

# Foreword



# Leaves from My Album

This is the story of my garden at Prima Porta. It is not particularly glamorous to the eye but it surrounds a gracious property that my beautiful wife, Eleonora, and I call home. We are hôteliers, entrepreneurs, but also dreamers. And we see a world where gardens are paramount, and people, their willing acolytes.

Through our estate, I will tell you the story of feudal Italy and of how wealth once was tied to an agrarian base. It's a story of ancient Rome, but also of archaic Etruria, north of Rome. It's my family's story, because we have lived here, on what was once a vast property, and have always seen ourselves as temporary custodians of one of Rome's most legendary landscapes. Finally, it's my own story and I am a *raconteur*.

In my own backyard, if you drive along an avenue of pine trees, the mythic plants of Rome, you arrive to our house and our park, which contains many ancient botanical species. They have always been here.

In the garden, there is a very large and bumpy egg, which was supposed to look a bit more like an egg but then developed a point to it, because the worker-artisans couldn't finish it properly. I solved this problem by calling it the *Egg With No Point*. I have a fondness for things paradoxical and metaphoric, like Dada. I have placed some other objects around the garden mostly out of a spirit of provocation, and

my wife, Eleonora, lovingly tolerates me. Visitors to our property (we run a small hotel) are puzzled by the sight of a mysterious manhole, that looks like a Neolithic shrine, and by a mandala shape, marked Avalon – Xanadu, hanging between two cypresses. The real marvel of my garden is its ‘itness.’ These are grounds that saw millennia of history, some of which so powerful as to become myth. To pay tribute to the area’s most important denizen – Livia Drusilla, wife of Augustus – I inventoried and replanted the 24 species that are depicted in the famous fresco of her earthly paradise, which were once located on the vast property that belonged, in a similarly extensive way, to my own ancestors.

Let me go back and tell you my family’s story, so we can better understand the historic density of these places and why the plants are so important in their context. In the mid-nineteenth century, my ancestors, Marchesi Silj di Sant’Andrea di Ussita purchased the one-time estate of Livia, from local landowners. A medieval tower and a castle, subsequently renamed ‘Silj,’ are near the remains of the imperial villa, which became a national heritage site in 1951, when the lands were expropriated by the Italian State.

Castle Silj is built in Gothic Revival style; nearby, is the fifteenth century Tower of Orlando, depicted in a well-known drawing documenting the finding of the so-called ‘Prima Porta Augustus.’ But my parents went to live up the road, in another part of the estate: an eighth century Saracen tower. Here, at Pietra Pertusa, are Etruscan tunnels, a palaeo-Christian church, a huge nymphaeum, burial chambers of Byzantine–Gothic wars and the triumphal arch of Constantine, where emperor Constantine camped his army, in 312 AD, on the eve of the battle that decided Christianity.

After the passing of my parents, I abandoned these dense, rather gloomy, landscapes and made my residence on higher, brighter, grounds, a farm situated on a special part of Livia’s estate. Here, too, were Etruscans remains. Indeed the entire area north of Rome was the land of the Etruscans, who founded Rome and were eventually overcome by the Latin Romans. But, as so often happens, the culture of the vanquished imbued that of the victors and there is a sense of magic which pervades all Roman things with Etruscan foundations. Originally of Anatolian origin, the Etruscans were deeply bound to earth, sea and sky: navigators, traders, engineers, craftsmen, and possibly the last shamans on Western soil.

The property I now inhabit has been documented as the site of an Etruscan oracle. Indeed its Ancient name is Lemniscati and originates from the Greek island of Lemnos, where the Etruscans made a pact with the gods. And in an extraordinary moment that has become lore the whole world over, Livia came to this oracle, to enquire about the meaning of the prodigy of *Ad Gallinas Albas* (white hens), which gave its name to the entire district and is the founding

legend of Rome's first imperial dynasty – the Julio-Claudian clan – that ruled the empire for a decisive and extraordinary period.

Legend has it that Livia was sitting in her garden, one day, when an eagle flew over from Africa and dropped a snowy white hen on her lap. The hen was quite unscathed and carried a laurel twig in its beak. People paid a lot of attention to signs in those days and Livia rushed over to the oracle at Lemniscati.

What the oracle said was that Livia should put the white hen into production and from the first egg would come the name of the next ruler in Rome, after Augustus. At first she was flummoxed about the meaning – hence the Dadaist “Egg with no Point.” But we also adopted Livia's *white hens* again, also because we can't do without the fresh eggs.

Additionally, the oracle instructed Livia to plant the laurel in her garden and the resulting laurel grove – which you can see today in the archaeological site of Villa di Livia and at Lemniscati – produced the laurel crowns for the emperors and, in particular, for the great poets of the time – Virgil, Horace etc; this produced the terms *poet laureate*, *Nobel laureate*, *laurea*, *baccalaureat*, etc.

Livia was a consummate hostess, gardener, villa, farm and city palace manager, not to mention latent governor, for her hand stayed the tiller behind both Augustus, her husband, and Tiberius, her son. Her circle of literati and poets, which gathered in the famous underground dining room of the villa at Prima Porta, was called *Cenaculum*. My ancestors revived this custom in 1949. This informal club, led by my uncle Pio Silj and the artist Paulo Ghiglia – which included the likes of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Arturo Toscanini – was dedicated to the revival of life and culture, after the horrors of war: music, art, theatre, cinema and, of course, good food and good conversation: light but grave, real but surreal, fuelled by recent movements of modern art, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism.... Then in 2017 some old Roman friends called me up to tell them some stories, in the evenings, and the *Cenacolo* continued its existence. After more than 2000 years, we are still captive of this poetic land.

But, above all, it was to nature that we turned, drawn by the natural area of Prima Porta and its mythological gravity. Take the aspect of transformation, such a feature of the garden: the Legend of the White Hen, *Ad Gallinas Albas*, emerges unquestionably as an initiation allegory into nature's mysteries. The same can be said of Ovid's *Apollo and Daphne*, in the *Metamorphoses*. Through these, you can see the following dynamics surfacing:

Augustus elects Apollo as his solar deity but Apollo goes chasing after Daphne (Dafni, Δάφνις in Greek, meaning laurel) into the wild side. Daphne, voted to chastity, cries out for help and is transformed into a laurel plant, which is

subsequently visited upon Livia, by an eagle, and a hen. Then Livia is visited upon Augustus, but with life renewed. Augustus got something different than he bargained for. For sure the rapture-*greening* of Livia is Augustus's conundrum. Emperors don't usually make very good *Green Men*, because of their craving for the limelight of Apollo who, like many old gods, is seduced by the Graces, for which he is capable of crossing to the other side. Following research from the scientific team, under the direction of Cornelia Lauf – which I have helped to sponsor with co-founding sponsor Suzanne Deal Booth – I see a clear correspondence between the use of plants in the garden of Livia and the longest peace ever recorded in human history. Following the research of Giulia Caneva, and Salvatore Settis, with an eye to the plants depicted in the triclinium frescos and Augustus' altar of peace (Ara Pacis), one can extrapolate that a deep knowledge of botany in many ways underscored or even affected, the Pax Romana.

As a *dilettante* (not by chance were my English ancestors founders of the Dilettanti Society) I find it easier to relate to plants via their mythology and lore, than through a whole lot of botanical and scientific data. Plant lore, after all, stands on the high road of man's primal impulses about his habitat: the stars, the elements, the flora and the fauna. Mythology is the ancient psychology.

The 1990s saw this new sensibility, spearheaded by botanist, Stefano Mancuso. Intelligence, wrote Mancuso, used to be considered "what distinguishes man from other living beings." But if intelligence is the ability to solve problems, plants have it better.

Villa Anson Silj today is deeply committed to studying nature and telling its stories. We organize workshops with artists, who have been able to study the newly identified plants in Livia's famous frescos cycle, now housed at Palazzo Massimo, in central Rome. These artists reinterpret the plants in the Gardens of Livia from the proto-Etruscans to ourselves. We are looking for intelligence, consciousness, soul and that deep healing, *greening*, power, safeguarded in the membranes of every living plant.

**Bernard Anson SILJ**

## Here is a list of Livia's plants in our gardens:



*Acanthus mollis*  
*Anthemis* cfr. *cotula* (dog-fennel)  
*Arbutus unedo* (strawberry tree)  
*Buxus sempervirens* (ordinary box)  
*Chrysanthemum coronarium*  
 (yellow chrysanthemum)  
*Cornus mas* (cornel)  
*Cupressus sempervirens* (cypress)  
*Cydonia oblonga* Miller (quince-tree)  
*Hedera helix* (common ivy)  
*Iris*  
*Liliaceae* (lily family)  
*Myrtus communis* (myrtle)  
*Nerium oleander* (oleander)  
*Papaver somniferum* (opium poppy)  
*Phoenix dactylifera* (date palm)  
*Phyllitis scolopendrium* (common scolopendria)  
*Picea excelsa* (spruce)  
*Pinus pinea* (stone-pine)  
*Punica granatum* (pomegranate)  
*Quercus ilex* (green oak)  
*Quercus robur* (common oak)  
*Rosa centifolia* (cabbage rose)  
*Viburnum tinus* (guelder rose)  
*Viola reichenbacha* (sylvan viola)



Bella Oaks labyrinth, © Erin Feinblatt  
photo: Erin Feinblatt, Bella Oaks

Meditation labyrinth nestled within a historic olive grove, designed in collaboration with Andrea Cochran, Landscape Architect, and inspired by the cathedral city of Chartres. A place to become grounded and reflective, this labyrinth is a vital landmark of Bella Oak Vineyard in Napa, California.

Much of my work now is taken up by the vineyard estate, Bella Oaks, I own in Napa Valley, California. There we are producing organically grown grapes for our Bella Oaks wines, incorporating biodynamic principles, and focusing on increasing biodiversity and sustainable agricultural methods, both in the vineyards and in our own domestic use gardens. The gardens of Livia, and this project to bring them back to life, including researching domestic and formal plant selections, reconstruction, and sustainability, truly speaks to my interests. It is a pleasure to support and stand by the side of professionals in so many fields, all dedicated to a holistic vision of the world, incorporating various perspectives from contemporary art to botany to digital preservation of world heritage.

**Suzanne Deal BOOTH**

Bella Oaks  
vintner and philanthropist  
Austin, Texas  
and Napa Valley, California



photo: Henry Thomas Sadt

In my time as the director of the Orto Botanico, my utmost goal has been to share my love of nature, ecology, and botany with the Roman public and all who come to visit us. Established in 1883 as the successor to the papal Botanical gardens at the Vatican, the Orto Botanico is home to more than 3,000 species of plants. Here in the botanical gardens, we marry nature and ancient Roman history, combining Earth's beautiful biodiversity with Rome's stunning architectural heritage. I believe an understanding of plant life is an integral facet of education, and being in nature is uplifting to the human spirit. As you read this book, consider your own relationship to the natural world around you, and what you can do to help it flourish.

**Fabio ATTORRE**

Sapienza University, Rome  
Director, Orto Botanico