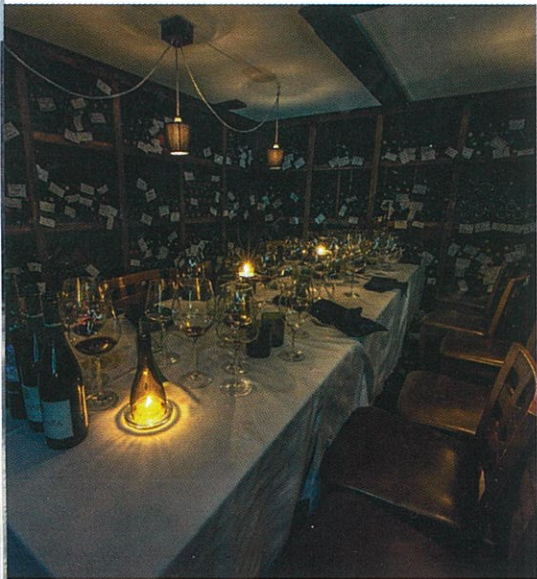


ITALY



Clockwise from top left: Hearty mountain fare works a treat for hikers; flavoursome speck is made by Paoli Wieser; the cheese room at Ciasa Salares; the chocolate room at La Siriola; the 24,000-bottle wine cellar at Ciasa Salares. Photos Lorenzo Piermattei, Giovanni De Sandre

the second leg of our hike, we catch up with some familiar faces: a couple of mountain bikers who passed us earlier. More precisely, we catch up with one of the pair. He is way ahead of us; she is lagging behind, clearly fatigued. As we watch, she loses focus for a moment and falls off her bike.

Fortunately, the woman lands in a convenient patch of springy bush, nothing injured apart from her pride. It takes her partner a while to realise something is wrong. The last we see of him he is unconcernedly doing loops on his bike, waiting for her to catch up. We predict that a blazing row is in the works.

Our day ends much more convivially. After our full-day hike – we have clocked up more than 20 kilometres, Agustina tells us – we retire to our hotel for a session in the spa followed by a feast in a wine cellar.

Our hosts at Ciasa Salares, a five-star hotel run by the Wieser family, have noted our interest in the local food and wine, and organised a tasting in their sprawling cellar.

The Wiesers are justly proud of their wine collection, which consists of no fewer than 24,000 bottles across more than 1800 labels.

Leading us through the tasting is Jan-Clemens Wieser, a baby-faced 20-something who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of wine. He explains that Ciasa Salares focuses on organic and biodynamic wines from small producers. More than half of its collection is Italian, with a huge array drawn from the area. The local producers prove to be an adventurous bunch: among the wines we sample are albarinos, pinot noirs and Muller-Thurgaus.

Jan-Clemens doesn't want us drinking on an empty stomach, so he has arranged an array of local specialties including fondues, cheeses and salume to graze on. The cold cuts are particularly impressive; the flavoursome speck was made by Jan-Clemens' grandfather, smoked over arola pine and birch wood.

The gourmet delights don't stop there. Jan-Clemens' father, Stefan, presides over the hotel's two-Michelin-starred restaurant, La Siriola, where we experience a superb tasting menu, a cavalcade of delicately-constructed dishes that includes venison done in yuzu and black garlic paired with smoked eel, and red prawns with white asparagus, lime, and rice crisps.

One of the highlights of the meal is a visit to the restaurant's chocolate room, an aromatic haven where guests can take their pick from about 70 different chocolates. There are pralines, blocks of chocolate and unusual pairing combinations including chocolate with pecorino cheese. Choosing what to put on your plate is not an easy decision, but you are welcome to take your time.

Tempting as it is, don't overdo things at dinner; you'll want to be ready for more action in the morning. Jan-Clemens has recommended the preserves made by his grandmother, especially the blueberry. I agree the blueberry is particularly good but then, so are the others.

However, as I graze my way through the bread basket each morning, I discover that many of the area's traditional breads are best enjoyed either with butter or with savoury topping. My go-to choices are the laugenbrot, made with pretzel dough, and the paarlbrot. This local flatbread has a fabulous crunch and a hint of fennel and cumin that makes it ridiculously moreish. If I needed just one more reason to start planning my return trip, I have found it. **T**

## TRIP NOTES

### HIKE

The Classic Safari Company offers tailored walking and hiking itineraries in the Dolomites in summer, as well as ski safaris in winter. Phone 1300 130 218 or see [classicsafaricompany.com.au](http://classicsafaricompany.com.au)

### STAY

The five-star Ciasa Salares teams the warmth of a family-run establishment with a range of culinary temptations, including a two-Michelin-star restaurant and a 24,000-bottle wine cellar. Rates start from €272 a night, including breakfast. See [ciasasalares.it](http://ciasasalares.it)

### MORE

[traveller.com.au/italy](http://traveller.com.au/italy)

*Ute Junker travelled with assistance from Ciasa Salares, the Classic Safari Company and Rail Europe ([raileurope.com.au](http://raileurope.com.au))*