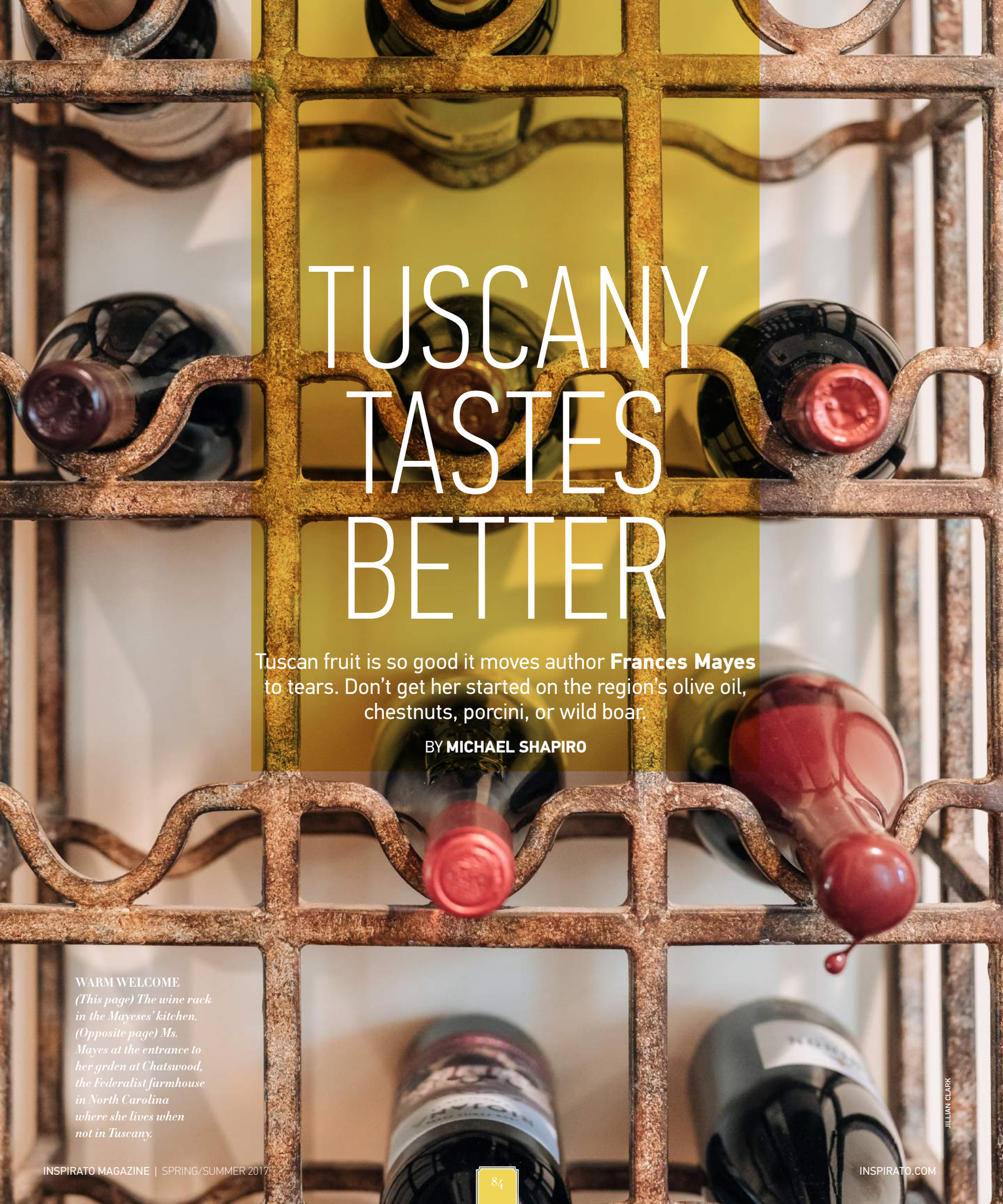
TUSCANY TASTES BETTER

Tuscan fruit is so good it moves author **Frances Mayes** to tears. Don't get her started on the region's olive oil, chestnuts, porcini, or wild boar.

BY **MICHAEL SHAPIRO**



WARM WELCOME
(This page) The wine rack in the Mayeses' kitchen. (Opposite page) Ms. Mayes at the entrance to her grden at Chatswood, the Federalist farmhouse in North Carolina where she lives when not in Tuscany.

JILLIAN CLARK

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It's summer in Tuscany and Frances Mayes, author of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, is shopping at a fruit stand in her adopted home of Cortona. "Are these plums local?" she asks the elderly woman at the stand as the sweet scent of the fruit perfumes the air. "Oh no, *signora*," the vendor apologizes. "They're from Castiglion Fiorentino." Which is just 5 miles away.

This exchange reveals Tuscans' preference for hyper-local food, one of the essential qualities that make the region's cuisine so heavenly. Italians in general and Tuscans in particular revere simple dishes made from ingredients found near (or at) their homes, but their appreciation for food goes deeper than taste.

In Tuscany, food isn't just something to eat—it's something to do with family and friends: harvesting wild mushrooms, picking olives, canning tomatoes, sharing big bowls of pasta, and gathering for dinners where everyone helps cook and conversation flows deep into the night. "There is an intense passion for local food, and it's particularly focused on what you can find yourself," Mayes told me last fall. "And that's what I see that is so different from living [in the United States]."

"In Tuscany right this minute [early October] everybody is out looking for the *mazza di tamburo*, the mushroom of the moment. That means drumstick—it's shaped like a drumstick with a long stem and a big, flat head. You find them on your own land and saute them with garlic," Mayes says. Italians "don't even want them on pasta—they just want them on little crostini because they so want to taste this wild mushroom. In the spring it's strange things like green almonds. Everybody loves crunchy green almonds before they turn into a nut. To me that's very much an acquired taste, but local people like them." Foraging for food, she says, is "profoundly different" than shopping at Whole Foods.

These days, Mayes, who grew up in Georgia, divides her time between an estate in North Carolina and her home in Tuscany. Both homes have names: Chatswood, a 4,500-square-foot Federalist farmhouse built in 1806, was once an inn and is steeped in Southern history; Bramasole, named for the big Etruscan wall near the house, is the Tuscan villa that Frances Mayes and her husband, Ed, began refurbishing in the early 1990s and where they've spent much of the past 25 years.

Located a couple of miles from town, Bramasole is an imposing three-story stone house in classic Tuscan peach-orange hues that glow in the setting sun. It's approached by a path flanked by roses, sage, and rosemary. The land on which it sits, a plot that would take "two oxen two days to plow" as stated in the property's ancient deed, is lined with olive trees.

"When I came here and got out of the car the first time, a real estate agent said, 'Bramare, to yearn for; and *sole*, sun—

STEVEN ROTHFELD / COURTESY FANCES MAYES

COUNTRY LIFE
(Clockwise from opposite page) Roasted fresh asparagus; The Mayeses' Bramasole estate; At Bramasole's front door; Lunch under blooming wisteria.

something that yearns for the sun,'" Mayes told me when I interviewed her in 2003 for my book, *A Sense of Place*, a collection of interviews with travel writers. "That just really hit because metaphorically I was hoping for a connection with the light, something transformative, something big." The locals thought Mayes was nuts to buy the house because no one in Cortona wanted it. "Now they say to me, 'I could have bought that house.' "

Under the Tuscan Sun, Mayes' 1996 memoir about restoring Bramasole, had an initial print run of 5,000 copies and quickly leapt to the top of the bestseller lists where it stayed for years. "The expectation I had of it was of course minimal because I had only published books of poetry before then. You don't know when you write a book whether it is going to sink or swim," she says. It swam, of course, and has been translated into 52 languages, selling millions of copies and becoming a film of the same title starring Diane Lane.

To mark the book's 20th anniversary last fall, Broadway Books published a special paperback edition with a new afterword by Mayes in which she speaks of how gathering for meals helped make her part of the local community. Calling herself a "product of a lavish Southern table," Mayes writes "food was the defining point of turning me half-Tuscan. The life around the table reminds me of the South. Every time I pull up my chair to a friend's table I know that I am home. ... Relaxation around food is extraordinary. No need to ask if you can bring an extra guest or two. Throw in another handful of pasta; grab a chair. ... Just found mushrooms translate into an invitation to come on over."

Part of the tremendous response to the book was based on the leap of faith Mayes took, leaving a comfortable life in the U.S.—she'd been a professor of poetry at San Francisco State University—and starting anew in Tuscany. "I think she is beloved for many reasons," says Elaine Petrocelli, owner of Book Passage, which operates three independent bookstores in the San Francisco Bay area. "Her tales are both fascinating and accessible. She followed her dream to live in Italy, and then as she became part of the fabric of her new Italian

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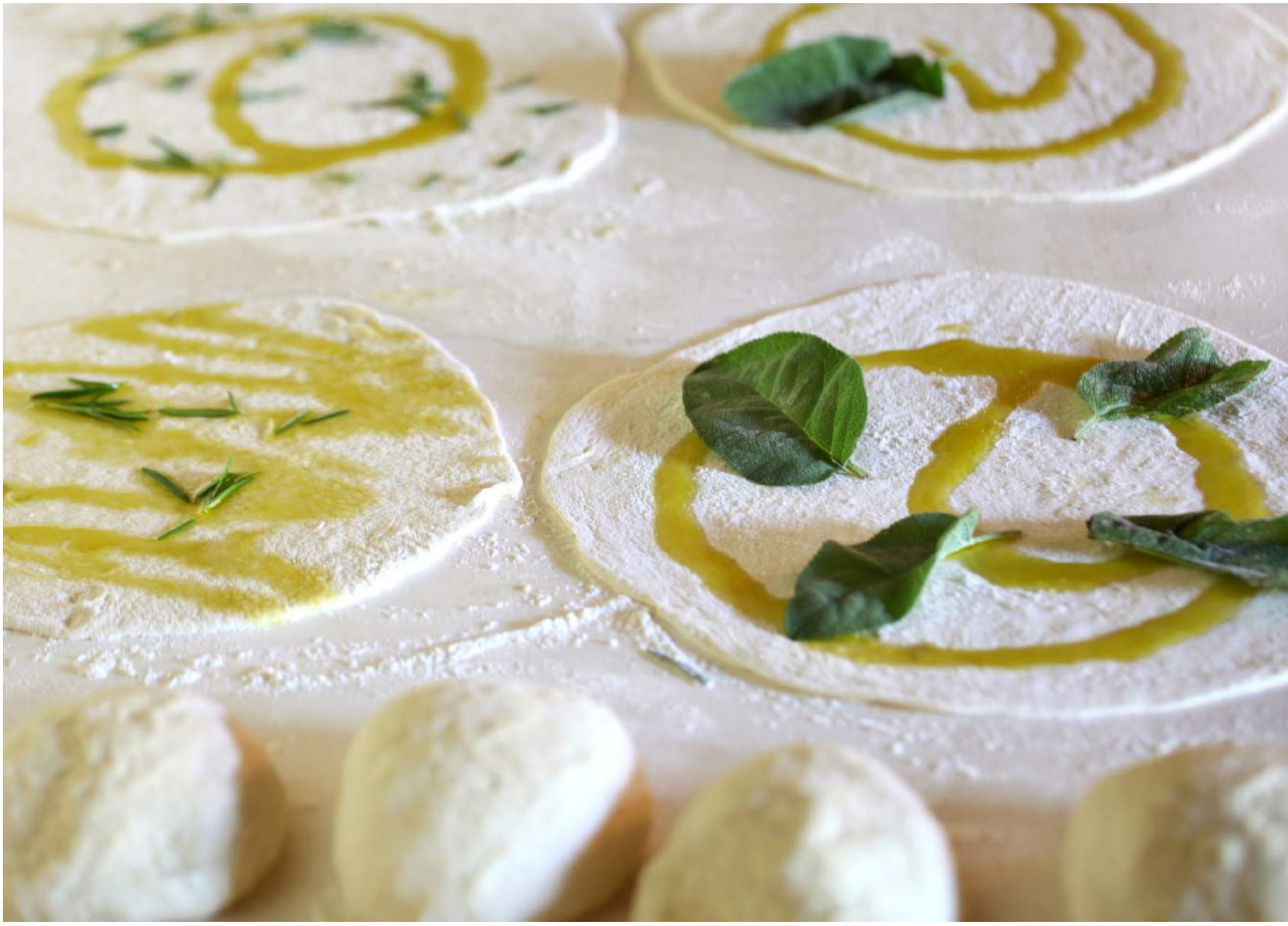
COURTESY FRANCES MAYES (3)



STEVEN ROTHFELD / COURTESY FANCES MAYES

In rural Tuscany, everybody still has a connection with the land—a garden. When you've got your garden, you share it, and people share with you.

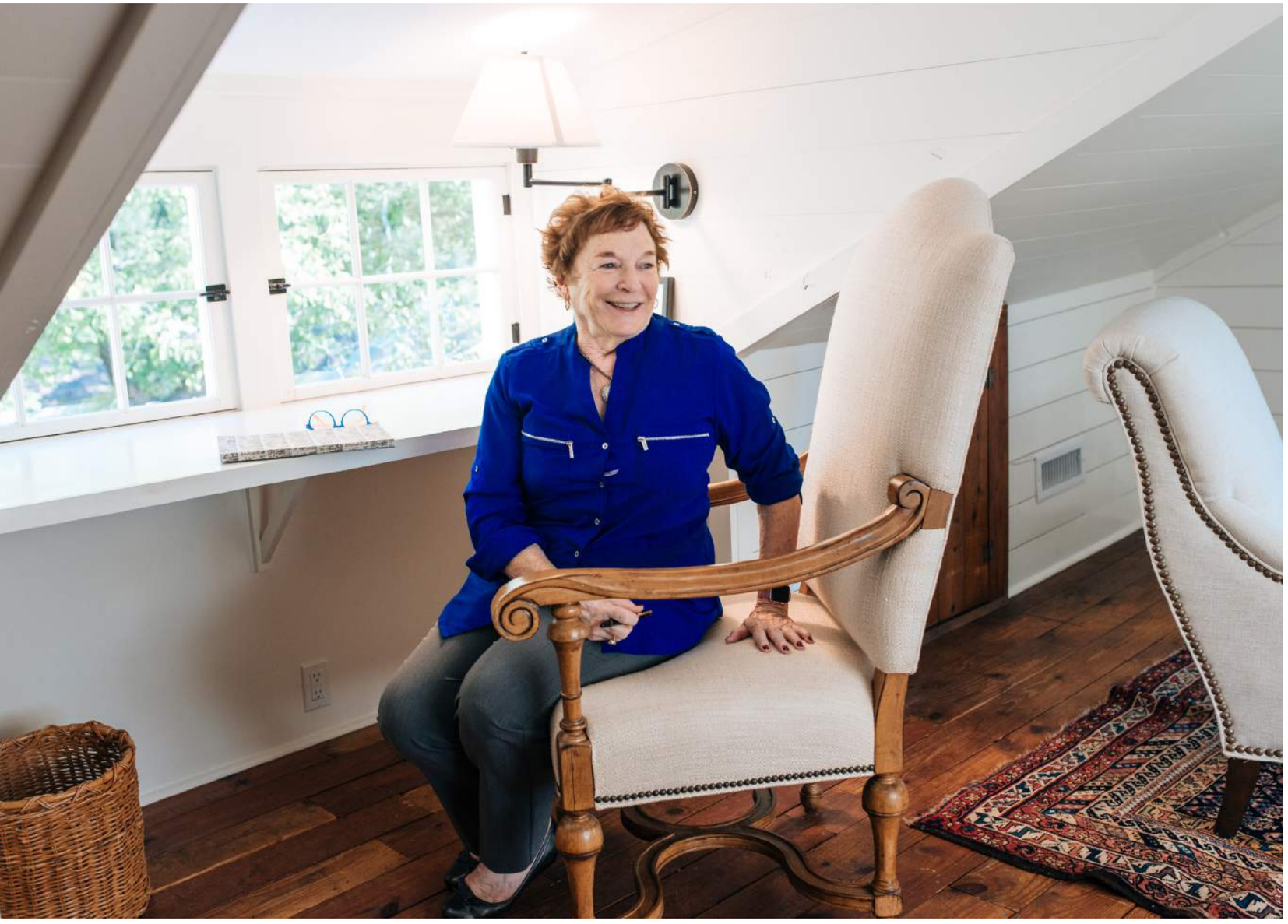
community, we laughed, cried, and cheered."

Early on, Mayes connected with her neighbors by collecting food. Foraging in Italy is seasonal, Mayes says, and part of what knits together Tuscan communities: "In August everybody is out looking for wild fennel" which is when wild blackberries are also at their peak. At other times of the year it's wild lettuces or purslane, an herb that "grows between the cracks of stones. It's great in salads and is supposed to be good for your liver."

Gardening is a big part of Italians' approach to food as well. "Everybody who has even a little plot is growing some food, particularly in the summer, [such as] tomatoes and basil. I'm in rural Tuscany, and everybody still has a garden. Part of this wonderful aspect of connection with the land is that it's very involved with the generosity I've always experienced among the Italians. When you've got your garden, you share it, and people share with you: 'I'm bringing you figs, you're bringing me melons,' that kind of thing." Sometimes Mayes finds food on her doorstep—squashes one day, bags of spinach the next—and doesn't even know who left them.

Harvests bring out the best in the community. "The biggest thing of all is the olive harvest. Anyone who can has an olive grove—or their uncle does or their cousin or their friend. Being able to take for granted the most sublime olive oil in the universe is just such a gift and part of that great heritage of connection with the land," Mayes says. "We pick mid-October. We make lunch, everybody gathers at a rickety old table; they even bring their coffee pots and put them on little burners. There's a lot of storytelling, a lot of singing and whistling—you're picking all day and you get really tired, and you've got crates and crates of great olives." The harvest from each tree after pressing produces about a liter of olive oil.

"You go to the mill and that's another big community thing," Mayes says. "People are visiting at the mill and getting their new oil. It's just such an amazing life around food; everybody talks about food. They take a very high level of quality of ingredients totally for granted. They just have no idea what they've got."



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In the U.S., where a half-century ago Wonder Bread, Velveeta cheese, and canned string beans were the norm, the trend today is toward artisanal food. Far more Americans now appreciate organic vegetables, fine chocolate, premium coffee, craft beer, whole-grain breads, and non-processed cheese. But in Tuscany, Mayes notes, eating quality food has long been a way of life for just about everyone.

"Things taste better," in Tuscany, she says. "I've never figured that out. Even getting apples from the farmer down the road (in North Carolina), compared to the apples in Italy, they just don't have the depth of flavor. I don't know why. I guess it's the Tuscan sun. We found that with so many things—it's just the flavor in the fruit particularly—you just want to cry."

With her husband Ed, Mayes is co-author of *The Tuscan Sun Cookbook*, published in 2012. She includes two recipes from the cookbook in the 20th anniversary edition of *Under the Tuscan Sun*: one for Baked Pasta with Sausage and Four Cheeses, another for Massimo and Daniela's Wine Cake.

In the cookbook, she includes a passage from *Every Day in Tuscany*, her follow-up to *Under the Tuscan Sun*, simply and poetically evoking a sense of kitchen spirituality. "The choreography of the kitchen—I peel, you scrape, wine spills, bag splits, beans simmer, sink slurps, petals fall, flours drifts, crust splits, aromas spread, lights flicker, chocolate melts, ... and dough rises in soft moons the size of my cupped hand as planet earth tilts us toward dinner." And in the cookbook she writes, "Etruscan tombs from 800 B.C. show men and women reclining around the banquet table. Their archaic faces reflect the joys of dining that are cherished in Italy—and have been forever."

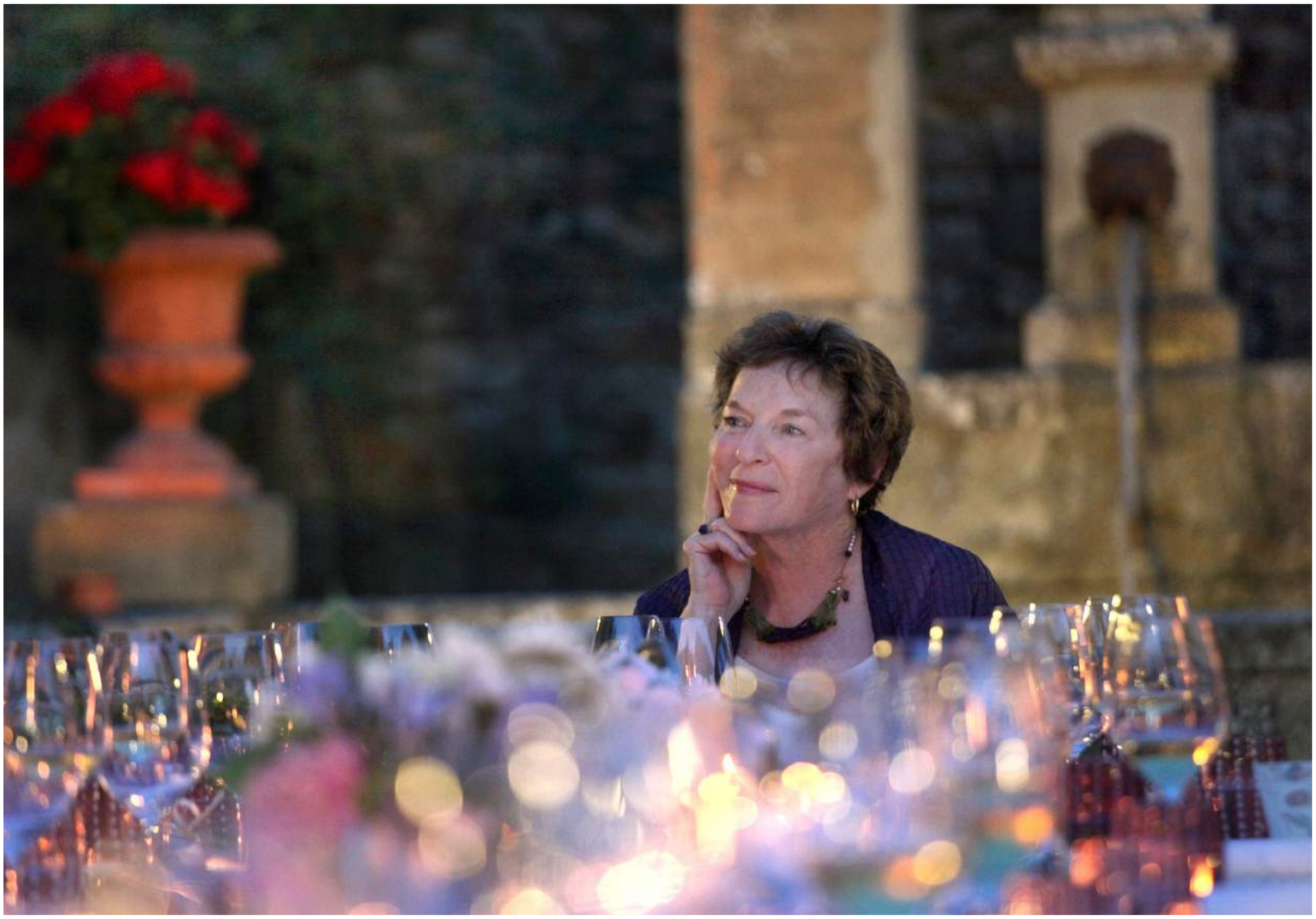
It's worth noting that *Under the Tuscan Sun* opens with a worker at Bramasole asking Mayes: "What are you growing here?" She replies, "olives and grapes" and he says: "Of course olives and grapes," as though that's the most obvious thing in the world. Then he tells her: "Grow potatoes. They'll take care of themselves." Five summers later, she writes, digging up the potatoes is "like finding Easter eggs. ... Just a rinse and they shine."

Today at Bramasole, Frances and Ed grow eggplant, parsley, "five or six different kinds of herbs, tomatoes, fennel, carrots, and radishes." And "we have tons of lemon trees—that's my favorite ingredient in the kitchen. It's such a luxury to have endless lemons all summer."

In Tuscany food isn't just enjoyed—it's honored. The *sagra* is a uniquely Italian festival, a big community meal in celebration of a particular ingredient or product in its season. In autumn there's a *sagra* for chestnuts and another for porcini

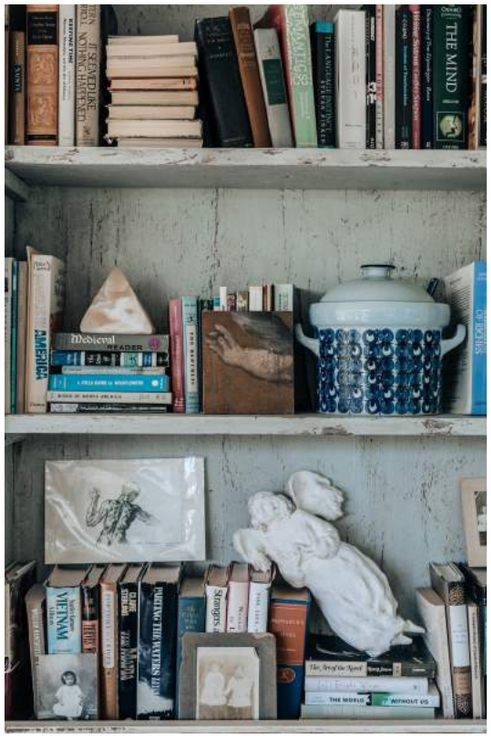
AT WORK

(Opposite page) Pizza dough made from a recipe in The Tuscan Sun Cookbook*, which Ms. Mayes co-authored with her husband Ed. (Above) Ms. Mayes' North Carolina attic study, where she often writes during the part of the year she spends in the U.S.*



LIFE, WELL LIVED

(Above) Ms. Mayes is drawn to Tuscany in part because of the close community and the "interse passion for local food." (Right) A full bookshelf in the sun room. (Opposite page) The Mayeses wrote a cookbook together; they also make wines and olive oils.

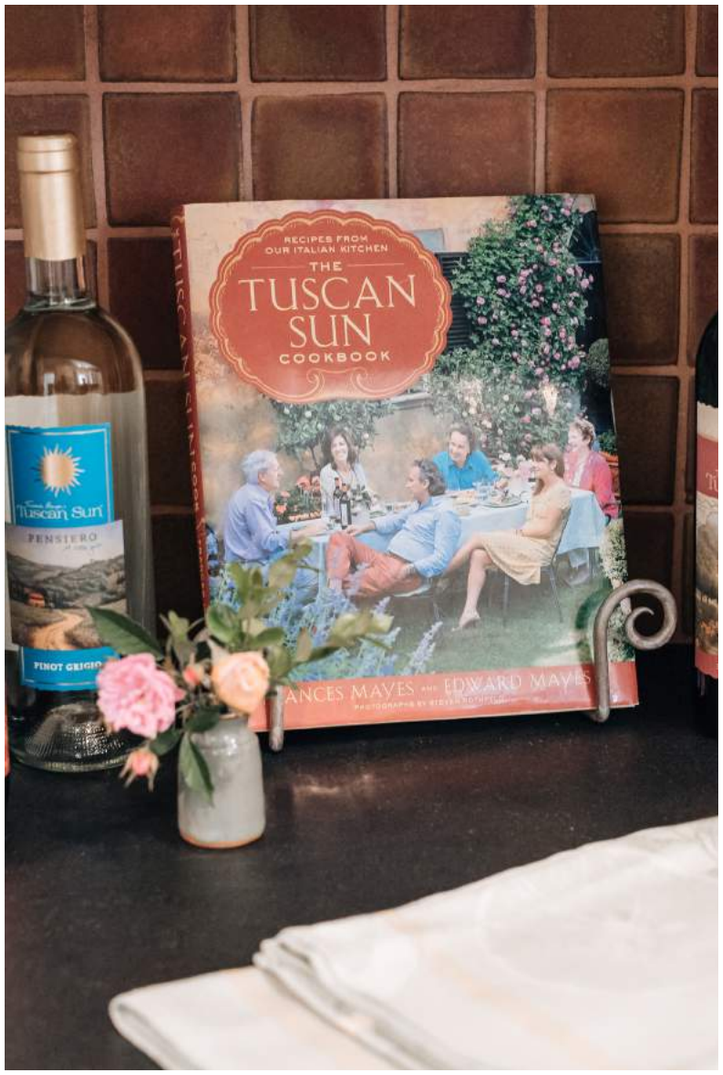


mushrooms, Mayes says, and the *sagra* for the cherry is in June. There's even a *sagra* for wild boar. "All around Tuscany if you see a sign that says *sagra*, something's about to be celebrated. You see the signs posted outside towns: the *sagra* of the tomato, the *sagra* of the snail—we have that in Cortona in the spring. People are out on the old castle wall in the middle of the night picking these snails—it's intense."

Of course not everything that Tuscans enjoy on their plates is local. At Camucia's farmers market near Cortona, shoppers find produce from throughout the country, such as artichokes. "As soon as they're in season in the south of Italy, big trucks come up in the night and sell the artichokes at the market." The medieval market has changed in one aspect since Mayes arrived in the early 1990s: "I know a lot of the Italians aren't running the stands—it's people from other countries. But other than that it's still the same market."

Farmers markets remain a locus of community where people meet and greet, Mayes says. "Old men from the country come in with their tweed suits and stand around while the women shop." The love of community has much to do "with the strong influence of the piazza in rural Tuscany," and the rest of rural Italy as well," she says. "The piazza is still that place where people gather. They're talking about recipes—they're shopping. Food is so paramount, it's just what they talk about. So when they get together in the piazza, you hear, 'well no, you don't put it in the oven; you grill it.' When you're standing in line at the meat market somebody is always going to ask you what you're going to do with what you're buying and will offer how they'd do it, which is much better."

STEVEN ROTHFELD / COURTESY FANCES MAYES (TOP), JILLIAN CLARK



When I first met Mayes in 2003, she and Ed surprised me by picking me up at the train station, about three miles from Cortona. Ed drove assertively, Italian style, while Frances pointed out historical sites: "That's where Hannibal defeated the Romans in 217," she said, pointing to a valley below. In Cortona, Frances took me to the Teatro Signorelli, a historic theater. She said she loved Audrey Wells' film adaptation of her book, even though it took liberties with her story. Walking along the narrow streets, we stopped to chat with a florist, then had a simple yet richly satisfying pasta lunch. To complete the meal, the osteria's owner brought us each a chilled glass of sea-green *alloro* (bay laurel) liqueur, a gesture emblematic of the generosity Mayes so eloquently evokes in her books. Then she gave me a tour of Bramasole, showing me a fresco they uncovered during the renovation.

Today, Mayes still sees many visitors gazing up at her home from outside its walled garden. "Sometimes I open the window in the morning in my nightgown and I think, oh God, there are 40 people down there," she says.

What's next? Mayes just completed a novel scheduled for publication in spring of 2018 called *Women and Sunlight* about three women who are slated to go into an active retirement community. Instead, they decide to take off together and lease a house in Italy. "It's about reinvention of yourself later in life," Mayes says. There's also a book about 100 secret places in Italy coming, which Mayes realizes means the places she includes will no longer be secret.

More than a quarter century after arriving in Tuscany, Mayes remains propelled by curiosity and eager to explore. When she arrives in a new place she doesn't rely solely on guidebooks. "I walk and walk and walk," she says, and she starts conversations with locals, asking where they eat or where they'd go on a special occasion. "I think it's fun to follow your nose and try and make a discovery, not just go where Mario Batali said he went. Look at the menus posted on the streets—look inside the door."

Michael Shapiro *is author of* A Sense of Place: Great Travel Writers Talk About Their Craft, Lives, and Inspiration*, which includes an interview with Frances Mayes. His Inspirato story (Summer/Fall 2016) on Vancouver's sustainable seafood movement won the 2016 Explore Canada Award of Excellence in the culinary category.*

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Simona Bresciani's picks
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Francesco Illy, better known for his Illy coffee brand, also owns **Winery Podere le Ripi**, his bio-dynamic winery is in the heart of Montalcino where he produces Brunello wine. Members visit the winery with a tasting, enjoy lunch, and afterward, a coffee tasting. Usually Francesco Illy himself leads the tour for Inspirato Members.

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