

# FOOD *and* TRAVEL

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Clockwise from top: Villa Sparina vineyards; the family behind Trattoria Pessenti; gnocchi al pesto at La Gallina; cortese grapes ready to harvest; linguine with smoked butter and lobster

## FOOD & WINE TRAILS OF ITALY

### NO.1 GAVI, PIEDMONT

From the far north to the toe of the boot and into the islands, there's a distinct flavour to every small pocket of Italy, often led by a great wine. This five-part series will take you on the ultimate gastronomic road trips

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## Food and Travel

### Food & Wine Trails of Italy

#### August 2022

The breeze picks up in the late afternoon, mitigating the summer heat. The vibrant green, sun-drenched expanse of vineyards undulates in the wind. 'It's the *Marin* blowing from the coast,' smiles Simona Bergaglio of boutique winery La Chiara, as she pours some straw-coloured Gavi into our wine glasses. 'You can feel the sea in the air. And in the bottle, as well.'

This is a corner of south-eastern Piedmont, much closer to Genoa and the Italian Riviera than the Alps, whose snow-capped peaks are only a distant backdrop on clear days. Nicknamed Gavishire after its most famous export, it's a land of gentle hills where vineyards alternate with hazelnut groves, poplar forests and oak trees, separated from the Mediterranean by the sudden harshness of the Ligurian Apennines. Suspended as it is between Piedmont and Liguria, it has that certain allure of border areas. 'The peculiarities of this small territory are all reflected in our wine,' continues Simona. 'From the proximity to the sea to the temperature fluctuation between night and day, which helps Gavi achieve its exquisite acidity and flavour concentration.'

Together with brother Dario, she is the third generation running La Chiara. Looking at their bright, modern space and design-led tasting room, you'd never be able to tell that some 50 years ago her father and grandfather started from scratch, on the strength of a long-standing farming tradition and a tight family bond. Produced entirely with cortese grapes, an autochthonous variety cultivated in these hills for at least four centuries, Gavi is also the result of the area's fascinating history. It's a land of transition – the via Francigena

from Canterbury to Rome passes through here, after all, and so does the Salt Road, a trade route twisting and turning from the Alps to the Ligurian sea. Gavi gave birth to a white wine in a region famous for its reds. The reason? A need to quench the thirst of Genoese aristocracy, as well as being the perfect complement to a diet that consisted mainly of fish and vegetables.

Most of the wineries in the area are scattered along the Lomellina Wine Route (SP158). Some are now superb wine resorts, offering everything from accommodation to gourmet food. Such is the case with La Gallina, Villa Sparina's fine-dining restaurant – chef Graziano Caccioppoli is the new kid on the block to look out for. Recently joining the team from Michelin-starred San Giorgio in Genoa, he has a remarkable portfolio under his belt, from Cannavacciolo's Villa Crespi to Mizuki in Kyoto. His love of *kaiseki*, Japan's multi-course haute cuisine, is reflected in the minimalistic excellence of his dishes. His low-temperature salted cod with green apple, almond and asparagus is a delicate – yet impeccable – example of his cuisine, and so is the crispy foie gras, whose firm, smooth texture is beautifully balanced by a delicious combination of sweet-and-sour cherries and laurel extract. His version of *gnocchi al pesto*, where the pesto sauce is hidden inside large potato gnocchi, is elegant cuisine at its finest: understandable to everyone and incredibly surprising at the same time. The estate's award-winning wines are a great accompaniment to every dish, and the aged ones particularly so – they amaze with freshness and minerality despite several years in the bottle. —————>>



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Clockwise, from top left: Broglia estate; ravioli, Il Moro; its historic register; owners Simona and Claudio; La Chiara winery; lunch at Villa La Bollina; Acqua Amara springs; tasting at La Chiara; Cantine del Gavi; wine o'clock; Cantine del Gavi gardens; cortese grapes; the little town of Voltaggio; seafood soup at Tracce



WINETRAILS

## THE ROUTE

### Day 1 Novi Ligure to Tassarolo

Retrace the area's noble past. Take a walk along Novi Ligure main street and marvel at its trompe l'oeil palaces. Visit the Oratorio di Santa Maria Maddalena (open on Saturdays and on *prefestivi* – the days before bank holidays – from 6pm) and don't forget to stock up on chocolate from Bodrato, a synonym for excellence since 1943. Then head south to Tassarolo, a sleepy village dominated by the oldest castle of the area, property of the Spinola family.

### Day 2 Gavi

Take time to explore the city, visiting the Romanesque church of San Giacomo and walking all the way up to its formidable fortress (guided tours are available). Drive to nearby Santuario della Madonna della Guardia, with sweeping views over the surrounding countryside. And make sure to try the ravioli and amaretti, two of the most delicious local specialities.

### Day 3 Libarna to Voltaggio

Explore the little-known archaeological site of Libarna, an ancient Roman city founded in the 2nd century BC. The amphitheatre, a few segments of city streets and a Greek-style theatre survived the passing of time (Tue–Sat, 9am–3.45pm). In the afternoon, trace your steps back to Gavi and head south to the small town of Voltaggio. Crossed by four rivers, it features a natural pool right in the town centre, perfect for a refreshing swim on hot summer days. The local art gallery – housed in a 17th-century capuchin convent – offers a collection of 150 paintings of sacred art from the 15th to the 18th century. Open on Sundays, July–Sept (free entrance).

### Day 4 Trek along the Gorzente river

Plan for a light trek along the Gorzente, right at the core of the Parco Naturale delle Capanne di Marcarolo, a natural reserve in the Apennine mountains between Piedmont and Liguria. You can walk upstream and reach the peaks of Monte Tobbio, or head downstream towards the Lavagnina lakes. Take your swimsuit along with you – the river forms plenty of small, natural pools whose emerald-green waters are perfect for a refreshing dip.

### Day 5 Hiking/biking in the Val di Lemme

With more than 80km stretching out before you, the path is perfect by foot, bike or even horseback. You'll stroll through immense stretches of plains and rolling hillsides as you admire evocative views.

dedicated Order of Knights) at Osteria Piemontemare, tucked in a side street off main via Mameli. The choice is between *al tocco*, where the 'touch' is a rich, roasted meat sauce in red wine, or the cheeky *culo nudo* (literally 'naked bottom') served with no seasoning bar a generous sprinkle of Parmigiano Reggiano. A few metres away is the unmissable Caffè del Moro, where Enrica Bassano bake their famous *amaretti* twice a week. ➔

## WHERE TO EAT

Prices are per person for a three-course meal, excluding drinks, unless otherwise stated

**Cantine del Gavi** Located in a beautiful 18th-century palace in the heart of Gavi, this is one of the region's most chic addresses. Surrounded by roses, hydrangeas and aromatic herbs, its secret garden is the perfect spot for eating alfresco – although frescoed rooms are an excellent alternative in case of cooler weather. Their tasting menu is a gourmet journey across the area's flavours – the zucchini carpaccio with anchovies and hazelnuts is an impeccable dish that brilliantly sums up the encounter between Piedmont and Liguria. Their signature dish, risotto al Gavi with 50-month Parmigiano Reggiano, is another must-try. Make sure to pay a visit to their impressive wine cellar, carved in the thick walls of the building, which boasts more than 1,000 labels, with special attention to the greatest Piedmontese wines. Tasting menu from £51, excluding wine. Via Goffredo Mameli 69, Gavi, 00 39 0143 642458, [ristorantecantinedelgavi.it](http://ristorantecantinedelgavi.it)

**Il Moro** On the main square of lovely Capriata d'Orba, this former inn transformed into a restaurant has been run by husband-and-wife team Claudio Reboria and Simona Botteri since 1999. Pasta is rigorously handmade by Simona with her grandmother's tools – from agnolotti to corzetti novesi. Their hazelnut semifreddo with a dark chocolate sauce from Novi is worth every single calorie. They also have three rooms available, one of them equipped with a kitchenette, if you decide to overnight there (doubles from £85). From £34. Piazza Garibaldi 6, Capriata d'Orba, 00 39 0143 461 57, [ristoranteilmoro.it](http://ristoranteilmoro.it)

**La Gallina** Villa Sparina's fine dining restaurant is housed in an old hay barn surrounded by vineyards and thick woodlands. The kitchen is led by talented chef Graziano Caccioppoli, who arrived here last spring with a Michelin star under his belt. You'd be wise to let him decide everything for you via the 'Ci penso io' ('Leave it to me') seven-course menu, although the à la carte menu has plenty to choose from, including his gourmet version of gnocchi al pesto. Wash it down with the award-winning wines from Villa Sparina estate. From £50. Tasting menus from £63, excluding wine. Frazione Monterotondo 56, Gavi, 00 39 0143 685132, [villasparinaresort.it](http://villasparinaresort.it)

**Osteria Piemontemare** This is the place to try the famous ravioli di Gavi, as well as other rare finds such as *colli di gallina ripieni* (stuffed hen neck), a dish in which the less desirable parts of a chicken are skilfully transformed into a real delicacy, or the *buridda*, a Ligurian cuttlefish stew. From £30. Vico Rose 2R, Gavi, 00 39 0143 642411, [osteria.ghiovini.it](http://osteria.ghiovini.it)

**Trattoria Pessenti da Renato** At this informal trattoria run by Gianni Ghiara, wife Milena and their two children, the accent is on traditional fare. Start with *fagottini* (fried dough) with a cheese filling – typical for Liguria – served with a selection of cold cuts, and continue with a typically Piedmontese swirl of tajarin pasta in a wild boar sauce. On hot summer days, ask for the table under the leafy pergola. From £21. Località Pessenti 119, Frazione Rovereto, 00 39 0143 682147



## THE PRODUCERS

**Broglia** First mentioned in a document from 972, the vineyards of this winery are considered to be the oldest in the area. Over 1,000 years later, the estate is in the capable hands of the Broglia family, now in their third generation. Their 65ha of vineyards produce several styles of Gavi, including sparkling. For those wishing to stay longer, the property also has two houses available for short-term rent (double occupancy starting at £152). Wine tasting from £17pp. Make sure to book in advance.

*Località Lomellina 22, Gavi, 00 39 0143 642998, broglia.it*

**Castello di Tassarolo** Respect for nature and life in all its forms is what drives winemaker Massimiliana Spinola, whose estate is only a few minutes' drive from the charming village of Tassarolo. Here, everything is about biodynamic viticulture, including some beautiful French Comtois horses that replace tractors in the vineyards. Besides a tour of the premises, a visit to the medieval castle of Tassarolo – which belongs to the Spinolas – can also be arranged upon request. Aperitifs are currently held every Friday (7-10pm), taking place either on the terrace – with views of the rolling vineyards – or inside the restored barn. Advance booking is required. Wine by the glass from £4.50; wine tasting from £21. *Località Alborina 1, Tassarolo, 00 39 0143 342248, castellogditassarolo.it*

**La Chiara** A stylish boutique winery just outside the town of Gavi. The estate consists of an impressive 20ha, cultivated accordingly to the passion of the Bergaglio family and through the effort of three generations. Their clear and intense black label is the winery's flagship, made from the best Cortese grapes harvested from their oldest vineyards. Five-wine tasting, accompanied by focaccia and other local delicacies, from £21. It's best to book ahead. *Località Vallegge 24/2, Gavi, 00 39 0143 642293, lachiarait*

## WHERE TO STAY

**Locanda La Raia** Once an inn where wayfarers would stop for food and a good night's sleep, this green mansion is now a lovely wine resort of 12 rooms, each individually and tastefully furnished with a mixture of local vintage items and contemporary designer pieces. Find traditional cuisine with a twist at the in-house restaurant, with a menu signed by Michelin-starred chef Tommaso Arrigoni. A spa, a swimming pool overlooking the hills and a peaceful garden complete the list of facilities. A 20-minute walk will take you to their biodynamic farm, where you can enjoy a wine tasting. Doubles from £245, including breakfast and access to the spa. *Località Lomellina 26, Gavi, 00 39 0143 642860, la-raia.it*

**Villa La Bollina** Set in the grounds of the Serravalle Golf Club, this fine example of 19th-century Liberty architecture offers eight rooms and four large suites. The interior is grand and as elegant as you'd expect from a former aristocratic residence (it was the summer house of the noble Figari family of Genoa) – think art nouveau style, Murano glass chandeliers and marble bathrooms. The park behind the property is the perfect location for an evening drink, followed by some typical Piedmontese dishes by chef Alessandro Scardina in the in-house restaurant Tracce. Doubles from £165 including breakfast. *Via Monterotondo 60, Serravalle Scrivia, 00 39 0143 302585, hotelvillalabollina.com*

**Villa Sparina Resort** Surrounded by the vineyards of the eponymous, renowned estate, this former farmhouse is now home to a luxury hotel and restaurant La Gallina. In spacious rooms, vintage pieces and artworks from all over Europe are beautifully combined with contemporary furnishings. Among the facilities are a swimming pool, gym, Turkish bath and a massage room. The impeccable hospitality of the Moccagatta family is the icing on the cake. Doubles from £211. *Frazione Monterotondo 56, Gavi, 00 39 0143 607801, villasparinaresort.it*

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Clockwise, from top left: views over the hills of Gavi from La Gallina; the castle in the sleepy village of Tassarolo is the oldest in the area; Ligurian and Piedmontese traditions combine on the plate at Trattoria Pessenti da Renato; Tassarolo Castle's frescoes were inspired by Greek mythology; the Fort of Gavi overlooking the River Lemme; peaceful street life, San Cristoforo; wine ageing in the barrel at Tassarolo Castle; mounds of local Montébore cheese

Soft and fragrant, their peculiar three-fingered pinch closure is the giveaway of a truly homemade biscuit. Everything here speaks of the good old times, be it the wainscoting that came straight from a Genoese brothel or the yellowed posters and photographs of legendary cyclist Fausto Coppi, a native of the area.

More culinary delights await – the sleepy Capriata d'Orba is only 15 minutes away. Trattoria Il Moro, sitting on its charming main square, is the place to try little-known *corzetti novesi*. Prepared in the shape of small discs, this rare pasta is then stamped with decorative patterns that help hold the sauce. 'In the past, the aristocrats would stamp it with their own family crest,' explains Simona Botteri, who runs the restaurant with her husband, while serving up a generous portion of *corzetti* with the most delicate sauce of pine nuts and marjoram. 'Each family had their own. Mine has an ear of wheat, to pay homage to my family's farming tradition,' she adds.

Montébore cheese is another hidden treasure of the area. Spectacularly shaped like a wedding cake, its regal history goes back to medieval times, when it was regularly sent to the court in Milan as a highly-prized delicacy. Allegedly, a few cheeses adorned the wedding banquet of Isabel of Aragon and Gian Galeazzo Sforza in 1489 – a marriage organised by Leonardo da Vinci himself. In recent times, passionate cheesemakers like Milena Coccon from Cascina Boschetto have resumed its production. As you drive past busy Serravalle Scrivia (home to a popular outlet and a golf course) and continue along the SP135, Milena's farm is a short diversion uphill and a blissful haven of peace. Aside from the noisy bunch of geese that might welcome your arrival, that is.

Castles are a recurrent landmark of wanderings here. Many started as watchtowers – a veritable network of them, all the way to Liguria, created to warn of potential threats coming from the sea. The

## FOOD GLOSSARY

**Amaretti di Gavi** Gavi's traditional biscuits. Almonds, sugar, egg whites and honey make up a recipe that dates back to the late 18th century

**Bacio di Dama Novese** Small hazelnut and almond cookies. Their romantic name is owed to the shape of the two halves of cookies, held together by a layer of chocolate, reminiscent of two mouths kissing. The ingredients are the same as those of the hazelnut and almond cake that has been popular in the Piedmontese countryside since the 19th century. The invention of these peculiar biscuits is attributed to Novi Ligure pastry chef Augusto Manelli

**Buridda** A traditional seafood stew or soup, originally from Genoa, made with mushrooms and cuttlefish

**Cortese** The white grape variety behind the wines of Gavi. Grown almost exclusively in Italy (their cultivation taking up almost 300ha), just under 90 per cent of this variety can be found in Piedmont, where it's been cultivated for at least four centuries – the remainder is grown in Oltrepò Pavese, near Custoza in Veneto. You might also find some bottles from Australia and California

**Corzetti Novesi** A round, handmade pasta variety, typical of Novi Ligure. Shaped into small wafer-thin discs, each piece is stamped individually with decorative patterns, which help keep the filling inside

**Montébore** One of Italy's rarest cheeses, first produced in the ninth century. Made of a mixture of raw cow and sheep's milk, it comes hard or medium-hard, as well as more or less pungent, depending on its ageing

**Mandilli de Sea** A thin, lasagne-like pasta served with a classic pestle-and-mortar pesto sauce. Originally from Genoa, the layers are so fine that the squares of pasta have been nicknamed 'silk handkerchiefs'

**Ravioli di Gavi** Stuffed pasta made in the area since the 12th century. A thin layer of pasta encloses a rich filling of beef, sausages, eggs, parmesan, escarole, endive and borage and is served in a variety of ways; *al tocco*, a rich roasted meat sauce, in red wine or *a culo nudo*, (literally 'naked bottom'), laid on a linen cloth with no seasoning but a sprinkle of Parmigiano Reggiano. Ravioli di Gavi is regulated and protected by a dedicated Order of Knights

imposing castle of Tassarolo, dominating the small village with the same name, is the oldest of the area, dating back to the 11th century. 'The Spinolas acquired it in the 1200s,' says Massimiliana, a descendant of the art-loving family who were to Genoa what the Medicis were to Florence. After many years between London and New York, Massimiliana came back to her roots and started to produce biodynamic wines, aged in barrel or in large terracotta amphorae. Her French Comtois horses work the garden, the wood and the vineyard, in accordance with her life philosophy of deep respect for the natural world. 'When I moved back, it felt like having a piece of marble in my hands. I could shape it into whatever I wanted,' she explains, looking at the green sea of vineyards from her terrace. 'I projected my values on to this land. And, yes, I like to think I found my purpose here.' □

For information on food and wine trails of Italy, visit [italia.it/en](http://italia.it/en)  
Next issue's trail: Custoza, Veneto

