



TRAVEL

29

BEST OF ITALY

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The hilltop village of La Morra, near Bra



Slowly does it

The stench of truffle given off by the gnarled old man and his hound from their pitch outside the lingerie boutique on Via Vittorio Emanuele II is overwhelming. But the runny thing is, no one — not even the rather grand fur-coated Piedmontese ladies up ahead — seems to mind. In fact, they're making a bee-line for his rickety table, with its knobby collection of tuber magnum, the priciest white truffle on the market. And they're handing over €200 notes without batting an eyelid.

That's Bra all over. This unassuming little town of 29,000 hungry souls, in the hush hills 30 miles south of Turin, could legitimately be called the greediest in Italy. Not only is it the capital of the International Slow Food movement (slowfood.com), with a tip-top collection of restaurants and artisan producers, it's also the business end of the Langhe, Piedmont's superstar wine region, and home to the University of Gastronomic Sciences, the first of its kind in the world.

The icing on the panettone is that Bra is pretty, too, all twinkly lights, baroque churches and cobbled streets shrouded in mist rising from the valley floor — the

Bra is the capital of Slow Food, swimming in Barolo and at the centre of what might just be Italy's tastiest region. By **Mia Aimaro Ogden**

perfect place in which to lay down some winter fat and start eating your way through Piedmont. This gastronomic paradise "at the foot of the mountains" (that's what the name means) is rich in subalpine flavours: truffles, mushrooms, hazelnuts, wild boar, rabbit, pigeon, snails and the regal nebbiolo grape, from which Barolo, the "king of wines", is made.

And the wine villages of the Langhe that make it? Well, they're tiny, gaspingly gorgeous hilltop outposts amid the miles and miles of vineyards. La Morra, with its

It was here that the journalist Carlo Petrimi launched his protest at the opening of a McDonald's in Rome



Our cup runneth over From left, ox-meat salami, Ugo Alicati at Guido Ristorante, and one of his pasta dishes. Below, manzo di Barolo, a dish of braised beef



medieval bastion; elegant Roman Cherasco; lovely Monforte d'Alba, with steep paths up to the vines, the castle of Serralunga; and Castiglione Falletto, where a skinny cat litters by a notice that claims he's not undeterred. Just very, very old. How could he go hungry round here? I kick off my food journey at **Osteria del Boccondivino**, one of Bra's handful of Slow Food restaurants, shoehorned onto the floor above the movement's headquarters on Via Mendicita Istruta. It was here that the journalist Carlo Petrimi launched his protest at the

opening of a McDonald's hard by Rome's Piazza di Spagna in 1986: slow food versus fast food. Goddit? That's not all, though, according to Francesca Rocchi, vice-president of Slow Food Italy. "It's not just that the food is fast, it's that it's junk."

In the 30 years since, Slow Food has become a worldwide movement whose aim is to promote traditional gastronomy using locally sourced ingredients. No industrial production or global food miles here, then. There's none of that nonsensical menu-speak, either: dishes include plain bottled pork belly with Jerusalem artichoke; irrob, raw sausage and veal tartare; and rabbit in white wine. They're much more delicious than they sound (mains from €7; osteria dellarco.it).

That's another thing about traditional Piedmontese cuisine: it's not for the faint-hearted. The rolling hills and rich plains produce favourites that





include *bollito misto*, seven boiled meats (beef, veal, pork, chicken, calf's head, stuffed pig's trotter and *cotechino* sausage), served with candied fruits; *bagna cauda*, a full-on garlic and anchovy dip into which great thistle-like cardoons are dunked; and *financier* piemontese, a mix of sweetbreads, brains, spinal column and, the *pfece de resistenza*, bull's testicles.

Bra isn't just about heritage Slow Food dishes, though: it has a few Michelin stars up its sleeve, too. **Guido Ristorante**, which started out as the university canteen, but has since migrated to lovely Serralunga d'Alba, has *financier* on its Michelin-starred menu, too, but Ugo Alciati's kitchen, in a royal hunting lodge surrounded by endless acres of nebbiolo vines, is in full truffle mode when I visit. You can have it on tagliatelle, raw veal, cardoon or fried egg — outstanding (mains from £17; guidoristorante.it).

Truffles are a big deal in the Langhe. Medieval Alba, 10 miles from Bra, holds an international truffle fair and auction each autumn to flog off the fungi dug up at night by the mysterious *truffatori* — or truffle hunters — and their dogs in the woods. In November 2014, a pair of white truffles were sold



Top tuber The region's beloved white truffles. Right, *Saras del Fen* cheese, ripening in hay, and hitting the right notes at a winery in Castiglione Falletto



here to a buyer from Hong Kong for \$125,000. But you're just as likely to find a wrinkly old bloke sitting on the street, selling them from a fold-up table, from about £25. Or there's the Saturday-morning farmer's market next to the 15th-century Cathedral of San Lorenzo, where you can pick them up along with fabulous local cheeses such as *Saras del Fen*, *Robiola di Roccaverano* and *Toma Piemontese*, and, of course, the all-powerful Barolo.

It's Barolo that brought visitors to the Langhe in the first place. "The wine and the food are the reasons they come," says Matteo Ascheri, the sixth generation to run the **Cantine Ascheri Giacomo**,

in Bra, producing 240,000 bottles a year. (That makes Matteo medium-sized — though to look at him, you'd never guess.) "But the landscape is the reason that they stay." That, and the people. Matteo is passionate about his product: a half-hour visit to his cellar turns into a two-hour crash course, with a tasting, of his Barolo and Barbera wines (tour with tasting from £8; ascherivini.it).

The cult of Barolo is bigger still (with more bottles — 1.5m a year) at **Marchesi**, the Abbona family's winery in the town, where five of their historic wooden barrels have been given World Heritage status by Unesco (from £3.50; marchesidibarolo.com). To put all

this nebbiolo knowledge in context, Valentina Abbona sends me to the Banca del Vino, then on a whistle-stop tour through the 100,000 bottles in the University of Gastronomic Sciences' cellars, from 300 for a good three-course dinner with us. But more than that, it's about the pleasure of eating together, with friends. That's the real value of food."

Yet it's Francesca Rocchi who really nails what this trip is all about for me. "Slow Food is democratic," she says. "It's the anti-Michelin. You'll never pay more than €35 for a good three-course dinner with us. But more than that, it's about the pleasure of eating together, with friends. That's the real value of food."

Where to stay

The Ascheri Hotel is an industrial-cool four-star above a winery in Bra, with doubles from £107, B&B (00 39 0172 430312, ascherihotel.it). It has a Slow Food restaurant, Osteria Murtvecchi, where the Ascheri family serve up local classics in a stylish, laid-back space (mains from £8; murtvecchi.it).

At the top of the medieval hill village of Monforte d'Alba, the four-star Hotel Villa Beccaris is a 300-year-old palace with fabulous views over the Langhe from its 23 rooms (doubles from £106, B&B; 00 39 0173 78158, www.villabeccaris.com). Eat at nearby Moda, a glamorous modern Italian cut out of the rock (mains from £7.50; modavenue.eu).

Getting there

Mia Atmaro Ogden was a guest of Inntravel, which has a seven-night Flavours of Piedmont tour, staying in four-star hotels, from £980pp. The price includes three dinners, transfers, guided visits and two wine tastings, but not flights (01653 617000, inntravel.co.uk).

Airlines flying to Turin include British Airways and Ryanair.