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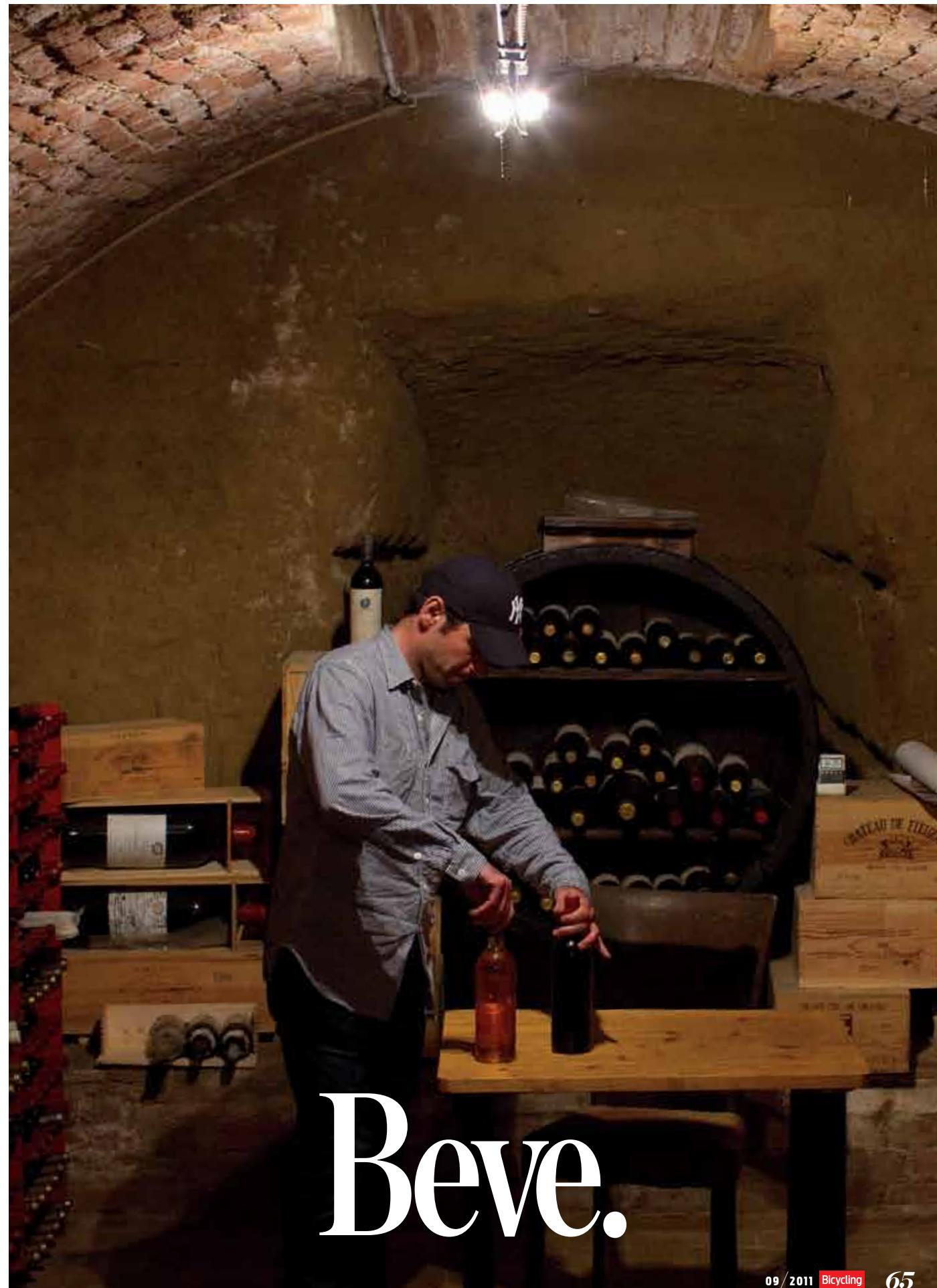
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WORLD'S LEADING BIKE MAGAZINE



Mangia.

CROSTINI FROM PAOLO CIONI'S BAR, WINE, AND FOOD SHOP, WHICH IS SO INSIDE-ITALY IT DOESN'T TECHNICALLY HAVE A NAME, AND (OPPOSITE) THE WINE CELLAR AT IL PORRIONE.



Beve.

Bici.

IF YOU THINK THAT
A WEEK OF RIDING IN CHIANTI
WITH AN EX-PRO RACER
WOULD WHIP YOU INTO TIP-TOP SHAPE,
THEN YOU DON'T
KNOW JOAO CORREIA
VERY WELL

by Bill Gifford
photographed by Jason Gould



We were in a very hot place, underground, and the diabolical figure confronting us was short and squat, bald and muscular. When he laughed, which was often, his entire scalp reddened, including his big ears. The only clues that Lorenzo was a baker rather than the devil himself were his white Crocs and the pinup calendar tacked to the wall.

He flipped open the doors to a massive oven—one of the biggest and oldest in Siena—and a blast of heat hit us in the face. Reaching into its depths with a long wooden paddle, Lorenzo pulled out a baking sheet filled with his family's legendary contucci, golden biscuits made for dunking in vin santo, the fragrant dessert wine. With a big smile, he waved the steaming cookies, fragrant with orange zest and almond, under my nose.

Eight of us had spent a week cycling in Chianti, the famed Tuscan wine region south of Florence. Though we'd ridden some pretty tough climbs (they're not called "Tuscan hill towns" for nothing), and bombed down some sketchy, rutted *strade bianche* (or "white roads"), tonight was shaping up as our biggest challenge yet. We were trapped in the bowels of Il Panificio Magnifico, a famous Sienese bakery; our exit was blocked, literally, by a table already groaning with contucci plus at least five other types of cookies,

including chewy almond moons called ricciarelli, dusted in powdered sugar. In addition, there were at least a dozen still-warm panetone, fluffy orange cakes each the size of a basketball. We could not simply walk out of this room. We had to eat our way out.

Our bellies were still stuffed from lunch, a two-hour feast that had begun with bruschetta and crostini, run through several platters of prosciutto and melon, and ended with hearty platefuls of lasagne and tagliatelle, all washed down with glasses of Chianti from the winery just up the road from the village where we were staying. Truth be told, we were still full from yesterday's lunch.

We eyed the confections on the table, bleary from gastric fatigue. But it wasn't long before someone sliced into one of the orange cakes—just to be polite, you know. Our host, Joao, filled a plastic cup with vin santo and dunked one of the biscotti into it. Big smile. Others followed his example. I picked up one of the powdered-sugar cookies and bit into it; in my mouth, it melted into a warm, sugary almond goo. Yes, please, I will have five more... Soon we were stuffing cake and cookies into our faces by the fistful, as our livers whirred back into the red zone. The table began to empty. We were all sweating profusely, thanks to the heat from the oven, but we didn't care anymore.

Table somewhat lighter, we said good-bye, then tottered down the street, woozy from glycemic shock. Time for dinner.



They take the seven deadly sins pretty seriously in Tuscany, ever since a local poet wrote a long and vivid account of who goes to hell, and why, and what happens down there.

Dante's *Inferno* became an all-time medieval best-seller, of course, and in it the Tuscan versifier reserved a special fate for the gluttons: They were forced to lie in the mud beneath a pounding, chilly rain, like the pigs they had emulated in real life. "Large hail, tainted water, and sleet pour down through the shadowy air," Dante wrote, "and the earth is putrid that receives it."

Which had me worried, because the skies had been threatening rain all week, and we were certainly tempting judgment with our gluttonous behavior. So far, we'd escaped with just a light dousing one morning, as we flew down the road from the hilltop town where we were staying. But by the time we reached the main road, the rain had stopped.

Indeed, the closest we'd come to divine retribution was early in the trip, when one of us overcooked a corner and kissed a guard-rail. Literally. He ended up with 20 stitches in his face—but would return to the trip, an object lesson in how someone can be both really unlucky and really lucky at the same time.



JUST ANOTHER
TIMELESS,
BEAUTIFUL
ROAD ON THE
WAY TO SIENA

Of course, passing a motorhome on a twisty downhill probably wasn't the best idea anybody ever had, but this was Chianti, the fabled wine and cycling heartland of Italy, with a castle on every hilltop and beautiful twisting blacktopped roads, with curves as tight as a Gucci model's butt. You can't not go fast.

The basic idea for the trip was so simple that it fit into a tweet: "Thinking of doing a ride, eat, drink EOY bash here in chianti October 12-18th," said @joaoisme, known in real life as Joao Correia. "Share my favorite things about this place. Who's interested?"

Four guys signed up immediately for a trip that was then just four weeks away. They would spend a week in the small town of Lecchi, where Joao had lived and trained as a pro for Cervélo Test Team. Joao sketched out an itinerary on a place mat at Enoteca Rinaldi, the wine shop and espresso bar that is the heart of Lecchi, but it boiled down to two main activities: riding and eating. There were no security deposits, no liability waivers, just Twitter and, as one guy put it, "a huge amount of trust."

That trip had gone so well that Joao had decided to repeat it in the spring. This time eight of us had shown up. We'd hit the hills every

amateur rider; he had won his first national championship, in his native Portugal, at the age of six. He kept racing when his family moved to the United States when he was 11; he'd done well enough that he briefly raced in Europe as a professional in the 1990s before concluding that there were easier ways of making a living. He'd quit to finish college and pursue his career and hadn't looked back.

Until 2005, when he started riding again. Instead of spending his lunch hours in Park Avenue restaurants, he could usually be found riding in Central Park, which is where I met him one day a couple years ago. Far more chatty and gregarious than the typical NYC roadie (to put it mildly), he became popular in the Park scene.

He hired a nutritionist to keep him away from the carbs and began working with the respected trainer Max Testa. Soon he was flying to California on weekends to race in national-level events, and, as he puts it, "getting shelled by amateurs." But a couple of decent finishes yielded a small contract with the domestic Bissell team, and that in turn led to his signing with Cervélo for 2010. That made him a ProTour rookie at 34, an age when most professional riders are thinking about checking out.

"Nobody needs to worry about the riding, you just need to worry about pulling your weight around the table. I'll send you home if you're not eating and drinking enough."

morning for a few hours, followed by some low-key tourism in the afternoons, and were going to live and train like pros, with pro-level massages and a mechanic, but with one difference: We could eat.

I'd joined the group thinking that a week of hard riding might kick-start my season after a winter in which I set a personal record for least miles ridden since 1998. I hoped to get back into halfway decent shape for an upcoming triathlon. Silly me.

"I've been hearing a lot of rumblings about lack of riding, fitness etc.," Joao warned in a pretrip e-mail. "I'm taking notes and on the lookout for sandbaggers."

That sounded promising. But the next sentence revealed his true priorities: "Nobody needs to worry about the riding, you just need to worry about pulling your weight around the table. I'll send you home if you're not eating and drinking enough."



This wasn't how most pro cyclists talked, at least not the ones I'd met. They generally ate like anorexic cheerleaders; even as they stuffed themselves after a race, you could see fathomless guilt in their eyes. Also like cheerleaders, their conversation tended to revolve around who had a fat ass.

But unlike most other pros, Joao had already been fat. Five years ago, he was a hard-charging advertising exec in the New York publishing world and years of expense-account dinners had bloated him to more than 205 pounds, which is an awful lot of prozhoot' on a 5-foot-8 frame. Then he became associate publisher of this magazine, which meant that he had to ride for his job. One day he was huffing through a gran fondo in Italy with a client—none other than Fausto Pinarello, the legendary bike builder—who noted his pedaling style and said, "You used to race—I can tell."

It was true: In his youth Joao had been a promising junior and

To sum up: Joao had gone from chubby New York office guy to lithe ProTour rider in the space of five years. His was a Cinderella story, if Cinderella wore Castelli bibs, and it made him the envy of every Tuesday Night Worlds rider in every city in America. If he were a baseball player, his story would have been made into a Lifetime movie; as it was, he drew plenty of media attention, including a *New York Times* write-up featuring superimposed photos of "old" and "new" Joao. The difference is stunning. Old Joao was the fat guy at a charity ride. New Joao was a sleek, compact pro. When he showed up at training camp, he weighed all of 145 pounds.

Though never a star, Joao proved a capable worker. At first, he astonished everyone merely by finishing tough early-season events like the Etoile de Besseges, a chilly stage race in France. The buzz, in turn, brought frequent surprise drug tests. "The only thing I ever worried about testing positive for was cholesterol," he says.

In June his season was derailed by a serious wreck during the Tour de Suisse. But, it must be noted, that in typical Joao fashion—always in the right place at the right time—he had crashed into an ambulance. But it meant an end to his hopes of riding in the Vuelta a Espana. "Over the course of the year I went back to the car for countless numbers of bottles," he wrote in his blog at the end of the year, "[and] rode at the front for more miles than I can remember." Inevitably after such efforts, he would get dropped, and end up in the *gruppetto*, the "laughing group" of domestiques just riding to make the time cut.

When Cervélo was absorbed into the Garmin-Transitions team at the end of the season, Joao found himself without a team for 2011, and he decided to call it quits. He'd lived the dream.

THE SPECTACULAR RIDING (INCLUDING THE "WHITE ROADS," CENTER) WAS MATCHED BY DELIGHTS SUCH AS BISTECCA FIORENTINA (TOP CENTER) AND THE WARM WELCOMES OF LOCALS CHEFS (BOTTOM LEFT).



Now it was time to move on—and go back to eating everything in sight. “I’ve already gained back 20 pounds,” he said proudly.



We were sitting at a café in Siena one afternoon when we noticed a stranger eyeing our Cervélos. We tensed up, on guard, as the guy approached, leering covetously. Then we noticed something familiar about his puffy mane of silver hair.

“Nice bikes,” said senator John Kerry.

An avid cyclist himself, Kerry had recently purchased a Cervélo after years of riding a custom Serotta. (Talk about a flip-flop.) The sight of nine beautiful R3s, leaned casually against the café furniture in the main square of Siena, was more than he could resist. We made small talk—bike-dork talk, really—as he ignored the pleas of his entourage to move on. “We’re just touring around,” he said, clutching a guidebook in one hand. It was pretty clear he would have preferred to be “touring around” by bike.

Cycling is like that: It unites people who might otherwise have nothing in common. And so it was with our little group. We were a heterogeneous clique, Americans and Canadians, Californians and Northwesterners. There was Big Joe from Marin, an old friend of Joao who looked every bit the Stanford water-polo star he’d once been; he’d brought his friend, Big Steve, who was somewhat softer and rounder than Joe. There were two guys from Toronto who couldn’t have been more different: Michael, an intense, chatty advertising “creative” who’d shown up sporting a man-bag and spouting Italian phrases that he seemed to have picked up from *Breaking Away*; and Dave, his polar opposite, a decent, sober guy



It was cycling utopia, with quiet, twisty roads—none of them flat—extending in every direction. There were long climbs, short climbs, and many miles of the famed *strade bianche*, Italy’s answer to pavé.

who worked in a bank. As if they weren’t enough, the group had yet a third Canadian, a dry, amiable 47-year-old CEO-on-sabbatical named Kevin, who’d been on Joao’s first Chianti trip in the fall. This qualified him as a Joao-trip veteran, but we also marveled at his prodigious vacationing: After the trip, he was meeting his wife for a tour of England, Scotland, and Ireland. “I’m having a well-planned midlife crisis,” he said, and shrugged.

Finally there were the Crank Brothers, Sean and Dean, both in their late 30s, natives of Spokane. Dean was a mountain biker with the build of a high-school shotputter, while Sean was lean and laconic. They made a fearsome duo: On the flats, Dean pulled like a Mack truck, then Sean would fly away from us on climbs. I figured him for a hardcore racer, but Dean informed me that this was not the case: A year ago, Sean was just getting into road cycling and his longest ride had topped out at about 25 miles. He’d since completed eight century rides in one summer and around 5,000 miles in a year, and now was decked out in head-to-toe Capo and dropping the shit out of everyone except Joao. I wanted to dislike him, but his polite, earnest Oregonian personality did not permit this.

To help out with the trip, Joao had corralled two fellow Portuguese: Jorge, a quiet but superb mechanic for Cervélo who drove down from Switzerland in a van loaded with bikes; and Raul, an

ex-pro turned soigneur. Raul gave a wicked massage, the equivalent of an Eddie Van Halen guitar solo on your legs. His other job, apparently, was to provide comic relief and inspiration. This consisted chiefly of his patented attacks: Whenever things got dull, he would come out of nowhere and rocket past us at approximately 45 mph, like a flying Portuguese sausage.

Scruffy-faced and inky-haired, Joao himself resembled a young Al Pacino and sort of dressed like it, too—off the bike, anyway—sporting fancy Italian jackets with aviator shades and, usually, some sort of scarf flung around his neck. His efforts earned him a merciless nickname—Fashion Boy—although in fact he dressed pretty modestly for a guy who once worked at *Esquire*.

When he signed with Cervélo, Fashion Boy had moved to Monaco to live and train, but he found it too urban, hectic, and distracting. So he packed up the car and headed to Italy for life in a small town that consisted of about two dozen houses clinging to the top of a wooded ridge, plus a single restaurant and one wine shop. It was a cycling utopia, with miles of quiet, twisty roads—none of them flat—extending in every direction. There were long climbs, short climbs, and many miles of the famed *strade bianche*, Italy’s answer to pavé. The food couldn’t be beat, and he adored the people.

“I love this part of the world,” Joao said one night over wine. “I



FULL SCHEDULE Joao’s Personal Chianti To-Do List

1. SARTORIA DEL CUOIO My love affair with Chianti started in 1998 while on a spring-break trip with my college roommates, when I stumbled into the shoe shop of Alessandro Stella. One of the best-kept secrets in the world of bespoke shoes. (+39 0577-43861)

2. RINALDI BAR & WINE SHOP Technically this small shop doesn’t have a name. But proprietor Paolo Cioni, an old friend of mine, served me lunch here most days while I was training in Europe. Great pasta, salads, and panini, and my Top 10 Chianti Wine List is actually Paolo’s. (+39 05777-46021)

3. BORGIO When you stay at this bed-and-breakfast, you feel like you’re suspended in time. It’s comfortable and modern, yet the outside world doesn’t seem to penetrate it. (borgioecchi.it)

4. PALAZZO PRETORIO When you walk in, look to the left behind the oven and let me know if my jersey is still there. Try the spaghetti Stefano and ask to be seated outside for incredible views of the valley. (palazzopretorio.it)

5. TRATORRIA LE PANZANELLE This small restaurant serves simple food with unbelievable taste and has friendly staff. When I’m in Chianti, I eat here a few times per week. (lepanzanelle.it)

6. BADIA A COLTIBUONO This is an old abbey on a hill I climbed almost daily—and in which my wife and I were married. Now owned by the Stucchi Prinetti family, today the badia offers tours and cooking classes, and a hotel with a great restaurant. (coltibuono.com)

7. CASTELLO DI AMA This is one the true great wine producers of Chianti. I first met the owner, Lorenza Sebasti, about 10 years ago. Take the tour and keep your eyes open for the modern art around the grounds. (castellodiama.com)

8. RADIENZA STUDIO D’ARTE LIES ROBBERTSEN This pottery is handpainted by Lies in the Majolica style. Back home, you’ll display it as art. (+39 0577-739006)

9. GALENDA Be sure to ride to the small hamlet I lived in. It’s my favorite tiny town in Chianti. (toscana-galenda.com)

10. WHITE ROADS There’s an organized ride that covers these historic gravelly roads each fall (eroica-ciclismo.it). But you can find and ride them anytime, and if I had a bad day or wasn’t feeling particularly cheery, I’d go hammer them and my mood would improve, at least temporarily.—Joao Correia



came from Portugal, grew up in New York, but this is the only place I’ve ever felt truly at home.”



Joao also had what he called an office here—the coffee and wine bar Enoteca Rinaldi, owned and run by the barrel-chested Paolo Cioni, who served a mean prosciutto plate and acted as de facto mayor of Lecchi; his family owned the bed and breakfast where we stayed, and his laughter boomed up and down the narrow main street. A towering guy with a deep voice, he had biceps like tree branches, as if he had hauled all the building stones to this hilltop village by himself.

In fact Paolo was a gentle giant, the kind of guy who made everyone feel like a long-lost cousin. When he was around, the wine flowed freely and platters of delicious food kept arriving until we begged him to stop. Every fall he gathered friends and family to harvest olives from the local groves then press them into the delicious, peppery green oil we poured over everything in sight. It tasted best, we decided, on the locally raised steaks that Paolo and a sculptor friend grilled for us in the fireplace one night. The velvety meat melted in our mouths, helped along by a magnum or three of 20-year-old Chianti Classico, which Paolo had brought from his own personal cellar.

“The steep hillsides make the sangiovese grapes more robust,”

BICI continued on p. 93

THE RIDERS (GOING THROUGH CASTELNUOVO BERADENGA, ABOVE) WERE KEPT ON THE ROAD BY JORGE THE MECHANIC (OPPOSITE PAGE) AND PALAZZO PRETORIO’S PASTA ALLA STEFANO (LEFT).

Big Steve had intoned that morning, as we glided past rows of just-leaving vines. “At least, that’s what I was told by the tour guide at the winery.”

The steep hills made a lot of things robust, notably Paolo himself. He’d once been a chubster like Joao, but had started riding a couple of years ago and lost 50 pounds. He was still pretty big and pedaled like a circus bear, but he generally kicked most of our asses up the final climb back to Lecchi, a mile and a half of daily, unavoidable pain.

Mornings were better, mostly because they began with a long, brakeless descent off the ridge, freewheels zinging as we picked up speed. The jubilation lasted until the next hard climb, which unfortunately was never far away; every town, it seemed, stood atop a steep hill, generally crowned with a castle or villa of some sort. It was like riding through the background of a da Vinci painting. What little traffic there was, polite, and of the tiny Euromobile variety, would let out a few beeps and be on the way, engines straining to pass us.

The roads of Chianti are old, basically a skim of pavement applied to the cart tracks and footpaths that once linked these stony hilltop villages. They hug the folds of the hillsides, and once in a while you dive into a curve only to find that it just keeps tightening until you think it won’t let go.

We were joined not only by Joao and his ad hoc staff, but local riders, too. To them, Joao was no mere visiting tour guide; he was an insider, a respected ex-pro who spoke fluent Italian. And, in the middle of the week, Joao’s Dutch friend Koos Moerenhout came to visit for a couple of days. Koos and Joao’s friendship dated back to 1991, when they rode the junior world championship together in Colorado; while Joao had gone on to become a fat ad guy, Koos had spent nearly two decades as a pro, ending up with Rabobank. He, too, had just retired, and was touring Tuscany with his wife, Edith, also a former pro cyclist.

Luckily Koos had almost no interest in riding hard. We looped down toward Siena, then cut left on one of the most beautiful roads I’ve ever ridden, a thin ribbon of asphalt following a long, gently rising ridge, cutting through ancient stone villages and vineyards just coming into leaf.

The Tuscan scenery was so ridiculously, well, scenic—an ochre castle on every hilltop, overlooking a sloping patchwork of vineyards and olive groves—that I half expected to hear the alarm go off and wake up in a motel room in Modesto. But no, we really were in Tuscany, and I really did hang onto Koos’s wheel for a blazing 5 kilometers at certifiable pro speeds.

That night we drove into Siena for dinner at a

new restaurant called I Porri, where we feasted extravagantly on pork and lamb, washed down with magnums of Castello di Ama, the local wine of Lecchi. We’d visited the winery the day before, and toured the vineyards and the aging cellars in the company of a lovely dark-haired tour guide named Lucia.

She discoursed knowledgeably about the wine of Chianti (a favorite, apparently, of Thomas Jefferson), and about the interesting art installations scattered about the property. (Raul being Raul, he nearly fell into the one representing the mouth of hell.)

Lucia also informed us that lactic acid plays a key role in the fermentation of grapes, just as it does in cycling. We nodded, our legs still loaded by the climbing the day before, not to mention the 2004 vintage we’d sampled extensively that night. She then launched into an overview of the growing and wine-making process, which now, in May, was just beginning. In September the grapes would be harvested and pressed. “In December,” she went on, “we give birth to the wine.” Lucia also said something about the juice of the sangiovese grape, the primary ingredient in the Chianti Classico blend, representing the “blood of Jupiter.” Unfortunately, I have no idea what she meant, because the next entry in my notebook reads, “interesting stockings.”

At the dinner table, in a reversal of our time on the bike that day, it was Koos who seemed intimidated by our ability. Even though he was retired, or maybe because he was retired, he still approached the dinner table with caution. We had no such inhibitions, and Koos and Edith looked on, appalled, as we devoured platter after platter of roasted lamb and grilled steak. As I heaped yet another meaty shank onto my plate, Koos remarked, pointedly, “You know, a lamb is not a fast animal.”

Nor was I, by this point. According to Kevin’s GPS, we’d covered more than 400 kilometers, with 6,800 meters of climbing; I suspected his readings were inaccurate, because they had only recorded one gelato stop. After the trip, skinny Sean would joke that he’d managed to limit his losses to a power-to-kilogram drop of 0.05 watts—though that could be the difference between winning and losing the Tour de France, if you were a contender.

We weren’t. We were just riders, and even that was but a means to an end. Later that night, as we sampled an ancient, amber-sweet vin santo that Joao had impulsively purchased from the restaurant’s proprietor, out of a dank but well-stocked cellar, he phrased it best: “This isn’t about cycling; this is about living life.” 