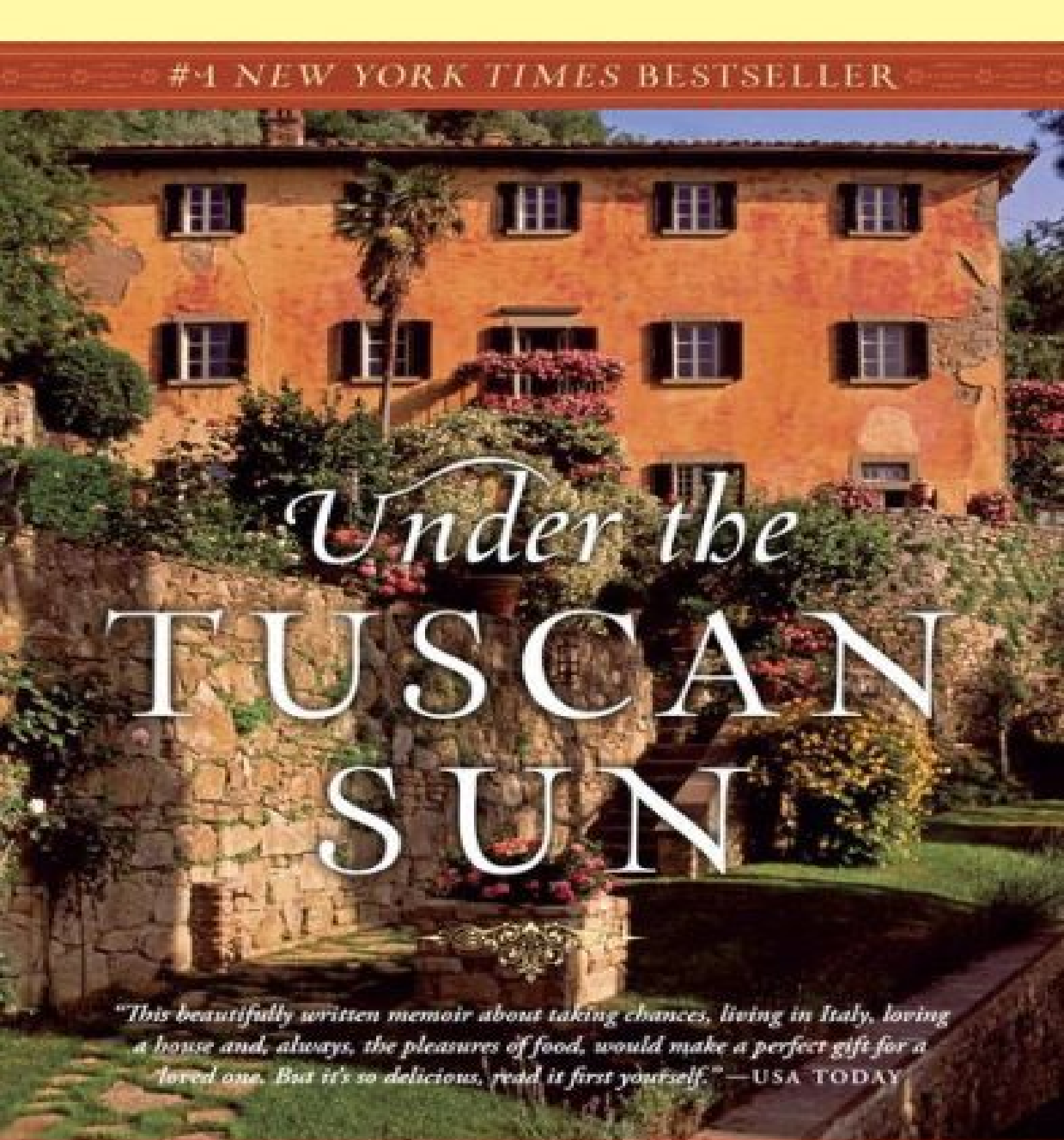


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



Under the
TUSCAN
SUN

"This beautifully written memoir about taking chances, living in Italy, loving a house and, always, the pleasures of food, would make a perfect gift for a loved one. But it's so delicious, read it first yourself." —USA TODAY

FRANCES MAYES

AUTHOR OF *UNDER MAGNOLIA*



*Under
the
Tuscan
Sun*

AT HOME IN ITALY



FRANCES MAYES

BROADWAY BOOKS

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For Ann Cornelisen

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Preface

“WHAT ARE YOU GROWING HERE?” the upholsterer lugs an armchair up the walkway to the house but his quick eyes are on the land.

“Olives and grapes,” I answer.

“Of course, olives and grapes, but what else?”

“Herbs, flowers—we're not here in the spring to plant much else.”

He puts the chair down on the damp grass and scans the carefully pruned olive trees on the terraces where we now are uncovering and restoring the former vineyard. “Grow potatoes,” he advises. “They'll take care of themselves.” He points to the third terrace. “There, full sun, the right place for potatoes, red potatoes, yellow, potatoes for *gnocchi di patate*.”

And so, at the beginning of our fifth summer here, we now dig the potatoes for our dinner. They come up so easily; it's like finding Easter eggs. I'm surprised how clean they are. Just a rinse and they shine.

The way we have potatoes is the way most everything has come about, as we've transformed this abandoned Tuscan house and land over the past four years. We watch Francesco Falco, who has spent most of his seventy-five years attending to grapes, bury the tendril of an old vine so that it shoots out new growth. We do the same. The grapes thrive. As foreigners who have landed here by grace, we'll try anything. Much of the restoration we did ourselves; an accomplishment, as my grandfather would say, out of the fullness of our ignorance.

In 1990, our first summer here, I bought an oversized blank book with Florentine paper covers and blue leather binding. On the first page I wrote ITALY. The book looked as though it should have immortal poetry in it, but I began with lists of wildflowers, lists of projects, new words, sketches of tile in Pompeii. I described rooms, trees, bird calls. I added planting advice: “Plant sunflowers when the moon crosses Libra,” although I had no clue myself as to when that might be. I wrote about the people we met and the food we cooked. The book became a chronicle of our first four years here. Today it is stuffed with menus, postcards of paintings, a drawing of a floor plan of an abbey, Italian poems, and diagrams of the garden. Because it is thick, I still have room in it for a few more summers. Now the blue book has become *Under the Tuscan Sun*, a natural outgrowth of my first pleasures here. Restoring, then improving, the house; transforming an overgrown jungle into its proper function as a farm for olives and grapes; exploring the layers and layers of Tuscany and Umbria; cooking in a foreign kitchen and discovering the many links between the food and the culture—these intense joys frame the deeper pleasure of learning to live another kind of life. To bury the grape tendril in such a way that it shoots out new growth I recognize easily as a metaphor for the way life must change from time to time if we are to go forward in our thinking.

During these early June days, we must clear the terraces of the wild grasses so that when the heat of July strikes and the land dries, we'll be protected from fire. Outside my window, three men with weed machines sound like giant bees. Domenico will be arriving tomorrow to disc the terraces, returning the chopped grasses to the soil. His tractor follows the looping turns established by oxen long ago. Cycles. Though the weed machines and the discer make shorter work, I still feel that I fall into this ancient ritual of summer. Italy is thousands of years deep and on the top layer I am standing on a small plot of land, delighted today with the wild orange lilies spotting the hillside. While I'm admiring them, an old man stops in the road and asks if I live here. He tells me he knows the land well. He pauses and looks along the stone wall, then in a quiet voice tells me his brother was shot here. Age seventeen, suspected of being a Partisan. He keeps nodding his head and I know the scene he looks at is not my rose garden, my hedge of sage and lavender. He has moved beyond me. He

blows me a kiss. “*Bella casa, signora.*” Yesterday I found a patch of blue cornflowers around an olive tree where his brother must have fallen. Where did they come from? A seed dropped by a thrush? Will they spread next year over the crest of the terrace? Old places exist on sine waves of time and space that bend in some logarithmic motion I'm beginning to ride.

I open the blue book. Writing about this place, our discoveries, wanderings, and daily life, also has been a pleasure. A Chinese poet many centuries ago noticed that to re-create something in words is like being alive twice. At the taproot, to seek change probably always is related to the desire to enlarge the psychic place one lives in. *Under the Tuscan Sun* maps such a place. My reader, I hope, is like a friend who comes to visit, learns to mound flour on the thick marble counter and work in the egg, a friend who wakes to the four calls of the cuckoo in the linden and walks down the terrace paths singing to the grapes; who picks jars of plums, drives with me to hill towns of round towers and spilling geraniums, who wants to see the olives the first day they are olives. A guest on holiday is intent on pleasure. Feel the breeze rushing around those hot marble statues? Like old peasants, we could sit by the fireplace, grilling slabs of bread and oil, pour a young Chianti. After rooms of Renaissance virgins and dusty back roads from Umbertide, I cook a pan of small eels fried with garlic and sage. Under the fig where two cats curl, we're cool. I've counted: the dove coos sixty times per minute. The Etruscan wall above the house dates from the eighth century B.C. We can talk. We have time.

Cortona, 1995

Bramare: ***(Archaic) To Yearn For***

I AM ABOUT TO BUY A HOUSE IN A FOREIGN country. A house with the beautiful name of Bramasole. It is tall, square, and apricot-colored with faded green shutters, ancient tile roof, and an iron balcony on the second level, where ladies might have sat with their fans to watch some spectacle below. But below, overgrown briars, tangles of roses, and knee-high weeds run rampant. The balcony faces southeast, looking into a deep valley, then into the Tuscan Apennines. When it rains or when the light changes, the facade of the house turns gold, sienna, ocher; a previous scarlet paint job seeps through in rosy spots like a box of crayons left to melt in the sun. In places where the stucco has fallen away, rugged stone shows what the exterior once was. The house rises above a *strada bianca*, a road white with pebbles, on a terraced slab of hillside covered with fruit and olive trees. Bramasole: from *bramare*, to yearn for, and *sole*, sun: something that yearns for the sun, and yes, I do.

The family wisdom runs strongly against this decision. My mother has said “Ridiculous,” with her certain and forceful stress on the second syllable, “RiDICulous,” and my sisters, although excited, fear I am eighteen, about to run off with a sailor in the family car. I quietly have my own doubts. The upright seats in the *notaio's* outer office don't help. Through my thin white linen dress, spiky horsehairs pierce me ever time I shift, which is often in the hundred-degree waiting room. I look over to see what Ed is writing on the back of a receipt: Parmesan, salami, coffee, bread.