



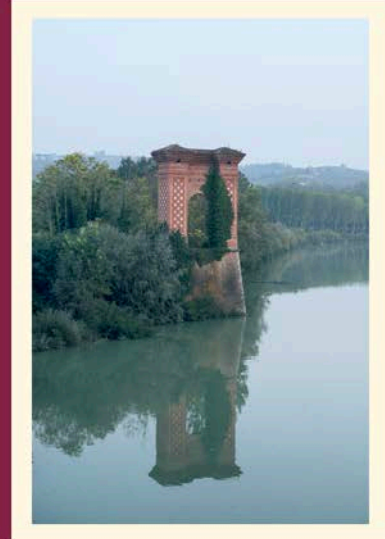
IMPOSSIBILE LANGHE

A TOURING NOVEL
by Pietro Giovannini



Photographs by Maurizio Beucci

ALBA, THE SMALLEST CAPITAL IN EUROPE



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THE SMALL
TOWN'S FAME
IS UNDOUBTEDLY
GREATER
THAN
ITS SIZE.



the Bonino and in the centre the Sineo. Next to the church is the Negri tower - the tallest in Alba and a civil rights symbol for the town - also torn down in 1967 due to extension work on the cathedral. Other towers made up the facade where the tourist office is today. Foundations can be visited during the 'Underground Alba' trail.

SAN LORENZO CATHEDRAL

The cathedral that dominates the square today is at least the fourth church built on this site since the Christian era began. In order of construction, the first church was built during the 6th century - a very recent discovery following the building of the Diocesan Museum in the cathedral's crypt. In addition to various ruins, this first cathedral has left us an impressive baptismal font complete with the immersion pool that was customary at the time, similar to the one in the church of Santa Maria Outside the Walls in Millesimo.

The second church was built around the year 1000. Vernazza describes the church of San Lorenzo in Alba, which had been mentioned as early as 989 in an imperial decree by Otto I. Strangely enough, it had a nave and two side aisles to include the early Christian font, even though the prior devastation by the Magyars had even led to the suppression of the diocese, which had to be united with Asti for a short time. This cathedral was, therefore, an affirmation of diocesan independence and municipal power. The first bell tower also dates back to the 10th-11th centuries. In contrast, the current one, built around the previous tower, which was used as a central pillar to support the access staircase, dates back to around the 12th century, as do the sandstone portals. An initial enlargement around the 12th-13th century is therefore conceivable, involving the facade and bell tower.

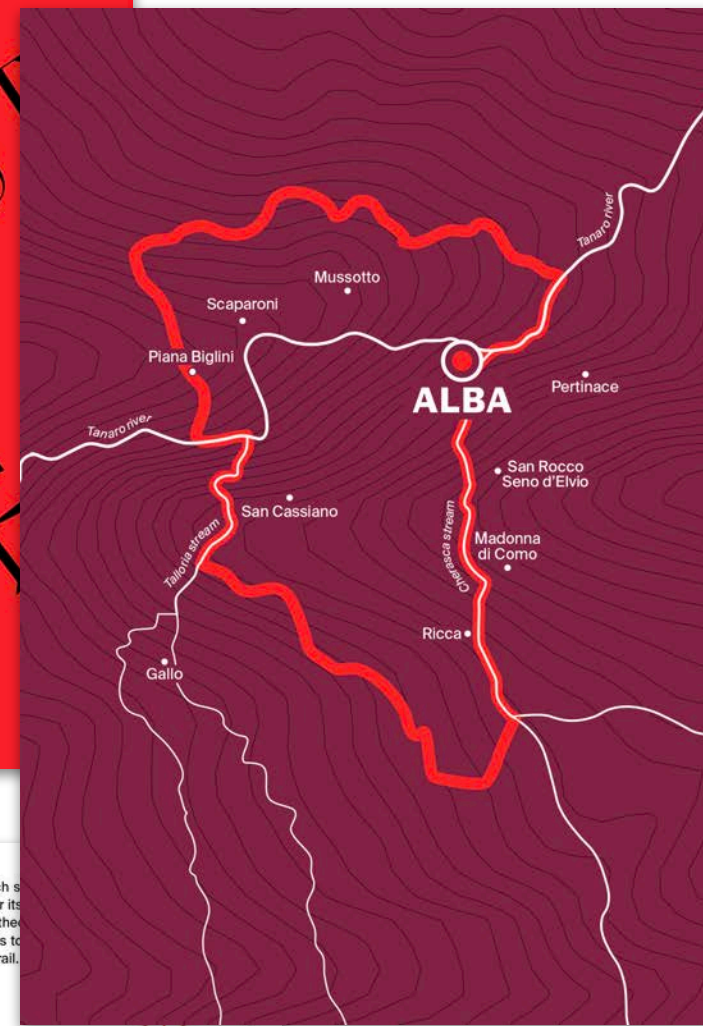
Visitors can climb the 130-foot bell tower, at least during certain times of the year, usually on weekends.

Chronicles also mention loggias and arcades outside the church, where town assemblies and the market were held, a Canon's cloister, another smaller church called San Silvestro and a cemetery area behind the apse. It could also be that part or all of today's Govone palace along Via Vida was part of the original cathedral grounds.

Between 1486 and 1516, the third church was erected from scratch, dismantling the portals and keeping the bell tower at the end of the Middle Ages on the initiative of the town's great renovator, Bishop Andrea Novelli - who later had his mother buried in San Domenico. This was a cathedral in the late Gothic style with three Latin cross-style naves, a portico, and an elegant window on the facade, which now has a neo-Gothic rose window.

Over the centuries, the cathedral was remodelled several times due to structural problems (its vault collapsed in the 1626 earthquake) and

ALBA, THE SMALLEST



Every year, the inhabitants of Alba, the capital of the Langhe, await tourists and gourmets of the world (these days, it happens year-round, not only during the Truffle Fair) with the sort of detachment of people who, aware of their merits, do not need to boast, but rather are accustomed to all the attention. Lying for 2,000 years on a bend in the Tanaro and Cherasca rivers (this last little more than a stream), the small town's fame is undoubtedly more significant than its size. With barely 30,000 inhabitants, it has the atmosphere of a large meeting hall where everyone knows everyone else. Alba's shared ethic, its mission, to use a fashionable term, is that of hard work, dedication and ambition. These traits are tempered, however, with an instinctive desire to live well - and consequently to encourage others to do the same, even if only for a few days' holiday.

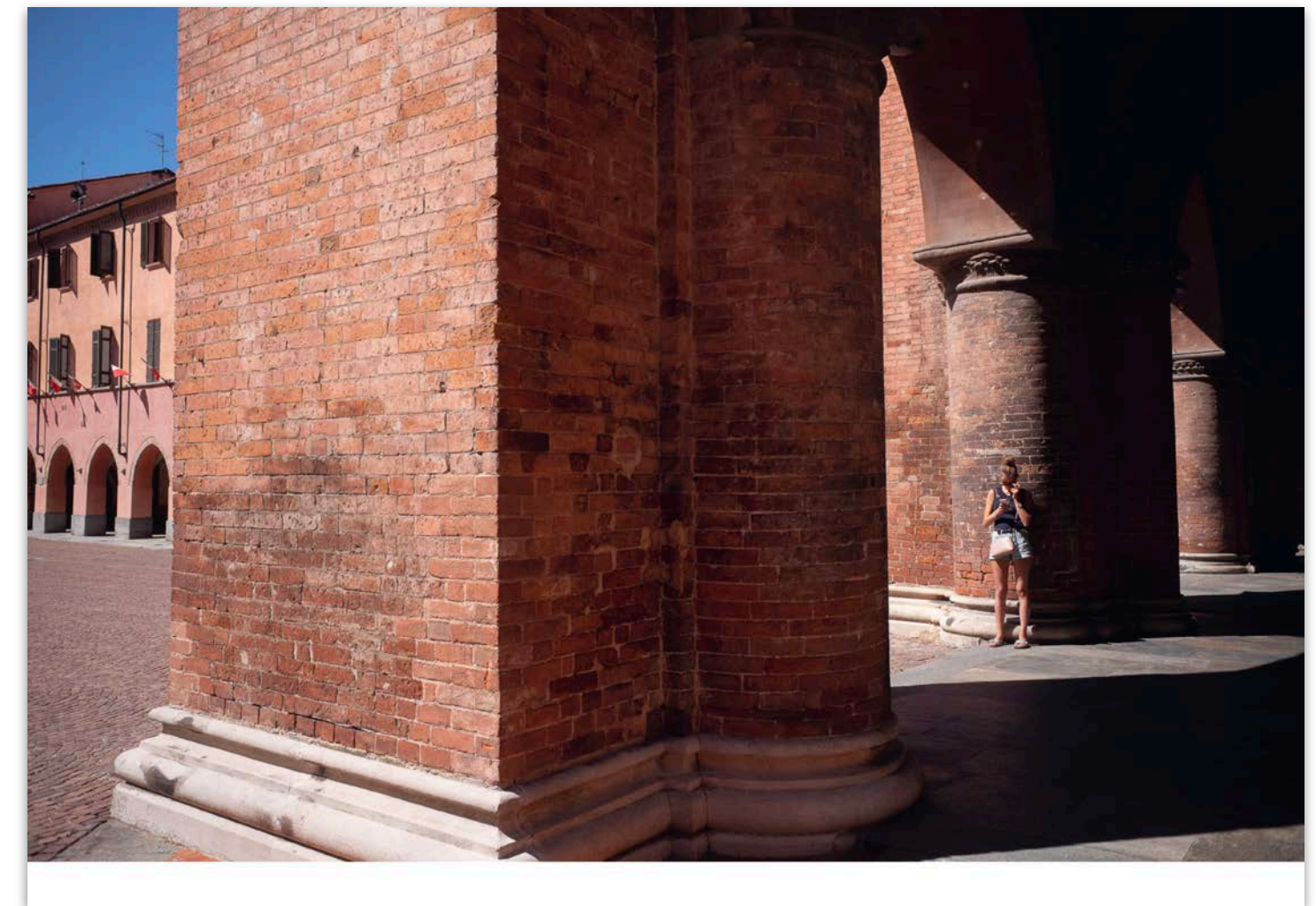
The name 'Alba' would seem to indicate a white town. It comes from the Latin word *albus*, meaning white or whitened, but also bright, auspicious, and serene. The Italian word for sunrise (*alba*) also derives from this. Though the Romans likely derived the name from the Ligurian/Celtic root for water, *el/ab*. But Alba is also a red city, built of cobblestones, tiles and bricks - so medieval and so very Piedmontese.

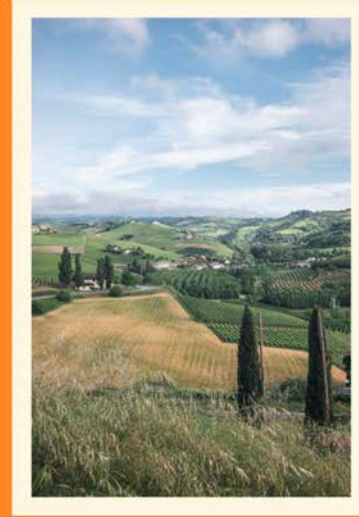
The writer Fenoglio, a native of the town, describes the approach to Alba from the Langhe hills through the eyes of poverty-stricken Agostino Brada in his great novel *La Malora (Ruin)*: "I feed at those steeples and towers and the clumped-together houses in my mind's eye - and then the bridge and that river, the greatest flow of water I'd ever seen!". Alba still makes the same impression on visitors who arrive down from the Langhe, like Agostino, towards its capital, with those markets, elegant shops, cafes and patisseries stretching before them. And the sound of bells from its many churches...

Alba is 'white', too, in a religious sense. It is an ancient diocese full of nuns and clergymen that reaches up over the Langhe hills in a protective embrace. Alba's war-time bishop, Luigi Maria Grassi, was also a hero of the Resistance. But it is also 'red' with partisans and thinkers. As Fenoglio recounts, the city was awarded Italy's gold medal for its role in the struggle against Fascism during the last war. In 1944, Resistance fighters liberated it for a brief 23 days.

ALBA, THE SMALLEST CAPITAL IN EUROPE

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THE BARBARESCO LANGA



Boundaries and outlines on these hills have always been intangible and disputed. Often all one has to do to change worlds is turn a corner, and so many municipalities that stand on these invisible lines (L.A.T. can, depending on who is reading or who lives there, belong to one or the other territory. Or, fortunately - this being my own choice - to both.

The case of the Barbaresco hills in this sense is exemplary: if one sticks to the definition used in the D.O.C.G. (Denominazione di origine controllata e garantita - Controlled and Guaranteed Designation of Origin), well, then we are talking about just three municipalities (Barbaresco, Neive and Treiso), plus a small hamlet around Alba, by the curious name of San Rocco Seno d'Elvio.

But at least for the author, who happily lives right here in the hills of Barbaresco, this is not the whole truth. Because as much as the excellence of the wines is a determining factor, especially for the economy of these lands, it cannot be said that the oenological criterion is unique and exclusive and therefore, for me, the realm of Barbaresco also includes neighbouring areas and villages that do not produce this wine.

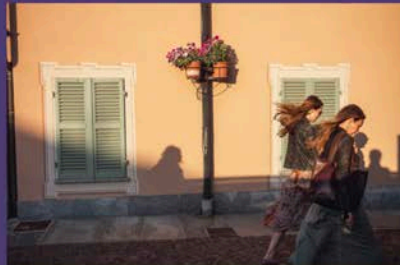
The wider Barbaresco area represents the historic border between the free communes of Alba and Asti (a border that was disputed for centuries during the Middle Ages), a hilly strip that rises, alternating between pretty little valleys and rounded panetone-shaped hills, from the Tanaro river up to 1800 feet where it borders on the Alta Langa, defined as beginning above 2000 feet in altitude. Along the slopes of the Tinella, the stream that runs from Trezzo to Santo Stefano Belbo, the area borders less abruptly on the Langa Moscato wine area. The south-east border is the Cherasca stream, dominated by the great hummock of Madonna di Como, a hill with a marvellously varied landscape, coyly hiding among its felines and ideal for a lazy walk, drive or bike ride during summer Sundays.

The Barbaresco Langhe is like a tiny Mesopotamia, the town of Alba its

THE BARBARESCO LANGA



IN THE LANGA EVERY BEND, EVERY CLIMB, EVERY GLIMPSE



CHANGES THE PERSPECTIVE.

THE CONFRATERNITY OF S...

The construction of the church lasted 40 years (1788, as revealed by dates inscribed on some of its tall and majestic walls) while the facade followed, featuring an entrance portal by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, man and architect, surmounted by the scales of justice. The Catholic Church, today it is the centre for the local congregation, a large community engaged in the area. Inside, a beautiful wall of icons can be seen in the nave. This example of integration in many small communities throughout our region is not far from the Catholic faithfulness - and local pride. It is something I find very fitting and touching.

Not far from San Michele, bordering the village to the north is the church of Santi Pietro e Paolo, marked by a soaring bell tower in 1731 by the excellent architect Francesco Gallo. The structure church is grafted onto a pre-existing Romanesque cemetery, probably dating back to the 12th century, but later redesigned in the 18th century. The interior is decorated with 18th-century stucco, chrome marbles, a 17th-century statue of the Madonna of the Milk and a beautiful inlaid wooden choir.

If you now go down Via Rocca, avoiding the central area, you cross what is still known as the 'dance ramp', an area where village dances were held and people would celebrate feast days together. Now known as Piazza della Vittoria, the area has been partly absorbed by the garden of the Counts of Castellborgo. Here, too, are signs of the greatness of architect Borgese's work: for example, the Borgese palace situated a little further on in Via Laffeur, sports an imposing portal. The monumental entrance to the Count's garden - Borgese's graduation thesis in 1751 - consists of three arches bordered by four double columns, closed by iron gates which are surmounted by the Counts' coat of arms. The garden is now much reduced in size but the majestic entrance suggests there once used to be a gigantic park here: all in all, the contrast in proportions is not jarring but rather touching.

Opposite the garden stretches the Baroque palace of the Counts of Castellborgo, known today as Castello di Neive, which houses the winery of the same name. The legendary oenologist Oudart worked in its cellars during the 1830s, dividing his time between Grinzane and Neive. Now you are finally back at the arch of San Rocco where this walk started. It is true that it is one of the most beautiful villages in Italy, as the sign at the entrance to the village declares!

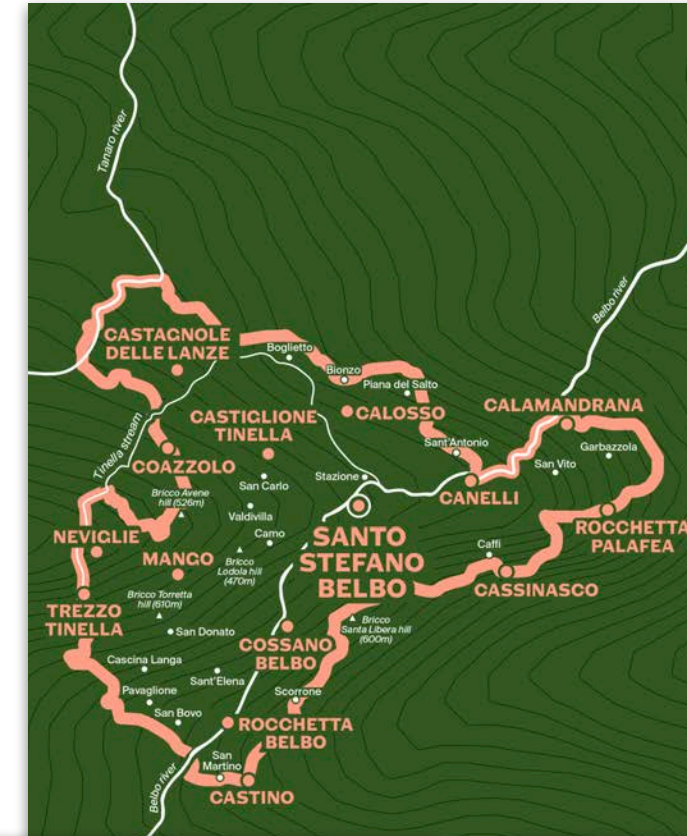
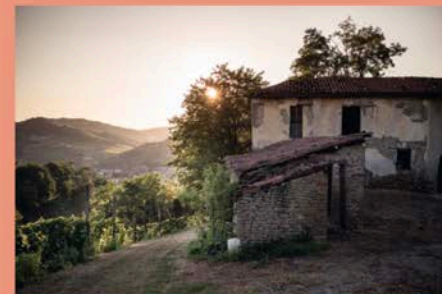


THE * MOSCATO LANGA ↗



3

SOME HILLS
AT FIRST GLANCE
YOU IMMEDIATELY
REALIZE ARE
IN THE LANGA
AND OTHERS
THAT YOU KNOW
BELONG TO THE
MONFERRATO.



"I understood then that it was all there in my memory: I myself was the village, the landscape. All I had to do was close my eyes and concentrate, not on asking myself 'Do those few cottages look familiar?' but on the sensation that all of my being - blood, bones, breath - everything had been formed out of that substance, that beyond that landscape and myself nothing else existed."
Cesare Pavese, 'La Langa'

The production area of Moscato d'Asti DOCG wine embraces the three provinces of Cuneo, Asti and Alessandria, forming an arch that runs between the Tanaro river and the Apennines. Excluding the two districts of Santa Vittoria and Serlungha, included in the specifications due to the presence of the Cinzano and Fontanafredda centers, the Moscato production area begins at Perletto in the high Langa of the Bormida valley and stretches as far as Grogna in the Alessandria region beyond the second Bormida valley. To the west, the area borders on Alba and Treiso (but not Barbaresco); to the east, the almost vertical line of Grogna-Vesone-Strevi-Cassine; finally, to the north the towns of Costigliole and Incisa, excluding Agliano, Bruna and Asti. This is a vast and heterogeneous production area, of which only the Langa section will be included here.

Nevertheless, a clarification must be made. The Langa is not a historically defined territory never having formed part of a marquisate in the same way that the Monferrato or Saluzzo areas did; in the Langa, feudal power was only exercised over a part of the hills during the era of the Dei Carretto, who were, however, the Marquises of Savona, ruling over both sides of the Apennines. The Langa were not part of the medieval free commune of Alba either, aside from a very limited territory, unlike the commune of Asti which controlled a vast area. Hence, the Langa is above all a culturally and topographically defined region: there are hills that - from experience or habit, or perhaps because you were born there - at first glance you immediately realize are in the Langa and others that at first glance you know belong to the Monferrato! Obviously, it is rare to find two people who agree on these intangible borders: I have friends who start laughing when I define their hill as the last of the Langa. While remaining debatable, this book defines the Langa according to my personal but well-documented boundaries.

The Langa comprehends all the hills to the right of the Tanaro river beginning at Ceva, including the Ceva valley and the town of Cherasco.

THE MOSCATO LANGA

THE MOSCATO LANGA

We continue towards Rocchea beyond the partisan memorial, maintaining the crest to the west in the direction of Vesime as far as the Piarella crossroads. Here, the green crests of the Belbo valley often appear as traceries in the mist, and right in front of us, barely concealed by the slope of the hill, is the lovely little church of San Bovo di Cossano, a cherry on the cake of this amphitheatre of vines. For the church, turn right at the fork and take the first well-indicated small road, where horses often graze. Our route, instead, takes us left until the next crossroads - that of Cal du Russ, with indications for San Bovo-Piandini - from where we descend to the valley while enjoying the stupor profiles and beautiful scenery of one of the most pleasant descents of the route. Not long afterwards, the little church of San Bovo will appear unreachable and beautifully isolated, until we pass right beneath it.

"At Cossano, where they had gone with the little money they got from the sale of the croft, Padrino had died a few years before, an old man forced out onto the road by his daughters' husbands." From *The Moon and the Bonfires*

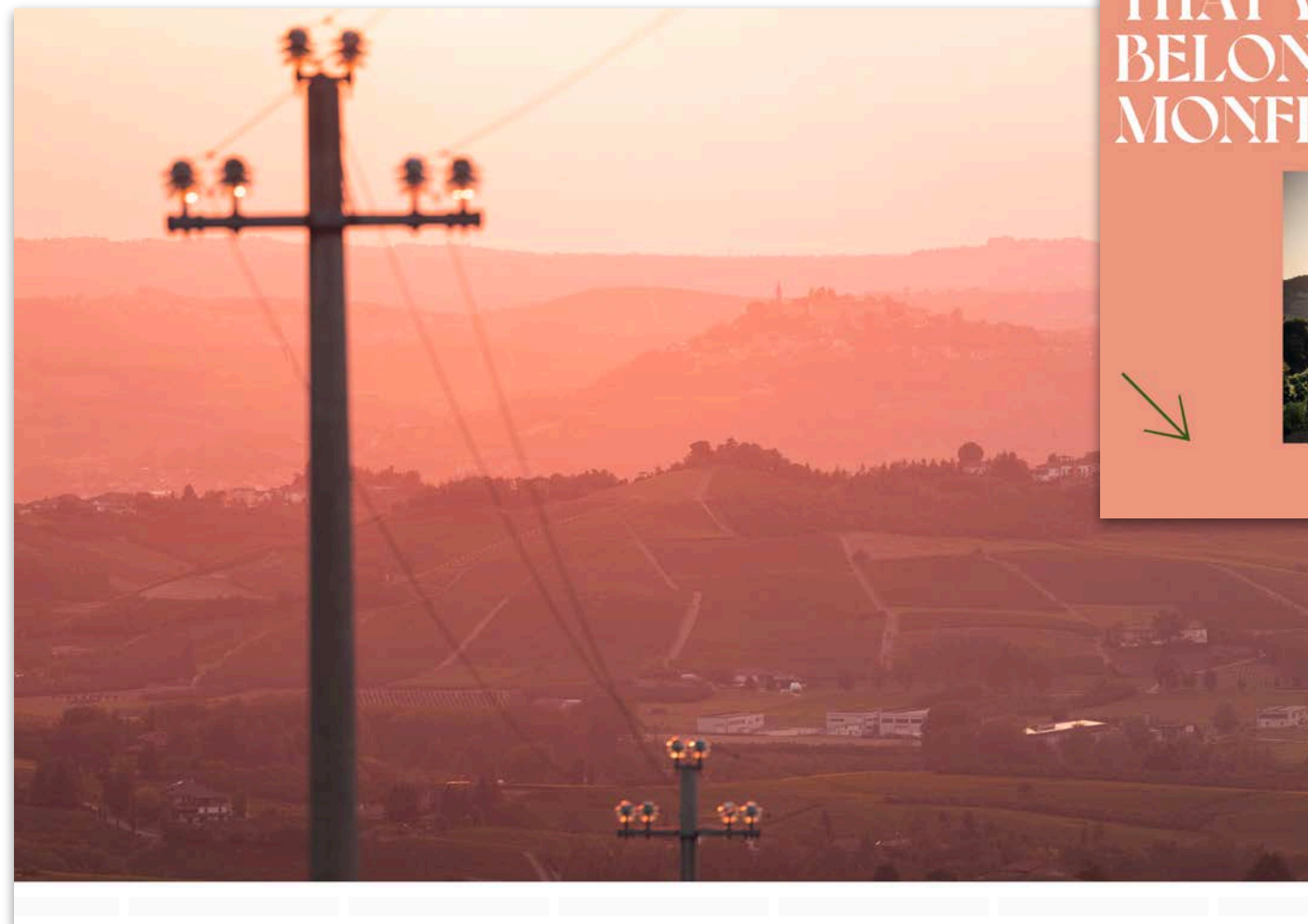
Now we are in the valley, from where we enter Cossano Belbo, a solid village hanging on a low spur over the river, today less visible due to the modern expansion of the town.

Here, it is said, traditions die hard, and so the 'Posta da Camolin', one of the oldest trattorias in the Langa, famous for making perhaps the best rajarin in the world, has survived - although who knows for how long. My grandfather used to come here as a boy and this was already a family tradition, because his father used to take him... For ravioli, on the other hand, they used to go to Vesime he told me. It is impossible not to also mention the tenacity of the last dynasty of millers in the valley, the Martino family, who still stone-mill ancient varieties of grains for exceptional bread.

After a due stop in the village, we resume our journey climbing the same slope but passing up the other breathtaking Santa Libera di Cossano climb - a tough one even for the standards of former cycling champion Pantani! - and returning with some effort to the crossroads. The route from here is less tortuous and more direct, but obviously for those who dislike winding roads you can continue along the hilltop without descending from San Bovo and arrive exactly at this point.

On the Santa Libera road (SP 592), at every junction go uphill until suddenly you arrive at the top: stop here for a moment though to take in the view, and then descend for a quarter of a mile to the first crossroads. Here, at a sharp bend, go right to take the smaller road (direction: Località Scornone - Cadalcaneilli). If at the next crossroads the sign says Vesime-Santo Stefano it means you've gone too far: it is easier to take the Scornone road by turning back and taking a left turn.

Now continue all the way along the Cadalcaneilli road (keeping left at every crossroads) until it joins the main road from Cossano up to Castino at the Madonna della Neve dello Scornone chapel, and passing through the little hamlet that Pavese called Scornone.





4

THE BAROLO LANGA



Throughout the Langa the nickname for those from Barolo is *biagheur*, deriving from the verb *biaghe*, to strut, describing someone who loves to show off, maybe spending unnecessarily - unforgivable in the Langa - to give themselves airs. It is the sort of attitude that the rest of Italy usually ascribes to the people of Milan, the so-called *bavasca*, who are considered wealthy and boastful. However, like all intimately dialect words, *biagheur* is difficult to translate into Italian, assuming a positive or negative nuance according to the circumstances or the tone of voice being used. In short, those in Barolo are rather big-headed, boastful spendthrifts: after all, as anyone in the Langa would tell you with mocking irony, "they make the king of wines and the wine of kings."

The grape grower from Dogliani with his Dolcetto vineyard just a field away from the Monforte farmer growing Nebbiolo grapes for producing Barolo must surely have made this comment a thousand times under his breath, half in envy and half in mockery. Although, in truth, the grower from Monforte was ultimately poorer than the one who could sell his Dolcetto in March, earning from it far before the producer of Barolo, who had to wait at least four years until he could sell his wine. And although until the 1960s both growers were unlikely to have also produced their own wines, well... the one from Dogliani would still have made more money more quickly.

Until 40 to 50 years ago it was actually very difficult to sell Barolo. It is said that in the past, sellers preferred to gift six bottles of Barolo to buyers who bought a lot of Dolcetto, rather than offer them a discount - although I don't believe it! Barolo had the reputation of being not only a wine "for the rich" but, what was even worse, a wine "for connoisseurs". Barolo's fame had developed over more than a century of international success through wine competitions, official representations, exports and supplies to royalty, consolidating a small but exclusive market whose clients included aristocrats, ambassadors, ministers, the upper middle class, bankers and other notables.

At the beginning of the 20th century there were perhaps just a couple of dozen Barolo producers. And, just as in addition to the country's elites there were millions of people who did not lead the gilded life, in addition to the Barolo producers were thousands of *contadini* who had nothing to do with these winemakers.



WERE IT NOT FOR BAROLO, THE LANGA WOULD NOT BE THE COVETED PLACE IT IS.



ALTHOUGH THERE IS MUCH IN THE LANGA BESIDES BAROLO,



THE BAROLO LANGA JUST CANNOT BE IGNORED.





5

THE DOLCETTO LANGA



Dolcetto is undoubtedly the most surprising aspect of the Langhe wine territory, notable for both its ever-changing landscape and the unique characteristics that define this viticultural area. Dolcetto is cultivated throughout the Langhe, (even at its highest altitudes), as it serves as the daily wine of the *langhetti* of this region, often produced for their own personal use.

There exists the denomination of controlled origin of the Dolcetto d'Alba which covers almost all the Langhe hills and displays a heterogeneity in its characteristics (a Dolcetto from Treiso and one from Monforte are indeed very different in their nuances), and, there's also the micro-DGC Dolcetto di Diano d'Alba, which highlights the specific quality of those *sori* (the vineyards with southern exposure - the sun-kissed vineyards facing south).

Then, there's the DOC of Dolcetto di Dogliani, which, on one hand has maintained a long-standing tradition of excellent production, but on the other hand, it has recently been reviewed (by some producers), as somewhat lacking the absence of Nebbiolo, that grape variety that garners so much attention today and is grown just a hill away. This led to a non-traditional idea of strengthening this wine, with, for me, unnecessary ageing in wooden barrels - a trend I believe is misguided.

However, trends come and go, and wine, like time as they say, is a gentleman: Dolcetto is poised and will soon experience a proper *nouvelle vague* that will elevate its true essence. In the meantime, I can assure you, I can guarantee that you will rarely find such good wine in any winery or tavern like you will on these hills. Let us not forget the example and legacy of Economist, Luigi Einaudi, who had a deep passion and love for wine and invested his wealth in the finest Dolcetto vineyards, to take pride in a legacy that is certainly commendable, wouldn't you agree?

Dogliani, with its ancient village overlooking the Rea stream and the Castle village perched above as a sentinel of protection and retreat, has always been a prosperous, bustling and vibrant market town, much like Santo Stefano for the Belbo Valley or Cortemilia for the Bormida Valley, far wealthier than the small, fortified villages of the Falletis, which gazed enviously down at Dogliani (and Alba).

DOLCETTO IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST SURPRISING LANGA



EXCURSION TO MONCHIERO ALTO

The secluded village of Monchiero Alto, surrounded by truffle woods, was a haven for Elio Peluzzi, one of the prominent painters of the twentieth century, as well as his grandson Claudio Bonichi. Peluzzi was laid to rest in the cemetery adjacent to the village, where the atmosphere remains imbued with his presence, everything surrounding the village still speaks of him, characterized by a romantic and magical ambience, beginning with the serene meditation park. Accessing the village involves ascending from Monchiero to Monforte and then turning right at the cemetery: a short climb leads to the horse chestnut trees in the park, overlooking the oratory of the *Disciplinati*, which has now been converted into a museum by the Peluzzi-Bonichi Association, while Bonichi's house awaits restoration; in the tiny square, the sanctuary of the Rosary, features late Baroque forms (somewhat gracelessly altered in the mid-nineteenth century by the architect Busati), creating a cosy, intimate, and extremely quiet environment. The beautiful and charming *Relais* in the ancient monastery (which long ago was a shelter for pilgrims), allows for an extended stay to appreciate the charm of the location. Additionally, while speaking about truffles, beneath the monastery, you will find, between art and oak, the esteemed Ezio Costa, an authentic *truffolo*, a true truffle hunter, alongside his wife Clelia (the granddaughter of the legendary truffle seeker Giuseppe Copia Vivaldi), who, if goes without saying, excels in the kitchen...

We then turn onto the main road to return toward Dogliani, but 80 yards later, we immediately take the first left at the Santa Lucia road, keeping to the right. The road runs through a somewhat uninteresting valley, featuring a very brief gravel section (500 ft) in the woods, before returning to the asphalted road and passing through hazelnut groves and wheat fields with the first vineyards in sight. The road gently ascends, opening up to the pastoral landscape where the cluster of houses in Santa Lucia soon comes into view (at the first left turn), highlighted by a modest seventeenth-century brick church and a spacious courtyard with clear traces of architecture by Schellino, possibly a priory: it is a stunning panoramic point, largely unknown to most.

From Santa Lucia, one could continue to reconnect with San Luigi, but this is a private access road (for consortium use)...better to explore on foot, as it is worthwhile! We retrace our steps to enjoy the usual winding path, this time along the hillside (luckily shaded by a crest of trees above) until we reach the fork that nearly leads back to San Giacomo (signposted *La Fusina*). From here, one can quickly reach the chapel of the Einaudi family with an attached country estate where the President lived after he had retired. It is a private but very beautiful and significant location: the distance to the Quirinale feels quite vast/astronomical!





THE TANARO ALTA LANGA



*"Well my heart's in The Highlands at the break of day
Over the hills and far away
There's a way to get there, and I'll figure it out somehow
Well I'm already there in my mind and that's good enough for now."*
Bob Dylan, Highlands

With this literary we enter the truest, most intact and ancient Langa: in fact, we begin to explore the Alta Langa, the complex and labyrinthine hill system of the highest/other Langa, as the historic mayor of Paroldo defines it with a perfect pun.

Here, just a few minutes from VIP destinations such as Monforte and Dogliani, the look of the hills has changed and wine has been replaced by hazelnuts and cheeses, just as millionaire estates have been replaced by crooked, lopsided stone houses, and instead of the unapproachable quotations of rustic cottages and farmhouses for rich people hungry for chic second homes, here we find just a few 'rough and ready' inhabitants, tenaciously attached to their homes, who maintain high-altitude farm land and villages with the strength of their arms alone: a Resistance fighting depopulation and the flight of young people to the valley.

The Alta Langa is the most authentic Langa, the hardest and most merciless, where real wars (the most recent being against Napoleon and then the Nazis) alternated with the daily battles of toil, hunger and loneliness, where wind, snow, fog (a peculiar phenomenon known as *nebbia alta* 'high fog') and rain still dominate the life of the people. If in Barbaresco they fire cannons against hail, happy to be able to decide the weather forecast, here still - as Fenoglio recounts in one of his indelible snapshots: "the slate roofs are loaded with stones so that the wind from the high hills does not tear them away."

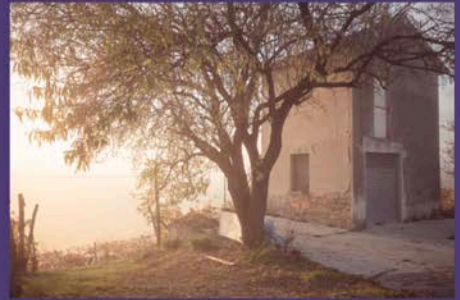
The Alta Langa possesses a primeval, wild and at times ruthless beauty, it is where wolves have returned to decimate wild boar and roe deer that are out of control (and even a few sheep, to tell the truth), where torrents and quakes sometimes explode in a ruin of landslides and mud, where the returning forest eats away at houses, bread ovens, wells and terraces erected over centuries of toil, when the inhabitants carried stones by hand over hills from the river and continually tilled a land of a few acres with hard rock not far beneath it. Here, the old people sit in the sun like wood out to dry, enjoying the *malin* (the warm, salty air of the sea) and waiting for winter to arrive when they will be ever fewer.

The Alta Langa is the Oklahoma of Piedmont, the last gold rush, the unattainable frontier waiting intact for new pilgrims to choose it as the promised land.

A promise, remember, that will always be kept.



THE ALTA LANGA POSSESSES A PRIMEVAL, WILD AND AT TIMES RUTHLESS BEAUTY.

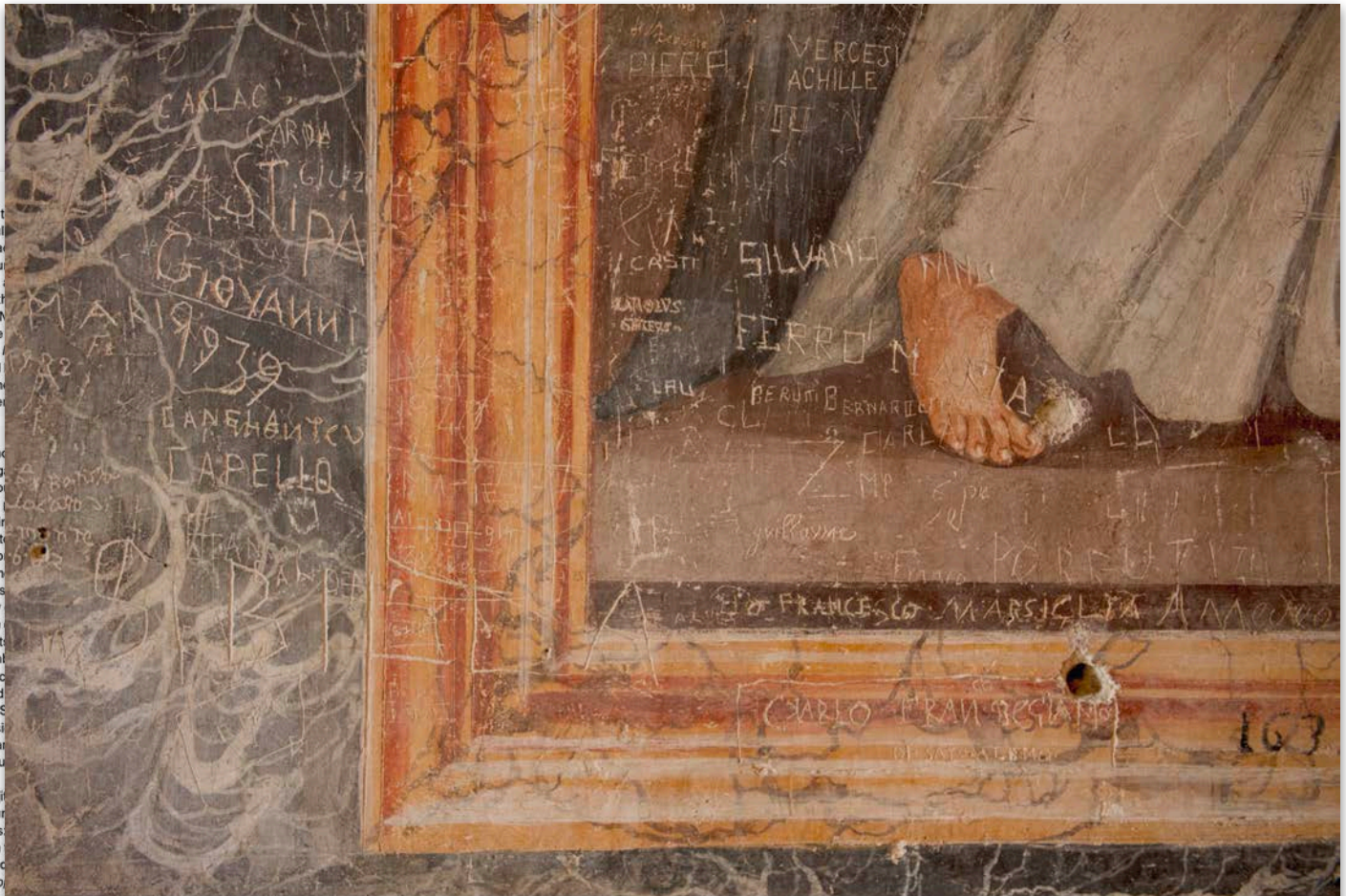


If you want to walk a little more, the trails of citation will lead you around these beautiful es, among ongoing self-sufficient farmsteads, green grottoes, such as the Canaretta foud the woods (such as San Grato di Roascio), was here between Paroldo and Torresina t gers was fought on April 19th, 1936, where it expelled but Commander Colli was unable it's good to remember the *Appuntamento* the Woods) halfway between Torresina and out in the events calendar (a uniquely-nam-mer festival held since 1980 that was rece- nostalgic like me misses already).

We leave Torresina in the direction of Iglia- Sebastiano e Rocco in the hamlet of Lang- frescoed and restored, it is just ahead of o- Frascolini, and the road runs along a ridge- churches on every rock around, then bendi- hamlet down to the Tanaro in an almost unt- We then turn right to skirt the river from a p- back up to Castellino Tanaro, entering with- rower but more authentic) or Plantorre (lea- romantic hamlet dominated by the mighty- Canducci mentioned it in *La Bicocca di San- on the town from above. The tower with it- ble, and woe betide you if you do not clim- an elegant parish church and a very charac- multi-purpose hall), frescoes by the refined- the small church of San Rocco and also in S- However, once again the oldest gem is outsi- and most panoramic point: the small, solita- orato (fully justified with the name of hono-*

The best thing about Castellino is the *lela* (l- mangiale from eating leil), or rather an u- the stove and then baked under the ashe- tions that are still alive make every lunch in- The best for me is waking up here in winter, t- eria and sleeping at the pleasant Punto Tap- the Alps at dawn: exceptional!

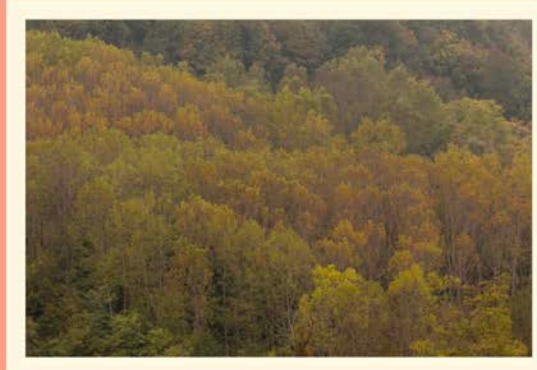
The ridge, as always open to the world, pas- Madonna della Neve and then takes us through Iglia- scattered in two- micro-villages, with Roman memories (a stela or memorial slab set in- the parish church) and where there is also San Lodovico (or San Luigi) di Francia, a little church that I love very much: one day it was open and a lady inside was sweeping the floor and arranging lace and flowers; she was French, but her grandparents were from the village. A few years ago I learned that right next door she and her husband opened a luxury



THE BELBO



ALTA LANGA

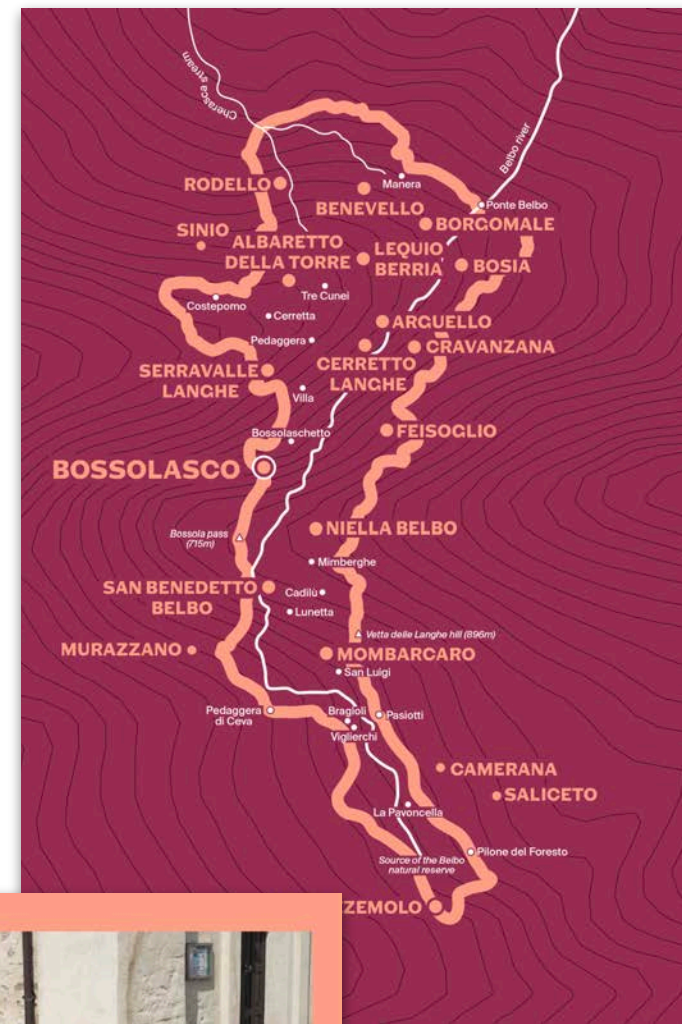


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THE BELBO VALLEY IS THE TRUE ANCIENT HEART OF THE LANGA. IT IS THE NARROWEST



AND DARKEST VALLEY, AND ALSO THE POOREST.



THE BELBO SPRINGS NATURE RESERVE

The Belbo is the true river of the Langa because it is the only one that springs from these hills (the Uzzone is only a stream, originating in Montezemolo. Its source is found within the only wildlife reservation of the Langa, a large, damp and very green natural amphitheatre. The river basin is wide at the beginning, starting to narrow below Mombararo, becoming a sort of funnel immediately beyond, in San Benedetto, where the river has forced its way through, carving the hillsides into deep, dark ravines. The heart of the Belbo valley has thus remained a green and intact area, unexplorable by car at least, because in San Benedetto the valley floor road ends and one must choose which ridge to climb. The two ridges are connected just by a few steep crossings (Niella, Cravanzana and Bosia). We only return to the valley floor in Campetto where the Belbo funnel opens up again toward the Moscato hills and our itinerary ends, closing the loop.

The Belbo Springs Nature Reserve has a catchment area of 1150 acres that collects water from dozens of ponds, rivulets and marshes, which finally become a single small river, the Belbo. The reserve is also the only wetland area in the Langa, the flora is endemic and the oak woods are flanked by alder woods where the beautiful wild orchids bloom: there are no less than 22 species, from the rare and beautiful *Epipactis palustris* to the widespread and showy *Orcis purpurea* (in the entire Langa there are as many as 43 species of wild orchids). The reserve has unpaved roads, paths, signs, lookouts and picnic areas. The Visitor and Information Centre is in Montezemolo, which shares the protected territory with Saliceto and Camerana. My favourite entry point remains the Pavoncella lodge (where you can sleep very well and eat cowboy steaks): a group of fantastic guys, really open to every sport and adventure, from horses and bikes to quads and trekking. From there we arrive at the Pione del Foresto, a millenary crossroads of pathways that unfortunately collapsed under the snow a few years ago: the municipality of Camerana has now acquired it (it was private before) and will return it to the 'honour of the world' again, to the delight of every true langhetto. The reserve is ideal for a day trip or as a base for broader routes such as the GTL (the Great Crossing of the Langa) or trekking to the seaboard of Liguria.





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THE BORMIDA ALTA LANGA



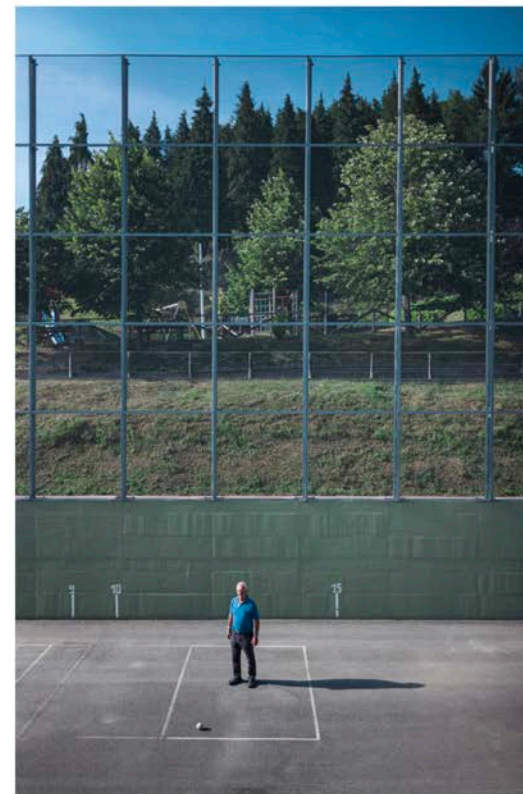
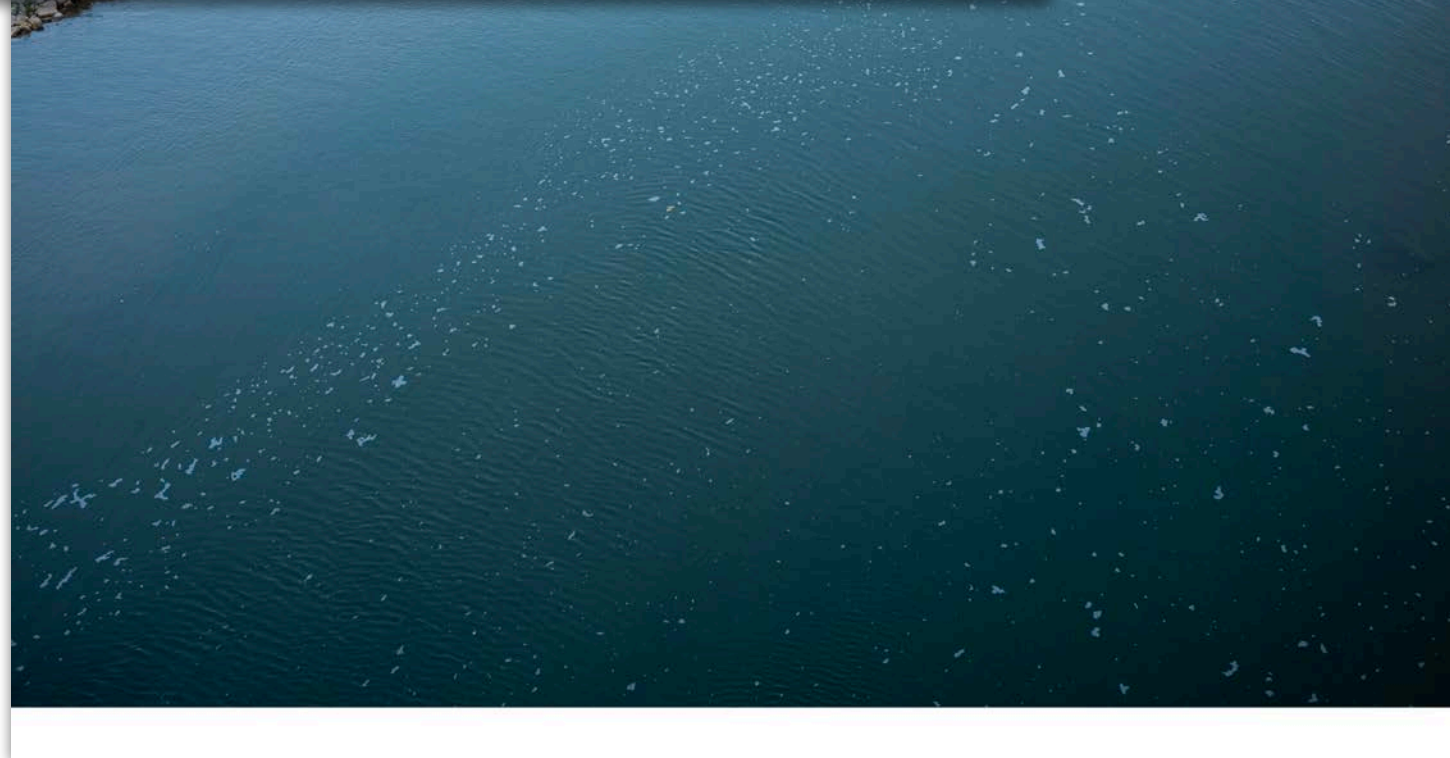
"In the Bormida Valley, the main towns are almost all located above the river, near the points where one or more lateral valleys, steep and dry, like Tatorba, Uzzone, and similar, open into the main valley. Springs, ditches, streams, and torrents—whether in small or large amounts—all the water in that funnel is conveyed to the centre, that refreshing, irrigating water, quenching thirst, turning the mill wheels... and it's beautiful, it's a blessing."
Augusto Monti, / Sansòssi

The Bormida Alta Langa is remote but not wild, rugged but not deserted, steep but terraced, full of rivers and streams but not green like that of the Belbo. In short, it seems like a sum of negations. Instead, to describe it, I would use only three words: stone, water and art. In fact, we are undoubtedly in places with the most testimonies of the past and of greater quality, just as on these hills the stone reigns supreme everywhere, starting with the hundreds of miles of dry-stone walls.

Finally, the water of Bormida and Uzzone, which attracted people to towns and villages downstream since the late Middle Ages, flows through wide and fertile valleys with not too steep a slope, where activities and farms, fields, and pastures have found their place on gentle slopes not at the mercy of the river as for the Belbo or the Tanaro. Water and stone were riches that allowed for the construction of solid houses (and from the quality and especially the quality and height of the houses, greater wealth). To better understand the valley's wealth over the centuries, one must look to the art, clearly visible in churches and castles, commissioned by powerful and ambitious lords. Many of these works have not reached us, so much so that this itinerary could be called "in search of lost castles," but what remains is still a great deal.

For Bormida Alta Langa, we refer to the collection of municipalities in the province of Cuneo that are situated along the Bormida di Millesimo and the Uzzone stream, plus a series of locations already in the province of Savona but all overlooking the Uzzone valley (such as Santa Giulia). However, Perletto is part of Itinerary 9 to better plan the route (it also belongs to the diocese of Acqui). Regarding the hill's formation, the ridge on the left bank of the Bormida is unanimously considered Belbo Alta Langa.

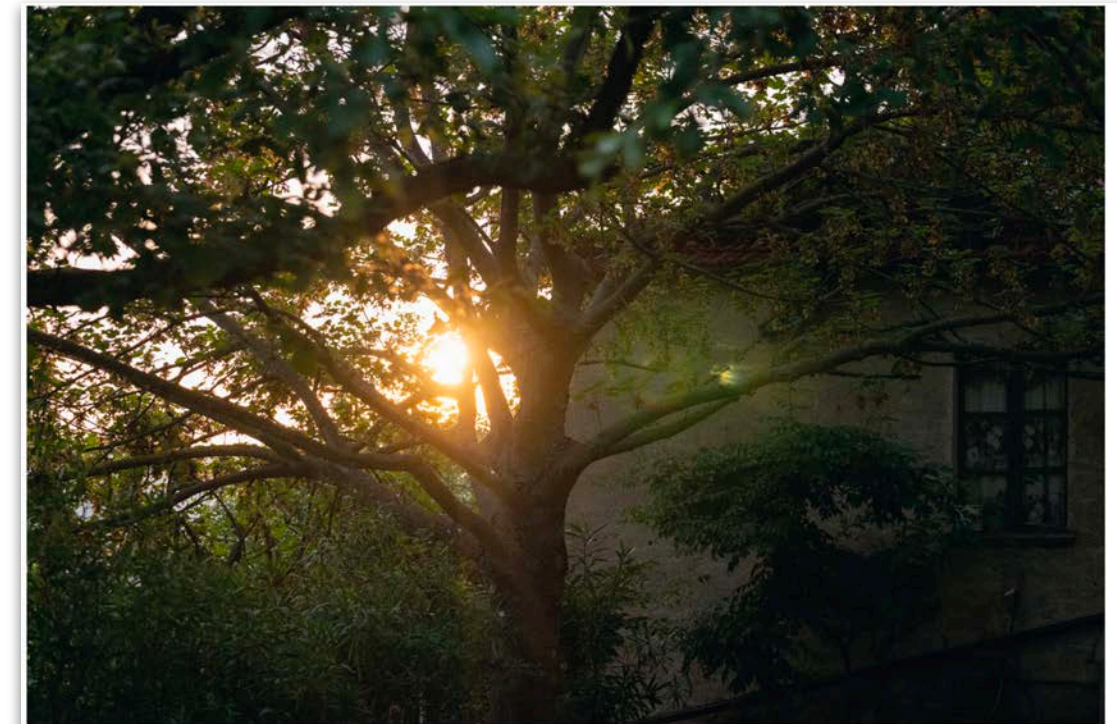
The Bormida Alta Langa is the farthest from Alba (except for almost all the places included in Itinerary 9), which makes it seem inconvenient and unreachable to many: nothing could be further from the truth. First of all, it simply depends on where you start from and where you enter the valley. For example, if you leave from Turin or Savona, you exit at Millesimo on the A21 motorway and you're already in the valley.



More interesting across from it is the church of the Santissima Trinità, baroque in style, recently restored and converted into a Diocesan Museum, where, alongside the inevitable medieval relic (in this case, a thorn from Christ's crown... obviously brought from the Holy Land and arriving in Cortemilia after various adventures in 1542), we find two professional groups (known as Casse della Passione, in wood and polychrome stucco), one late Baroque and the other fully 19th century (by the Brilla family from Savona, also the creators of the beautiful Deposed Christ), as well as a cycle of 17th-century frescoes recuperated from beneath countless layers of plaster. Behind the village, right in front of the cobblestone ascent to the castle, is the former Franciscan convent, with its oldest parts dating back to the romanesque period of the 12th century (bell tower and apse), while the cloister can be ascribed to the 15th century and the facade to the late 17th century. It preserves fragments of ancient frescoes (13th-14th century) that are still visible today; it is now used for cultural events and celebrations such as the famous Sagra della Nocciola. Across from the convent on the other side of the river finally stands the Pieve, the most beautiful thing in Cortemilia.

THE PIEVE OF CORTEMILIA

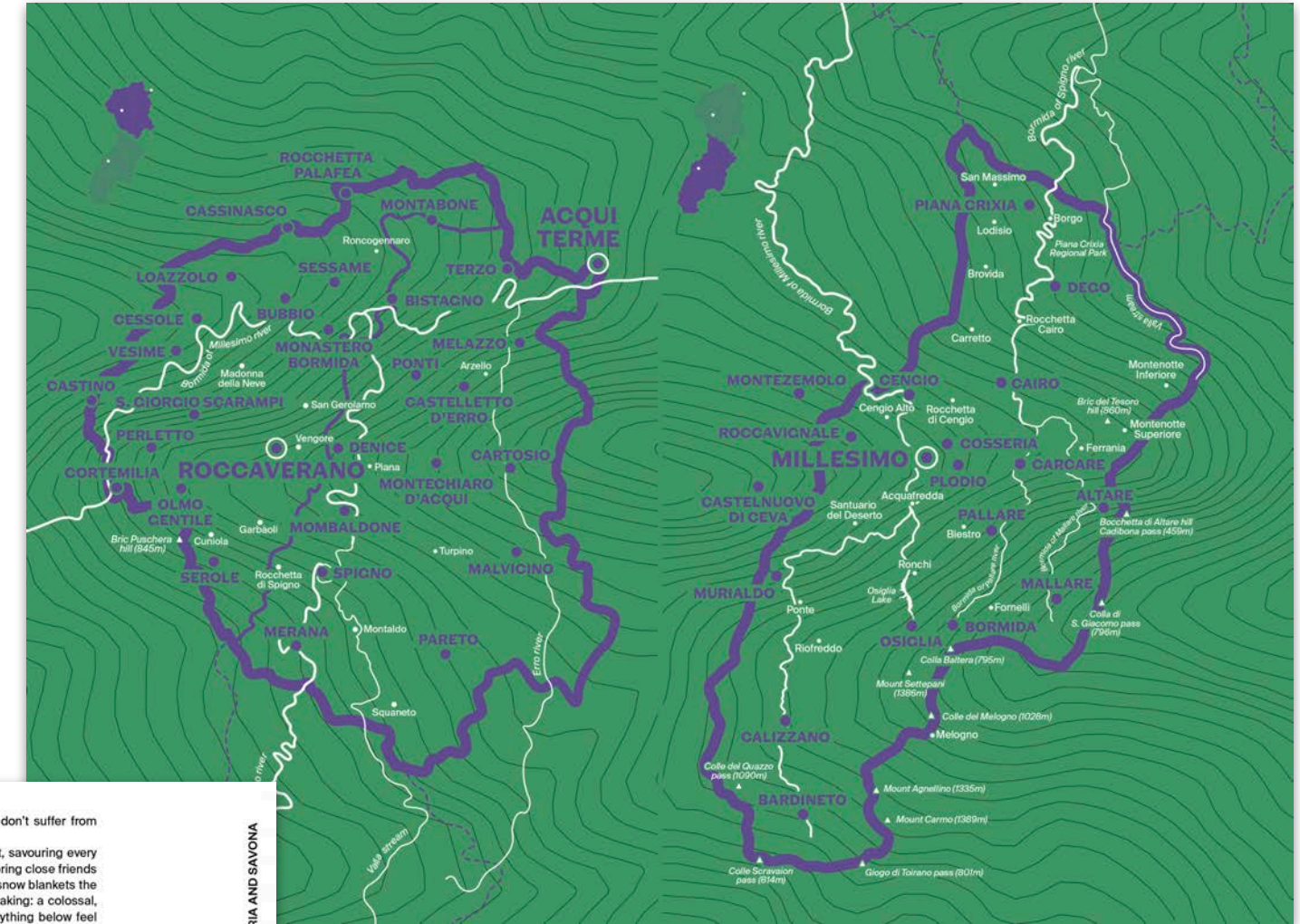
Built in the 12th century, it preserves elegant Romanesque forms, especially in the semicircular apse adorned with classic blind arches made of sandstone, featuring figures hidden among the arches, similar to those at San Secondo di Cortazzone. A subsequent elevation is evident. The bell tower, located halfway down the right nave and contemporary to the church, consists of five tiers of irregular arches. The facade presents an original sandstone portal with a lunette now occupied by a Marian marble: between the architrave and the lunette, an ancient stone depicts a man in bas-relief. The upper part is plastered, featuring a late medieval Gothic bifora window with fluted columns instead of a rose window. The interior is spartan but houses an extraordinary bas-relief accidentally discovered in the courtyard during excavation work: it is triangular in shape, depicting a blessing hand and a Madonna with Child on a throne, flanked by two saints (perhaps Michele and Pantaleo?) and the two boroughs of Cortemilia represented by the two towers, possibly with monks inside. All of this is decorated with representations of symbols of life, reflecting the blend of Christian and pagan elements often found in the early Middle Ages. Dating it is difficult: some suggest the 7th or 9th century, while others hypothesize the 1200⁺... in any case, it is an unmissable piece. My hypothesis: perhaps, also considering its shape, the stone was originally placed on the facade above the entrance where we now have a semi-empty lunette. It is possible that it was later removed when the church was raised and ultimately forgotten in the courtyard.





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THE LANGA OF ASTI, ALESSANDRIA AND SAVONA



and mesmerizing view will leave you in awe. If you don't suffer from vertigo, do climb it! The village is a cozy nest; you can explore it on foot, savouring every moment (it's another one of my soul places, where I bring close friends but more often visit alone, especially in winter when snow blankets the area). The surrounding countryside is simply breathtaking: a colossal, infinite hill shooting up toward the sky, making everything below feel small and insignificant. This hill is painted in unique colours and scents, decorated with terraces as in Cortemilia, but here they abruptly transform into calanchi - not steep ravines but dunes of crumbled sandstone, as if sculpted by Cyclops. These calanchi are like infinite grey fractals, straight out of an 80' video game. And then, there's art: impossible to recount it all-leaving a trail so pervasive church, you realize you'll have to return a hundred more times over a lifetime, because the houses here are unique of stone and simplicity: I'd buy them all if I could! A perfect synthesis of all this is the Church of San Gerolamo masterpiece by the anonymous Master of Roccaforte encounter often). There are still a few tombstones in the diaval cemetery around it, and even the stone used for blessings outside the church walls (if it's closed, the keys). It's a timeless place, just a mile or so from Mombaldone. Further along is the now semi-abandoned gorge, where even the last remaining scao maintains a privileged view. On the ridge, we find the names of red and stunning, watching over the valley of Spigno and those of Denice and Roccaforte (accessible with key village bar). They've also set up an area where the place can be paired with that of taste!

EXCURSION ON THE GARBAIO

If we don't detour through Vengone, we head toward Mombaldone (on the Acqui route), a fun Parco Quarelli, an open-air modern sculpture and adults alike. A must-stop! At the Mombaldone, passing through its beautiful straight onto the hill where the road winds to the tiny hamlet of Garbaio (with a long detour). From here, we ascend further beyond the ridge of Puschera, before returning to loop. This route offers views of the steep, the Spigno valley otherwise difficult to see

