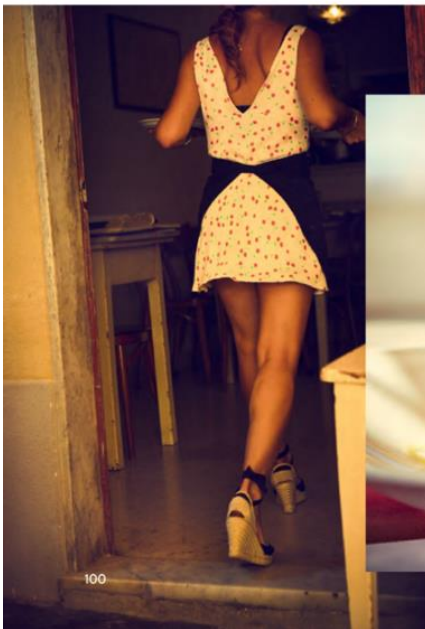
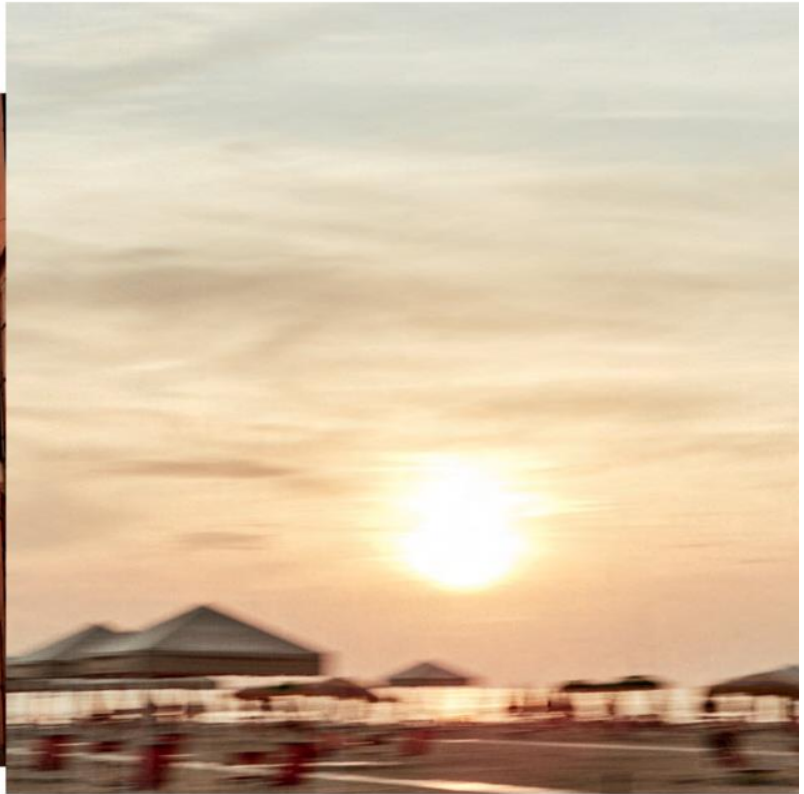




D E E P

A TINY SWEEP OF TUSCAN COAST, VERSILIA PUNCHES ABOVE ITS WEIGHT FOR GLAMOUR





D I V E

AND INTRIGUE. STEPHANIE RAFANELLI DIGS IN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNY ZARINS





WHEN THE FIAT HEIR Edoardo Agnelli putt-putted in his Savoia-Marchetti seaplane a few hours south of Turin to Versilia in the early 1920s, it must have seemed like he'd reached the tropics of South America rather than the stretch of coastal Tuscany north of Lucca. Before him were the marble peaks of the Apuan Alps, serrated and chipped as primitive flints; the sea humidity settled on umbrella pines beneath them like a cloud forest of monkey puzzle trees; and at their feet, 14 miles of wild sand dunes – a long, sun-gold sprint of freedom near the cramped pebble coves of Portofino on the edge of the Ligurian sea. Versilia was a law unto itself, a topographical greenhouse between mountain and water.

Agnelli's leather shoes were not the first to make imprints on these sands when he landed south of Forte dei Marmi (Fort of the Marbles), a fishing village built on Michelangelo's fervour for the marble he found at the nearby Medici quarry at Monte Altissimo; the stone as white and unblemished as steamed halibut. A road was constructed to transport the artist's blocks of marble to Florence, and a pier cemented its position as a trading hub. But it took until 1926, when Agnelli bought Villa Costanza, for the Versilian Riviera to be born: an outdoor salon in a seaside botanical garden beneath chorus lines of umbrella pines holding up green plumes for discretion.

Drawn by the Fiat dynasty – Italy's bourgeois royal family – Jazz Age industrialists, fascists and intellectuals started to arrive; writers

and sculptors who self-consciously dabbled in the fisherman's life. In a town people started to call Roma Imperiale, Aldous Huxley and Thomas Mann scanned Socialist paper *Avanti!* with toenails dug into the sand like clamshells. The commander-in-chief of Italian North Africa debated Futurism with painter Carlo Carrà behind virile palms. Primo Levi and (future Nobel Laureate) Eugene Montali sipped newly invented Negronis under a blood-orange moon at Achille Franceschi's beach shack La Capannina, to the thin sound of a young Satchmo's trumpet on the gramophone.

The Agnellis fled Forte during the Sixties boom, when La Capannina evolved into a nightclub rocked by Ray Charles and Sophia Loren, and the stars of Rome's Cinecittà arrived en masse. But they left behind their

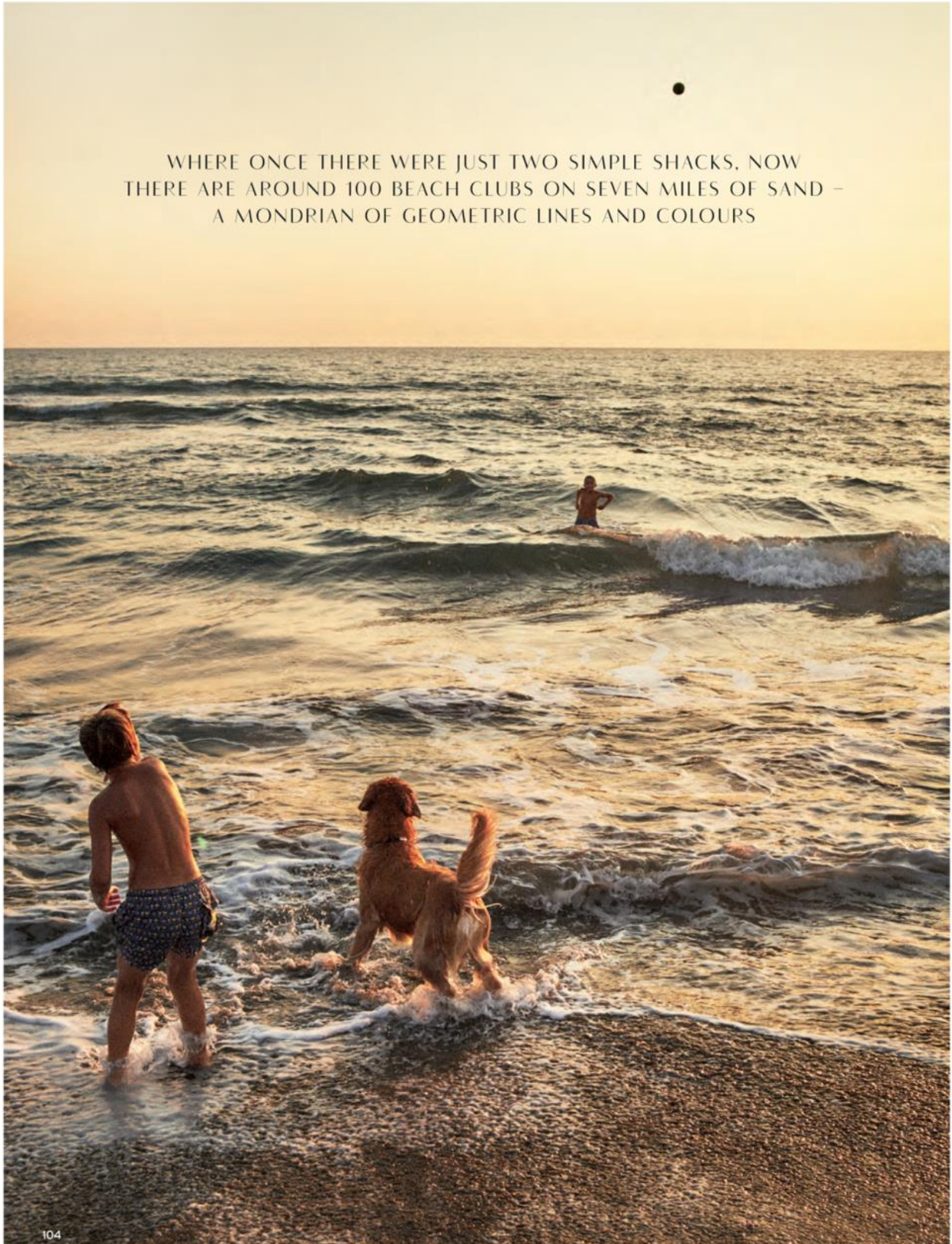
long-held rituals, later set down in *We Always Wore Sailor Suits*, the memoir of Edoardo's daughter Susanna. Those rituals are still observed today, as if preserving a rarefied bubble of privilege and time; the lazy rhythms of a decades-worth of long, pink-gold days passed the same way, as reassuring as the tides.

On Versilian sands, traditions are holy. Today, cabins with nautical stripes stand like a polished parade of mid-century marines at Bambaissa – the restaurant of the Augustus Hotel, in the Agnellis' abandoned villa. A gecko climbs the tent pole of the marquee with a slit roof flashing moving squiggles of sky. At sparrow-skimmed tables,

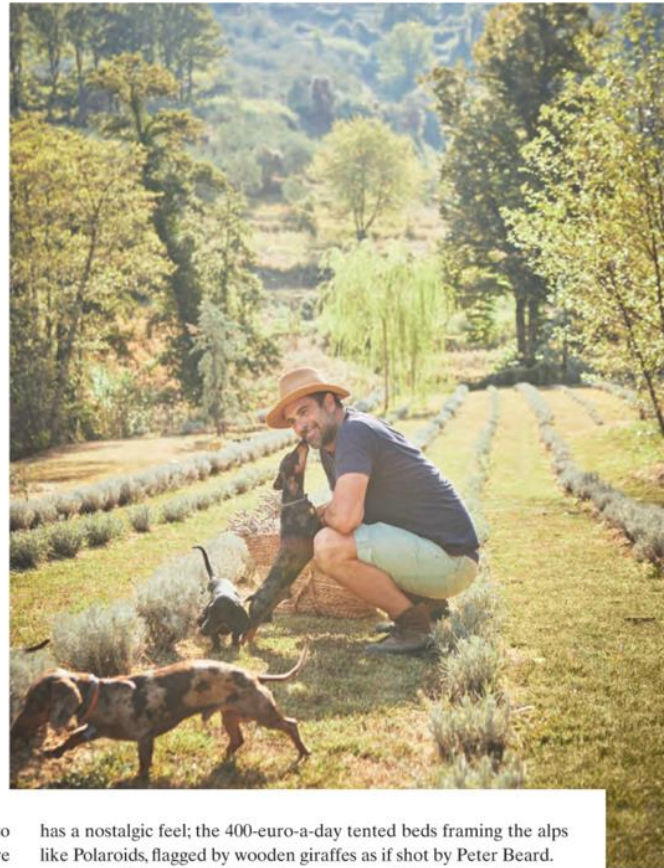
JAZZ AGE INDUSTRIALISTS AND INTELLECTUALS STARTED TO ARRIVE, WRITERS AND SCULPTORS WHO DABBLED IN THE FISHERMAN'S LIFE

Above from left: sculptor at Franco Cervietti; Cervietti in his studio. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Le Gusciane guesthouse; wicker lampshade at La Cesteria; bedroom, and dachshund at Le Gusciane; Pesce Baracca; lemon tree, Le Gusciane. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Pesce Baracca sign; dinner at Le Gusciane; beach in Forte dei Marmi; street in Pietrasanta; Viareggio beach at sunset; sculptor at Franco Cervietti; boys on the beach, and waves at sunset, Forte dei Marmi; bedroom at Le Gusciane; spaghetti alle arselle, Augustus Hotel; Trattoria Betty Chicca, Pietrasanta

WHERE ONCE THERE WERE JUST TWO SIMPLE SHACKS, NOW
THERE ARE AROUND 100 BEACH CLUBS ON SEVEN MILES OF SAND –
A MONDRIAN OF GEOMETRIC LINES AND COLOURS







three generations of Milanese with the same Cubist nose eat fritto misto tended by Lorenzo, a maitre d' with shades of Omar Sharif. Before them: two orderly lines of gazebos like little Roman pantheons, worshipping – with a quick turn – either alps or waves. Beach hawkers are among the few breaches of Versilian convention. 'If a woman feels a-loner, then a coco can console her,' sings the coconut man to sun loungers of oiled hips and thighs as dark as Henry Moore bronzes.

In the 1920s, there were only two beach clubs here, made up of simple shacks. Now there are around a hundred on only seven miles of sand, many run by second or third generations, some warranting UNESCO status, all with cabins, umbrellas and restaurants, some even Michelin-starred – from above, a Mondrian of geometric lines and colours. This is Forte's elite civilisation in the sand: a genteel social fairground where the well-heeled saunter in fisherman's clogs straight into the beachside Belle Epoque, or the mid-century or La Dolce Vita, drawn in by signs that look designed by Le Corbusier, Erté or Saul Bass. Bagno Piero's Art Deco logo dates back to 1933; Maitó's accent and blue-and-white-striped parasols have a Fellini-esque wit. The old writers' beach club of choice, Alpemare, is now owned by Veronica and Andrea Bocelli, where she hosts fashion shows – models swaying in Ferragamo among the agapanthus – and he bursts into impromptu arias to the waves' timpani. Even the 21st-century La Twiga

has a nostalgic feel; the 400-euro-a-day tented beds framing the alps like Polaroids, flagged by wooden giraffes as if shot by Peter Beard.

'Really it's the families that bring people back to the same club, same number cabin every season,' says Luchino Dazzi whose famous clan founded the Bagno Silvio beach club in 1919. 'That and the way you like your spaghetti alle arselle.' Eating the yoke-yellow baby clams cooked in a casserole dish is a Versilian rite. At Bambaissa, they use more refined capellini; at Bagno Silvio a tiny sprinkle of peperoncini is added, the chilli

sensitising palates to garlicky flakes of sea, that slow-release a rush of salty memories made dreamier by glasses of Vermentino. 'The skill of our menus is in the perfection of dishes – there aren't many surprises,' says Davide Vaiani, grandson of Nelia who sold marinated anchovies

TWO SISTERS CYCLE ALONG IN THE SAME BRODERIE ANGLAISE DRESS. OFF-BEACH ETIQUETTE RULE NUMBER ONE: GO EVERYWHERE BY BIKE

the size of fishing weights at Le Tre Stelle in the 1960s. Along with his brother Marco, Davide owns five acclaimed seafood restaurants near the pier, where barefoot nut-brown boys line-fish in octopus-print shorts. At night, the kids still party hard at centenarian La Capannina.

Nearby, agave stems sprout like flowered ladders to the alps. Two sisters cycle along in the same broderie anglaise dress. Off-beach Forte etiquette rule number one: go everywhere by bike, no matter who you are. In Roma Imperiale, a man with the presidential air of a CEO free-wheels past, chest tanned the colour of tobacco, cigar in mouth, leaving a tail of smoke and Acqua di Parma. Jasmine swarms like fireflies over

Above from left: dried flowers, and co-owner Luca Calvani at Le Gusciane. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Villa Agnelli at the Augustus Hotel; Calvani making pasta in the kitchen of Le Gusciane; light on the property; shadows on a wall, Pietrasanta; pizza at Betty Chicca; reflection at the entrance to Galleria Poggiali, Pietrasanta. Previous pages, from left: sunset, Forte dei Marmi beach; sun loungers of the Augustus Hotel





iron gates. Behind them are Forte's secret villas, where Italy's industrial elite still decamp every summer. The Barillas' place is somewhere among the vanilla-lolly curves of Villa Antonietta; Casa Mann-Borgese was built for Thomas Mann's daughter, with a Janus-like view of sea and mountains.

'As a girl, I was mesmerised by the ladies leaving their villas in evening dresses at night,' says Paola Papi, a woman with a ballerina's posture in regulation sailor pants, who has sold wicker furniture to villa owners since 1968 in Forte's town, despite the onslaught of luxury brands and the odd interruption of an off-message Ferrari. Here, clipped oleander trees line the streets like floral lollipops in cherry red and raspberry pink. Legendary poker games are still dissected over morning coffee at Caffè Principe.

They have all made their pilgrimage to Papi's. Henry Moore used to buy her cane chairs. The Yorkshireman came here in 1957, while working on his *Reclining Figure* for the UNESCO Paris headquarters at the Medici Henraux quarry. In 1965, he and his wife bought a villa; dressing for the beach as for a cricket match at Lords, discussing primitivism with sculptors Ugo Guidi and Marino Marini to an eternal backdrop of jagged sky. Their works are still mounted on eponymous streets and roundabouts on the road to Pietrasanta, the Versilian capital of art. Here mid-century mavericks Jean Arp, Joan Miró and Isamu Noguchi chiselled Michelangelo's marble into strange, limb-like

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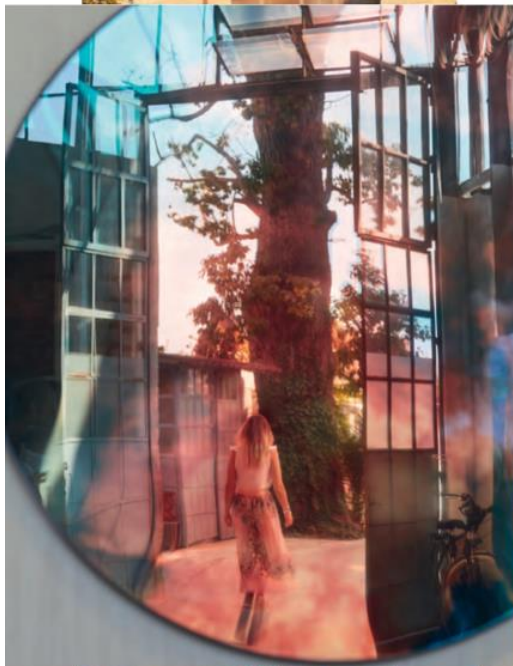
abstractions. *Roman Warrior* by Fernando Botero stands in Piazza Matteotti like a super-sized, mohawk-ed action man.

Artsy women in kaftans float past sculptures installed outside polenta-yellow palazzos and gated gardens of magnolia blooms as white as nun's wimples. An outrageous blue banana by a 'New Pop' artist directs its Joker's grin at Bar Michelangelo, where old men debate the front page of *Il Tirreno* in a circle of chairs as if in group therapy. At the Museum of Bozzetti, generations of preliminary sculptures crowd onto the church porticos – the work of Pietrasanta's acclaimed artisans. Franco Cervietti has been sculpting marble works for decades for the likes of Noguchi, Botero and Jeff Koons. 'We used to transport the stone by ox right up until the 1970s,' he tells me at his studio, a bunch of cour-

gette flowers from his allotment (his lunch) as big as tiger lilies in hand.

Inside – where eight assistants sculpt standing on orange boxes – there's Marc Quinn's *Chelsea Charms* piece, a marble woman holding up giant watery breasts. 'Jeff Koons used to come in here with [former porn actress] Cicciolina,' says Cervietti. When all the art and illustriousness gets too oppressive, he hikes into the anonymity of Alta Versilia, a national park of alpine villages and rare flowers fastidiously catalogued by local herbalists. Here, the only sculptural forms are the angular boughs of stone pines, their trunks the texture of corroded metal. Wild grasses sway like metronomes, setting a whole different rhythm. 📍

Above from left: street scenes in the town of Pietrasanta. Opposite, browsing La Cesteria wicker shop (or Papi's), Forte dei Marmi









WHERE TO STAY

AUGUSTUS HOTEL A grand series of neo-Renaissance villas, this has been a maximalist Riviera icon since eccentric patron Augusta Pesenti opened the first villa in 1953, with its signature green-striped awning. The Agnelli family's former villa was added in 1969 – still bedecked in Sanderson wallpaper and floribunda. The real magic is in the original Villa Pesenti, where the ground floor was built by modernist Osvaldo Borsani, and feels like a living design museum set in tropical gardens.

Doubles POA; augustus-hotel.it

VILLA GREY This contemporary respite from the lungomare's circus of colour declares itself as different with its shades of marble and dolphin. It was once inhabited by Franciscan nuns. Serenity lingers in the ether perfumed by Culti Milano, whose CEO designed the 19-room property and four-room dimora. The 'immaculate' part of the sisters' creed persists in New York-snappy service, Michelin-starred Il Parco and an assigned beach gazebo. *Doubles from about £245; villagrey.com*

LE GUSCIANE In the Apuan foothills outside Forte – a world away from the beach scene – this rural retreat set in a two-bedroom 1860s cottage is run by charming polymath Luca Calvani and his partner Alessandro Franchini. Calvani – an actor, presenter, director, perfumer and interior designer – has curated everything from the Regency interiors in smoke blues and artichoke greens to the collectors-item crockery and the juniper in the soap. He also plays chef, while Franchini tends to the bees and agapanthus. The greenhouse is chandelier-lit like a Georgian salon, and their friendly dachshunds tumble and chase badgers. *Doubles from about £100; legusciane.it*



WHERE TO EAT

IL PAPCO Miu Miu-clad diners cycle barefoot to this restaurant in Villa Grey's gardens for Roberto Monopoli's exquisite mood-setting dishes, served as optical illusions at spotlit tables. There's an exquisite echo of the sea to the spaghetti with algae, oysters and smoked butter. *About £130 for two; ilparcodivillagrey.com*

PESCE BARACCA Droll third-generation restaurateurs Davide and Marco Vaiani's five acclaimed seafood restaurants, including Michelin-starred Bistrot, are supplied by the waves (in fishing line's distance) and their own farm. Pesce Baracca, a mid-century fish market and foodie hotspot, is perhaps most in tune with their spirits, popping with optimism, lobster-oranges and Campari-reds as refreshing in Forte as a fizzy juice. Executive chef Andrea Mattei keeps all things Vaiani together. *About £130 for two; pescebaracca.it*

MAITO Locals bemoan a spate of takeovers of the legendary family-run beach clubs, of which Bagno Silvio (see main story) remains a stalwart. The latest is Maitó, opened in 1960, now namesake of a new Versilian luxury group. Today, it's the perfect Instagram version of itself with blue-and-white-striped umbrellas and acid-bright design chairs. Sophia Loren's comfort dish of penne alla Maitó remains on the menu. *About £100 for two; mymaito.com*

L'OSTERIA CANDALLA Set in an old mill in Camaiore, L'Osteria Candalla feels a continent away, specifically in Thailand, as a wooden extension rises on fishing-village stilts over a riverbank. But the menu is super-local: tordelli al ragù, testaroli with celery pesto and spelt from Garfagnana. *About £60 for two; osteriacandalla.it*

Above from left: local on a bike, Forte dei Marmi; early morning in the hill town of Camaiore. Opposite, clockwise from top left: dinner in the greenhouse, Le Gusciane; Augustus Hotel awnings; street in Pietrasanta; pizza at Bambaissa; post swim on Forte dei Marmi beach