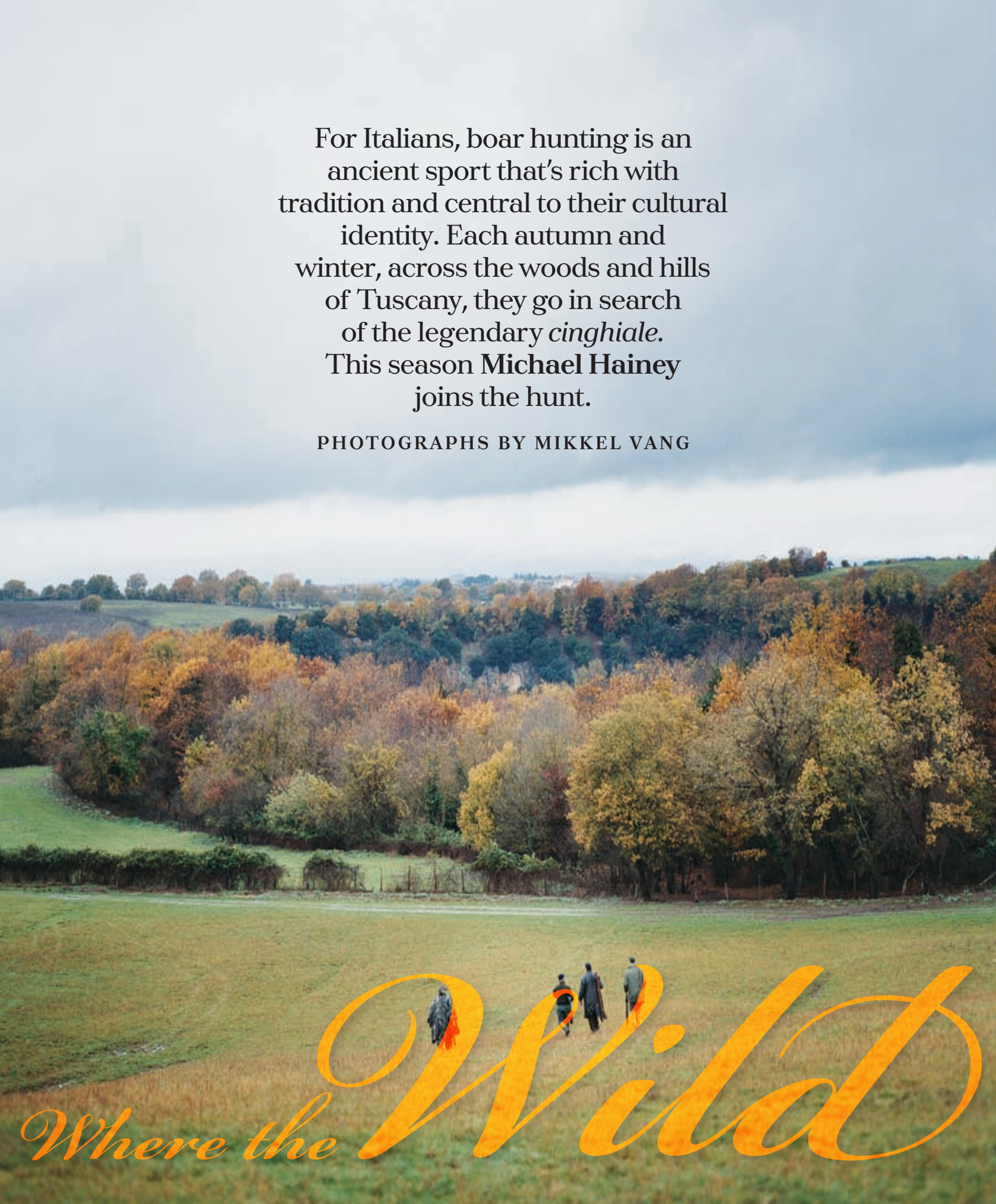
Where the Wild

For Italians, boar hunting is an ancient sport that's rich with tradition and central to their cultural identity. Each autumn and winter, across the woods and hills of Tuscany, they go in search of the legendary *cinghiale*. This season **Michael Hainey** joins the hunt.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKKEL VANG



Dressed to kill: Umberto Angeloni, former CEO of Brioni, with his sons Marco, *far left*, and Massimiliano, before setting out on a morning hunt, *opposite*.

Boots are

In Italy, the boar trumps all.

Nearly as long as this boot-shaped peninsula has dangled its leg into the Mediterranean, these animals have wandered its dark woods and rough, piney mountains. In a country where bloodlines count for so much, the boar—*il cinghiale*—is the oldest of the old. As a winemaker in the Maremma once muttered to me after the beasts had come in the night and gorged on his ripening grapes, *Il più vecchio dei vecchi*. This is the boar's land. Legend has it that ancient Greek sailors found so many of them on a small island that they named it Kapros, Greek for boar. The Italians now call it Capri.

Today the boars are gone from Capri, but across great swaths of Italy they still roam, maintaining their hold on the people. And Italy being Italy, each region claims its boar is superior to another region's. Tuscans will tell you that the fiercest boar lives in the Maremma and, as if to validate its regality, will point to *Il Porcellino,* Pietro Tacca's famous 17th-century bronze sculpture of a boar that has sat for centuries in a fountain in Florence's Mercato Nuovo. Tuscans will also tell you their boar tastes best because it feasts on the chestnuts that grow in the area's forests. Sardinians, on the other hand, will boast that theirs, being an island boar, is closest to the animals the Greeks first found on Capri and thus is the true Italian boar. They claim it's tastiest because it feeds on the acorns that fall from the island's groves of oaks. Umbrians, however, contend that their boar is the most refined and, quite frankly, the best tasting, for a reason that is hard to argue with: The countryside is rich in pungent black truffles, a favorite food of the boar's throughout the winter. And then there are the "divine" boars of Lazio, which live on the presidential hunting estate of Castelporziano, near Rome. Originally selected specially for Pope Pius VII in the early 19th century, they have been kept there ever since.

If you ask an Italian to explain what the boar means to him and why it has such a hold on his countrymen, you might get an answer like the one that same Maremma winemaker gave me: "Imagine if your bald eagle in America tasted like the best prosciutto you've ever eaten."

"Imagine if your bald eagle in America tasted

Boar hunting is to the Italian nobility what fox hunting is to the British ruling class—an ancient sport that is very much about affirming tradition and cultural identity. Indeed, the boar hunt in Italy goes back to Roman times. Wander around Italian museums and you're bound to come upon venerations of the hunt, as in an ancient sarcophagus in the Musei Capitolini decorated with scenes of well-dressed men slaying snarling, charging, wild-eyed primeval beasts. For centuries boars were hunted by groups of spear-carrying men who walked deep into the woods accompanied by packs of hounds, some wrapped in leather pads to protect

Scenes from a hunt at the Filissano Estate, including one of the cards designating each shooter's position

them from being gouged. The dogs would catch a boar, usually by biting its hind legs to slow it down until the hunter could dispatch it with a spear. Today dogs are used primarily to flush the boar into the open, where the hunters can shoot them.

I've never shot anything in my life that didn't involve a camera or a basketball. I do, however, confess to an inordinate weakness for salami, *salsiccia,* and just about any salted, cured pork product. And especially boar. I still remember the first time I tasted it: About ten years ago, in a palazzo near Siena, where the family cook, an old woman the size of a hummingbird, served it as bacon with my morning eggs. I'd never had bacon so chewy and salty and pleasantly gamy. Through the years, I have eaten boar as a steak, in ragùs over pasta, even as a kind of Slim Jim. Yet I'd never seen one in person.

Then one day I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Umberto Angeloni, the former CEO of Brioni and one of the most elegant men in Italy. He also happens to be an expert hunter and incredibly knowledgeable about boars. When I told him I was fascinated by them, he invited me to join him on a hunt outside Rome.

"Meet me at Tullio's the night before," he e-mailed me.

What's that?

"The only restaurant in Rome," he wrote back.

Umberto looks a lot like De Niro circa *The Godfather, Part II* but with a touch of gray in his swept-back hair. He has graceful cheekbones, penetrating eyes, and a confident bearing. Over dinner he told me how he learned to shoot game as a boy growing up in East Africa and about the traditions of the boar hunt in Italy. By evening's end I knew these seven things about *cinghiali,* thanks to Umberto:

1. They are the wild ancestor of the domestic pig.
2. They can grow to be three feet tall at the shoulder.
3. They can weigh as much as 400 pounds.
4. They will eat almost anything.
5. In medieval and Renaissance times, the boar was thought to have Satanic associations because of its tusks and dark coat.

like the best prosciutto you've ever eaten."

6. A male boar will defend itself by lowering its head, charging, and slashing upward with tusks it sharpens on rocks and trees.
7. A female boar, having smaller tusks, will merely try to bite its prey to death.

It was all fascinating. And all good. Until, toward the end of our meal, he asked—in that very calm, polite Italian tone—"So, what will you be wearing tomorrow?"

Wearing? I told him I'd be wearing what anyone would if they were going to be tramping around in the woods with guns and blood: a pair of jeans, old boots, and an old herringbone jacket.

Umberto slowly placed his espresso on the table. He sighed and softly tapped the rim of the white cup with his trigger

Hunting trophies line the estate's dining room walls, where lunch is served. *Opposite:* A plate with boar sausage, roasted thrush, venison-stuffed cabbage, spinach, and polenta.

In Italy no part of the boar goes to waste. The best are often cured and aged as that great delicacy, prosciutto di cinghiale.

finger. It seemed as if he was trying to will away the look of sourness that had crossed his face. Finally he looked at me.

"What size jacket are you?"

I told him.

Hat? Pants?

I told him.

"Very well," he said. "I'll see you in the morning. I will send a car to meet you at your hotel."

At 5 A.M. a car pulled up to my hotel and took me through the dark and empty Roman streets to Umberto's home on the outskirts of town. When I got there he was loading guns and duffel bags into his station wagon. As I approached, he held out a Barbour coat and cap as well as a necktie.

"Wear these," he said.

Taking them, I noticed what he was wearing: loden-green plus fours, loden-green kneesocks, benchmade British lace-up leather hunting boots, a white dress shirt with a plaid necktie, a loden-green sports coat.

I suddenly felt like a schlump. But I was grateful for his kindness. I donned the gear and got in the car.

It was still dark when we left Rome and merged onto Via Aurelia, the ancient road laid out by the Romans, and headed north along the coast, toward the Tuscan hills and the Maremma, a hunter's paradise. As the sun rose, I could begin to see the Mediterranean, grayish-blue, to our left and the flat countryside and hills beyond to our right. There were few other drivers on the road, but once in a while we would pass cars or battered Land Rovers pulling trailers no bigger than refrigerators. On one side were metal bars. Inside the trailers were packs of dogs—two, three, or four to a trailer. Wet black noses poked between the grates, sniffing the cool morning air.

"Those are *i canai,*" Umberto said as we passed one such car and trailer. "The men who bring the dogs for the hunt."

It was late autumn and the hunting season had been open since the first of November. The modern boar hunt is known as the *cacciarella* ("small hunt") to distinguish it from the *caccia,* the large hunts for red deer done on horseback during the Middle Ages. Traditionally the season runs through the end of January. Fall is the best time to hunt *cinghiali* because it's when they are fattest—and most destructive, driven to excess by the season's bounty. They spend these months gobbling up fresh-fallen acorns and chestnuts, rooting out mushrooms with their huge, sharp tusks, and attacking vineyards for the ripe grapes waiting to be harvested. Cursed with poor eyesight, they spend most of their time in wooded thickets to avoid predators.

Over the past 50 years boars in Italy have grown bigger and more numerous, crossbreeding with the wild ones that have pushed west from Eastern Europe. Boar hunting in Italy can be compared to deer hunting in this country: It's necessary to thin populations and keep them healthy.

In Italy no part of the *cinghiale* goes to waste. The meat, of course, gets eaten, either as hard salami, softer *salsiccia,* or ham, while the best boars are often cured and aged as that great delicacy, *prosciutto di cinghiale.* The white tusks are occasionally carved into buttons and knife handles or mounted in gold and worn by women as pendants. The thick hair is used for hairbrushes, toothbrushes, dartboards, and the little sprigs you see on traditional Tyrolean hats, the kind worn in *The Sound of Music.* As often happens on hunts such as the one I was about to partake in, the boars are donated to local villagers.

It took nearly three hours to reach the estate, an ancient parcel of woods northeast of Grosseto. During the season the owner (who wishes to remain anonymous) allows Umberto and other members of a club to hunt the wild boars that live on the grounds. After about ten minutes on a rocky, bumpy road, we rounded a bend and came into a clearing in a small valley. Cars and sport trucks were parked here and there. In front of a small rustic lodge, men—all dressed as elegantly as Umberto—mingled and chatted beneath the shade of a few wild olive trees as white-coated waiters brought them espressos on silver trays that glinted in the morning sun. The men—and a few women—are passionate hunters and spend their autumn on a kind of circuit, moving around the country from estate to estate. Often they pay the owner a fee, which goes toward the salaries for the *canai* and groundskeepers and other costs of maintaining the land.

"Let's make our greetings, shall we?" Umberto said.

We walked off toward the group. Soon enough a gentleman came around carrying a brown felt hat turned upside down. Inside were folded pieces of paper. One by one the men reached in, then opened up the paper. Numbers were on each, determining the hunter's post in the woods. Unlike in the spear-toting days, the hunting is now done from solitary, stationary positions. On this day there were 20 shooters. We climbed onto a hay wagon that was hitched to a tractor and rode out into the woods. Every so often a group of two or three hunters would jump off and head into the hills. Umberto and I were in one of the last groups. We walked up a fading path and found our perch, a triangle-shaped wooden platform no bigger than a bistro table and maybe 18 inches off the ground. A small railing made of old branches ringed the platform. The two other men with us walked over a small ridge some 20 yards away.

As I watched this primeval creature, it became

"Where are they going?" I asked.

"To their blind. It's just next to us."

I was silent for a minute.

"Can I ask you something? Isn't that dangerous? I mean, can they shoot us?"

Umberto was crouched down assembling his shotgun, an over-and-under 9.3-by-74-caliber Merkel.

"Not possible," he said without looking at me as he thumbed two large and long shells into the chambers. "We can only shoot at a ninety-degree angle to the front or back—not to the sides. No one is dumb enough to shoot at each other."

I nodded.

Umberto climbed onto the platform.

"This will be tight," he said, directing me to a spot next to him, from where I could observe (as I would not be shooting). I stepped up, trying to see the other hunters. CONTINUED ON PAGE 000 »

clear why the boar has such a hold on men.

The owner, Dino Cartoni, blows a horn to signal Umberto and Marco, *left*, that the hunt is over. *Right:* A waiting room at the estate.

WHERE THE BOARS ARE

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Suddenly, from somewhere down in the valley beyond, a horn sounded. It was 10 A.M. The hunt had begun. No sooner did the notes fade than we could hear, first far away and then getting louder, coming toward us, the howling and barking of dogs echoing through the woods. Mixed in were the echoing shouts of the *canai*. *"Dai-iii!"* (Come on!), they screamed. Or *"Va-iii!"* (Go on!), urging the dogs on in their mission. For the next three hours the dogs, usually in packs of two or three, crisscrossed the estate in pursuit of boars. Here and there I could hear gunfire, sometimes close, sometimes distant.

Umberto and I stood shoulder to shoulder on the platform. His gun seemed to be the only one that was silent. He held it in his arm, resting the thick barrel on the wooden railing. For the first time I took in our position. For maybe 50 yards around us, there were a few trees. The forest floor was mostly clear, just a mix of ferns and small shrubs that gave way, farther on, to a dense mix of ancient oaks and chestnuts.

"Don't try to see the boar," Umberto said as I stared into the woods. "You will hear him first. Sound always precedes sight. You will hear him. A *tick-tick-tick* of their hooves on the dead leaves as they scurry. A sound like the devil on an icy pond."

Just then we heard a rustling. Umberto raised his gun. A small red fox froze, stared at us, and scampered on.

"A good omen," he whispered.

An hour passed. In the distance we could hear the pop of gunfire and the *canai* yelling *"Eccolo! Lì sotto!"* (There it is! Under there!). While there seemed to be action all around us, on our spot—still nothing. A light rain began to fall, the drops slapping the leaves of the trees, making a sound like bacon sizzling in a skillet. I don't know if it was that soothing patter, but I won't lie: I was getting tired. I'd been up since 5 A.M., having stupidly consumed nothing but two espressos, and had been standing motionless for the past hour or so, trying to spot boars. I shifted back and forth on my feet in an attempt to stay awake.

"Why don't you watch the back side and I will watch the front," Umberto said. "When you spot something, tap me."

I moved behind him. I dropped my elbows to the railing and propped my head on my hands. I looked into the forest. I'll confess, it's possible my eyes closed.

Time passed. I don't know how much. Enough so that when it happened, I wasn't sure if I was dreaming or it was real. It was the *tick-tick-tick* sound.

Hooves on leaves.

I opened my eyes. The sound continued, but I saw nothing.

And then. There, shuffling through the ferns, in and out of view, like a thick shadow. I looked hard. A boar. A large one, less than 30 feet away. It was a female. I could just see a hint of white tusk curling from her dark mouth. Her coat had a mesmerizing black sheen. I watched her move, watched the primeval-ness of this creature. In that moment it became clear why this beast had such a hold on men, why it lived in myth. Looking at her move across the forest floor, I could see just how easily the Brothers Grimm and other Europeans had marked these animals as dark-hearted agents of evil.

I tapped Umberto.

He turned. I pointed.

Before I knew it, he had swiveled his gun onto my shoulder and squeezed off a shot. The gun exploded in my ear and from out in the woods came a bloodcurdling screech.

"Oh no you don't," Umberto whispered as he cocked his gun again and trained it on the wounded boar as it ran furiously toward the woods, racing for cover.

Another shot ripped off and I saw bark tear away from a tree. Then another shot and another screech and then—enormous silence. I looked toward the tree line. There, maybe 80 yards from our perch, was a dark black mass.

Two more hours passed before the horn blew again. By that time Umberto had shot one more boar. We stepped down from our perch and into the woods. It was our job to retrieve the animals and pull them toward our post so that the *battitori* (the beaters, the gamesmen who walk the grounds after the hunt, checking for wounded animals) could collect them. We found the beasts. At the first one, the largest, Umberto leaned over it. The initial shot had struck the haunches; the second, just behind the ear. I could not stop looking at its fur—gleaming black, bits of dirt stuck to it. The eyes were black, too. Umberto motioned to me to grab a rear leg and together we pulled the animal, which must have weighed more than a hundred pounds. I felt as if I were dragging a fat man in a sleeping bag.

It is tradition in Italy that there be a feast provided by the lord or lady of the estate after the hunt. We were not disappointed. Roast pork, Tuscan steak, pappardelle, spaghetti, sausages, cured meats, hunks of cheese, countless bottles of wine, and more were spread out on a giant U-shaped table set for 40. The hunters traded tales from the morning. It soon became clear that Umberto was the high scorer for the day, with two boars. This was confirmed when we finished lunch a couple of hours later and walked outside to have coffee.

While we had been inside the lodge, the *battitori* and *canai* had collected the animals and laid them out on the grass, largest to smallest. There were a few dozen in all, as well as several deer. One of the men told me it was a small hunt—maybe 10 percent of the population on the estate. The hunters identified their kills. Pictures were taken. Butchers from the local village stood nearby, ready to take the animals away. Aside from the cars in the background, it could have been a scene from 200 years ago.

Umberto and I stood off to the side, sipping our espressos.

"It's important to respect the animals," he said. "You know, in parts of Bavaria, after the hunt a small band will come and serenade the animals, playing a different piece of music for the *cinghiali* or the deer or whatever has been killed."

He walked over to his boars and gave them a final pat. Then he shook hands with his fellow hunters. The sun was beginning to set in the valley. It was time to go home and Rome was far away.

On the Hunt

The season for boar hunts in Italy runs from November through January. Most take place on private estates and are open only to members of hunting clubs. However, some estates allow members to bring guests once a year. The Filissano Estate, an hour north of Rome (and the site where our story was photographed), permits visitors to hunt, but they must be accompanied by an Italian host (owner Dino Cartoni can be contacted at artc@hotmail.it). Castello di Vicarello, about an hour south of Siena, is one of few estates that will arrange hunts for guests. A three-hour guided "Tuscan safari" on a nearby reserve—available September through March by special permit—costs $2,900 per person and includes accommodations for two nights and dinner (39-0564/990-718; vicarello.it).