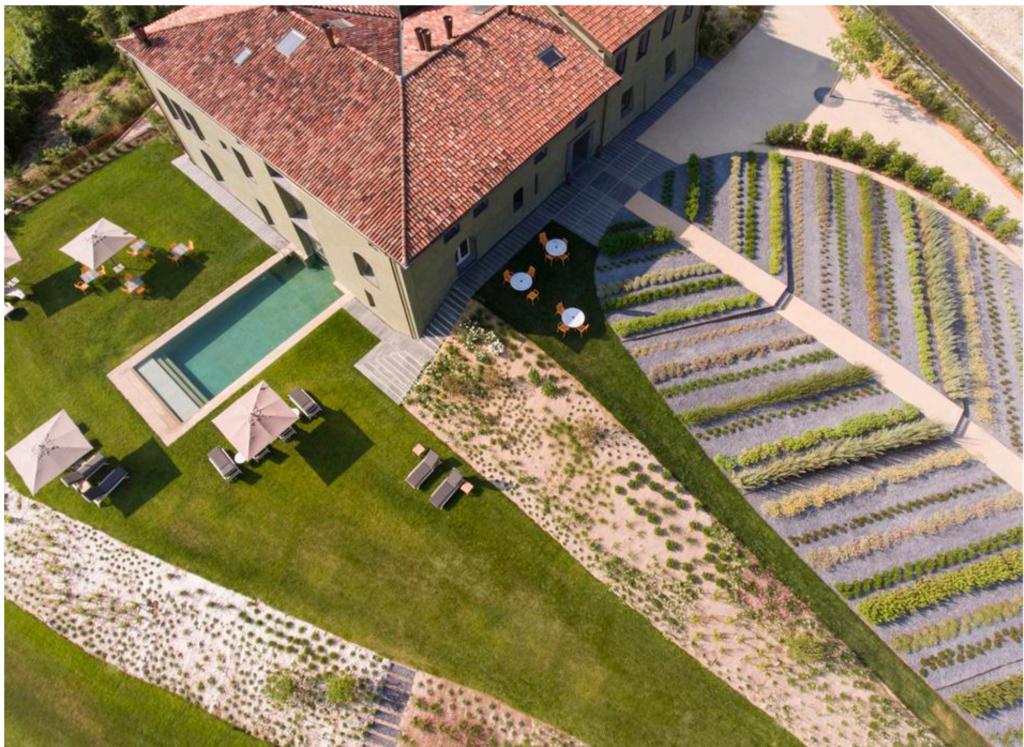


## Destination Spirits: This 12-Room Italian Boutique Creates Biodynamic Wines Worth Traveling For

By Jillian Dara | July 15, 2021

In the heart of Piemonte—one of Italy’s top white wine appellations—a 12-room luxury boutique hotel, known as Locanda La Raia, welcomes guests to experience their biodynamic farm and winery that encompasses 440-acres of private estate.

“*Locanda* means an Italian place where people stop,” explains Piero Rossi Cairo, owner of Locanda La Raia. “The building is an old post office, where people would stop and change horses then continue their travels, usually to Genoa from Milan, in the 19th century.” Nowadays, the hotel is one hour from each city’s international airport, respectively.



LOCANDA LA RAIA

Rossi Cairo's family purchased the first of the farmlands and vineyards that comprise of La Raia in 2002. The immediate intention was to convert the land from conventional to biological farming through biodynamic intervention. La Raia became organic certified in 2005 and was biodynamic certified by 2007. "Biodynamic is our mantra; to try to preserve the fertility of the soil and produce something that lasts," says Rossi Cairo, who explains that during the early days, a new cellar was built in natural materials, the land rotation was restarted, and rearing at pasture was reintroduced. He adds that these techniques have allowed the complete recovery of this terroir's peculiarity.

In 2012, the family purchased another plot of land to recover. This land also happened to include a building, which unknown at the time was the old post office. Now repurposed as Locanda La Raia, the edifice gave the family a chance to create a historic, intimate accommodation on the estate, or as Rossi Cairo refers to it, a second home for guests, which permits the family to "show guests what they do, not just tell them."

"We wanted to open our doors to make people understand our job is not just a mission to produce good crops and good wine, but also to respect and valorize the landscape," explains Rossi Cairo, who adds that if guests only stop by for 30 minutes, it's difficult to understand the explicit purpose and resident traditions that his family is upholding with La Raia. "We wanted people to not just come over for a tasting but also to spend a night at our estate, to walk around, to pop in the cellar unannounced, and to experience what it means to be part of our estate."

Though the most historic part of the property is the Locanda itself, some of the vines—growing the regional Cortese grape—date back 70 years. Today, La Raia uses these grapes to produce three types of Gavi D.O.C.G. (white variety), including Gavi, Gavi Riserva Vigna della Madonnina and Gavi Pisé, of which some bottles are only available on property to guests, as well as two red varieties of Barbera D.O.C.

Below, Rossi Cairo explains more about repurposing the vineyards and why onsite wine experiences, including education about biodynamic farming, are existential to the future of wine.



Piero Rossi Cairo of Locanda La Raia | LOCANDA LA RAI A

**Dara:** What about the hotel is most unique to the vineyard it's on?

**Rossi Cairo:** It's unique because it's restoring something that was already there. It's interesting to see how many people stop at Locanda La Raia, who were not planning to stop, simply because it's on the way—now the road which goes past Locanda is not the road which people used to take when traveling from Milan to Genoa by horse but we have a highway not far away—for a night of rest and a good meal. For this reason, we wanted to make Locanda feel like your second house; not like a structured hotel, but rather cozy and welcome in a small environment.

**Dara:** Was the vineyard producing wines for retail when you purchased it in 2002?

**Rossi Cairo:** When my dad bought it in 2002, the previous owner had vines but was not selling bottles of wine, he was selling the wine in bulk. The big challenge was then to

develop the La Raia brand as a wine producer, little by little, because the commercial and the farming side of this business is very slow. I come from a corporate office where all business transactions occur in a second; farming is different, you work with bare bones, variables you can't control like sun and rain. At first, it's frustrating but then life-changing—I develop value not for someone else but for myself and my family. Even if it's very slow, I'm developing something that will remain.

**Dara:** Is there a proprietary wine label that can only be enjoyed with a stay at the hotel?

**Rossi Cairo:** For guests of the hotel, we offer Gavi without added sulfites, which we do not export; it's a very delicate wine. Locanda is the only restaurant in Italy [and the world, apart from Japan] where it's possible to taste this wine. We also offer a chance to taste different vintages of Pisé wine for which we use stainless steel, without any age in oak, so it does age quite well in bottles. We're not afraid of letting the bottle age five to ten years, so we offer guests the opportunity to taste how the wine evolves by using Coravin. We're currently selling 2017 vintages, but can go back to 2007 for guests on property—I love a little oxidation in wines but it's personal.

**Dara:** Are there any other exclusive wine experiences available for guests?

**Rossi Cairo:** There are several different [wine tours](#), including a new offering which includes a wine tasting, of course, followed by lunch at Locanda La Raia's [in-house restaurant](#). On the new light lunch and tasting tour, the afternoon includes a tasting of three La Raia labels along with local cured meats, cheeses and our honeys, followed by a lunch inspired by the region's tradition at Locanda La Raia. We can also organize more articulated tastings in the Gavi and Langhe regions, with the Nebbiolos and Barolos produced in the organic farm [Tenuta Cucco](#) at Serralunga d'Alba.



LOCANDA LA RAIA

**Dara:** Who did you work with to launch the hotel and restaurant?

**Rossi Cairo:** It's all in the family—my dad has a passion for interior design so every room was designed by him. He went on tour for six months to every small antique market to choose all the furniture, which is typical of Piemonte; the hotel is the jewel of his jewels.

Locanda La Raia's in-house restaurant is led by [Tommaso Arrigoni](#), chef of the one Michelin-starred and Milan-based [Innocenti Evasioni Gourmet Factory](#). Tommaso was first a consultant to develop the furniture of the kitchen of Locanda, then he developed the menu and now visits every two to three weeks.

**Dara:** Why do you think it's so important to offer this type of boutique accommodation for guests?

**Rossi Cairo:** Producing good wine has become a commodity; simply producing wine is not enough anymore. Nowadays, you need to offer much more, you need to offer an experience, which comes together with the wine. The idea of making Locanda an experience came when I went to Napa Valley and was tasting in a winery. I had to book in advance, my tasting was three shots of Chardonnay and 15 minutes of a speech, then over to the next guest; I felt like an animal in a cage. I thought, ‘we need to offer a real experience to make people feel what we do and the difference we’re trying to make here.’

The greatest happiness comes when guests visit for a tasting that should take 30 or 60 minutes, but lasts for two hours and all get tipsy together. A long-term impression requires time and work.

**Dara:** Do you see a shift in guest's demand when it comes to wine offerings?

**Rossi Cairo:** We offer a small selection of the most popular wine producing regions of Italy [on our menu] but we’ve seen even more attention to the products that are local. The guests who stop at Locanda, while at first would also be drinking wines from the south, or other regions, now want something that is an expression of the state they’re staying at even more.

*Link:* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jilliandara/2021/07/15/destination-spirits-this-12-room-italian-boutique-creates-biodynamic-wines-worth-traveling-for/?sh=44e0a9e81298>