

Travel

The gardener from Gubbio

- Robin Trinca
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Illustration by Paul Newman. *Source:* The Australian

- **DESTINATION EUROPE**

FABIO arrives dressed in the finest of khaki cord pants and a bottle-green, long-sleeved shirt. Can he really be a gardener?

On his feet are what appear to be flat-heeled, calf-high, brown leather boots, owing nothing to our garden-variety gumboots. But yes, this is Fabio the gardener from Gubbio. He looks fabulous, as if he has stepped out of a magazine featuring attire for the classic country squire.

If the sun comes out, Fabio takes off his long-sleeved shirt to reveal a stylish charcoal T-shirt. He mows lawns and whipper-snips shrubs and verges. The grass here is seemingly never-ending, stretching from the house on the ridge and tumbling down the slopes on all sides. Fabio has long conversations with the woman of the house, Anna, about the equipment, la benzina, where he should mow, snip, not mow, not snip, and in what order the work should be done.

Their exchanges are robust, with Fabio giving his opinion politely but forcefully. He shakes his head, smiles and mutters "Ah, Anna, Anna . . ." when she disagrees. She is dead serious; he is open, friendly, relaxed. He seems the opposite of the insular character that she has told me is natural to the locals in this part of Italy.

I have finished weeding the rose and iris beds and am tackling a steep, curved embankment overgrown with grasses and weeds. Their roots cling to the grey-brown Umbrian clay. I fight my way through the dense shrubs and clamber over old lavender and rosemary bushes to get at them. As I brush against the plants they release their perfumes, along with those of salvia and fennel.

The hum of Fabio's mower reaches me from nearby, along with an occasional mild oath when the machine gives him grief. I pause and look out over the valley, the forest, the farmhouse in the distance. The setting is straight out of a Merchant-Ivory period film. I am volunteering on an organic farm, or agriturismo, in the Umbrian mountains, 6km of dirt track from the nearest bus stop. The winter won't go away and it seems that rain is constantly present, but the countryside is as green as green can be and it feels good to be here.

About 2pm Anna puts her head out of the upper-storey window and calls us to lunch. We eat pasta or risotto, with beans, a frittata or vegetables. There is hard, dry bread, salad, cheese, bottled water and, later, coffee. At coffee on the first day Fabio says to me, "Fumo? Posso?" He immediately lights up. Anna takes out her tobacco packet and rolls her own. How long has it been, I think, since I've seen people smoke inside?

At lunch I ask them about the animals in the region. They tell me of cervi (deer), cinghiale (wild boar) and porcupine that launch their spines and can pierce the tyre of a four-wheel-drive. They ask me about wombats and emus. They smile at my story about the emus that used to steal the sausages off our plates at bush barbecues back home.

One day Fabio arrives in a tiny truck with a rotary hoe. He rips the earth of the orto (vegetable garden) until the dirt is fine and friable, and spreads sacks of pellet manure. Then he moves on to the ground around the swimming pool. As he crosses the back lawn above where I am raking hay on the slope, he salutes me. A little later he comes and politely asks if I will help him.

Beside the pool he has ripped the earth where the grass has failed. He has spread manure, distributed lawn seed, and is now demonstrating how I am to assist. We each have a shovel and we must use the back of it to slap down every inch of this hard Umbrian clay. Slap it flat to bring the seed and the dirt into close contact. Fabio demonstrates. "*Ma forte!*" he says in response to my first attempt. I try to lift my game.

I complain about the clay in this part of the world. He replies a little testily that it's not the same as mine at home; we must try anyway. Miffed, I say that in fact it is exactly like the clay in my part of the world, except mine is red, not grey. He tells me companionably of an Umbrian saying, "*Quando il grillo canta, la formica mangia.*" It means, "When the cricket sings, the ant is eating." If we don't slap all this clay flat, he continues, the ants will devour all the seed in a few days. Obviously, my increased efforts are impressive, because he takes a rest.

We continue thus in the fierce sun, slapping the clay, sweating, resting, chatting. After 30 minutes we are finished and Fabio carefully articulates the only English words I ever hear him utter: "Thank you." He adds that it would have taken an hour alone.

At lunch he tells Anna that Robbi, as he calls me, has been helping him with his work. "Yes," I say, "I have a new job now." He finds this hilarious. I slip into a reverie, thinking about what he has accomplished in a morning: a large vegetable garden overgrown with weeds is now ready for planting, and he has prepared, planted and watered a substantial piece of new lawn. All this for the E50 (\$70) a day he charges. I am worrying about how he lives, supports his children and wife.

The conversation has moved on: Fabio is warning Anna that if she intends to seed the orto she will have to wait until the old moon. But she can plant seedlings immediately. They discuss how to plant. The consensus is to put the seedlings at the bottom of a deep channel, cover their roots, adding the dirt as the plants grow.

"There's a calendar, very famous," Fabio adds, "if you want to know about companion plants. My mother does all that; she's gone on the pension now and it gives her something to do. I

prepare everything and she looks after it after that." Thank goodness there's a mother, I think, with a good Italian pension, probably close to Fabio's wage.

I remember what my father used to give as the knockout reason for attending to one's studies: "so you don't have to have a job out in the sun on the end of a shovel," he'd say. "So you can get a job inside in comfort." The quality of that advice has not dimmed in the half-century since he first offered it. The meek do not inherit the earth, as my father well knew. They get to rip it, hoe it, then slap it down with the back of a shovel.

The morning I am leaving, I seek out Fabio to say goodbye. He turns off the mower, rubs the sweat from his face on to his beautiful shirt and kisses me on both cheeks. He apologises for the lack of conversation. "But with outside work, that's the way it is."

"Ah, but at lunch we talked," I reply. "*Tante belle cose, tante cose,*" he says, wishing me lots of good things. "You too, Fabio, I say, "*Tante cose. Tante belle cose.*"