

THE Conca d'Oro — the Golden Basin — sounds like something hidden and precious. It is. This is a part of Tuscany, deep in the Chianti region, that not even Tuscany insiders know about. It's a place you might stumble across, if you were lost.

I should know. Although it's only a 60-mile drive from Pisa, I got lost and did not have a satnav, so it was well after midnight before I finally collapsed in my bed in the Villa Barone.

The Villa Barone is just outside the village of Panzano; and Panzano is where you head to discover the Conca d'Oro.

After breakfast, we strolled into the village. Below, the gentle hills and valleys of the Conca dozed away the summer.

The bakery and cafe were doing steady business. Panzano has a population of 979, not many of whom were in evidence.

A couple of older citizens sat on

a bench and discussed life. There was not much traffic other than the occasional farmer's van or another visibly lost hire car.

But in the distance there was a sound that was distinctly at odds with these tranquil, timeless surroundings.

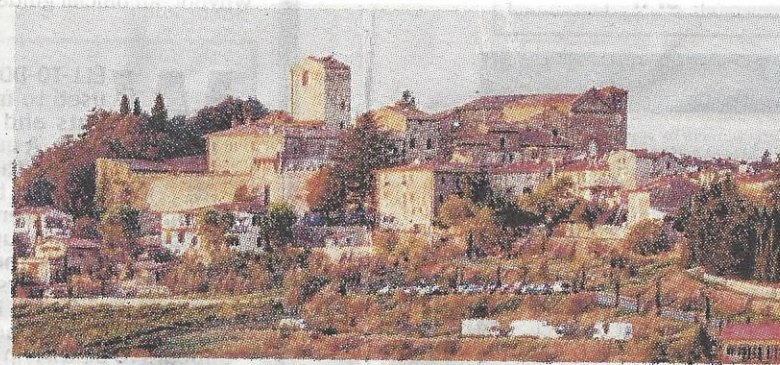
We walked towards the cacophony. Here, in the land of cantatas and madrigals, someone was playing Aussie rockers AC/DC at full blast — in a butcher's shop.

People, some of them with wine glasses in hand, were spilling onto the pavement. Inside, the place was packed with a crowd laughing and drinking.

It was not like any other butcher's shop I'd ever known.

But then it belongs to Dario Cecchini: possibly the world's only celebrity butcher.

Dario looks a bit like Jack Nicholson's jovial Italian cousin. He has demonic eyebrows, a large, hooked nose and burly frame. All the international superstar chefs



Magnet: Panzano attracts foodies, such as Jamie Oliver, right

know him: Alice Waters, Wolfgang Puck, Jamie Oliver. His shop is a place of pilgrimage for those who care about meat.

It is also a restaurant. At lunch, under the vines and on long tables, we ate course after course of his succulent beef.

There were glasses of majestic Fontodi reds. And the best guide

to the Conca d'Oro is the man who makes that wine: Giovanni Manetti. If Dario is a Tuscan Jack Nicholson, Giovanni is an Italian Cary Grant: tanned, beautifully dressed, dryly humorous.

After lunch, he drove us around his 80-hectare estate.

So what is the Conca? Sculpted into the hills 2,000ft high, it's a



fertile valley once famous for its golden corn — hence the name.

Today, the corn has gone and the Conca is a kind of heaven for wine-growers and cheese-makers, as

well as butchers, English chefs and AC/DC fans.

The south-facing slopes are perfect for Giovanni's wonderful organic wines.

His vines are interspersed with barley to feed his Chianina cows. Their manure nourishes the vines, and their milk makes the cheese and their meat ends up in Dario's big hands.

Later that evening, Dario was cranking up the volume and sharpening the knives.

The coals in his inferno were white hot and Highway To Hell blasted out of the speakers.

Here in foodie heaven it was going to be a long and hellishly good night.

MARK JONES

TRAVEL FACTS

BRITISH Airways (0844 493 0787 ba.com) flies to Pisa from Gatwick from £86 return. Double rooms at Villa Barone (villalebarone.com) cost from €195 a night.