

ON WINE / LETTIE TEAGUE



Why Oenophiles Flock to A Foggy Corner of Italy

The first in a three-part series on wines in Italy's Piedmont.

It's rainy, it's foggy, its roads feature tight switchbacks that can be a challenge to drive, and yet it's a hugely popular destination, especially right now, during white truffle season.

The Langhe, in the Piedmont region of northwest Italy, offers much more than truffles: The hilly area attracts tourists with its two world-famous wines, Barolo and Barbaresco, and its many Michelin-rated restaurants, too. During the week I spent there with my husband, we heard, over and over again, "You can't help but eat well in the Langhe."

The fog or *nebbia* that envelops the Langhe in fall and winter is said to have inspired the name of its most famous red grape, Nebbiolo. Of all the varieties grown in the Langhe, it's the most planted and the most important, too, as it's the source of Barolo and Barbaresco.

Our first day in the Langhe, the fog was so thick I couldn't see the vineyards from the window of my room. We'd checked into the discreetly luxurious Corte Gondina, in the village of La Morra. Formerly a private residence, it was turned into a small hotel by Bruno Viberti and his wife, Elena Oberto, in 2002.

As the fog slowly lifted, the steeply terraced vineyards surrounding the town came into focus, along with a view of the Alps beyond. (The name Piedmont means "foot of the mountain.")

Although the Langhe is home to dozens of wines, it's fairly compact. You can drive from La Morra and Barolo in the west to Barbaresco in the east in about half an hour. The route runs past the city of Alba, a de-

facto truffle bazaar during the white truffle season, with sidewalk truffle salesmen as commonplace as hot pretzel vendors in New York.

La Morra stands out among the region's charming towns with its welcoming hotels and great restaurants. Many of the latter are within walking distance of the Corte Gondina—a bonus after a long day driving those switchback roads. The Michelin one-star Massimo Camia has a long wine list and exceptionally good pasta. And one of my favorite La Morra restaurants, Osteria More e Macine, in the historic town center, serves excellent iterations of regional dishes, including *vitello tonnato* (veal with a tuna sauce), *agnolotti del plin* (Piedmontese ravioli) and *tajarin al ragu* (thin noodles with a meat sauce).

The owners, Fabrizio Borgogno and Stefano Carbone, have partnered on a winemaking project with Isabella Boffa Oddero and Pietro Viglino Oddero, owners of Poderi e Cantine Oddero, a favorite La Morra producer. The partners are working together to produce Timorasso, a white varietal rarely seen in Piedmont today. While the food at Osteria More e Macine is quite good, the wine list is even better, largely focused on the Langhe but with plenty of choices from other regions in Italy and elsewhere in the world, all well-chosen and reasonably priced.

The same is true of the wine list at Locanda Fontanazza, another casual and very good restaurant, set among the vineyards. The 2014 Bartolo Mascarello Barolo, goes for 125 euros, less than half its retail price in the U.S.; the equally rare 2014 Bartolo Mascarello Langhe Nebbiolo is priced at a mere 35 euros. "It's my last bottle," said owner Mattia Mar-

tinelli, looking as sad to see it go as I was happy to drink it. The rich, supple Nebbiolo proved a beautifully balanced match for seared guinea hen and truffles shaved over tajarin.

It's crucial that the chef knows the truffle source, said Katharina Marengo, an owner of Osteria Veglio in Annunziata, outside La Morra. Her restaurant, where her husband, Emanuel, is a chef and co-owner, is regarded as one of the best in the Langhe. We had impeccable truffles shaved over a fried egg and a delicious stuffed Savoy cabbage. When I raved over the meal, Ms. Marengo modestly described it as "simple food from very good raw materials."

We spent our days visiting wineries, from old school outfits such as Giuseppe Rinaldi and Bartolo Mascarello in Barolo to more modern operations such as Luciano Sandrone, Vietti and Elvio Cogno. Many were open only by appointment. Some offered free tastings, others charged a fee. The wines varied as widely as the wineries themselves.

The next two columns in this series will cover the wines of Barolo and Barbaresco in detail. But for oenophiles traveling to the region, I'd begin with the tip to make an appointment far ahead with producers whose wines you admire and to leave plenty of time to drive from one place to the next—because of unpredictable weather and roads, and because you will inevitably find a great restaurant and want to stop.

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