

## May 2010

So much of may in the sweep of the hedges. After the piazzas of Florence where, thanks to volcanic dust, I was stranded for five days, England seems green and calm and mellow. Collared doves are courting in the apple trees, tulips glitter. This is primavera of a different order. It's good to be home.

Just over a fortnight away and yet so much change. To one side lie the fields of swollen grass, to the other, where Jonathan's working Leeks Land, plumes of ochre dissipate the view of Kirton Church. Sahara. Smoke screens of dust. The land is being rolled to lock in moisture.

Adrian and the team have been busy: the potatoes are planted, the beetroot's drilled, the spring cereals lie over the land. For three weeks now Mark's planted cauliflowers and broccoli in the parchment-dry field at Woodlands. I hope the rain soon comes. You look into the sky searching for clouds. What you find is azure blue. There are no clouds. The sky is the sea. In my mind I'm in Italy again. Not far from Florence.

Where I'd taken the train to Arezzo, and then a taxi, to reach **Fattoria La Violla**, the 1000 acre biodynamic farm which exports wines and olives and cheeses to England, Germany and the Netherlands. I'd negotiated the short avenue of juniper trees along the steep hillside drive and was greeted at the gate by Ingrid. She was dressed in white. Like an angel. 'Wanna take a look?' she enquired in an interesting Italian-Belgian dialect (I indicated I would) 'Then follow right on' she said and thwacked her right buttock.

Off we went. I was shown the manufacture of biscotti and pasta, the olive bottling plant, the jarring of the pasta sauces and the vast wine cellar containing shiny stainless steel vats each of which has a capacity of 10,000 litres. It was impressive, and the buildings were beautifully designed, on a human scale. The angelic Ingrid evidently agreed. Having expressed my admiration she thwacked her buttock again.

Out into the garden for lunch. Checked table cloths under the trees, under arbours of wildering wisteria, among golden hayricks. I noticed a couple of geese circling in a pond, eggs not too far away. My reverie was interrupted:

'Now you'll have soup, wine, salami and salad' announced Ingrid (This all seemed admirable, not that I had any choice). 'Enjoy the view!'

And away she went to the kitchen like a bee after pollen. I heard the sound of a distant thwack behind the green baize door.

It was very lovely – olive groves so near, the five hundred sheep. The dip of the hills into the wide Tuscan valley. It was ecological: all the electricity used in the kitchens and on the farm is generated on-site. Earlier I'd seen rows of photovoltaic cells laid out like fruit trees in a field further down. Not far from the beehives.

Then home where a school visit was in full flow. Stella and Rosie were showing round a band of pupils from the Priory School, Spalding. The pigs, the turkeys (we have the first of the eggs in the incubator now), the chickens, the sheep. There were gasps of delight as our only bottle fed lamb rushed towards the children in search of milk. (Bruce feeds her regularly so she's always on the look-out). Then down to the cattle to see the calves including our new wonder-bull bull who's just a few days old.

And so permit me the compliment of introducing to you....

**Novalis**

## *Market Garden News*

The garden is transformed. It really looks a picture. Come and see if you're passing this way!

This past fortnight Simon's drilled sugar snap peas, French beans, golden and purple beetroot, chard, spinach, shallots, broad beans, radish, turnips, potatoes, borage, nasturtium. Among the transplants there's lettuce, salad leaves, kohlrabi, horseradish, celery. A tremendous list which conveys the promise of a well-stocked larder.

We've good supplies of rhubarb, chives, radish, spring onions, lettuce and brassicas (including sprouting broccoli at last). The first tenuous asparagus shoots have appeared (still too young to pick) and the carrots are through. It's worth bearing in mind that because of the cold spring, crops will be available later than usual this time.

### **Biodynamic pilot project update**

Biodynamic and organic farms are inspected at least once a year to ensure standards are being followed. In our case, given the complexity and diversity of Woodlands, this can take up to two days. Field and veterinary records are checked, sales and purchase ledgers are audited, animals and crops are inspected. We have our biodynamic inspection on 11<sup>th</sup> May. We'll soon need to start preparing....

Visit [www.la-violla.com](http://www.la-violla.com) for more info on the Italian biodynamic farm.

For the life and work of Novalis  
[www.wikipedia.org/wiki/novalis](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/novalis)

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**Warm wishes, Andrew Dennis**

[www.woodlandsfarm.co.uk](http://www.woodlandsfarm.co.uk)