Borgo Egnazia shines in Puglia

25 Jun 2011 by Jancis Robinson

On Saturday I wrote in Getting to grips with Puglia about the Radici del Sud wine competition that was held over three days and four nights at the beginning of this month. I feel I ought to mention a little bit more about the extraordinary place where this took place, Borgo Egnazia on Puglia's Adriatic coast roughly halfway between, and a 45-minute drive from, the airports of Bari and Brindisi.

This sprawling complex of hotel, restaurants, spa, pools, golf course, tennis and 'Moorish village' (pictured above left by them and right and below by me) was built remarkably recently (it opened only this year) from the brilliant local white limestone by the Melpignano family, who already owned the nearby Masseria San Domenico and Masseria Cimino as well as the upmarket bed and breakfast San Domenico in London SW3. Although it springs rather alarmingly out of the flat scrub a few hundred yards inland, their latest venture Borgo Egnazia is all extremely easy on the eye - and even in early June seemed pretty busy with both Italians and foreigners.

As I hinted in A foretaste of Puglia, the food is really remarkably good (an important factor in my view), thanks to Mario Musoni, the reassuringly senior chef recruited from Michelin two-star Al Pino restaurant in Pavia, with buffet lunches in the airy arcade between the hotel and the pool a real high point. He is billed as running a cooking school as well as ensuring that guests are well fed.

But the real distinguishing mark of this place for me is the interior décor. It's so easy to decorate a five-star luxury hotel so that it looks like all the others (think Park Avenue baroque), but Borgo Egnazia's look really is unique, so stylish, yet uses the simplest and cheapest of objects to create maximum effect. All is very white but the visual details include strategically placed balls of string, piles of old newspapers, white dining chairs hung upside down, bunches of herbs, cages, artfully placed collections of empty bottles - so simple, yet so effective. Forgive my terrible Blackberry attempts at photography (I'm sure you can tell them from the pictures lifted from the official website) but I am in awe of the man responsible, local designer Pino Brescia, whom the Melpignanos first encountered at the age of 18 when he helped them decorate a family birthday party.

I should point out however that there were notable glitches - possibly due to the fact that the 'village' complex of rooms opened so recently. Technoking Ryan Opaz of Catavino was put in a room which not only had no internet connection, it had no air conditioning and a lighting system that was impossible to turn off. He was mightily pleased to be switched to a (larger) room in the hotel itself.

You may not be surprised to learn that Borgo Egnazia (with which, needless to say, I have absolutely no relationship) is not cheap. Published rates are from around €350 per double room per night at this time of year. But it looked very child-friendly (there is supposed to be a 'kid's club run by English and UK-trained nannies') and yet quite glamorous.

Nearby sights include the towns of Alberobello, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the 'white city' of Ostuni.

www.borgoegnazia.com