

LANGHE OVERDUE

Named Italy's 50th UNESCO World Heritage Site, Piedmont's Langhe wine region is finally getting the recognition it deserves, writes **Chris Allsop**



La Morra

“It’s Italian style,” says my guide, Fiammetta, laughing and buckling her seat belt simultaneous with steering the aged Panda around a sharp bend. After experiencing this procedure following two tastings (had she spat every glass?) and a wine-fuelled three-course lunch, I’d suggested, milquetoast Brit that I am, that perhaps buckling up while stationary was prudent? By the side of the road a grey-haired local steps back onto the verge, her lips pursed as we speed by.

I’m in Piedmont, north-west Italy, swerving around the graceful contours of the Langhe wine region. Last June, the Langhe – along with the neighbouring Roero and Monferrato appellations – was declared Italy’s 50th UNESCO site. Located south of Alba, its snaking northern border designated by the broad Tanaro river, the Langhe is famous for big, bold reds vinified from the peevish Nebbiolo vines planted in its €1m-per-hectare clay-rich soil.

For many, the honour is long overdue – viticulture here dates back to Roman times – but the upside to this neglect is that the Langhe’s lyrical sweep of hilltops

Langhe’s lyrical sweep of hilltops encrusted with castles remains unpoiled

encrusted with sun-blushed villages, castles, and Romanesque church towers remains unspoiled. It’s not like it’s hard to reach: only a couple of hours on one of the regular BA flights from London to Piedmont’s capital of Turin (the Langhe is an hour and a half drive south of the city). While comfy in BA Club, how about selecting the robust South African Pinotage (eschewing the gutless Merlot blend as you pass over France) to prepare your palate for the twin tannic majesties of Barolo and Barbaresco, whose namesake towns lie within the Langhe.

In spring and summer, when the temperature rises, it’s Tuscany without the crowds. In October – when I visit – the Tanaro is turned slate-blue by the rains and the vine leaves are freckled with autumn colour. Doughy mist collects in ☺





⊙ the valleys, rising as the day warms to expose patchwork slopes stitched with yellow (Nebbiolo) and dark (Barbera) and light (Dolcetto) reds.

I'm staying on one of these photogenic hillsides at the 'Barolo-Cru Resort' Palas Cerequio – its plush caveau stocks 6,000 bottles from 50 Barolo vintages dating back to 1958. The resort is a renovated palace, as the name suggests, built in 1781 and revived by winemaker Michele Chiarlo and his family. Each of the rooms laid with magisterial terrazzo tile are named after Barolo crus, and the minibar in Villero has the residual whiff of honeyed garlic – the perfumed promise of Tuber magnatum pico or the famous Alba white truffle (the truffle festival is held every weekend in October and November).

The modern reputation of both truffle and Barolo were made in the latter half of the 20th century – the latter by the collective efforts of innovative producers who tamed 'traditional' Barolo's loutish tannins and greatly reduced the maturation period required to render it drinkable. The modern version, which adheres to quality assurance DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) guidelines, is aged for a minimum of three years before release and made from 100 per cent Nebbiolo (as is Barbaresco). The wine produced has an orange, brickish hue, while a heady blend of roses, violets, tar, truffles, tobacco and prunes can be found in the nose and on the palate.

With time to kill before Fiammetta arrives, I hike the 20 minutes from Palas Cerequio to the village of La Morra – one of the five key subzones of the Barolo DOCG. Blue-grey lizards slip through the cobbles, and its tiny summit somehow supports several cathedral-sized buildings. It's idyllic now, with a group of cyclists enjoying white wine as a reward for their hill climb, but, back in the day, they'd lop off a hand if

you cut down a Nebbiolo vine. And if you were unlucky, they hanged you.

"It's been a rainy summer," says winemaker Pietro Ratti, shrugging, while giving me a tour of his modernised cellars near La Morra. Pietro's father, Renato Ratti, was one of the chief Barolo innovators in the 60s. "It will not be an excellent year," Pietro continues. "Good, but... when you are used to excellent..." He shrugs. Last October, Wine Spectator rated Ratti's Barolo Rocche dell'Annunziata 2010 at 95 points. We pause before a break in his cellar's tall concrete walls, where the raw blue clay and limestone terroir is left bare for inspection.

Afterwards, Fiammetta and I have lunch in family-run Antica Torre in Barbaresco, in the shadow of the village's distinctive square tower. Naturally, we drink Barbaresco – a cherry and spice 2009 bottle produced by the respected Produttori del Barbaresco cooperative – while eating ribbons of rich tajarin pasta covered in flakes of white truffle. Bill Clinton, when he was president, enjoyed Antica Torre's handmade tajarin so much that he flew chef Cinto Albarello over to cater for the White House.

Every Italian that I drink with admits a reluctant preference for Barbaresco over the heavier 'wine of kings, king of wines' Barolo. After lunch, we walk off about half a noodle of tajarin touring the tiny village – passing by the high stone walls of Gaja where moderniser Angelo had full-blooded rows with his traditionalist father en route to creating perhaps the Langhe's most illustrious brand – before it's time to get back into the Panda and on to the next tasting. As I nervously side-eye Fiammetta's unengaged seat belt, perhaps I should have taken heart from the local history: tradition is all well and good, but safe did not the Langhe make. 🍷

palascerequio.it; langheroero.it

THREE VINEYARDS TO VISIT



CERETTO, MONSORDO BERNARDINA ESTATE

A 19th century farmstead on the outskirts of Alba turned Bond villain HQ (see: the Grape viewing platform). The Ceretto family is known for its Barolos as well as Blangé – a refreshing Arneis white that is a national aperitif obsession.

ceretto.com



GAJA, BARBARESCO

In the 1960s, Angelo Gaja joined the family business and became 'the undisputed king of Barbaresco' by introducing modern techniques that elevated Barbaresco wine to new heights.

Search Gaja at bbr.com



RENATO RATTI, ANNUNZIATA DI LA MORRA

Moderniser Renato Ratti was the first to vinify a Barolo from a single vineyard (Barolo Marcenasco, 1965). His son Pietro's recent vintages are establishing him as one of the Langhe's most exciting young winemakers.

renatoratti.com