

CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER

Fertile Ground

Mar 2022, pp. 62-71

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FERTILE GROUND

The discreet, sophisticated southern swath of Italy's Piedmont region has the wine and food to rival Tuscany, and now it is growing a scene all its own

By Lee Marshall Photographs by Tom Parker

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The vineyards of mostly red grapes in the countryside near Monforte d'Alba, Piedmont

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I'M IN A MISTY WOOD

on the sprawling grounds of Casa di Langa hotel with two young truffle hunters, Marta Menegaldo and Daniele Stroppiana. As the pair's curly-haired Lagotto Romagnolo dogs Bianca and Luna dart off into the undergrowth, noses to the ground, tumbling over each other in their quivering search for that elusive scent, Daniele tells me that his grandfather first took him out looking for prized white tartufi in the woods

of Roero, sparking a lifelong passion. We're in Le Langhe, a southern pocket of Italy's Piedmont region. These days, truffle hunting is an almost exclusively male preserve, but back then, at least in Daniele's family, it was his grandmother who went out looking for mushrooms and truffles while his grandfather was at work. Back in the kitchen, white truffles that today command hundreds of euros at Alba's autumn Fiera Internazionale del Tartufo Bianco d'Alba would be thrown into a minestrone "to give it a bit more flavor."

Handfuls of tartufi bianchi thrown into the family stockpot: I keep returning to the image as I walk, cycle, and drive around the wine zones of Langhe, Monferrato, Roero, and Gavi. Southern Piedmont was once a poor, feudal place where foraging was not some back-to-nature experience for well-heeled city folk but an essential survival tool. Soon after the end of World War II, two seminal novels by Langhe-born writers—Cesare Pavese's *The Moon and the Bonfires* and Beppe Fenoglio's *Ruin*—dwelled

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Clockwise from top left: Outside the upscale Guido Ristorante, in the Langhe wine region; a truffle hunter near Casa di Langa hotel; duck with sour cherries and saffron at Guido Ristorante; Casa di Langa's alpine-inspired design; white truffles at Casa di Langa

on the sheer hardship of life in the region. Many rural Piedmontese emigrated to the United States or Argentina; others took the shorter but no less life-changing journey to work in the factories of Turin.

And yet today, this UNESCO-listed place of outstanding natural beauty, which borders France to the west and Liguria to the south, rivals the hills of Chianti as a poster child for the Italian good life. The manicured vineyards of Barolo and Barbaresco turn out some of Italy's most highly prized red wines, as do the areas of Asti and Alba, which are known for Barbera. A glance at the latest Italian edition of the Michelin gourmet guide reveals a whole nebula of stars within a 15-mile radius of the market town of Alba: There were 22 at last count, spread across 20 restaurants. No other part of the Italian countryside has so many in such a small area. And southern Piedmont is finally getting there in terms of accommodations too. Last year, the sustainable Casa di Langa and the modern Nordelaia opened,

providing an upscale base for the swath of wine districts that stretches from Le Langhe to Gavi.

Alba's pugnacious skyline bristles with medieval towers (there were once close to 100), but at ground level, this gateway to the Langhe and Roero wine regions is all upmarket boutiques, wine bars, and delis offering every imaginable variety of cheese, salami, wine, and truffle. Nearby Bra, another of those neat Piedmontese towns with both flowery charm and a nose for business, is the headquarters of the Slow Food movement, which was founded here in the '80s.

Roberta Ceretto's grandfather Riccardo moved to Alba in the 1930s from a dirt-poor village in the high Langhe and found work with a local wine producer. Learning fast, he soon set up his own business vinifying grapes that he bought from a variety of growers. It wasn't until Roberta's father, Bruno, and uncle Marcello came on board in the 1960s that Ceretto—today one of the area's leading producers—began investing in vineyards. "Riccardo sensed the potential, back in the days when Barolo was still sold in

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demijohns,” Roberta tells me, “but it was the next generation that led the revolution.” We stand looking out over the vines planted around the company HQ from L’Acino (“The Grape”), a transparent domed tasting room that thrusts out from the hillside like a Bond villain’s lair.

At the end of the last millennium, the Ceretto family asked artists Sol LeWitt and artist David Tremlett to turn La Cappella del Barolo, a wayside chapel they owned next to their La Morra vineyards, into a site-specific installation. LeWitt took on the outside, Tremlett the interior. Inaugurated in 1999, this joyful chromatic eruption is now an attraction for the global Instagram set. “It has become a symbol of the territory,” Roberta says, “and yet when we unveiled it we got a lot of flak from locals.”

More Ceretto-commissioned art is on view at the winery’s Piazza Duomo restaurant, in the center of Alba, where in 2007 Italian artist Francesco Clemente frescoed the main dining room of what has since become, under chef Enrico Crippa, Piedmont’s only three-Michelin-star dining destination. Meanwhile, Tremlett, who describes himself as a sculptor who paints walls, has left his mark on five other former religious buildings in the nearby Langhe and Monferrato wine zones. These include the small church of Beata Maria Vergine del Carmine, just outside the village of Coazzolo, its exterior now a jazzy play of wine-dark reds, ochre yellows, and moss greens.

Farther south, in one of the remotest corners of the wooded Alta Langa, art gallery Lunetta 11 occupies most of the buildings in Borgata Lunetta, a beautifully unreconstructed rural hamlet. Young codirectors Claudia Zunino and Francesco Pistoï live here with Pistoï’s art-dealer mother, Eva Menzio, and the three remaining original inhabitants of what was once a thriving agricultural *borgo*. The gallery, which organizes one or two multi-artist shows each year, spreads around an interconnected group of village houses, one of which is a B&B and artists’ residence featuring Arte Povera pieces from Menzio’s collection. Zunino stresses that the gallerists are not “importing culture” so much as reviving it in an area dotted with ancient chapels and churches that were made by and with the community.

Southern Piedmont has opened up plenty in the last couple of decades—to art, to cutting-edge gastronomy, to the *stranieri* who have begun buying up



holiday villas and farmhouses in the area. But like the hazelnut that is the key ingredient of Nutella, Alba’s sweet gift to the world, the town has a shell that can be hard to crack. If Tuscany’s wine regions are proud and gregarious, Piedmont’s are reserved and marked by tribal and family loyalties that go back to less prosperous times.

It’s a challenge Alan Manley recognizes—and relishes. He’s one of the few outsiders to have gained entry to the world of Barolo winemaking. A restaurateur and wine buff who moved to Piedmont 11 years ago, Manley has a passion for Nebbiolo (the grape variety that is the sole component of Barolo and Barbaresco). He started visiting the area in 1995, determined to understand the local wine scene and perhaps, one day, to make his own. “I knocked on a lot of doors,” he tells me. Eventually one opened. Producer Luciano Sandrone, one of the pioneering “Barolo Boys” who in the 1980s and 1990s convinced the world that the region’s wines could compete with those of Burgundy or Bordeaux, told Manley that if he came to work for him, he would teach him how to make wine. “Which was

From top left:
A snug chill-out
area at Relais
San Maurizio in
Santo Stefano
Belbo; Claudia
Zunino, owner
of the art gallery
Lunetta 11, in
the Alta Langa

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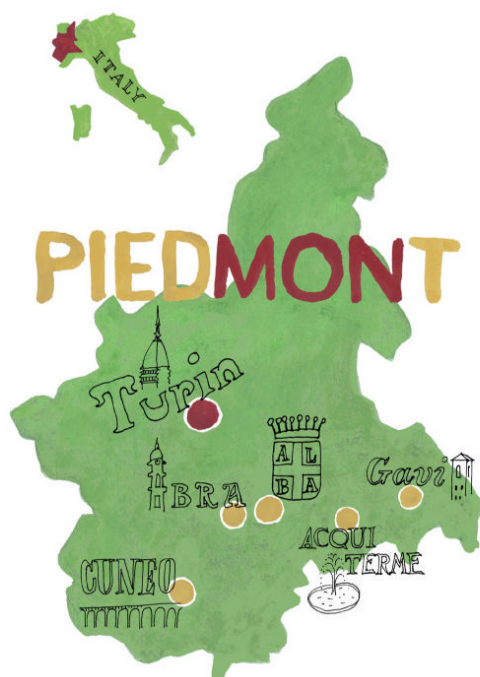
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a bit like Keith Richards saying, ‘Come round to my place and I’ll teach you to play guitar,’” Manley quips. This was the very beginning of an adventure that would lead him, in 2015, to establish his microwinery, Margherita Otto, in the village of Monforte d’Alba.

Through a mix of perseverance and simply being seen around a lot, Manley has finally achieved what counts for acceptance around these parts. “In the main piazza of Monforte, there’s always a group of old guys sitting there, propped on their canes,” he recounts. “I said, ‘Buongiorno’ to them every day for 18 months and got no reaction. Then one day, one of them finally lifted his chin slightly in acknowledgment, and I was like, ‘Yes!’” Today they even talk to him occasionally.

Manley’s story is a neat metaphor for a serious, reserved part of Italy light-years from all those arm-waving, long-lunch clichés. Like its most famous foodie treasure, the white truffle, the soul of southern Piedmont needs patience to unearth—but it’s all the more rewarding when you do. ●



WHERE TO STAY

> LANGHE & AROUND

Casa di Langa, Cerretto Langhe

From the outside, this new arrival feels a little like the prow of a huge ship about to set sail over the vineyards toward the snow-capped mountains that shimmer on the horizon. Aptly, a hint of eco-chic alpine design comes through in the 39 spacious guest rooms, which are dominated by natural wood, stone, and unbleached textiles. The mood is more

jazzily urban in the panoramic Faùla restaurant, where chef Manuel Bouchard’s deft, seasonal riffs on the Piedmontese recipe book jostle for attention with the contemporary-art collection of the American owner, the Krause Group. Don’t miss out on a Piedmontese wine tasting with personable head sommelier Pier Francesco Molinari—if you’re new to the region, it’s an essential primer. *Doubles from \$500; casadilanga.com*

Arborina Relais, La Morra With their midcentury-modern design touches, the 10 rooms of this stylish mini resort overlooking one of Barolo’s most celebrated vineyards make for a perfect Langhe base. Many people stay here just to eat at Osteria Arborina, presided over by Enrico Marmo, a rising star with a militant “zero-kilometer” commitment to locally sourced ingredients. *Doubles from \$327; arborinarelais.it*

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNIKA HUIETT

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Clockwise from top left: The earthen palette of a guest room at Nordelaia, a hotel in Cremolino; Zunino's living room; approaching Ceretto Wineries

Relais San Maurizio, Santo Stefano Belbo

When it opened in 2002, this 17th-century monastery conversion was Le Langhe's first real high-end country-house hotel. It's still one of the most elegant bolt-holes in the area, kept in contention by a magnificent rock-hewn spa, an impressive contemporary-art collection, and a sophisticated restaurant, Guido da Costigliole. If you've never tried the Piedmontese specialty vitello tonnato—

wine-marinated veal in an anchovy-and-caper sauce—try it here first.

Doubles from \$340; relaissanmaurizio.it

> ACQUI TERME TO GAVI

Nordelaia, Cremolino
Opened last year, this boutique charmer makes a good case for a stay in a part of southern Piedmont that until now has been well off the tourist radar. It's housed in a peach-pink villa whose interiors have been engagingly restyled with old-meets-new

verve by U.K. design studio These White Walls, alongside Genoese architect Valerio Tunesi. The feeling that you've walked into a local art collector's house party is enhanced by simpatico GM Alfonso Spinelli, who personally meets and greets guests. In the two-story dining annex, British chef Charles Pearce puts a creative spin on the local tradition upstairs at L'Orto with affordable prix-fixe menus featuring dishes like an umami-rich cheese-and-onion tart. Downstairs, the clubby Bistrot offers a lighter menu. *Doubles from \$230; nordelaia.com*

Locanda La Raia, Gavi

If you can get beyond the bracing moss-green exterior (which—ahem—grows on you), this 12-room coaching-inn makeover really channels the quirky appeal of the southeastern, almost-in-Liguria corner of Piedmont, with its mix of retro-modern design and country comfort. *Doubles from \$315; la-raia.it*



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WHERE TO EAT

> LANGHE & AROUND**Piazza Duomo, Alba**

The culinary Everest of Le Langhe is this millennial-pink temple of high food in Alba, where wiry chef Enrico Crippa shuns the randomness of à la carte in favor of a series of guided menus whose dishes have names like Journey Through History. It's a thrilling trip, one based on produce so fresh it arrives from the restaurant's own farm twice a day. *Tasting menu from \$315; piazzaduomoalba.it*

Borgo Sant'Anna, Monforte d'Alba

This is one of the best-value gourmet meals in the area, but the secret is out, so book well in advance. In an airy pavilion among Barolo vineyards, chef Pasquale Laera juggles the culinary heritage of his native Puglia with Piedmontese traditions and ingredients. Unusually for this meaty part of Italy, seafood is the star, as in a wonderful anti-pasto of baby squid, watermelon, intensely flavorful tomato confit, and tangy passion-fruit seeds. *Dinner for two from \$140; borgosantanna.it*

Guido Ristorante, Fontanafredda, Serralunga d'Alba

Chef Ugo Alciati serves up textbook versions of Piedmontese classics in a

former royal residence at the heart of Fontanafredda, a wine estate created in the 19th century by the Savoy king Vittorio Emanuele II. Dripping with chandeliers and stiff military portraits, it's still frequented by posh types who look like extras from a Fellini movie. Don't miss the meltingly good tagliatelle, served with a grated snowfall of white truffles. *Dinner for two from \$95; www.guidoristorante.it*

Battaglino Ristorante dal 1919, Bra

An institution in the town that gave Slow Food to the world, this no-nonsense regional trattoria with its pretty inner courtyard turns out reliable Piedmontese classics like mincemeat-stuffed agnolotti del plin, but also offers at least a couple of daily vegan or vegetarian options. *Dinner for two from \$50; ristorante battaglino.it*

> ACQUI TERME TO GAVI**Da Fausto, Cavatore**

Call it a destination trattoria: This delightful family-run place a few miles south of Acqui offers a mix of good, seasonal Piedmontese and Ligurian specialties in a restored stone farmhouse. There's an alfresco terrace and four bright and simple rooms. *Dinner for two from \$80; relais borgodelgallo.it*

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Clockwise from top left: Ravioli del plin with roasted sauce at Guido Ristorante; the kitchen crew at Nordelaia; the elegant dining room of Guido Ristorante; tasting rooms with views at Ceretto Wineries; the cavern-like restaurant Guido da Costigliole at Relais San Maurizio

WINERY VISITS

> LANGHE & AROUND

Ceretto Wineries, Tenuta Monsordo Bernardina, Alba It's the setting as much as the Barolos that makes a tasting at one of Le Langhe's most dynamic wineries a must: a company HQ among the vines, where landscape, design, and contemporary art riff engagingly off one another. ceretto.com

Castello di Verduno, Verduno This small, historic, female-run winery offers a glimpse into an older world of Barolo production at its most evocative in the ancient vaulted

cellars beneath the Savoy-era castle, which also houses a charming old-school restaurant and guesthouse. cantinecastellodiverduno.it

> ACQUI TERME TO GAVI

La Raia, Gavi Specializing in white wines based on the Cortese grape, this gorgeously landscaped biodynamic winery organizes twice-daily tastings and tours, which also include part of the estate's site-specific contemporary-art collection. la-raia.it
L.M.