



VILLA OLMI FIRENZE

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## OUR HISTORY

Villa Olmi is situated in an area of Florence, Pian di Ripoli, which was so verdant and lush in the Middle Ages that the most well-off Florentine squires often had large farm estates there. The River Arno, which flows half a kilometre (550 yards) from the villa, often flooded these lands and helped to make them fertile thanks to the silt deposits it left behind. The plants that grew there flourished so much that the area, entirely covered by orchards and cultivated fields, was known as the “Pomario di Firenze” (the fruit orchard of Florence).

As well as planting immense crops, the richest Florentines also built their summer residences in this area, refuges where they could devote themselves to the otium of the ancient Romans: so, not just rest and relaxation, but also studies, art and contemplation. In these villas, the landowners of Florence – the centre of which is just 6 kilometres (almost 4 miles) away, at that time by horseback – organized banquets for visiting guests, who could enjoy agreeable leisure pursuits in a much more healthy and pleasant rural environment than the city, which could be very unhealthy in the Middle Ages. Suffice it to think of the Plague that struck in 1348, killing four fifths of Florence’s inhabitants, giving Giovanni Boccaccio the cue to write his Decameron, one of Europe’s most important late medieval works, in which ten young people flee Florence to avoid contagion and retreat to a villa in the countryside where they pass the time telling each other stories.

The countryside was therefore a much sought-after place, and those who could afford it spent the hot summer months, which were more oppressive and difficult to tolerate in the city, in these pastoral residences. Without counting that at the time land was the greatest source of wealth: while modern investors buy property, shares or businesses, then the most important asset they had to make the effort to preserve, expand and pass down was the land, all the more so in a fertile area like Pian di Ripoli.

The first known owners of a noble residence situated on the land of the present-day Villa Olmi were the Ardinghelli, a family of rich bankers and tradesmen: in 1427 in the city’s land register they declared that they possessed a farm with a house for the lord and one for the workers, situated close to the Pieve di Ripoli church, with a well and fields cultivated with grain, barley and beans, plus a vineyard and a fruit orchard. In all likelihood, their villa was knocked down in 1529, when Spanish troops under the guidance of Philibert de Châlons, Prince of Orange, approached Florence to lay it to siege. The house would not have been devastated by the assailants, as might be thought, but by the Florentines themselves: they decided to destroy all the buildings in a five-kilometre (three-mile) range from the city walls, so that the enemies could not find shelter anywhere. Benedetto Varchi, man of letters born at the beginning of the sixteenth century who lived through the events, wrote that it was the villas’ owners who razed them to the ground in fury, uprooting and then devastating all the fruit trees with hatchets, as well as the vines, ornamental plants and olive trees, to leave the besiegers empty-handed.

After the siege, the Ardinghelli family villa was probably rebuilt, because it is known that in 1565 it passed, along with all its lands, to the Mozzi family: they were the ones who looked after it for over 300 years and embellished it with significant restoration and decoration work in the eighteenth century, providing the basis for the present-day hotel layout. The Mozzi were a rich Florentine family who owned an old palazzo in the centre of Florence, in what is now in fact known as Piazza dei Mozzi, in the Oltrarno district not far from Ponte Vecchio. Palazzo Mozzi had a large garden which stretched as far as the city walls (at San Miniato al Monte), more or less corresponding to the gardens of Villa Bardini today. At that time, this city residence was the most important in Florence, and there was no prince, ambassador or cardinal visiting the city who was not hosted by the Mozzi clan. The family had given Florence many important figures, amongst whom numerous members of the city government, a beatified saint and a bishop, Andrea dei Mozzi, whom Dante placed in the XV canto of his Inferno. Thanks to their wealth, over time the Mozzi family managed to put together a great collection of artworks which are now on display in important museums around the world: according to some nineteenth-century historians, they possessed a bas-relief of a Virgin and Child by Mino da Fiesole (c. 1462-66), a Mona Lisa (an alternative version to the one housed at the Louvre, because Leonardo never let the original – set to remain in France after his death – leave his side), The Adoration of the Magi by Carlo Dolci (1649), a painting by Guido Reni, and then a Titian, a Correggio, a Ghirlandaio and many other masterpieces.

Hence, when Giulio dei Mozzi, member of the Florentine Senate, decided to extend the villa and modernize the property in 1781, he was able to use his vast artistic culture as inspiration to decorate the walls and ceilings of his estate. The frescoes of landscapes and allegoric scenes that he commissioned, decorated by grotesques, were uncovered in 2006 for the benefit of the guests of Villa Olmi, and the façades of the two main parts of the hotel were restored so as to reproduce the appearance that they might have had in the eighteenth century, when the building with the terracotta-coloured trimmings was a farm. The busts erected on the roof are copies of the originals, placed for protection in a gallery linking the villa to the former farmhouse, under a beautiful red-brick vault. Giulio dei Mozzi carried out all the modernization work in just one year, and was so satisfied that upon its completion he had his coat of arms mounted in stone on the façade of the villa where it is still visible today, accompanied by a plaque with an inscription in Latin to remind posterity of how quickly the work had been done: Julius Mozzi / has aedes / anno S. MDCCLXXXI / inchoavit et perfecit.

It was in the following century, perhaps thanks to the more elegant appearance of the property, that he decided to change the villa’s name: until that moment the old maps had marked it with the simple name of “Villa del Mozzi”, while the locals referred to it disparagingly as the “Cloaca dei Mozzi”. “Cloaca” is not a very flattering name referring to the underground channels used to dispose of waste away from inhabited areas; in a word, the sewers. Yet there is no way it had earned that name because it was ugly: as is known, since the Middle Ages the place had always been green and lush, with a large noble residence and workers’ cottages around it. So, where the nickname came from will probably remain cloaked in mystery. However, what we can be sure about is that, sometime before 1870, the property was given the much prettier name “Villa la Pergola”, referring to both the decorative structures used in gardens, and the vines, cultivated with excellent results on the Mozzi’s land, often used to cover pergolas.

That particular name hit the nail on the head. Indeed, the estate’s farming fortunes blossomed under its new owner Ippolito Pestellini, who had bought it from Count Adolfo Mozzi Del Garbo, forced to sell after having frittered away the family riches and finding himself in economic difficulty. Pestellini came into possession of the villa and its 400 hectares (1,000 acres) of land, which included various other farms in the surrounding area, on 3 February 1862. Even though he was a lawyer by profession, he was above all a farming technique enthusiast, spending his time studying and experimenting to improve the quality of the farm’s produce. Also interested in wine, he had a vast vineyard planted opposite the villa and published numerous volumes on the subject, amongst which *Il mio modo di fare il vino*, *Degustazione e commercio dei vini* and *Per la tutela del fiasco toscano*. Furthermore, he also entered and went on to be a very active member of the Accademia dei Georgofili, a Florentine institution founded in 1753 which still promotes studies and research in the agronomic sector. Under his expert guidance, the villa became the centre of a hugely profitable estate which as of 1870 won many awards, amongst which the gold medal at the Exposition Universelle of Paris in 1900.

It was in this period that the villa changed its name again to adopt the current one. The story behind it goes as follows. Pestellini had asked the municipality of Bagno a Ripoli to build a road to connect the Pieve di Ripoli church with the nearby Via della Nave a Rovezzano, bypassing the entrance to his residence which the road previously went by. Inspired by the two giant elms (olmi in Italian) in the gardens, when the work was finished he named both the villa and the new road, still called Via degli Olmi today, after them. Initially, however, this created some confusion. In Pian di Ripoli, and on Pestellini’s estate no less, another villa and another road already existed with the same name, situated to the east of Villa Olmi: these were the large building known as “L’Olmo” in Via del Padule, located at the crossroads with the little road then known as “Viuzzo dell’Olmo”. Any confusion disappeared though when L’Olmo progressively fell into ruin and, in 1924, the street was done away with as the local people hardly ever used it.

As the decades went by, the descendents of Ippolito Pestellini abandoned the country villa and stopped farming, so the property experienced a slow and progressive decline. In 1999 it was bought by the Lotti family who, aware of its historic and cultural value, started a lengthy project to restore the original architectural features, styles and period materials, with the aid of expert craftsmen skilled in traditional techniques. The aim was to recreate at Villa Olmi the atmosphere that would have breathed at the end of the eighteenth century, after the modernization work carried out by Giulio dei Mozzi. So the frescoes from that period were brought to light, today framed by elegant stuccoes, as well as the brick vaults in the cellars. Antique furniture was chosen to furnish the various rooms, with fine upholstery and Murano lamps. Outside the Italian garden, with elegant geometrical hedges and flower beds, and the hortus conclusus, that is, the more intimate and cosy medieval garden, have also been recreated.

Hotel Villa Olmi was inaugurated on 31 May 2006. Since then it has opened its doors to guests from all over the world wanting to spend a holiday in the countryside, just a stone’s throw from one of the most picturesque cities in the world.