



## Case Study

# Podere La Villetta

## 1. Introduction

The Podere La Villetta agrotourism is the brainchild of a young farmer, Cristina Salvadori, who wanted to make farming her profession while opening up to the world and the community.

The farmhouse is located in the heart of the Val di Chiana, a flourishing centre of a type of agriculture mainly dedicated to cereal and fruit production, but with excellence also in livestock breeding and horticulture. The Chianina cattle breed and the Val di Chiana aglione garlic are renowned.

The farm has a strategic position, close to the medieval village of Lucignano and the highway A1, through which it is possible to reach important cities such as Arezzo (30 min), Florence (1.3 h) and Rome (2 h). The facility is a typical Tuscan farmhouse and has a total of 12 beds in 6 separate rooms named after the women of the Salvadori family, the current owners of the farm.

It was in fact the women of the family who started the agrotourism business, in particular Cristina, the current owner, who found in agrotourism the combination of the need to live in the countryside and still have a view of the world.

### NAME OF THE BUSINESS:

Farmhouse Podere  
La Villetta

### LOCATION:

Locality Villetta, 93 - 52046  
Lucignano (Arezzo) - Italy

## 2. About the agrotourism

Of Etruscan origin, Lucignano assumed strategic importance in the Middle Ages in the context of the struggles between Siena and Florence, until the Battle of Scannagallo and the subsequent Florentine supremacy over the whole of Tuscany. Each period has left important traces, but the Sienese influence is the one that has characterised the city's current artistic and architectural heritage the most.

Today, Lucignano is slowly opening up to tourism, investing more and more resources in the promotion of its territory. Recently, the town has been given an institutional portal for tourism promotion (<https://www.visitlucignano.it/index-eng.html>) and has been recognised as one of top villages of Italy, Borghi più belli d'Italia (<https://borghipiubelliditalia.it/borgo/lucignano/>).

The municipality is located in the Val di Chiana, one of the most fertile agricultural areas in central Italy. In the Chiana territory, the agricultural sector is still one of the main sources of employment thanks to fruit and cereal growing in the flatter areas and viticulture in the hilly areas. In the valley, 18 wine-related PODs, 1 PGI oil and PGI white veal rearing are recognized. Tourism in the area is mainly driven by the characteristic medieval villages of Montepulciano and Cortona, established tourist destinations with an average of over 70,000 visitors/year for Montepulciano and 44,000 for Cortona.

Lucignano stands at around 2,500 presences/year (Source: Tuscany Region), but the trend is growing strongly, and in 2022, there were a total of 3,471 sojourners, of whom 1,427 were Italians and 2,044, foreigners. Tourism in the area has a seasonal character with a concentration during the summer months, characterised mainly by the arrival of foreign visitors. The main countries of arrival are: Germany (400), the United Kingdom (224), the Netherlands (222), the United States (208) and Belgium (180).



## When did the agrotourism business start?

2005.

## Number of workers

One full-time worker. During the summer months, the whole family supports Cristina in running the accommodation.

## Some tourist data from the agrotourism

Podere La Villetta's agrotourism offer is represented by the large kitchen, designed to welcome guests in a family atmosphere, as an ideal link to the six double rooms available, different in shape and colour, which bear the first name of a person in the family.

Podere La Villetta has six independent rooms with private bathrooms, for a total of 12 beds. They share two kitchens, one indoor and one outdoor, a swimming pool and a multi-purpose room where breakfast is served. One room is accessible for disabled people, including the toilet specially dimensioned and furnished for wheelchair users.

The farmhouse is open throughout the year, but in fact the actual opening follows the periodic and seasonal tourist flows. During the autumn and winter months, tourism is mainly concentrated at weekends with a prevalence of Italian tourists.

In the summer months, particularly from mid-May to mid-September, the farm welcomes up to 1,800

people, mainly from Germany, the Netherlands, France, Sweden and the United States.

The foreign guests, generally numerous, rent all the rooms of the agriturismo, and they appreciate the privacy offered by the isolation of the house and enjoy the many open spaces available for guests. The treatment only includes breakfast, leaving guests free to use the kitchen areas for their main meals.

During the summer period, a minimum stay of 2 nights is required, while during the winter period there are no restrictions as the facility mainly receives guests at weekends.

Guests are not involved in agricultural activities. The predominantly family tourism and the impossibility of offering a catering service mean that guests often do not stay inside the facility during the day, where they return in the afternoon to enjoy the swimming pool and the available outdoor space.



Assunta room furniture detail  
(photo by Cosimo Righini)



Kitchen detail  
(photo by Cosimo Righini)



Claudia room furniture detail  
(photo by Cosimo Righini)



Structure Overview (photo by Cosimo Righini)

## About advertising

To start the business in 2005, Cristina and her family sought the advice of a local tour operator. At the same time, they created their own website (<https://www.poderelavilletta.it>) available in Italian and English. The webpage was initially promoted with marketing campaigns aimed at indexing it on the main search engines.

The entire promotional campaign was overseen by an advertising agency that also took care of the creation of promotional photos of the structure. This represented a significant initial investment, about 6,000€/year, but it has led to growth in the number of guests to the current levels.

Currently, the collaboration with a local tour operator continues, but the management of the booking calendar is shared, in fact, thanks to word of mouth, more and more new customers contact Cristina directly to book their stays.

The agrotourism also has a profile on Airbnb (<https://www.airbnb.it/rooms>) where they promote one room that is usually hard to rent due to being separate from the others. This makes it uninteresting for families, who prefer to stay together. There is also a profile of the property on Tripadvisor (<https://www.tripadvisor.it/Podere-LaVilletta>), where you can check availabilities and book directly.

The company's communication strategy was based entirely on the quality of the service offered. This movement ensured the farmhouse publicity based on the positive reviews left by previous customers, which contributed to the publicity of the establishment.

Confirmation of the quality of the service is given by the high listing on the Airbnb site, where the agrotourism has an overall score of 4.95 out of a maximum of 5 points. On the Google search engine, they score 4.4 out of 5 and on Tripadvisor they score 5 out of 5.

Cleaning and laundry services are taken care of directly by Cristina and her family to guarantee impeccable service to their guests.

## About commercialization

Similar to the promotional activity, the marketing of the services offered took place initially through a tour operator specialising in the organisation of package holidays.

The booking schedule was initially managed by the agency, which paid for accommodation and food at the end of the guests' stay.

This formula has been maintained over time, but currently many bookings are managed directly by the farmhouse.

Crucially, the company's website required the services of specialists in the sector for targeted promotion to make the facility known in an area that has only in recent decades become one of the most popular tourist destinations.



Targa Agriturismo Italia (photo by Cosimo Righini)



Terrace panorama detail  
(photo by Cosimo Righini)

## About starting up the business

The rural complex in which the agrotourism activity is carried out is located in the center of a farm, owned entirely by the Salvadori family.

The current owner's grandparents were direct farmers all their lives until they reached retirement age. Later, in July 2000, Cristina continued farming with the clear intention of starting an agritourism business on the farm. There are many reasons that drove her to this choice, first and foremost the realisation that embarking on an entrepreneurial activity in the agricultural sector would have tied her inextricably to her land both physically and emotionally, exposing her to the risk of being isolated.

Cristina accidentally saw an article in a magazine about agritourism, its potential and economic benefits, and the desire to try to do something similar on her farm was born.

His father's support was decisive, who happened to be in contact with a consultant from the CIA association and learned about the funding opportunity for young farmers under the rural development plan.

After an initial phase of self-financed work aimed at the structural consolidation of the building, carried out between 2000 and 2002, the opportunity arose to receive a grant for the construction of the facilities and the conversion of the structures from production to living quarters.

It took almost two years of work, completed in 2004, to allow the transformation of the rooms that were previously dedicated to agricultural activity, such as stables, storage rooms, tobacco dryers, and pigsties, into 6 rooms that still preserve the history of a past agricultural activity.

Cristina did not attend any educational courses in the tourism sector, but the region of Tuscany did organise a course for agritourism operators, which took place in 2003, the year in which the current regional law regulating the sector came into force.

Cristina therefore gained knowledge through direct experience in contact with the first guests who arrived at the facility from 2005 onwards.

What is also special about Cristina's farmhouse is the refinement of the furnishings. All the rooms are furnished with period furniture, and although it is not particularly valuable, it conveys all the history that accompanies beds, bedside tables, cots, trunks and wardrobes.

The entire Salvadori family has contributed to the search for the furniture, which has been found at antique markets even outside the province.

The entire business development process was assisted by CIA, which provided support both in starting and maintaining the business.

The biggest contribution, however, came from family members and relatives, who are still involved in running the farm. This, on the one hand, has been a great support for the development of the business, but also a commitment that has grown as the number of guests has increased.

This characteristic is an added value that distinguishes small family-run businesses like Cristina's, which are widespread within the Tuscan agrotourism scene. With the changes within the household, changes in the management of the farmhouse will be necessary in the coming years. Some activities, such as room cleaning and laundry, could be outsourced due to lack of space and time.

## About managing an agrotourism business

Agricultural activity is concentrated on the two prevailing crops in the area: vines and olives. Approximately three non-contiguous hectares are used as vineyards, the grapes of which are harvested and delivered to a local winery.

In the vicinity of the facility, around 300 olive trees are cultivated on a total area of one ha. The oil is processed by a local oil mill and sold directly on the farm and to local restaurants. The farm also cultivates 3 ha of arable land, mainly grassland crops.

Not all farm areas are close to the buildings used by the agrotourism.

Of the three hectares of vineyards, two are located in another area also within the municipality of Lucignano. These areas were also purchased later in order to maintain the connection between agrotourism and farming.

Regional legislation provides that, in addition to the economic parameter, whereby the agricultural turnover must be higher than the agrotourism turnover, it is also possible to consider the number of working hours that each activity requires. Each crop determines a workload that is parameterised according to the farm surface area. The sum of the hours calculated in this way is compared with the hours envisaged for agrotourism activities, estimated through special tables that vary according to the type of treatment (B&B, half board, full board) and the characteristics of the buildings.

Maintaining agricultural production activities is therefore an indispensable element of the regional regulations governing the agrotourism sector in order to consider agrotourism income as agricultural income and thus subject it to favorable tax regulations compared to other commercial accommodation facilities.

Currently, agrotourism activity accounts for 50 to 75% of household income. The percentage is subject to fluctuation during the year and depending on seasonal trends.

Running an agrotourism business implies training obligations that Cristina had to fulfil. Notions of first aid, fire risk prevention and intervention, food handling and safety for the swimming pool and home environment are required.

In addition, Cristina has attended English language courses over the years to improve communication with her guests as direct contact with visitors has increased over time.

For Cristina, it would be useful to further explore the use of communication platforms (social media) and other promotional marketing channels. However, she does not think she can increase her working days dedicated to agritourism because it would mean giving up farming activities. At the same time, she does not intend to expand her agricultural activities so she can have the time to welcome guests in order to guarantee a family-oriented address for her agrotourism.



Panoramic kitchen/breakfast room (photo by Cosimo Righini)

# Advice for new entrepreneurs

There are many difficulties within the agricultural sector, especially when it is intertwined with accommodation activities. The busiest time for maintaining the vineyard and olive grove coincides with the arrival of guests. It has not infrequently been necessary to interrupt pruning or harvesting activities in order to receive new guests or prepare breakfast for those present.

However, those who stay at the agriturismo are aware that they are on a farm that still cares for the land, and they have often been understanding and sensitive even at the cost of having to be patient or wait to have their needs met.

Passion in one's work and care for the guest are the key words that Cristina feels she would recommend to those who want to have an experience similar to the one found at Podere La Villetta.

The advice Cristina feels most strongly about is to approach agriturismo with passion and dedication. In the past few years, marked by the pandemic, there have been many moments of uncertainty that have made her question her choice to live in the country and dedicate herself to farming. 2020 was already booked up when the lock-down was declared at the end of February. Many customers cancelled, but others preferred to wait, giving confidence and hope to Cristina's business.

The Covid also changed Cristina's perspective, made him realize how crucial it is to take care of the relationship with the host, to personalize his experience by creating a mutually enriching exchange.