchia (left), built in 1568 by artist Dario Varotari as a hunting lodge for the Capodilista family, resembles a maharaja's dream. Its spacious interiors (right) hold up to twelve guests.

OPPOSITE: The ground-floor loggia has checkered marble floors, sixteenth-century frescoed murals, and wooden benches specially designed for the villa.

LA MONTECCHIA, a hundred-acre wine farm set among the Euganean Hills just south of Padua, is the perfect choice for the restless traveler. That is, someone who *does* want to experience what it feels like to loll about in the Veneto countryside but is worried that too much nature might feel isolating or even, God spare them, *boring*.

No such risks at La Montecchia, an estate that includes an eccentric sixteenth-century villa, an Italianate garden, a fortified castle, a medieval farm, several houses and apartments to rent, a luxury B and B, a small private museum of ancient agricultural tools, a superb winery, a Michelin-starred gourmet restaurant, and even a twenty-seven-hole golf course, complete with Olympic-size swimming pool and tennis courts.

Owned and run by Count Giordano Emo di Capodilista, a man in his early forties whose ancestors dominated this territory for centuries, La Montecchia blends well-honed agricultural traditions ("Wine has been made on these hills since the Middle Ages," he says, proudly) with a modern, high-tech entrepreneurial dynamism that reflects the spirit of this highly productive and industrialized region, one of the wealthiest and most densely populated in Italy. "It is vital to me," says Giordano Emo, "that La Montecchia, thanks to a successful energy-efficiency plan and to our having cut down the use of chemicals in agriculture to a bare minimum, has a very low environmental impact." The result of this synergy of

tradition and innovation, strengthened by the excellent *terroir* produced by the volcanic origins of the Euganean Hills, can be tasted in the estate's prized wine blends.

Travelers who land at La Montecchia have a wide range of lodging possibilities, the most spectacular and luxurious being the villa on the top of the small hill (*montecchia*) that lends its name to the estate. "This land has belonged to our family since the eleventh century," says Giordano Emo, "and the villa has been a family home since it was built in 1568, which is why it has retained such an intimate atmosphere." The light restoration of its interiors in 2008, handled with care by Paris-based designer Anna Guarini, who also created some of La Montecchia's wine labels, and by Francesca Papafava, a cousin of Giordano, has left the villa's age-old patina intact.

From a distance Villa La Montecchia, originally conceived as a hunting lodge, looks like something out of a maharaja's dream. Its severe, cubic volume is rendered light and breezy through elaborate pinnacles that surmount the four sides of the building. Each side of the "cube" has two rows (one for each floor) of arched porticoes, or loggias, where one can sit and enjoy the view. "The thing people love most about our villa is the way it fits so harmoniously in the landscape," says Emo. Designed for his family by painter Dario Varotari—a pupil of Veronese with a passion for architecture—this building has a free-spirited,







LEFT: A view of the nineteenth-century Italianate garden as seen from one of the porticoes painted in 1568 by Dario Varotari, a pupil of Veronese who had a passion for architecture.

OPPOSITE: The interiors of La Montecchia are decorated with elaborate murals. Those in this ground-floor bedroom depict various Capodilista family properties. The neoclassical furniture seen here marries seamlessly with the renaissance proportions of the rooms.

artistic uniqueness that sets it apart from other Venetian villas. Varotari conceived this architecture as a three-dimensional canvas on which he could paint the giant murals that are this villa's most exquisite feature. Bright, colorful, perfectly preserved frescoes depicting pagan deities cover nearly every inch of the wall surfaces, both indoors and out, enhancing La Montecchia's dreamy, jewel box allure. "The setting, with the open loggias and the frescoes mirroring the garden and landscape, is pure theater," says Francesca Papafava, who lives and runs Frassanelle, another spectacular family estate in the vicinity of Padua where travelers can rent comfortable and charming old farmhouses.

At La Montecchia, sparsely and beautifully furnished with family heirlooms—many of which were originally conceived for this villa—travelers can indulge in some rare and rich experiences. Lying in one of the enormous beds (all of which have the most exquisite linens, with the family crest embroidered on them, handmade in the region of Puglia, southern Italy), staring at the painted walls and ceilings, trying to figure out who's who among the pagan deities and Roman heroes, is one of them. Another is walking bare-foot on the original sixteenth-century Venetian floors (made of crushed pink marble and lime), which feel like fresh velvet under the feet. Or lingering at sunset in one of the open loggias,

sipping a glass of chilled Fiori d'Arancio, a sparkling white wine with the fragrance of orange blossoms, after which it was named. On special occasions visitors can arrange for one of the chefs from La Montecchia's restaurant, situated on Giordano Emo's property and run by the Alajmos, a family of celebrated restaurateurs (one of their restaurants, Le Calandre, also near Padua, has earned three Michelin stars!), to cook directly in the villa. Candlelit dinners on one of the loggias or in the main dining room overlooking the garden, with the sound of water trickling in the stone fountain, are all part of the experience.

Villa La Montecchia can host up to twelve people, so it is ideal for family gatherings or for those who prefer to travel in groups. Romantic couples or travelers exploring the region on their own may prefer to stay in the estate's luxurious B and B, situated in one of the wings of the medieval castle where Giordano Emo himself has his living quarters. The B and B has only one large bedroom, more like a living room, with high ceilings. It overlooks an enclosed garden with jasmine and roses climbing up stone walls. It has a huge fireplace, which is of great comfort during the cooler days. The interiors of the castle where the B and B is situated are richly furnished. Ancient metal armors—belonging to some Emo Capodilista warriors (of which there were many)—have infused this area with an appealingly Gothic allure. The bedroom, characterized by dark, carved mahogany furniture, has its own private bathroom, of course, and breakfast is served in an adjoining living room or, weather permitting, in the garden. Travelers with children or who need a little more space and independence can opt for an altogether different and more rustic

solution than the villa and the B and B. They can choose from four separate apartments. All are tastefully decorated and include a kitchen, a small living room, and access to a garden. All lodgers residing on the estate have access to La Montecchia Golf Club and use of its swimming pool, tennis court, and restaurant facilities. Wine tastings and visits to the cellars of La Montecchia and to the estate's private museum of ancient agricultural tools are most welcome.

The Veneto region is famous for its wines (Valpolicella, Amarone, Bardolino—to name but a few), and so it is not surprising that there are several thousand wineries spread all over the territory. What is rare, strangely enough, is to find wineries in the region that also offer good hospitality. This is why La Montecchia is such a precious address: it is the ideal place for travelers eager to leave the touristy bustle of Venice behind, for a while at least, and explore the region's lesser-known countryside. The Euganean Hills, just south of La Montecchia, have been celebrated for centuries for their picturesque beauty and their hot springs. Many of the villages nestled around these hills are charming and worth a tour.

Towns such as Padua and Verona, with their exquisite city centers, churches, and museums, are a short drive from La Montecchia. The Palladian villas built along the Brenta river are definitely a must-see, and so are some of the great Venetian gardens, such as Villa Emo alla Rivella (belonging to another cousin of Giordano's) and Villa Barberigo. "One mustn't forget that ours is a region with a strong and varied culinary tradition," says Giordano Emo, "which is why our traveling guests often indulge in some excellent food and wine in between sightseeing expeditions."

The eighteenth-century table was designed for this room, also called "the architectural room" for its murals.

