

Wellness and Culture in the Hills of Bologna

Palazzo di Varignana is an Italian retreat like no other

By Melody Wren

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alazzo di Varignana is no ordinary retreat.

From the moment we were ushered up the cypress-lined drive, this 18th-century estate began to unfold like a well-kept secret. At the heart of the experience is Dr. Annamaria Acquaviva, a pharmacist-turned-nutritionist and author of *The Five Pillars of Health*, who serves as the resort's Scientific Director. Her influence is everywhere—from the wellness philosophy behind the spa's antioxidant-rich treatments to the health-focused menus.

The 650 acre agri-tourism property produces its own olive oil, wine, saffron, pomegranates, apricots and more, which are used in everything from spa products to multi-course meals. It's a sensory-rich escape where agriculture, science, art and hospitality are deliciously intertwined.



One of seven pools

A Spa Journey Rooted in the Land

We started our spa experience with the Turkish hammam, a three-step journey designed to stimulate metabolism and restore balance. Next came the Japanese bath, a quieter, more contemplative ritual. Surrounded by aromatic cypress wood, we perched on low stools and used soap

crafted from homegrown pomegranate. After a mindful rinse, we submerged ourselves in a soaking bath designed to purify mind, body and soul. After a rushed travel day, I could have easily drifted off, swaddled in warmth and stillness.

As a final touch, we participated in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. A cup of green sencha tea—slightly salty, quietly bitter and metabolism-boosting—was served alongside dried figs, apricots and delicate olive oil crackers.



Garden Maze



Varsana spa

The Science of Wellness: Dining with Dr. Acquaviva

Over dinner at the Ginkgo Longevity Restaurant, we had the privilege of dining with Dr. Acquaviva, whose rare blend of clinical insight and passion permeates every corner of Palazzo di Varignana's wellness program.

Her approach is rooted in the belief that health isn't simply about diet or discipline, but about transformation. "Our destiny is not defined by DNA," she explained. "It's defined by our choices." Her five pillars—functional nutrition, inner harmony, quality sleep, mindful supplementation and emotional wellbeing—form the foundation of everything from menus to masterclasses.

Her background in Bologna's hospitals gives her insight into wellness science. "People don't need more information," she said. "They need transformation."



Ginkgo Longevity Restaurant



Dr. Acquaviva

Drawing from neuroscience and Eastern medicine, she emphasizes the importance of the brain-gut connection and circadian rhythms in digestion, memory, immunity and mood. She encourages intention in food preparation and eating slowly—with all five senses. "Food is not just fuel. It's biology dancing with nature. The key is to eat with joy and curiosity."



Owner and History

In 2013, Carlo Gherardi opened the gates of Palazzo di Varignana, centered around a villa dating back to 1705. When he bought the property in 2005, it had long been abandoned, but Gherardi saw hidden potential and dreamed of putting Bologna—a region often overlooked by travellers—on the map. What began as 40 hectares has blossomed into 650, blending luxury and hospitality with vibrant agriculture.

One of the estate's most fascinating touches is its 1921 Royal Train of Italy. Now a restaurant open a few days a week, its menu honours stops along the train's original route. Adorned with elegant Art Nouveau details, it is a vision brought to life by Dr. Acquaviva, who believes art should be woven into every corner. As you wander the grounds, you encounter over 800 pieces of art, many being subtle sculptures that reveal themselves like hidden treasures.



Palazzo di Varignana's Treno Reale restaurant

An Agricultural Estate

Our first full day began with a generous buffet breakfast accommodating gluten- and lactose-free diets. Then, we were given a tour of the sprawling estate. Connected by a network of underground tunnels (a thoughtful touch that makes rainy days effortless), the property boasts 265 hectares of olive groves and 57 hectares of vineyards growing Pinot, Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. The on-site amphitheater hosts concerts celebrating culture and agriculture's harmonious blend.

Olive oil is a cornerstone here—from the groves nurtured with smart irrigation, to the mill where no part goes to waste. Last year, the estate sold 40,000 liters worldwide. Italy boasts over 500 olive varieties, and this region alone grows twelve—far from the “one olive fits all” notion. The estate's extra virgin olive oils are packed with polyphenols, prized not just for flavour but for anti-aging benefits.



Wisteria arbor



Palazzo di Varignana Winery



Country House Oliveti

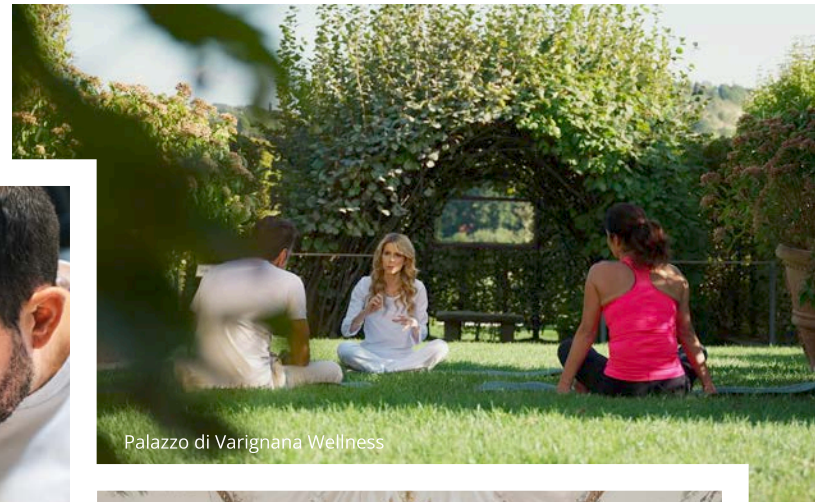
The Resort

Seven buildings house 150 rooms, from cozy entry-level accommodations to suites and six private villas. The resort offers plenty to keep guests active, with seven pools, a practice golf course, paddle ball, baseball, tennis and squash courts. On our final night, we were thoroughly pampered with a fine dining experience in the original 18th-century palazzo that once served as General Montgomery's wartime headquarters. The elegant setting matched the artistry of the tasting menu, each course thoughtfully paired with local wines by our charming and knowledgeable maître d', Elio.

Leaving Palazzo di Varignana, I felt completely refreshed. It's one of those rare places where you could honestly spend your whole holiday or retreat without ever stepping off the property. Palazzo di Varignana isn't just a getaway—it's a little sanctuary where time slows down and genuine wellness just happens naturally.



Manograsso Piatto



Palazzo di Varignana Wellness



Grifone fine dining