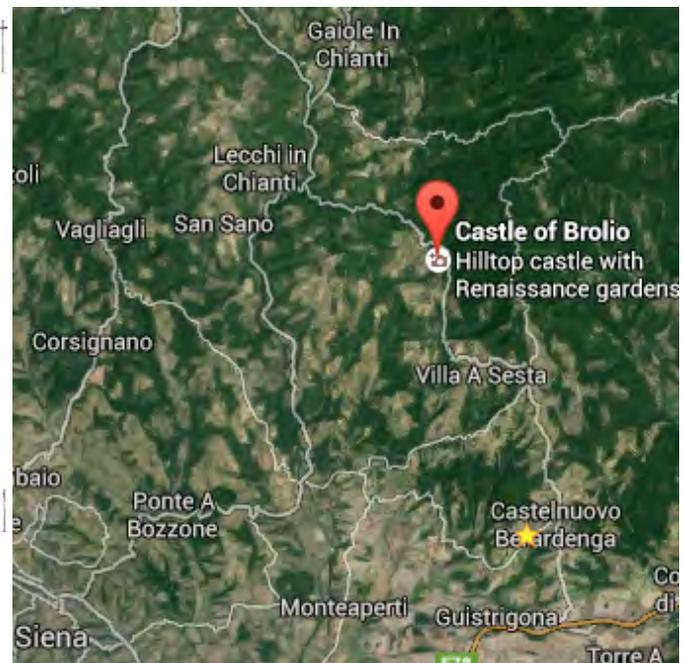


# **l'Eroica bike ride, Gaiole in Chianti, October 4, 2015. Bicycling on the “strade bianche” (unpaved gravel roads) in the Chianti Classico region of Italy.**

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With my friends George Pohl and Joe Phillip, and several thousand others, I rode in the annual l'Eroica biking event this year. I'm making this report because for us this was a most wonderful experience to be remembered. All three of us hope to do it again. The event celebrates traditional bicycling on traditional routes in Italy. Vintage (pre-1988) steel bicycles are required. In Italian “l'eroica” refers to such a bicycle. It also means the heroic, which many riders feel after finishing the ride. Traditional clothing (eg, wool, leather helmets, knickers, etc) are common. Bikers, equipment, and outfits of all sorts participate from many countries. Gaiole is a lovely town in the beautiful, rolling Chianti Classico region of Tuscany, about 25 km northeast of Siena. Much of the riding is on the “strade bianche” (white roads), which are unpaved gravel roads. These roads are a preserved and protected part of the region's heritage. George and I drove over from the Italian Cycling Center in the Veneto on Friday, October 2. Joe arrived with his bike in Rome that day by plane from Philadelphia, and drove up. We lodged for the weekend in an apartment in the nearby town of Castelnuovo Berardenga.



On Friday I registered and picked up my rental bicycle, a fine Rossin with a triple crankset, from the Steel Vintage Bikes tent at l'Eroica headquarters in Gaiole. There was a large, lively crowd of bicycle enthusiasts, and many folks selling all sorts of vintage biking paraphernalia. Joe was to ride his restored classic Raleigh Professional bicycle, and George his newly restored Scapin. All three bikes used classic Campagnolo components. We had a grand Tuscan dinner in Castelnuovo that night, with much fine local Chianti, at the Enoteca-Trattoria Bengodi. (Bengodi is an imaginary land of plenty from Boccaccio's Decameron.)



Saturday dawned a beautiful day in Castelnuovo. We got up early and had a lovely walk to breakfast at a bar in the main piazza. Then we drove to Gaiole. George and Joe registered, and we poked around the biking markets and bought some biking stuff. We drove back to Castelnuovo, had lunch, then rode our vintage bikes back to Gaiole. A good test, as none of us had ridden on such vintage equipment for a long while. All went perfectly on this beautiful route in ideal weather. There were already many other bikers out on this day before l'Eroica ride. We hung out in Gaiole with a few thousand other bikers, then rode back to Castelnuovo to complete the 45 km round trip. Although the Chianti grape harvest was about 90% complete, we did see some luscious grapes not yet harvested. Often through the weekend one noticed the heady smell of fermenting wine and encountered little tractors pulling bins of just-harvested grapes. A fine dinner that night at the Trattoria Quei Due ("those two") helped prepare us for the next day's riding.



It rained a little Saturday night. Sunday dawned overcast, damp, and with an accurate forecast for rain We drove with our bikes to Gaiole and parked in a large muddy field with a kazillion other bikers. Scraped the mud out of our cleats and rode to the start area. It took a while to start, but eventually we and many others were riding away. I was wearing a new woolen 50's style Italian blue jersey, a birthday gift from my wife Genie. We all took rain jackets with us. A light rain had begun.



About 10 km out we began the first climb, up to the Castello Brolio (see map above). The property has been in the family of Barone Ricasoli for many centuries, and is the center of their extensive winemaking activities. (We all received a bottle of their special l'Eroica Chianti Classico at registration.) The climb was steep and curvy. I was glad to have the triple crankset and low gears. Already a few cyclists were walking their bikes uphill. I rode all the way up, and did not have to walk up any hills that day.



After the crest of the hill the rain became steady, and the first gravel stretch began. I put on my rain jacket, and wore it for the rest of the riding. There followed about 22 km of about a 50:50 mix of paved and unpaved riding, with intermittent rain and sun. We enjoyed the splendid countryside even in the rain. The riding was challenging but not impossible. We rode carefully and averaged about 14 km or 9 miles per hour. Amazing sights and fun with many fellow cyclists of all sorts.



Then came the “ristoro”: the rest stop! The rain had stopped for a while, so we took off our jackets and enjoyed wonderful Tuscan hospitality and companionship: prosciutto, salami, cheese, breads, fruit tarts, panforte, grapes, water ... and, of course, wine. All served by lovely local folks in a rural atmosphere which included traditional farm work animals. It was really muddy underfoot, but we happy bikers were having a grand time here!



George and I used his little bike tool to clean our cleats of mud, and we went on to finish the 46 km route. Joe had planned to do the 75 km route, but a shoe cleat problem sent him on the shorter one, too. Shortly after the ristoro a detour took us off the regular gravel road onto a minor road through vineyards, with no gravel and lots of squishy mud. A long hill down and up, and more curvy hills afterwards. A really treacherous part of the ride because of possible slippage. I thought that if I had to stop here I'd never be able to ride out of the morass. George said his rear wheel spun out a little on some climbs, but fortunately we both rode out ok. Not everyone rode up these or other hills, but there was no shame in that, and there was often some touching camaraderie among walkers. There were many heroic efforts that day.



We rode out of the last unpaved stretch, and at 46 km we were back in Gaiole. The rain had now stopped for good. There was much celebrating around the finish area. We were all a bit wet, muddy, gritty, but satisfied, and maybe feeling a little heroic. George seemed pleased with the little plaque signifying that he had completed the ride, and muddy Joe was happy with his muddy bicycle. I turned in my rental bike. We went to the pasta party. Then we called it a day, a very good day.

