

Just as tasty as Tuscany - and no tourists

Piedmont, the hilly region around Turin, had been a closed book to long-time Italy resident John Brunton. But a weekend driving round its foodie towns and vine-clad hills opened up a land of friendly family-run hotels and rustic trattorias

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Rooftops and landscape, Barolo, Langhe, Italy. Photograph: Paolo Negri/Getty Images

When you have lived in a country for many years there is inevitably one region that tends to get overlooked, the place you'll be sure to visit next year but never do. For me that was always the case with Piedmont, as I concentrated on classic destinations such as Tuscany, Umbria and the Veneto. But when I finally made it here last year, I immediately realised just what I had been missing out on, and why my Italian friends had always berated me for not discovering one of the most surprising and welcoming parts of Italy.

While the landscapes, castles, cuisine and fabulous wines are just as stunning as anything you'll see in Tuscany, Piedmont could be a million miles from Chiantishire. Tourism hasn't become big business yet, and prices for eating out in traditional trattorias and staying in charming bed and breakfasts or agriturismo could not be more reasonable.

The Piedmontese are reserved people, very proud of their culture and language, and while they may not fall over at first to ingratiate themselves with tourists, you soon discover just how hospitable and friendly they are. So, after our first successful visit we decided to head back for a long lazy weekend, driving round its two most enticing and contrasting provinces, Langhe and Roero.

Only an hour on the autostrada from Turin, we kicked off our Piedmont roadtrip at the medieval city of Alba, which sits at the crossroads of Langhe and Roero. Alba is one of the gastronomic capitals of Italy, famed for its white truffles and the great wines of Barolo and Barbaresco. The best time to arrive in Alba, we discovered, is on a Saturday morning, when the whole town is converted into one giant street market.

The main drag, Via Vittorio Emanuele, is packed with dirt-cheap clothes stalls - impossible to ignore the bargains - but we also couldn't resist an aperitivo at the belle époque Bar Pettiti, which bakes tempting cakes and pastries. Then it was back into the teeming crowds until we surfaced at a vast covered market, perfect for stocking up on olive oil, cheese and salami.

Alba has some serious gourmet restaurants - which can also be seriously expensive. Luckily we had already made a reservation at the old-fashioned Osteria del Teatro, where for €20 we were treated to a feast of huge helpings of vitello tonnato (cold veal with a strange but delicious creamy tuna sauce) and stinco di maiale (succulent pork shank roasted with potatoes and wild herbs). After a quick dose of cultural sightseeing at the imposing red-brick San Lorenzo cathedral, which dates back to the 12th century, it was back to the car, and off in the direction of Canelli, to begin exploring the renowned wine country of Langhe.

Canelli is idyllically situated, surrounded by vine-clad hills that produce the Moscato grapes which give Asti Spumante wine its distinctive taste. Steep narrow lanes lead you past grand palazzi and ancient churches, towards a fairytale castle that resembles an ornate wedding cake. The castello is owned by the Gancia family, who invented spumante back in 1865, and today have a huge winery turning out 20 million bottles of bubbly each year. Unsurprising, then, to hear some locals calling their town "Ganciaville".

While the hotels in Canelli are not very exciting, there are some interesting places to stay high up above the town, hidden away in a maze of vineyards. We were lucky to come upon the charming La Casa in Collina, a sprawling farmhouse owned by the friendly wine-making Amerio family, and transformed into an elegant B&B, with antique furniture, to-die-for pool and spectacular views.

From Canelli we set off early in the morning in the general direction of Barolo, the town that gives its name to the most famous Italian red wine. But we quickly let ourselves get lost and spent most of the day on windy detours, exploring romantic villages such as Serralunga, Sinio, Perno and Barbaresco, each one more beautiful than the last. For lunch, we were severely tempted to stop off at the elegant dining room of the imposing 11th-century Castello di Grinzane Cavour, which has just hired Alessandro Buglione, a brilliant young chef who trained under Ferran Adrià - of El Bulli fame - and where, miraculously, a gourmet meal will set you back less than €40.

But sitting in a smart restaurant with wine waiters hovering around is not really what Piedmont is all about, so instead, we managed to get the last table in the rustic La Briccola in the small town of Diano D'Alba. The lively owner, Ivana Olivero, doubles as chef and sommelier and it was filled with noisy Italian families enjoying Sunday lunch. Its specialities are traditional Piedmont pasta - minuscule homemade ravioli del plin cooked in butter and rosemary, and tajarin, delicious wafer-thin noodles smothered in a rich meat ragù

We finally made it to Barolo before everything closed. The town is dominated by an enormous castle that has been transformed into the Enoteca Regionale del Barolo, perfect for tasting a wide selection of the region's wines, which you can buy to take home.

There are dozens of agriturismi in the area, but nobody pampers their guests quite like the friendly owners of Cascina del Monastero. Beppe Grasso loves to uncork bottles of his excellent wines before dinner, while at breakfast his wife, Velda, puts on a feast of homemade jams, farm-cured sausages and hams, and more than 15 cheeses. And this year they have just finished transforming a barn into a spa and wellness centre that offers a variety of treatments, including vinotherapy.

While Langhe is almost totally devoted to growing grapes, with practically every hillside covered with vines, the landscape altered dramatically the moment we crossed over the Tanaro river and entered Roero. Vines are still cultivated here - excellent white wines are made from the local Arneis and Favorita grapes - but the panorama is far more varied, ranging from dense woods and forests that hide elusive truffles and wild mushrooms, to fields planted with crops and grazing land for cattle. The prized hazelnut orchards send their harvest straight to factories in Alba, which churn out Ferrero Rocher chocolates and children's favourite Nutella.

We already knew where we were staying for our first night here: Casa Scaparone, an eco-friendly agriturismo run by the charismatic Battista Cornaglia, an ardent Piedmont nationalist who is farmer, winemaker, poet and musician. It could scarcely be more rustic - the children of families staying here get to feed the animals and watch the goats being milked; Battista threatened to drive us around the countryside in his horse and carriage.

At night, the place is transformed into a magical restaurant, with a menu of food and wine that is all produced on the farm. Battista's wife, Alessandra, conjures up a gargantuan eight-course menu for €28, and the night ends in the early hours with a raucous concert by Battista and his friends.

If Langhe still hasn't been overrun by tourists, Roero is even more unspoilt. The region's capital, Canale, is little more than a sleepy backwater, so we didn't spend much time there, apart from popping into another of the enoteche regionali to taste some of the local vintages. The signora serving the wines told us we would have no problem finding a bargain-priced trattoria in the surrounding countryside, and suggested we head for Castellinaldo, an imposing fortified town atop a tall hill.

This place is well-known to locals as the home of a somewhat eccentric version of the French game of boules. The balls used are cube-shaped - a Roero tradition developed to cope with the extremely steep streets of most villages in the region. Sadly there wasn't a game on the day that we visited, but from our elevated position, we soon spied the Ristorante Mongallegto, sitting on another hilltop right opposite Castellinaldo.

We had already had some memorable meals in Piedmont, but this one was exceptional. Its misto piemontese classico, a huge serving of traditional antipasti, turned out to be a meal in itself - savoury stuffed cabbage, rabbit rillettes, anchovies with a garlicky parsley sauce, veal tongue braised with tomatoes, vitello tonnato, roasted onions - all for the grand sum of €12. It was tempting afterwards to just book a room for a siesta, as Mongallegto is a hotel too, but we decided to drive on towards Govone, where we were planning to spoil ourselves for a last night in Sogni e Tulipani, a plush boutique bed and breakfast.

Before arriving in Govone we made a detour to the bustling market town of San Damiano d'Asti, which boasts the splendid 17th-century church of Saints Cosma and Damiano, so ornately baroque that it could be in Mexico rather than Piedmont. The main street here is lined with shady medieval porticos and tempting boutiques, including the art nouveau Pasticceria Povero, an old-fashioned cake shop and bar.

Govone itself is home to probably the most sumptuous castle in Roero, a mini Versailles filled with frescoes, glittering crystal chandeliers, marble statues and a series of opulent salons decorated with rare silk Chinese tapestries.

Sogni e Tulipani is in the centre of town, and in contrast to the more rural style of most agriturismi, is in a splendid mansion that has been beautifully renovated by Margherita and Maurizio Minasso, two local teachers who both speak good English. They are a mine of information about the region, and adore pampering their guests, telling us to be sure to have an appetite for breakfast as they love to bake cakes, puddings and focaccia bread each morning.

Each guest suite includes a cosy salon with marble fireplace and comfy sofa, and the day ends with our hosts popping open a bottle of chilled spumante, sitting out in their ornate Italianate garden, with vistas over the Roero countryside.

Getting there

How to get there

Easyjet (easyjet.com) and Ryanair (ryanair.com) together fly from nine UK airports to Turin, where Carrentals.co.uk offers car hire from around £24 per day.

Where to stay

Casa Scaparone, Scaparone; 00 39 0173 33946; casascaparone.it; doubles from €85.

B&B Sogni e Tulipani, Govone; 00 39 0173 58130; sognietulipani.it; from €120.

Cascina del Monastero, La Morra, 00 39 0173 509245; cascinadelmonastero.it; from €85. **La Casa in Collina**, Canelli; 00 39 0141 822827; casaincollina.com; from €100.

Where to eat

L'Osteria del Teatro, Via Govone Generale, Alba; 00 39 0173 34231. **Albergo**

Mongalletto, Via Priocca, Castellinaldo; 00 39 0173 213251. **La Briccola**, Via

Farinetti, Diano d'Alba; 00 39 0173 468513. **Ristorante al Castello**, Via del Castello, Grinzane Cavour; 00 39 0173 262172.

Four more gourmet driving tours

Seafood tour of Scotland

The Western Highlands are world-famous for their seafood: fresh langoustines and lobsters, scallops and prawns. McKinlay Kidd (0844 804 0020; seescotlanddifferently.co.uk) offers a five-day tour of the area, beginning with a ferry journey from Glasgow across to the Isle of Bute. You spend time in Loch Linnie - famed for its oysters - before heading on up to Gairloch. There is more to the trip than just the sumptuous seafood: cookery lessons and the chance to go on a fishing trip (and eat what you catch) are also included. From £479 B&B, not including car hire.

Truffle hunting in Istria

The Istrian peninsula is Croatia's answer to Tuscany, and among its lush hills are woodlands studded with truffles, farms that produce fantastic olive oils and cheeses, and prsut - Istria's equivalent of prosciutto. The tourist board produces maps for an Olive Oil Route, and a Wine Route, and many of the producers offer free tastings and tours. Hidden Croatia (020 7594 0609; hidden-croatia.com) can tailor-make a week's self-drive, including car hire and accommodation from £732. More info: istria-gourmet.com.

Gourmet green Spain

The city of Bilbao, with its endless bodegas, offering pinxtos (the local equivalent of tapas) is the starting point for a self-drive tour into the provinces of La Rioja and Asturias, staying in atmospheric country inns that specialise in superb local cuisine. La Rioja is famous for serrano ham, chorizo and menestras - traditional vegetable stews - as well as its wines, and visits to local producers can be included in the itinerary. From £942 for eight days, including ferry crossings, through Inntravel (01653 617906; inntravel.co.uk).

Taste the Isle of Wight

It may not be one of the world's leading gourmet destinations, but the island is packed with vineyards, specialist food producers, farmers' markets and gastropubs. All are linked on the Wight Taste Trail, a downloadable map marked with all the best foodie stops, produced by ferry operator Wightlink (wightlink.co.uk), which offers return crossings from £35.

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