

15 CIRCUIT FROM GAIOLE VIA THE CASTELLO DI MELETO AND BARBISCHIO

Distance/time: 12km/7.5mi: 3h15min

Grade: easy, with an ascent of 200m/650ft; on good tracks and trails and suitable in any season

Equipment: as pages 137-138; also walking boots if there has been rain, as there is a ford to cross

How to get there: TRA-IN 🚆 127 from Siena to/from Gaiole (*not Sundays*); journey time 50min. Or 🚗: following Car tour 2, turn off to Gaiole at the 53km-point; park on the road behind the church.

Refreshments: bar/restaurants in Gaiole; pizzerias at Barbischio and Castagnoli (the latter called L'Alto Chianti)

Note: Meleto Castle can be visited on a guided tour (groups only); tel: 0577 749217 to enquire about the fee and opening times.

This walk is set in the heart of Chianti and the Chianti Classico wine-growing area. The route has all the ingredients for a typical Chianti walk. It starts in a stone-paved piazza, passes a 10th-century church, a castle involved in the wars between Siena and Florence, and a medieval tower house. It is, of course, set among a myriad of vineyards patterning the hillsides not covered with trees. In autumn, with all the wild fruits around — blackberries, figs and grapes — the walk is a feast both metaphorically and literally.

Start the walk in the centre of **Gaiole**, by the **SCULPTURE**. This street, **VIA CASABLANCA**, is the main road to Siena (SS408). Follow this road towards Siena until you arrive at a **JUNCTION (5min)**. Stay on the right-hand side of the road, cross **VIA GALILEI**, and look straight ahead for your ongoing route — a track that starts at this junction and winds uphill. It passes a renovated **FARMHOUSE** and leads into the piazza of the 10th-century parish church of **Spaltenna (15min)**. The surrounding buildings are now a hotel, so are very well kept. Take the track at the right of the piazza, skirting the **HOTEL COMPLEX**, with the hotel grounds and gardens on the left and a vineyard on the right. Veer to the left at the **POND** and continue to where the main track turns left: go straight ahead here on an old grassy track into the trees, leaving the **CAI 16** behind. Soon you join a second track, where **YELLOW MARKERS** indicate the line of an underground pipe. Emerging from the trees, you will see a large derelict **FARM** on your left. Head towards it, skirting the edge of **VINEYARDS (25min)**.

The farm is **San Pierone** and, if it is still uninhabited, do look around the outside. You will see the outdoor oven, the wells, and a chapel. It looks as if the people left only recently. Head left downhill from the farm, towards a strange, isolated villa with a tabernacle at the crossroads.

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(The last time we did this walk, land was being cleared for new vineyards, and the stone tabernacle had been moved — temporarily I hope!) Continue with the villa's garden wall on your left, the *cantina* for 'Geografico' wine on your right, and the castle of Meleto on the hillside ahead. What could be more Chianti? The track leads you into the valley, skirting to the right of a **FARMHOUSE** halfway down (**40min**).

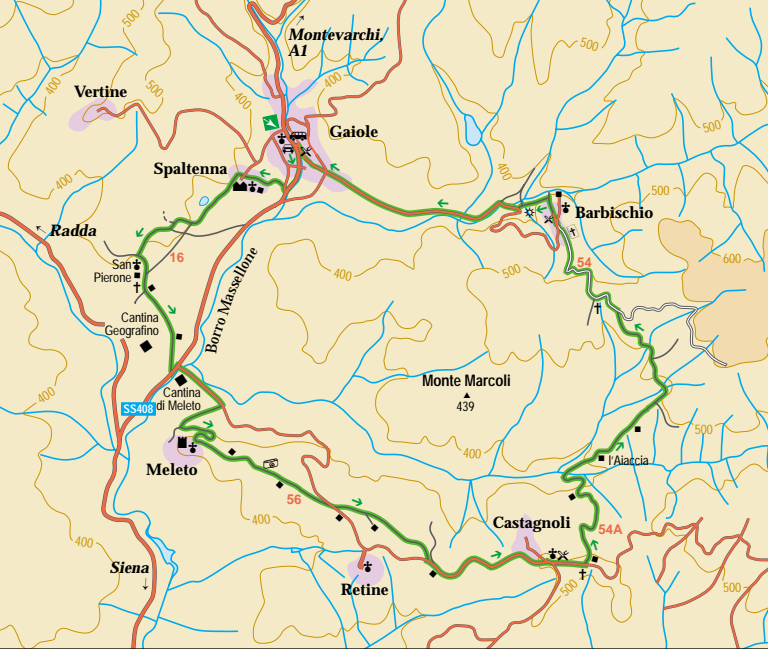
Meeting the Siena road once more, go left and immediately right over the bridge (signposted for Meleto). Five minutes up this minor road, you pass an elegant shop on the right, housed in what was once the lime kiln for plaster for the walls inside Meleto castle (photograph below). Plans are now afoot for it to be turned into a restaurant. Turn right up the straight, cypress-lined drive leading into the courtyard of the **Castello di Meleto (55min)**.

After a tour (see above) and perhaps a wine-tasting, follow the **CAI 56** along the chapel wall. This track has wonderful views over the undulating Chianti country with its woodlands and vineyards. The track leads past a farm and



Top: old lime kiln for plaster for the walls inside Meleto Castle; bottom: looking towards the castle across typical Chianti vineyards





up to another, large rectangular farm on the ridge. The track dips and then rises to the road again, by a **BUS STOP (1h15min)**. Cross the road and follow a track towards another farm. The track divides below the farm: keep left and continue, veering right, back to the road. Turn left on the road and stroll up to **Castagnoli (1h45min)**, with its huge castle-like building by the roadside. Below the wall you can see some of the stainless steel wine-making equipment.

Walk straight on, past the church and restaurant. Just before the next house on the left (where there is a **WOODEN CROSS** on the opposite side of the road; **1h50min**), turn left down a track, the CAI 54A. Cross the stream by the ford, then walk up to a pretty **HOLIDAY HOME (2h05min)**. Beyond the next house, the track becomes a sandy trail through chestnut woods and scrub. Follow this marked route, ignoring two trails off to the right, until you meet a wide track. Turn left here; then, at a wide junction with a **TABERNACLE (2h35min)**, take the right-hand track (CAI 54).

Coming into the medieval hamlet of **Barbischio**, you meet a **Y-junction (2h45min)**. The road to the right goes up to the 10th-century tower house; take the road to the left, descending past the Papavero Restaurant. The road ends by 'PIETRO', a house covered with old farming artefacts. But a lovely soft woodland trail continues to the right and takes you down to the stream. Turn left, walk parallel with the stream, and you will come to a farmyard, which was once the old village **MILL (3h)**. Continue down to the road and turn right over the bridge. At the **T-JUNCTION**, keep left for **Gaiole (3h15min)**.

VINEYARDS

Virgil said 'Vines love an open hill', so what better place to grow grape vines than in Tuscany.

Grape vines, which naturally are woodland climbers from lowland areas of the Mediterranean, have many other requirements if good grapes are to be harvested.

These include: a great deal of light, a warm climate (between 25 and 28°C in the growing season), abundant autumn sunshine to ripen the fruit, well-drained soil to encourage the roots to grow deep into the subsoil, plenty of water, and moving humid air.

Of course the plants love rich soil in which they produce strong verdant growth. Wine-growers, however, would rather they produce grapes, so prefer less-rich soils. It is no wonder that much of Tuscany produces good wine, with its rolling hills, dry gritty, sandy soils, proximity to the sea with its warm breezes, and protection by the Apennines from the worst winter weather. But late frosts, hail storms and unreliable spells of rain occur too, just to stop the growers from getting too complacent.

The wild strain of grape, *Vitis vinifera*, is



indigenous to Italy and parts of Asia, and still grows wild here. Italians were not in fact the first wine-makers, but have certainly been developing their skills for thousands of years. Production of wine today is not dissimilar to the methods used by the peasants over centuries. Winter and spring is the time for pruning and training the vines. Today concrete posts and wire hold up many new vines, but you can still see plants trained onto specially-pollarded turkey oak trees using willow fronds — the time-honoured method. Spring is spraying time, and autumn is harvest time (the *vendemmia*). In Tuscany, this is still done largely by hand by groups of grape-pickers,

although I have seen one huge machine. Recently the quality of Italian wine has improved drastically, due to new methods of viticulture and oenoculture. Large estates now exist where the only crop is grapes. They produce homogeneous, dependable wines at a reasonable price. Extremely high quality wines are also produced in estates where the wine-makers have experimented with using different varieties of grape, adding Cabernet Sauvignon grapes for example, to the traditional red Sangiovese. Making good-quality wines on well-run vineyards is one of the few agricultural enterprises in Tuscany that can actually make a profit.