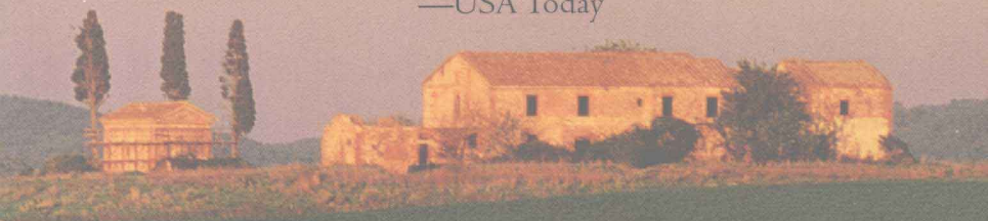


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

Frances Mayes

"This beautifully written memoir about taking chances, living in Italy, loving a house and, always, the pleasures of food, would make a perfect gift for a loved one. But it's so delicious, read it first yourself."

—USA Today



UNDER
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at home in italy
TUSCAN
SUN

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AT HOME IN ITALY

FRANCES
MAYES

Broadway Books
New York



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Further Acclaim for *Under the Tuscan Sun*

"Mayes [has] perfect vision. . . . I do not doubt that centuries from now, whoever lives in Bramasole will one day uncover bits of pottery used at Mayes' table. She has, by the sweat of her brow and the strength of her vision, become a layer in the history of this place."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Irresistible . . . a sensuous book for a sensuous countryside."

—*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

"Armchair travel at its most enticing . . . Mayes' delightful recipes, evocative descriptions of the nearby village of Cortona, and thoughtful musings on the Italian spirit only add to the pleasure. Can we really blame ourselves for wanting to strap Mayes down in some ratty armchair while we go live in her farmhouse?"

—*Booklist*

"Can we bear yet another book about buying and remodeling a tumble-down house in some sunny foreign country? The answer, in the case of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, is a simple, unqualified yes. . . . Warmth and light nearly glow from these pages, a tribute to the sun, symbol of hope and renewal."

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Carefully written . . . an unusual memoir of one woman's challenge to herself and its successful transformation into a satisfying opportunity to improve the quality of her life."

—*Library Journal*

"A model for the open, curious mind and the questing soul . . . Those who want to find parts of themselves they didn't know existed, take risks, have an adventure . . . and discover another culture altogether, with its different rhythms, tastes, smells, and ways of being human—those readers will find in Mayes a kindly, eager, tough-spirited guide."

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"Luscious . . . delightful . . . In the search for writers who thrill you just with their mastery of the language, include Frances Mayes."

—*San Jose Mercury News*

"A report from our dream Italy, still rural, still devoted to beauties that are not artificial. . . . Mayes has a profoundly sensual relation to everything she touches, from texture to food. . . . Her description of meals that we, alas, didn't get to eat evoke in me satisfaction without jealousy, like paintings."

—*Boston Globe*

for ANN CORNELISEN

PREFACE

"WHAT ARE YOU GROWING HERE?" THE UPHOLSTERER lugs an armchair up the walkway to the house but his quick eyes are on the land.

"Olives and grapes," I answer.

"Of course, olives and grapes, but what else?"

"Herbs, flowers—we're not here in the spring to plant much else."

He puts the chair down on the damp grass and scans the carefully pruned olive trees on the terraces where we now are uncovering and restoring the former vineyard. "Grow potatoes," he advises. "They'll take care of themselves." He points to the third terrace. "There, full sun, the right place for potatoes, red potatoes, yellow, potatoes for *gnocchi di patate*."

And so, at the beginning of our fifth summer here, we now dig the potatoes for our dinner. They come up so easily; it's like finding Easter eggs. I'm surprised how clean they are. Just a rinse and they shine.

The way we have potatoes is the way most everything has come about, as we've transformed this abandoned Tuscan house and

land over the past four years. We watch Francesco Falco, who has spent most of his seventy-five years attending to grapes, bury the tendril of an old vine so that it shoots out new growth. We do the same. The grapes thrive. As foreigners who have landed here by grace, we'll try anything. Much of the restoration we did ourselves; an accomplishment, as my grandfather would say, out of the fullness of our ignorance.

In 1990, our first summer here, I bought an oversized blank book with Florentine paper covers and blue leather binding. On the first page I wrote ITALY. The book looked as though it should have immortal poetry in it, but I began with lists of wildflowers, lists of projects, new words, sketches of tile in Pompeii. I described rooms, trees, bird calls. I added planting advice: "Plant sunflowers when the moon crosses Libra," although I had no clue myself as to when that might be. I wrote about the people we met and the food we cooked. The book became a chronicle of our first four years here. Today it is stuffed with menus, postcards of paintings, a drawing of a floor plan of an abbey, Italian poems, and diagrams of the garden. Because it is thick, I still have room in it for a few more summers. Now the blue book has become *Under the Tuscan Sun*, a natural outgrowth of my first pleasures here. Restoring, then improving, the house; transforming an overgrown jungle into its proper function as a farm for olives and grapes; exploring the layers and layers of Tuscany and Umbria; cooking in a foreign kitchen and discovering the many links between the food and the culture—these intense joys frame the deeper pleasure of learning to live another kind of life. To bury the grape tendril in such a way that it shoots out new growth I recognize easily as a metaphor for the way life must change from time to time if we are to go forward in our thinking.

During these early June days, we must clear the terraces of the wild grasses so that when the heat of July strikes and the land dries, we'll be protected from fire. Outside my window, three men with weed machines sound like giant bees. Domenico will be arriving tomorrow

to disc the terraces, returning the chopped grasses to the soil. His tractor follows the looping turns established by oxen long ago. Cycles. Though the weed machines and the discer make shorter work, I still feel that I fall into this ancient ritual of summer. Italy is thousands of years deep and on the top layer I am standing on a small plot of land, delighted today with the wild orange lilies spotting the hillside. While I'm admiring them, an old man stops in the road and asks if I live here. He tells me he knows the land well. He pauses and looks along the stone wall, then in a quiet voice tells me his brother was shot here. Age seventeen, suspected of being a Partisan. He keeps nodding his head and I know the scene he looks at is not my rose garden, my hedge of sage and lavender. He has moved beyond me. He blows me a kiss. "*Bella casa, signora.*" Yesterday I found a patch of blue cornflowers around an olive tree where his brother must have fallen. Where did they come from? A seed dropped by a thrush? Will they spread next year over the crest of the terrace? Old places exist on sine waves of time and space that bend in some logarithmic motion I'm beginning to ride.

I open the blue book. Writing about this place, our discoveries, wanderings, and daily life, also has been a pleasure. A Chinese poet many centuries ago noticed that to re-create something in words is like being alive twice. At the taproot, to seek change probably always is related to the desire to enlarge the psychic place one lives in. *Under the Tuscan Sun* maps such a place. My reader, I hope, is like a friend who comes to visit, learns to mound flour on the thick marble counter and work in the egg, a friend who wakes to the four calls of the cuckoo in the linden and walks down the terrace paths singing to the grapes; who picks jars of plums, drives with me to hill towns of round towers and spilling geraniums, who wants to see the olives the first day they are olives. A guest on holiday is intent on pleasure. Feel the breeze rushing around those hot marble statues? Like old peasants, we could sit by the fireplace, grilling slabs of bread and oil, pour a young Chianti. After rooms of Renaissance virgins and dusty back roads from Umbertide,

I cook a pan of small eels fried with garlic and sage. Under the fig where two cats curl, we're cool. I've counted: the dove coos sixty times per minute. The Etruscan wall above the house dates from the eighth century B.C. We can talk. We have time.

Cortona, 1995

UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN

7 PREFACE

5 BRAMARE: (ARCHAIC) TO YEARN FOR

24 A HOUSE AND THE LAND IT TAKES TWO
OXEN TWO DAYS TO PLOW

41 SISTER WATER. BROTHER FIRE

63 THE WILD ORCHARD

75 WHIR OF THE SUN

90 FESTINA TARDE (MAKE HASTE SLOWLY)

107 A LONG TABLE UNDER THE TREES

124 SUMMER KITCHEN NOTES

138 CORTONA. NOBLE CITY

159 RIVA. MAREMMA: INTO WILDEST TUSCANY

180 TURNING ITALIAN

194 GREEN OIL

205 FLOATING WORLD: A WINTER SEASON

220 WINTER KITCHEN NOTES

234 ROSE WALK

242 SEMPRE PIETRA (ALWAYS STONE)

258 RELICS OF SUMMER

271 SOLLEONE

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BRAMARE: (ARCHAIC) TO YEARN FOR

I AM ABOUT TO BUY A HOUSE IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY. A house with the beautiful name of Bramasole. It is tall, square, and apricot-colored with faded green shutters, ancient tile roof, and an iron balcony on the second level, where ladies might have sat with their fans to watch some spectacle below. But below, overgrown briars, tangles of roses, and knee-high weeds run rampant. The balcony faces southeast, looking into a deep valley, then into the Tuscan Apennines. When it rains or when the light changes, the facade of the house turns gold, sienna, ocher; a previous scarlet paint job seeps through in rosy spots like a box of crayons left to melt in the sun. In places where the stucco has fallen away, rugged stone shows what the exterior once was. The house rises above a *strada bianca*, a road white with pebbles, on a terraced slab of hillside covered with fruit and olive trees. Bramasole: from *bramare*, to yearn for, and *sole*, sun: something that yearns for the sun, and yes, I do.

The family wisdom runs strongly against this decision. My mother has said "Ridiculous," with her certain and forceful stress on the second syllable, "RiDiCulous," and my sisters, although excited, fear I am eighteen, about to run off with a sailor in the family car.

I quietly have my own doubts. The upright seats in the *notaio's* outer office don't help. Through my thin white linen dress, spiky horsehairs pierce me every time I shift, which is often in the hundred-degree waiting room. I look over to see what Ed is writing on the back of a receipt: Parmesan, salami, coffee, bread. How can he? Finally, the signora opens her door and her torrential Italian flows over us.

The *notaio* is nothing like a notary; she's the legal person who conducts real-estate transactions in Italy. Ours, Signora Mantucci, is a small, fierce Sicilian woman with thick tinted glasses that enlarge her green eyes. She talks faster than any human I have ever heard. She reads long laws aloud. I thought all Italian was mellifluous; she makes it sound like rocks crashing down a chute. Ed looks at her raptly; I know he's in thrall to the sound of her voice. The owner, Dr. Carta, suddenly thinks he has asked too little; he *must* have, since we have agreed to buy it. We think his price is exorbitant. We *know* his price is exorbitant. The Sicilian doesn't pause; she will not be interrupted by anyone except by Giuseppe from the bar downstairs, who suddenly swings open the dark doors, tray aloft, and seems surprised to see his *Americani* customers sitting there almost cross-eyed in confusion. He brings the signora her midmorning thimble of espresso, which she downs in a gulp, hardly pausing. The owner expects to claim that the house cost one amount while it really cost much more. "That is just the way it's done," he insists. "No one is fool enough to declare the real value." He proposes we bring one check to the *notaio's* office, then pass him ten smaller checks literally under the table.

Anselmo Martini, our agent, shrugs.

Ian, the English estate agent we hired to help with translation, shrugs also.

Dr. Carta concludes, "You Americans! You take things so seriously. And, *per favore*, date the checks at one-week intervals so the bank isn't alerted to large sums."

Was that the same bank I know, whose sloe-eyed teller languidly conducts a transaction every fifteen minutes, between smokes and telephone calls? The signora comes to an abrupt halt, scrambles the papers into a folder and stands up. We are to come back when the money and papers are ready.



A window in our hotel room opens onto an expansive view over the ancient roofs of Cortona, down to the dark expanse of the Val di Chiana. A hot and wild wind—the *scirocco*—is driving normal people a little crazy. For me, it seems to reflect my state of mind. I can't sleep. In the United States, I've bought and sold a few houses before—loaded up the car with my mother's Spode, the cat, and the ficus for the five-or five-thousand-mile drive to the next doorway where a new key would fit. You *have* to churn somewhat when the roof covering your head is at stake, since to sell is to walk away from a cluster of memories and to buy is to choose where the future will take place. And the place, never neutral of course, will cast its influence. Beyond that, legal complications and contingencies must be worked out. But here, absolutely everything conspires to keep me staring into the dark.

Italy always has had a magnetic north pull on my psyche. Houses have been on my mind for four summers of renting farmhouses all over Tuscany. In the first place Ed and I rented with friends, we started calculating on the first night, trying to figure out if our four pooled savings would buy the tumbled stone farm we could see from the terrace. Ed immediately fell for farm life and roamed over our neighbors' land looking at the work in progress. The Antolinis grew tobacco, a beautiful if hated crop. We could hear workers shout "*Vipera!*" to warn the others of a poisonous snake. At evening, a violet blue haze rose from the dark leaves. The well-ordered farm looked peaceful from the vantage point of our terrace. Our friends never came back, but for the next three vacations, the circuitous search for a