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Four of the best Italian hotels for food-lovers, by Francesca Syz

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RELAIS SAN MAURIZIO PIEDMONT In a converted 17th-century Franciscan monastery on a hill surrounded by vineyards, overlooking the village of San Stefano Belbo, Relais San Maurizio is a gourmet spa resort with 31 rooms fashioned from the original monks' cells. The family-run Michelin-starred Da Guido restaurant is located in the barrel-vaulted cellars of the former monastery and specialises in regional dishes such as veal and rabbit. The agnolotti (a kind of ravioli), which features both these ingredients plus pork, onions, carrots and rosemary, is legendary. The hotel also has the less formal Bistro Bar & Restaurant in a fresco-covered room with an outdoor terrace, a bar and cigar room in a flower-decked winter garden, in- and outdoor pools and the new La Via del Sale ('the Salt Path') Medical and Beauty Spa, which specialises in salt-based anti-ageing and skin-renewal thalassotherapy treatments. Truffle fans take note: Piedmont's truffle season runs from September to December and the International White Truffle Fair takes place in the medieval town of Alba (a 15-minute drive from the hotel) from October 9-November 14. **The details** Doubles from £246; closed from December to March (00 39 0141 843 833; relaissanmaurizio.it).





L'ANDANA TUSCANY There was great surprise when the French culinary giant Alain Ducasse announced he was opening a restaurant (with a hotel attached) in rural Italy. Less surprisingly, since launching back in 2004 this former hunting lodge of the Duke of Tuscany in the coastal region of Maremma has been a rip-roaring success. Today the hotel has 33 bedrooms divided between the main villa and the fattoria, a food-inspired Espa spa and La Villa, a terracotta-walled traditional trattoria. As it is owned and run by the first chef to have restaurants with three Michelin stars in three different cities, one might expect stuffy, officious service, but instead both the hotel and the restaurant feel impressively cosy and informal. While there is of course a French influence to the cuisine, the menu focuses on traditional seasonal delicacies such as risotto with peas, streaky bacon and pecorino cheese and plates of heavenly prosciutto and poached salt cod. New additions are nearby Casa Badiola, a 14-room (each with its own kitchenette) outpost of the main hotel, and a children's club. **The details** Doubles from £455, including buffet breakfast; book before November for next summer and rates are from £227 (00 39 0564 944 800; andana.it).

VILLA SAN MICHELE FLORENCE In a fantastic hilltop location overlooking Florence, Villa San Michele is a 15th-century monastery with a facade by Michelangelo, set within beautiful landscaped gardens. The hotel, a member of Orient Express, has always had a major food focus and its cooking school is one of the best in Italy. Housed in an air-conditioned building within the hotel's kitchen gardens, the school offers a range of cooking classes and packages with the executive chef, Attilio di Fabrizio. There is everything from individual sessions to two- and three-night packages with cookery schools, including 'A Symphony of Pasta for Three Authors', in which three chefs from three other Orient Express restaurants share their secrets on pasta-making and pasta dishes, and a children's cookery school, where kids learn to create a series of desserts. The hotel also has an excellent restaurant, the Loggia, which serves dishes such as 'small pie of Pienza pecorino cheese matured in underground caves, served with fresh tomato purée'. It has alfresco tables for fine days and two beautiful cloistered rooms for cooler weather. **The details** Classic doubles from £472 (0845-077 2222; villasanmichele.com).





DON ALFONSO 1890 CAMPANIA Famous throughout Italy for its exceptional, fresh, understated Mediterranean cuisine, the family-owned Don Alfonso 1890 is a brilliant restaurant with eight suites and an organic farm, idyllically set among olive and lemon groves on a headland between Sorrento and Positano. Alfonso Iaccarino and his wife, Livia, lovingly run the place with their two sons, Ernesto (also a chef) and Mario (front of house). Light lunches are served by the swimming-pool, while the main 'dinner time' event happens in the elegant, light, airy restaurant simply furnished with antiques. Expect swordfish with chickpeas and thyme, ravioli with caciotta, wild marjoram, chopped tomato and basil and more. New for this year is an on-site 'cooking laboratory' offering classes to guests, plus a special 'Dinner with the Chefs', which can be arranged on request and costs €300 pp for up to three people, €250 pp for more. A small shop sells family produce, including extra-virgin olive oil, pasta, tomato sauce and the covetable Alfonso Iaccarino cookbook. **The details** Suites from £250, including breakfast; closed from November to late March (00800-2000 0002; relaischateaux.com). **Next week: European golf resorts**