The Italian composer Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) was proud that he came not just from Tuscany, but from Lucca – and that all the houses he owned were entirely on Lucchese territory. This northwest corner of Tuscany, with its dramatic mountains, Art Deco beach resorts and ancient walled cities, is an affluent wine-producing area. Puccini himself would have drunk early vintages of many of the wines still bottled here today.

The most romantic opera composer of his generation, Puccini was a great lover of food and wine, with a clubhouse that he built in the reeds of the idyllic Lake Massaciuccoli. Here, in sight of the Apuan Alps, he used to cook meals for his friends and serve them the basic wines of Lucca.

To follow in Puccini’s footsteps – and gain an insight into why he loved his home region so much – base yourself in Lucca, the imposing, walled city of his birth and childhood. It has a Roman street plan, churches full of art, several boutique hotels and many charming restaurants.

The province of Lucca has long produced wine, even prior to Roman times. Records show that in AD1334, it sold nearly 17,000 barrels of rossos to its great rival, the city of Florence. The imposition of Napoleon’s sister, Elisa, as princess of Lucca in 1805 brought French influence to local viticulture, with Chardonnay, Sauvignon and Semillon, the Pinots Blanc and Gris, and dependable Merlot joining the indigenous Grechetto, Malvasia, Trebbiano, Vermentino and Colorino grapes.

These days, the province of Lucca has two DOCs, Colline Lucchesi and Montecarlo, both on higher ground to the north and east of the city, and protected from sea breezes by the Monte Pisani hills. A third DOC, Terre di Pisa, begins south of the Arno river and Pisa itself. It’s no more than 40km from the most northerly of Montecarlo’s vineyards to the southernmost in Terre di Pisa. All three could be explored in a long weekend.

Colline Lucchesi

Begin by exploring Colline Lucchesi, created in 1968 and garnering very good reviews these days. Soils based on limestone and sandstone – plus a lot of sunny south-facing vineyards – provide ideal conditions for vine-growing.

PUCCINI’S TUSCANY: a wine lover’s guide

Perhaps the greatest of the operatic composer’s many love affairs was the one he had with his home region of Tuscany – and its wine and cuisine. Follow in his footsteps for a charming long-weekend getaway among vines and history, says Adrian Mourby.
Tenuta di Valgiano (www.valgiano.it) is a 16th-century estate situated 13km northeast of Lucca. The walk up to the old mansion is around another elegant mansion (www.fattoriadifubbiano.it). On these south-facing slopes, winters are very mild and wildflowers bloom as early as January. Like most estates in this part of Tuscany, the output is mainly organic reds and whites, but Fubbiano also produces a rosé named Schiller, after the estate’s new owner.

South of both of these vineyards is Tenuta Lenzini (www.tenutalenzini.it), a jumble of old buildings in a natural amphitheatre that’s surrounded by vines and cypresses as far as the eye can see. This estate was once owned by the Arnolfini family, whose 15th-century portrait by van Eyck famously hangs in London’s National Gallery.

Montecarlo
Drive east of Colline Lucchesi and downhill ever so slightly to visit the Montecarlo DOC, created in 1969. A Montecarlo Bianco must be made from 30%-60% of the Trebbiano variety, while its Rosso counterpart must feature 50%-75% Sangiovese.

Fattoria il Poggio (www.fattoriailpoggio.net) is an old low-rise farm that has been run by the Rossi family since 1963. It’s now a tourist attraction in its own right, serving as a space for weddings as well as hosting wine tastings inside its brick-lined vaults.

Fattoria di Montechiari (www.montechiari.com) was built on the site of an old Florentine fortress destroyed by the bellissime Lucchesi at the beginning of the 14th century. Today, its 10ha of vines are surrounded by cypress trees. The owners, Moorero and Catherine Panattoni, produce five wines here, including their 100% Pinot Nero.

‘Limestone and sandstone soils provide ideal conditions for vine-growing in Colline Lucchesi’

Below: the Tenuta di Valgiano estate

GETTING THERE
Pisa International Airport (www.pisa-airport.com), also known as Galileo Galilei Airport, is the main hub for Tuscany, receiving flights from all around the world. Rhino Car Hire (www.rhinocharhire.com) offers a variety of car hire options from the airport, while Zest of Italy (www.zestoffitaly.com) puts together bespoke tours for wine and food lovers in Italy.

My perfect day in Puccini’s Tuscany

MORNING
Start your day in Lucca, walking, jogging or cycling the unbroken 4.2km of the city’s 17th-century walls. There is lots to see in Puccini’s city. Visit his birthplace (www.puccinimuseum.org), the architecturally impressive cathedral where he learned to play the organ or the restored Roman amphitheatre.

LUNCH & AFTERNOON
Drive up through the vineyards of Colline Lucchesi to Celle in the Apuan Alps to see the old family home, where the young Puccini spent his summer holidays. Along the way, call in at Tenuta di Valgiano (see p114), an estate that converted to organic farming in 1997 and produces a widely exported Rosso.

At Museo Pucciniano di Celle (www.museopucciniano.it), the house is full of Puccini artefacts donated by his favourite nieces, including the bed in which he was born. You can get lunch next door at the Puccini B&B. On the way back, call in at Villa Reale di Marlia (www.villeraledimarlia.it) and walk the beautifully restored grounds of this summer palace that Napoleon’s sister appropriated for herself.

EVENING
End your day with an early-evening tasting at the rural Tenuta Lenzini (see p116) with owner Benedetta Lenzini. Now head back into Lucca to enjoy dinner at Giglio (www.ristorantegiglio.com), a restaurant opposite the opera house where many of Puccini’s operas were performed in his lifetime.
Terre di Pisa

Terre di Pisa DOC lies on a coastal plain, south of the river Arno and Pisa itself. The city of the leaning tower has a particularly strong connection with Puccini, because it was here that the young student from Lucca first heard a Verdi opera and decided that he, too, wanted to compose for the stage. Terre di Pisa was only established as an independent DOC in 2011. It produces a lot of red wine from varieties similar to those used in the DOCs to the north: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah, plus the all-important Sangiovese. But unlike mountain-protected Montecarlo and Colline Lucchesi, the area is exposed to the winds and mists of the Mediterranean and – having been under the sea for thousands of years – has a very different soil, the result of millennia of seashells decomposing just below the surface.

Varramista (www.varramista.it) is an estate 40km east of Pisa, just 70m above sea level, that is typical of the DOC. It is owned by the Agnelli family of Fiat fame. The central villa has a gracious, high-arched entrance surrounded by boxed hedges. It was designed by the great 16th-century Florentine sculptor Bartolomeo Ammannati, who also worked on the transformation of the Medici’s Pitti Palace in Florence. The estate produces only red wines, made from predominantly Sangiovese and Syrah grapes.

Drive 20km south of Varramista through low, rolling countryside to arrive at Villa Saletta (see right). English hoteliers Guy and Julia Hands have bought up this picturesque, abandoned, hilltop Renaissance town and all its vineyards. They have since reopened three old villas within the 65ha estate for guests, and are building a new visitor centre for the vineyards. The estate grows Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Sangiovese, which also combine beautifully in the lovely Rosato wines, made from predominantly Sangiovese and Syrah grapes.

South of Villa Saletta, along 12km of winding flat roads, stands La Spinetta (www.la-spinetta.com). In 2007, this famous Piedmont company opened a satellite vineyard in Tuscany, building a new glass-faced visitor centre overlooking 65ha of vines and the hilltop town of Santo Pietro Belvedere. Formerly an award-winning BBC drama producer, Adrian Mourby has published several novels and also works as a journalist, mainly in the fields of opera and travel.

ACCOMMODATION

Grand Hotel Duomo, Pisa
Not the most beautiful hotel in Pisa, but there are superb views of the Piazza dei Miracoli from its roof terrace, and its proximity makes it perfect for a daybreak stroll around the cathedral and leaning tower. www.grand-hotel-duomo.pisa-hotels.com

Hotel Ilaria, Lucca
A modern hotel within the old city walls of Lucca, with parking and free-pour Prosecco offered at breakfast as well as cocktail hour. B&B only, but free bicycle hire. www.hoteliliara.com

Your Lucca & Pisa address book

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Restaurants

Ristorante da Mario, Pisa
This low-key but remarkably foodie-friendly restaurant is situated just northeast of Pisa’s must-visit Piazza del Duomo. www.ristorantedamario.it

Ristorante Puccini, Celle dei Puccini
North of Lucca, high up in Celle dei Puccini, where the composer’s family kept their original mountain home, there is a cozy B&B with a welcoming restaurant downstairs. www.bb-puccini-ristorante.it

Restaurants

Ristorante Puccini, Celle dei Puccini
Puccini had a long-term relationship with the young woman who ran this – now beautifully extended – lakeside restaurant opposite his home in Torre del Lago. www.rialto-del-lago.it

Gli Orti, Lucca
Just outside Lucca’s medieval city gates sits an understated restaurant run by Sergio, one of the city’s best sommeliers. Do not be put off by the lack of street-side tables - Gli Orti is for gourmet’s not tourists. www.ristorantedelorti.it

Gli Orti, Lucca
Formerly an award-winning BBC drama producer, Adrian Mourby has published several novels and also works as a journalist, mainly in the fields of opera and travel.

Villa Baldaccini, Lucca
In the foothills above Lucca, this historic villa has been converted into a luxury self-catering holiday home that sleeps 12. Extensive grounds include a swimming pool. +39 0583 40 64 65

Villa Saletta, Pisa
There are three historic villas with swimming pools on this wooded estate, which is also a working vineyard. Pisa airport is just 35km to the north. www.villasaletta.com

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