

# Country House Montali

IT'S RARE TO FIND EXCLUSIVELY VEGETARIAN establishments that offer truly gourmet-standard food. Any vegetarian who demands cuisine of such a quality can probably list on the back of an envelope all the restaurants and hotels in the world that can deliver a perfectly satisfying experience. Country House Montali belongs on the list.

The creation of this vegetarian enterprise owes equal debts to serendipity and sheer determination. Owner Alberto Musacchio tells me that, whilst the received wisdom is that Italy is something of a haven for vegetarians (all the pizza and pasta you can eat!), the actual number of vegetarians amongst the population is very small. Italians take enormous pride in their cuisine, and embrace every aspect of it with gusto – and that includes the offal. So what are the chances of Alberto, a self-confessed 'army brat', turning vegetarian, opening a vegetarian bar in Perugia, a busy little university town, and meeting Malu Simões, a Brazilian architecture student and also a vegetarian? How much vision and determination must they have required to turn an abandoned farm shack on a rocky ridge between Tuscany and Umbria into a world class vegetarian country house hotel, complete with swimming pool and a whole team of chefs?

Malu is the driving force in the kitchen. Largely self-taught, she says she learned a great deal about fine culinary artistry from a Japanese chef, Akira Shishido, a gifted professional who worked with them in the early days. Today, Malu seems to spend most of her life in the kitchen she designed herself, overseeing the creation of a wide spectrum of dishes which, taken as a whole, define Montali's culinary style. At the beginning of every season, she and Alberto recruit a team of chefs and kitchen assistants, often ending up with a challenging mixture of characters and nationalities. This year's team includes two chefs from the CIA – that's the Culinary Institute of America – and others from Khazakstan and Poland. They're at Montali to learn about vegetarians and how to make them happy, and at the end of the season they'll return home and, Malu hopes, continue to delight their vegetarian clientele.

Malu's dishes are quintessentially Italian; Alberto tells me that they have no time for the current trend towards 'fusion'

menus which might mean an Indian-style starter, a Mexican-style main course and a Thai dessert! Evening meals at Montali invariably consist of a light starter ('Antipasti'), a first course which is typically based around grains or pasta ('Primi') and a more substantial second course in which a vegetable dish takes a starring role ('Secondi') – followed naturally by a fabulous dessert ('Dolci'). Malu's menus are carefully planned and Alberto prides himself on his choice of wine. But while the food represents the best of modern Italian cuisine, it is inevitably influenced, very gently, by Malu's Brazilian homeland, and perhaps also a little by the input of the international chefs who have worked alongside her over the years. While each course complements the last, Malu's adventurous use of colour and flavour means that though traditions are honoured, nothing is predictable – every dish offers new excitement!

The new Country House Montali cookbook, *The Vegeterranean*, is a lavishly-photographed showcase for Malu's dishes and her presentation skills, peppered with anecdotes and stories about the family and staff, past and present. Joining her in the Montali kitchen was an exhilarating experience. Malu and her team are preparing the evening meal, and it has to be done right, so there's a limit to how 'hands on' she'll let you be. The upside is how much you learn about meticulous attention to detail, both in the preparation of the food and in the way it is arranged on the plate. Less is often more, with a carefully placed spot of glossy orange sauce or a few artfully scattered flecks of black olive on large white plates. The book is an invaluable aide-memoire after spending time in Malu's kitchen, but there is no substitute for the real thing. Just an hour's train ride from Rome, Country House Montali is well worth a visit, and anybody who values top notch vegetarian cuisine and the opportunity to recharge their batteries in a peaceful environment will not be disappointed.

For more information about Country House Montali visit [www.montalionline.com](http://www.montalionline.com)

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