

Bella Umbria

Seventeenth century villa provides taste of Italy and hospitality business

By Kimberly Link-Wills

Evans Photos: Gary Meek
Italy Photos: Courtesy Susan Evans

Susan Evans saw beyond the crumbling stone structures inhabited by sheep and pigs, devoid of electricity and plumbing, and made it her business to share her vision of 21st century life in a 17th century Italian villa.

Evans, IE 89, grew up in Tucker, Ga., but has been living in Europe for the past decade. An apartment in Brussels served as her stopping point between business trips at the time of her first Italian holiday in 2000, when she rented a villa with a group of friends. Another vacation in Italy followed the next year. Although there were some problems with the accommodations, Evans felt relaxed. She felt at home.

"Even a bad day was a good day in Italy," she says.

Back in Belgium, she began researching the possibility of buying a home in Umbria, a region of Italy she found less developed than Tuscany and populated with olive groves stretching over the countryside and cypress trees reaching skyward.

"My mom has a cousin who has a cousin who lives in Rome," says Evans, recalling when the cousin's cousin called and said, "My friend Shirley's son Ricky can help you.' He helped foreigners buy property and helped with the restoration. I about fell out of my chair. It was perfect."

Ricky turned out to be Riccardo Caracciolo, an architect who, in another stroke of luck, speaks fluent English.



The architect found a farmhouse in Sismano that belonged to an honest-to-goodness contessa, who lived less than a kilometer away in a 400-year-old castle once owned by the Vatican.

"Many of the families that are very wealthy are land rich and cash poor. She inherited this 17th century castle. It didn't have good heat, she wanted to redo a lot of rooms and add bathrooms. She sold some of the ruined farmhouses to renovate the castle. She met my architect at a cocktail party and said she was thinking about selling some property," Evans says.

She points to a photograph of the villa today, nestled into a hillside warmed by late afternoon sunlight.

"This is the vision I saw. I must have gone there four or five times before I decided to make the offer. Because it was abandoned, you didn't need the keys or the agent to go in."

Evans wanted "rustic" — and she got it. After nearly six months to complete the sale, she was the owner of Fondo de Teglie — a dilapidated farmhouse, stable and two outbuildings. While she was signing contracts and mortgage papers, pigs, sheep, chickens and rabbits were roaming both the first floor of the main house and the annex.

She laughs when reporting her father's reaction. "He said, 'You paid how much for a house that doesn't have plumbing or electricity?'"

While the villa was being gutted in early 2004, Evans was traveling between continents. Inducted into Georgia Tech's Council of Outstanding Young Engineering Alumni in 2001, Evans directs business development in Europe and Africa for California-based Savi Networks, which markets technology to track containerized cargo from the port of origin to port of destination.

"The first day I arrived at the house after the construction began there were two giant cement trucks and all this construction equipment," Evans says. "I thought, 'Am I paying for all this?'"

While trying to grasp the actual construction process and costs involved, she also was trying to comprehend what was actually being said to her. "My architect speaks English. I wouldn't have done it otherwise," she says. "The first part of the con- >>>



struction I had no Italian. Then I took lessons. Now I'm pretty good."

Evans found herself biting her tongue when dealing with the man she hired to design her garden. She wanted concrete details. He could not express his creativity with pencil and paper.

"My architect is very much like me, very organized and methodical. My landscape designer was very artistic and non-methodical. The garden is beautiful and I love everything that he did, but it was stressful," Evans acknowledges.

Deadlines came and went as the months passed. Some deadlines were met. Others required flexibility. The first time Evans and friends stayed at the villa, there were no interior doors — or a kitchen. "It was pretty rough living," she says.

Umbria drew Evans' friends back. Lucky for her, many of her friends are skilled in trades that proved useful during the yearlong restoration.

"I had a lot of friends that I flew over on my frequent flier points," Evans says. Those friends included an interior designer, seamstress, carpenter and a photographer to snap pictures of finished rooms for a brochure and Web site, both designed by a graphic artist, who also happens to be one of her pals.

Throughout the wiring, plumbing, plastering and painting projects, Evans tried to retain as much of the 17th century house as she could. The kitchen is now big, airy and modern, but original stone and wood beams are still visible.

The annex, really more of a stable when Evans bought the property, was converted into a one-bedroom apartment with fully appointed kitchen to serve as her private quarters.

"I was able to use many of the original materials. Many of the floor tiles from the second floor in the main house were used in the apartment because they never had animals on them. Some of the floor tiles from downstairs I put on the windowsills on the outside of the house," she says.

Her attention to detail has helped Evans balance her responsibilities with Savi Networks and her job managing the rental of the villa through a company she named Il Gusto del Paese — a taste of the country (www.ilgustodelpaese.com).

Guests can dine al fresco around the original wood-burning oven,

Vision Complete

"Even a bad day was a good day in Italy" for Susan Evans, who opened her restored villa to paying guests through the business she launched, Il Gusto del Paese — a taste of the country.

lounge by the pool or wander the villa's six acres scattered with olive and cypress trees and a hedgerow of lavender. She is helped by three gardeners, two housekeepers and a cook, a local woman who was Evans' first — and only — recommendation. The cook awed Evans and her friends during an audition dinner that included fried sage and onions, mixed crostini and bruschetta, pasta made fresh on the premises and, for the meat course, tordo arrosto (roasted thrush).

During the appropriate seasons, guests can taste locally grown artichokes, pomodoros and figs and sample fried zucchini blossoms, a regional delicacy. Guests can cook for themselves if they prefer. Evans also has a local woman who will conduct cooking classes at Fondo de Teglie if desired. Wine tastings can be arranged as well.

Visitors can stay connected to home via high-speed Internet access and satellite TV. Years of travel have taught Evans that the best hostesses provide bathrobes, hair dryers and flip-flops. She can arrange car service from the airport in Rome two hours away,

provide suggested itineraries, hand out maps to Assisi an hour away and recommend restaurants in nearby Todi.

The final deadline in the construction project came with the 2004 holiday season. Evans' family was coming for Christmas. The doors in her apartment were hung with care on Christmas Eve. As the new year dawned, Evans opened Fondo de Teglie for business.

"There are four bedrooms and four baths in the house. I typically say I can accommodate eight to 10 comfortably. I do have a loft that sleeps two children and I have a sofa bed. This summer I had six adults and five kids at one time," she says, noting that the villa is only booked to one group at a time, whether it's a party of two or 10.

"I have a lady who works with me. She takes care of a lot of things for me when I'm away," Evans says. "Somebody was reading something about me and said, 'Basically you have two full-time jobs.' People are shocked that I've done this. 'You're by yourself? You're single and you set up this business?'"

"It's a business that can be run from multiple places. What I do now is marketing and selling. I have a lot of communication with guests before they even arrive," she says, explaining that while in Atlanta over the summer she had lunch with some prospective guests. "That makes a big difference — seeing the person you're renting from, knowing a little bit of the history. I try to provide more personal service. I think it assures people."

She notes that Fondo de Teglie was booked 15 weeks in 2005, 22 this year, despite the fact that she does little advertising. Time seems to stand still in Umbria, but word spreads.

Evans is enjoying the Italian hospitality business so much that she is considering managing her architect's rental apartments and is looking at another villa in need of restoration.

"It's worse than mine was — and the roof is falling down," she says, smiling, undaunted. **GT**



Before & After
 In the column at left
 are photos of what Susan
 Evans found when she bought
 her 17th century Italian villa.
 In this and the right column,
 her restored villa today.

