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In the Groove

Apr 2022, pp. 94-105

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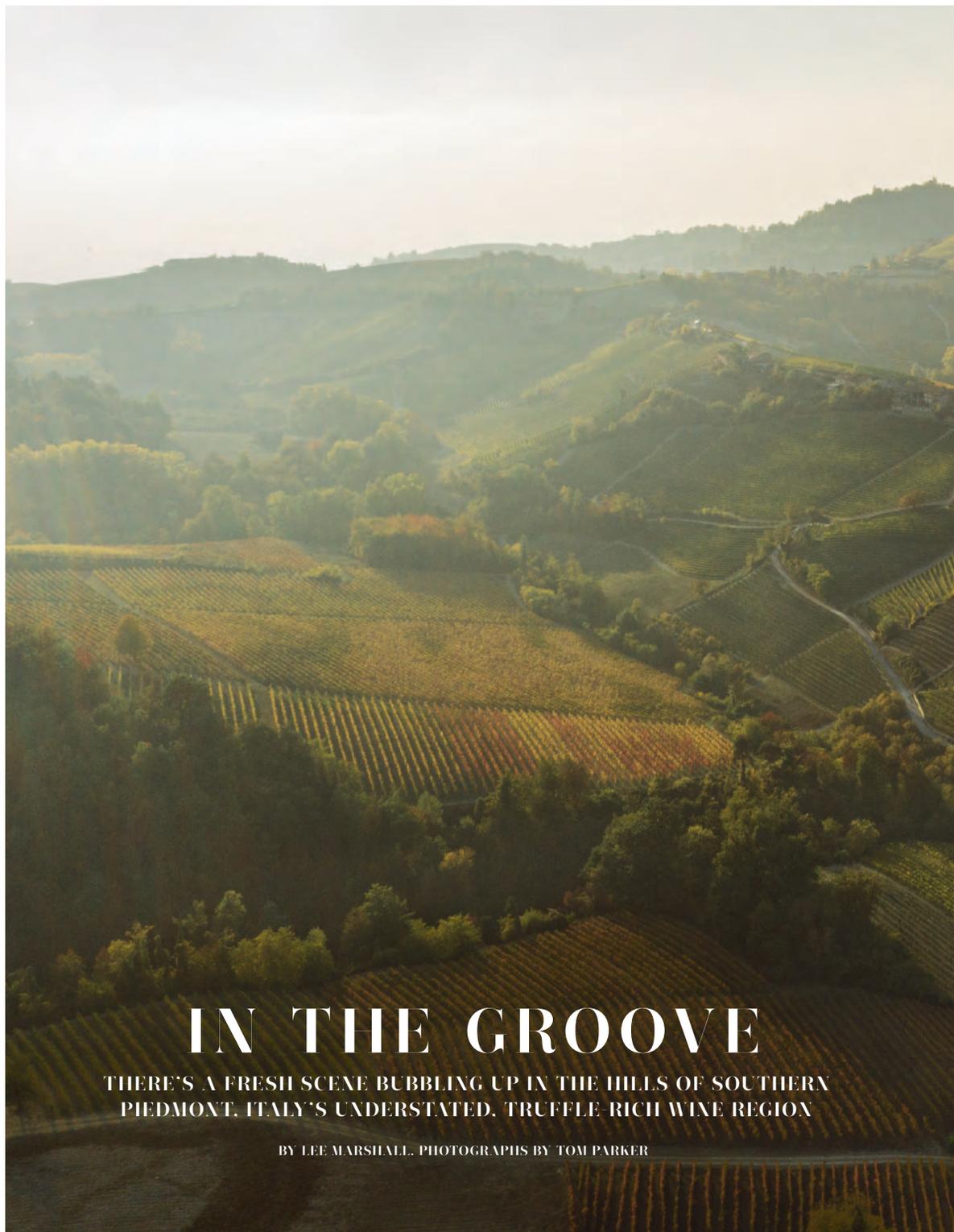
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IN THE GROOVE

THERE'S A FRESH SCENE BUBBLING UP IN THE HILLS OF SOUTHERN
PIEDMONT, ITALY'S UNDERSTATED, TRUFFLE-RICH WINE REGION

BY LEE MARSHALL. PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM PARKER

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CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER UK

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IM IN A MISTY WOOD in 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 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 something surprising. It was his grandmother, he explains, who first took him out looking for prized white *tartufi* in the woods of Le Langhe, sparking a lifelong passion. These days truffle hunting is an almost exclusively male preserve, but back then, at least in his family, it was mostly the women who went out looking for mushrooms and truffles while the men were at work. Back in the kitchen, white truffles that today command hundreds of euros at Alba's annual international truffle fair would be thrown into a minestrone 'to give it a bit more flavour'.

Handfuls of *tartufi bianchi* tossed 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 city folk but an essential survival tool. Shortly after the end of World War II, two seminal novels by Langhe-born writers – Cesare Pavese's *The Moon and the Bonfire* and Beppe Fenoglio's *Ruin* – dwelt on the hardship of life in the region. Many rural Piedmontese emigrated to the USA or Argentina; others took a shorter but no less life-changing journey to work in the factories of Turin.

TWO CURLY-HAIRED DOGS FALL OVER EACH OTHER IN THEIR SEARCH FOR THAT ELUSIVE SCENT

And yet today, this UNESCO-listed area of outstanding natural beauty rivals the hills of Chianti as a poster child for the good life. The manicured vineyards of Barolo and Barbaresco turn out some of Italy's most highly prized red wines. A glance at the latest Italian edition of the Michelin guide reveals a nebula of stars within a 15-mile radius of Alba: 22 at the last count, spread over 20 restaurants. No other part of the Italian countryside has so many in such a small area. And southern Piedmont is finally getting there on the accommodation front, too.

Until a few years back, if you wanted to stay here you mostly had to choose between old-fashioned castle conversions full of grandma's furniture, or functional modern hotels geared towards those working in the wine trade. When it opened in 2002, stylish country-house hotel Relais San Maurizio, in Santo Stefano Belbo, was among the first to offer the kind of retreat one might expect at a French vineyard. Others slowly followed, including two big openings last year: the Alpine-chic Casa di Langa and Nordelaia, a boutique stay in a coolly converted farmhouse. (Paradoxically, it's Turin, the region's fascinating capital, that is now lagging behind, with few really persuasive places to stay).

The jumping-off point for the Langhe and Roero wine regions is the market town of Alba. Its pugnacious skyline bristles with medieval towers, but at ground level it's all boutiques, wine bars and delis. Nearby Bra – another of those neat Piedmontese towns that somehow manages to transmit flowery charm and a nose for business in equal measure – is the headquarters of the Slow Food movement, which was founded here in the 1980s to defend the local culinary culture.

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 wine



From above: the Barolo Chapel by Sol LeWitt and David Tremlett; chefs and dish of beetroot, quince and cheese at Nordelaia. Opposite, clockwise from top left: chapel of Relais San Maurizio, painted by Tremlett; dining table at Relais San Maurizio; home of Claudia Zunino, Lunetta 11 art gallery owner; Palazzo del Comune, a public building in Alba; bedroom at Nordelaia. Previous pages, countryside near Monforte d'Alba



CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER UK

In the Groove

Apr 2022, pp. 94-105



From above: Guido Ristorante in Fontanafredda; smoked trout at Relais San Maurizio; truffle hunter near Casa di Langa. Opposite, clockwise from top left: town of La Morra; winemakers Roberta Ceretto and Giuseppe Blengini; ravioli *del pin* at Guido Ristorante; lobby at Locanda La Raia



producer, soon setting up a business using grapes from local 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 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, Ceretto asked colour-obsessed American artist Sol LeWitt and British artist David Tremlett to turn 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 dance is now such an Instagram star that the council has been forced to ban weekend private traffic on the narrow gravel road that leads there. 'It has become a symbol of the territory', says Roberta, 'and yet when we unveiled it we got a lot of flak from the locals.'

More Ceretto-commissioned art is on view at the winery's three-Michelin-starred Piazza Duomo restaurant in the centre of Alba, where chef Enrico Crippa's dishes are almost overshadowed by the pink frescoed walls, with birdcage motifs by Francesco Clemente. Meanwhile, Tremlett, who describes himself as 'a sculptor who paints walls', has left his mark on three other former religious buildings in the Langhe and Monferrato wine zones. These include the church of Beata Maria

IF TUSCANY IS GREGARIOUS AND PROUD, PIEDMONT IS RESERVED AND MARKED BY FAMILY LOYALTIES

Vergine del Carmine, outside the village of Coazzolo, its exterior now a freeform play of wine-dark reds, ochre yellows and moss greens.

Further south, in one of the remotest corners of the wooded Alta Langhe, art gallery Lunetta 11 occupies most of Borgata Lunetta, a beautifully unreconstructed rural hamlet. Young co-directors 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 organises 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 the owner's collection of Arte Povera pieces from the 1960s and 70s. Zunino stresses that they are not 'importing culture' so much as reviving it in an area dotted with ancient chapels and churches.

Southern Piedmont has opened up plenty in the last couple of decades – to art, to 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 to Nutella, Alba's sweet gift to the world, it has a shell that can be hard to crack. If Tuscany's wine regions are proud but 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 recognises – and relishes. He's one of the few outsiders to have gained entry into the world of Barolo wine-making. A restaurateur from Denver with a passion for Nebbiolo (the grape variety that is the sole component of Barolo and Barbaresco), he started visiting Piedmont in 1995 and moved here 11 years ago, determined to break into the local wine scene. 'I knocked on a lot of doors,' he tells me. Eventually, one opened. Producer Luciano Sandrone,

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CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER UK

In the Groove

Apr 2022, pp. 94-105



CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER UK

In the Groove

Apr 2022, pp. 94-105

TOWNS HERE MANAGE TO TRANSMIT FLOWERY
CHARM AND A NOSE FOR BUSINESS IN EQUAL MEASURE



Rooftops of Monforte d'Alba.
Opposite, Origins Bistro at
Relais San Maurizio

CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER UK

In the Groove

Apr 2022, pp. 94-105



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In the Groove

Apr 2022, pp. 94–105

one of the pioneering ‘Barolo Boys’ who in the 1980s and 90s 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 a bit like Keith Richards saying, “Come round to my place and I’ll teach you to play guitar,”’ says Manley. It was an adventure that led him, in 2015, to establish his microwinery, Margherita Otto, in the village of Monforte d’Alba.

Manley has finally achieved what counts for acceptance round 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.

His story is a neat metaphor for a serious 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. 📍

THE LOWDOWN.

WHERE TO STAY

LANGHE AND AROUND Cerretto Langhe’s **Casa di Langa** takes hospitality to another level. From the outside, it feels a little like the prow of a huge ship about to set sail over vineyards towards the snow-capped mountains that shimmer on the horizon. The 39 spacious bedrooms are suitably Alpine, with natural wood, stone and unbleached textiles. In the panoramic Faula restaurant, the American owner’s contemporary art collection jostles with chef Manuel Bouchard’s deft riffs on the Piedmontese recipe book. The local wine tasting with head sommelier Pier Francesco Molinari is an essential primer. *Doubles from about £390; casadilinga.com*

With their mid-century-modern touches, the 10 bedrooms at stylish mini-resort **Arborina Relais**, overlooking one of Barolo’s most celebrated vineyards, make for a sleek base in La Morra. Many stay here just for the fixed-price menus at the Osteria Arborina restaurant, presided over by Enrico Marmo, a rising star with a militant zero-kilometre commitment to local ingredients. *Doubles from about £240; arborinarelais.it*

When it opened in 2002, **Relais San Maurizio** was Le Langhe’s first true high-end country-house hotel. The 17th-century monastery conversion in Santo Stefano Belbo is still one of the area’s most elegant boltholes, kept in the running by a Michelin-starred restaurant with a best-in-class *vittello tonnato*, a magnificent rock-hewn spa and an impressive contemporary art collection. *Doubles from about £290; relaissanmaurizio.it*

ACQUI TERME TO GAVI New in 2021, converted farmhouse **Nordelaia**, in Cremolino, makes a good case for a stay in a relatively undiscovered part of southern Piedmont. Its peach-pink villa has been turned into a dozen crisp rooms with a hammam spa and glassy dining annexe, where British chef Charles Pearce works creative magic on simple dishes such as an umami-packed cheese and onion tart. *Doubles from about £250; nordelaia.com*

If you can get beyond the bracing moss-green exterior, Gavi’s **Locanda La Raia** really channels the quirky appeal of the south-eastern, almost-in-Liguria corner of Piedmont. A revamped 12-bedroom coaching inn, it mixes retro-modern design with country comfort. *Doubles from about £230; la-raia.it*



From above: tasting room and rows of vines at Cerretto. Opposite, clockwise from top left: dish of hazelnut, white chocolate and coffee at Nordelaia; Alba cathedral; lighting at Nordelaia; chill-out pod at Relais San Maurizio; café in Alba; wine cellar at Cerretto



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CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER UK

In the Groove

Apr 2022, pp. 94–105

WHERE TO EAT

LANGHE AND AROUND **Piazza Duomo** in Alba is the culinary Everest of this area, where wiry chef Enrico Crippa (he's a keen cyclist) shuns à la carte in favour of guided menus whose dishes have names such as Journey through History. It's a thrilling trip, based on produce that arrives from the restaurant's own farm twice a day. *Fixed-price menu from about £225 per person; piazzaduomoalba.it*

For one of the best-value meals in the region, head to **Borgo Sant'Anna** in Monforte d'Alba (and locals know it, so book well in advance). In an airy pavilion amid Barolo vineyards, chef Pasquale Laera juggles the culinary heritage of his native Puglia with Piedmontese traditions and ingredients. Unusually, seafood gets equal billing with meat, as in a wonderful antipasto of baby squid, watermelon, confit tomatoes and tangy passion-fruit seeds. *About £85 for two; borgosantanna.it*

Guido Ristorante takes up 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 locals who look like extras from a Fellini film. Among the textbook versions of Piedmontese classics don't miss the meltingly good *tortelli di seirass* (buttery pasta parcels filled with a local ricotta-like cheese), served with a grated snowfall of white truffle. *About £80 for two; guidoristorante.it*

A no-nonsense regional trattoria with a pretty inner courtyard, **Battaglino** in Bra is an institution in the town that gave Slow Food to the world. Go for reliable classics such as mincemeat-stuffed *agnolotti del plin* – although it also offers at least a couple of daily vegan or vegetarian options. *About £50 for two; ristorantebattaglino.it*

ACQUI TERME TO GAVI Not so much destination restaurant as destination trattoria, **Da Fausto** is a delightful, family-run place a few miles south of Acqui that serves a mix of good, seasonal Piedmontese and Ligurian specialities. It's set in a restored stone farmhouse, with a terrace and four bright and simple bedrooms for those who want to linger. *About £60 for two; relaisborgodelgallo.it*

WHERE TO DRINK

LANGHE AND AROUND It's the setting as much as the Barolos that makes a tasting at **Ceretto**, one of Le Langhe's most dynamic wineries, a must. Design and contemporary art riff engagingly off one another at this company HQ amid the vines. *ceretto.com*

In complete contrast is **Castello di Verduno**, a historic, female-run winery offering a glimpse into an older world of Barolo production. This is 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 Specialising in white wines based on the Cortese grape, **La Raia** is a gorgeously landscaped biodynamic winery in Gavi. Visit for the twice-daily tastings and tours, which also take in part of the estate's site-specific contemporary art collection. *la-raia.it*

From top right: Claudia Zunino; bedroom at Nordelaia; exterior of Guido Ristorante. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Zunino's home; duck with sour cherries and saffron at Guido Ristorante; gardener at Casa di Langa; Guido da Costigliole restaurant at Relais San Maurizio

