

In tune with Tuscany

Tenor Andrea Bocelli's architect brother, Alberto, has ambitious plans for the hill town, Lajatico, where he grew up

November 23, 2008

By Marc Zakian

Alberto Bocelli is sitting in the family vineyard in Tuscany. If the relaxed, shy smile is familiar, it is no surprise: he has the gentle grin with which his brother Andrea, the singer, has charmed the world.

The Bocelli brothers are the descendants of generations of farmers who have tilled the fields around the hill town of Lajatico for more than 300 years. Their father worked the land and made wine, and tradition dictated that the sons would join the family business. But Andrea, 50, turned to singing and Alberto, three years his junior, became an architect.



Now Alberto is using his skills to improve the fortunes of his native town. "Like many rural farming communities, Lajatico has gone through difficult times," he says. "People left in search of work in the cities and there was little to keep the younger generations here. I was one of those who set off to make my way in the world, but after university in Florence, I felt the need to come home. My first job was converting a local farmhouse into a second home for an English lawyer from Surrey."

Alberto hopes to attract British buyers with his latest project: with Luca Catalano, director of the property company Realitalia, he is restoring an abandoned 200-year-old villa next to an olive grove on the edge of the village and turning it into flats. Alongside the villa, which has views across orchards into the valley, will be three homes built in traditional style. "We want the buyers to become part of our community, and in return our new residents will help Lajatico by creating work for locals," he says.

Prices start at £190,000 for a one-bedroom flat, rising to £590,000 for a three-bedroom villa with two bathrooms and a large garden. The development includes a swimming pool, a play area for children, a solarium and part ownership of the private olive grove, which is ideal for picnics and barbecues. The shops and town square are a couple of minutes' walk away. As part of the plan to integrate buyers into the community by creating jobs, the optional services on offer include baby-sitting, cleaning, gardening and shopping.

The show flat should be ready for viewing from next March; and, having seen the style of the scheme, potential buyers will be able to choose the kitchen fittings and other finishes. "We will encourage buyers to follow our commitment to using only locally sourced materials in the traditional style," Catalona says.

Realitalia, which is offering an on-site management service, reckons buyers who wish to let out their properties should be able to do so for 15-20 weeks a year – producing an annual income, after management fees, of £11,800 for the two-bedroom flats, which are priced at about £235,000.

With Pisa airport a 40-minute drive away, Lajatico is an interesting option for British buyers who are looking for a second home in northern Italy. Although this area of Tuscany is relatively undiscovered, and cheaper than the more famous parts of the region, the familiar rural landscape is all there: the rolling hills chequered with cypress trees and olive groves have prompted some to describe this as the Pisan Chianti-shire. It is also a good deal closer to the coast than much of Tuscany – the beaches of the Italian Riviera are only an hour and a half away by car.

Lajatico's real claim to fame, however, is the annual concert Andrea Bocelli stages in honour of his birthplace. "A few years ago, we were walking on the hills on the side of our home town, with their views across the valley to the historic town of Volterra," Alberto recalls. "It was late in the day, the sun was setting, and I said, 'It seems like a theatre.' " From this Tuscan sunset, the Teatro del Silenzio (Theatre of Silence) was born in 2006. In July, that hillside becomes a 7,000-seater auditorium, with Andrea performing alongside guests who have included Sarah Brightman and Lang Lang. Local schoolchildren join the international stars on stage and the town's 1,000-strong population grows ninefold. All the profits are used to help the local community.

This year's show was even more of a family affair, with Alberto's seven-year-old daughter Maddalena acting in a scene that accompanied one of Andrea's songs. "Last year, she spent so much time watching the rehearsals that this time she wanted to join in," Alberto says. "She insisted on doing her make-up and costume on her own, and since her performance she talks about nothing but next year's show."

For Alberto, watching Maddalena and his other children, Alesso and Rachele, grow up in Lajatico brings back memories of his childhood adventures with his brother (who was born with congenital glaucoma, and went blind at the age of 12 after a football accident). "We would ride around town on a tandem," he says. "Andrea insisted on steering while I pedalled behind, and we'd fly around the bends on the hills of Lajatico. He always liked to be in charge, though he would never admit it."

Forty years on, Alberto is still pedalling. Much of the organisation for the Teatro del Silenzio is run from the Bocelli wine cellar on the edge of Lajatico, and as well as running an architect's studio, Alberto looks after his brother's financial affairs, which he took over because of concerns that they were being mismanaged.

After the death of their much-loved father in 2000, Alberto also began to oversee production of the Bocelli vintage, which is snapped up by fans visiting Lajatico. Yet the architect turned agent and winemaker is sanguine about the many demands on his time. "Since I stopped going on tour with my brother, I have more time for other plans," he says.

Besides the Lajatico project, these "other plans" include a development in the nearby town of Chianni. Borgo in Chianni is a collection of 11 houses down a private road. Built

in the local stone, the one, two- and three-bedroom properties are arranged around communal gardens and a swimming pool. Prices start at £185,000.

Chianni's historic architecture has caught the attention of people looking for a countryside lifestyle that is not too remote from the resources of a large city. A mini revival in the town is being led by incomers such as Paula Parodi Ciurlo, from Genoa, who has moved there to open two fashion shops specialising in the local Casentino textiles. This year she organised a fashion show that attracted 400 visitors to a town of less than 1,000 people. It will be some time, however, before the fashion world can compete with Chianni's wild-boar festival. For six days in November, the community dedicates itself to everything porcine – stalls in the streets offer tastings and the smell of roast sucking pig fills the air.

"This community energy has encouraged people to buy in the area," Catalano says. "We have already sold three of the properties in Chianni, and the market is fairly lively in this part of Tuscany. Britons looking for a home here will find that prices have not fallen as in other parts of Europe. A lot of Italians buy second homes, and because they don't use mortgages, the prices here have not been severely affected by the credit crunch. This market doesn't fluctuate much; it has grown more slowly, but is less vulnerable."

The helter-skelter of the housing market aside, Alberto Bocelli hopes that these houses will add to the local community. "There are always concerns when new people move into a rural community," he says. "But we are trying to make sure that these are not just holiday homes, but part of the area's life and economy. Our aim is to create jobs for local people; for baby-sitters, for gardeners and for the local shops.

"I have seen visitors who have come from Britain befriended by some of the older members of the village who didn't speak a word of English; through gestures and a few common words, they have ended up having dinner together. It's those kinds of bonds that I hope will create the community of tomorrow."

Classic Journeys visits the Bocelli family farm for a wine tasting with Alberto and his wife Cinzia on each of the company's "Tuscany to the Sea" tours, a weeklong Cultural Walking Adventure that begins in Lucca and ends in Pisa. For more information on the "Tuscany to the Sea" trips, contact Classic Journeys at 1-800-200-3887 or visit www.ClassicJourneys.com/TuscanCoast