



PASS THE JUG

by Christopher Farley

is famous for its cycling history, its chocolate and its *focaccia* bread.

A museum dedicated to cycling champions from a bygone age can be found close to the town centre. Costante Girardengo, a phenomenally successful racer and once proclaimed more popular than Mussolini during the inter-war years, was given the honour that every express train should stop at his hometown, previously only awarded to heads of state.

The chocolate brand, Novi, now owned by the Elah-Dufour group, is a household brand in Italy, and its TV commercials carry the slogan "Switzerland? No, Novi." Seen as a rebuff to imported Swiss chocolate, even for a non-chocoholic like me, the product is up there with the best, and I live in Switzerland.

Focaccia, although widespread in Italy, is particularly popular in Liguria and this southern part of Piemonte and recipes may differ even between towns. The Focaccia Stirata or stretched focaccia of Novi is absolutely wonderful straight from the oven. The olive oil and salt combine with the light, crispy focaccia to set off a chain reaction of gastronomic delight. Taking it home in the car for lunch is a temptation as the pervading smell is hard to resist.

Novi Ligure, or rather Novi, as it once was, has a history of being passed from pillar to post. The original town, surrounded by a high wall, was owned by the Milanese Visconti family for many years. In 1447 it was given over to Genoese ownership, albeit temporarily, and the Milanese took back the town, only to lose it again, this time to the French. The Genoese commander Andrea Doria then won it back in 1529. It remained under Genoese control for almost 300 years and was given the addition of "Ligure" due to its historical ties with Genoa.

As you follow the ancient walls of the old medieval part of town, you can take the road known locally as the Lomellina. A small winding road that snakes through the first foothills of the Ligurian Alps, the Lomellina passes vineyards in the clay limestone hills at an altitude of around 400 metres, the vine covered slopes in their summer glory with each branch bearing a weight of fruit of both Cortese and Barbera grapes. It is here that you can find many of the cantinas, the vineyards

that will open their doors for wine-tasting and even aperitif hours.

While following the road, a left turn will take you to a tiny village named Montero-tondo. The road gets smaller and two-way passing traffic can be a nuisance but it is well worth it. You will eventually arrive at Villa Palavicini, a privately owned estate producing organic wine. To pass the summer days, there is a large swimming pool and a bar / restaurant area. The food is typical of the region and the wine a perfect accompaniment. The proprietor, Alessandro, explained that although the production is limited, 80 percent is exported every year to the United States. He is currently busy immersing himself in the export to potential new territories, including Brazil.

Returning back to the Lomellina road, 10 kilometres from Novi is the small medieval town of Gavi, dominated by its castle and known for its white wine, named appropriately Gavi di Gavi, it being named after the town which is at the centre of the Cortese growing region, where the



"That'll be €1.50 a litre". We weren't talking about the latest hike in petrol prices but the cost of the wine sold direct from the cantina. A 2010 Barbera, 13° volume and perfect for the dinner table. Here the inhabitants of Novi Ligure, the "Novesi," bring their bottles, demijohns and any other fit-for-the-purpose container to be filled time and again, happy in the knowledge that the product is quality and the price... well, the price can't be argued with: This is wine country.

Novi Ligure, a small Piemontese working town nestled between the alluvial plain and the first foothills of the Ligurian Alps,

foothills wind slowly up into the Ligurian mountains.

Cortese is the grape that provides us with Gavi di Gavi. The current growing style of this wine dates back to the 1870s, although reports of its production and consumption have existed for hundreds of years. The growing region is now under strict (DOCG) regulations, demanding that wine native to this region be recognised as such.

As for the town itself, there are fewer pleasurable moments in life than to sit outside Bar Matteo, a Gavi institution since 1946, and order an aperitif consisting of a glass of Gavi and a plate of olives from Liguria.

The story of Gavi is an interesting one, if it is to be believed. Around 500 A.D., there was a Frankish princess named Gavia who fell hopelessly in love with one of her guards. Although her father, Clodimir, King of the Franks, forbade the marriage, the couple absconded and married secretly. Their travels took them across the Alps and into the far reaches of the old Frankish kingdom in what is now lower Piemonte.

The couple remained hidden from the king until one evening when the husband, no doubt after a few too many of the local wines, divulged his secret to an innkeeper. News eventually reached the king who immediately set forth to confront the couple and see that punishment be carried

There's something intrinsically rustic and satisfying about a clay jug of red wine placed in front of you.

out for their disobedience. However, upon seeing his daughter once again, and the happiness on her face, he decided to bless the couple, and as a gift, he gave them the town which was renamed Gavi, after the princess. The couple lived happily, and possibly drunkenly, ever after.

Food tv fantasia

by Joseph Farina

Each morning
espresso or cappuccino
at historic chic cafe's
in rome, milan, venice and florence
Under a rising Mediterranean sun

At noon
Ligurian olives, kissed with extra virgin oil
Prosciutto di parma
Pasta made by milanese hands
Tuscan wine in murano goblets
Bocconcini di bufala and basilico
Al fresco beneath a Mediterranean mezzogiorno
Vistas of dream cities in background

Evenings
Are slow passeggiate
Arm in arm
Along ancient rivers
Or coastal promenades
Banked with palazzos and palms
Dusk scented
With Sicilian lemons, jasmine and oranges
Laughter, around outdoor
Linen covered tavolas
The sound of the Mediterranean a love song
The setting sun a chiaroscuro caress
They're living their dolce vita
While we save and deny ourselves
Hungry for their recipes.

From Bar Matteo you can choose any number of small local restaurants to savour the local ravioli of Gavi. This wonderful pasta is traditionally offered in three guises in this part of Piemonte, with a ragu sauce, in butter and sage and, for those hardier folk, in red wine, mainly Barbera. This last is popular and rightly so. However changes to the drink-driving laws have meant that many will now avoid risking this dish as the wine is traditionally drunk from the plate after the last of the ravioli has been eaten.

Barbera, the people's wine, is another Piemonte native although the centre of production is further north-west, around the Monferrato area. The town of Monferrato itself is a lovely little place boasting some decent restaurants and a selection of bars. One bar in particular (there's always a bar involved somewhere) comes to mind where one evening my girlfriend and I found ourselves outside and, as we drank a glass of wine, I strained my ears to the sounds of Creedence Clearwater Revival. I happened to mention my admiration for the band and the bar owner had suddenly found himself a new, albeit foreign friend in music. To show his appreciation of my appreciation another glass of wine was put before us, before I'd even finished the previous. As the music continued its 1960s theme, he regaled us with tales of Monferrato during those years, digging out photo-

graphs of the local flower power movement, well, 40 or so teenagers in paisley patterned shirts, seated at tables enjoying the pleasures of a jug of wine, as opposed many of their contemporaries elsewhere at the time.

The Barbera wine is another DOCG controlled production and there are records of its existence dating back to the 12th century in Monferrato. Traditionally served as a table wine with any meal both at home and in the *trattoria*, it is interesting to note that in Piemonte the consumption of this wine 100 years ago was double what it is now, raising the question of whether drinking habits have changed or if consumers now venture away from local wines, preferring instead to sample the

vast array of other wines now on sale, from both home and abroad.

Barbera production hit an all-time low in the early 1980s, the industry rocked by scandal related to unscrupulous production methods. As a reaction to this, one man more than most is recognised as having not only halted the decline of the wine but raised its standing in the wine community.

Giacomo Bologna went to California on a fact-finding mission and returned with ideas for a new approach. Bologna set about using the same small French oak barrels he had seen in the Napa valley vineyards. The difference was astonishing. The wine which left these barrels was a reserve of high quality and was suddenly changing hands at

previously unheard of amounts for a Barbera. Although the wine was and is still available in any quality and for any pocket, it is not uncommon to see certain Barbera reserve wines approach the price of their Piemonte peers, Barolo and Barbaresco.

The wine production and consumption in this area is intertwined with the culture and, as a result, various drinking songs have been passed down the years. One in particular I remember hearing during the first wedding I attended in the area, is simply called "Butta giù, butta giù" – In English translated basically as "Down it, down it" and the first verse is thus rendered:

*Chi è nato a gennaio
si alzi, si alzi
chi è nato a gennaio
si alzi in piè!*

Who is born in January
stand up, stand up
Who is born in January
Stand up on his feet

*bevilo, bevilo, bevilo
bevilo, bevilo tutto
bevilo, bevilo, bevilo
butta giù, butta giù!*

drink it, drink it, drink it
drink it, drink it all
drink it, drink it, drink it
Down it, down it

*e l'ha bevuto tutto
e non gli ha fatto male
è l'acqua che fa male
il vino fa cantar!*

He has drunk it all
and it hasn't made him ill
it's water that makes you ill
The wine makes you sing!

The Grape Harvest


by Peppino Ruggeri

Strolling on a lazy afternoon
I passed the local grape-crushing site
My senses felt the smell as an invite
I couldn't resist the call and went inside
To pass the time with old familiar sights,
But I saw none;
The vats, the press, grape skins littering the
paths,
Bare-footed boys and shirtless men,
They were all gone.
Their shapes soon resurfaced in my mind
As ghosts that ancient paths had failed to find;
I walked around devoid of any intent,
Still in a daze, on an unwonted floor made of
cement.
I heard the new machines crushing the grapes
And watched the juice that flowed through
plastic pipes.
I fled that place that memories had revived
But like the grapes has left them crushed and
dry,
I wandered for a while, then sat on an old
bench,
My mind flashed pictures of a life gone by
As I looked down the sloping, terraced land
That led to the river bed around the bend.
I saw women with long dresses and head
scarves
Cutting the grape bunches from the vines
And filling baskets made of willow twigs;
Donkeys slowly trudged through narrow trails
Laden with grapes that would become new wine

A boy was leading them holding the reins
I saw my face when I was barely nine;
Tired men unloaded baskets into vats
Made of cement stained by age and wear
And barefoot men and children hand in hand
Performed a ritual dance on mounds of grapes,
Naked, sweating torsos turned the press
Pushing on a wooden pole, showing prowess,
Some men filled goatskins with the sweet juice
Others loaded the goatskins on their back,
Women walked as dancing ballerinas
Carrying loaded pots on their bare heads.
The nostrils brought to mind the pungent
smell
That they remembered and had preserved so
well
Of the grape skins discarded by the side
Forming a hill on which the kids would slide.
My ears were quick to join the recollection
As they remembered tunes of ancient lore
That female pickers sang as an encore.
Awakened by a car that just drove by
I turned around, for home I made my way
This time I chose a trail where few would pass
That in ancient times was trod by mule and ass,
I saw an abandoned shack still standing tall
Fields of bamboo by thorny scrub embraced
Where green had reigned supreme; an old fig
tree
Extended its long arms as welcome call
And offered its ripe fruit as an invite
I took a fig and ate all in one bite.

Upon ending, the person standing will
down his glass. This song will carry on
through the rest of the year and it becomes
amusing especially at a large table where all
the months of the year are probably repre-
sented by birthdays. I once saw someone
accompany every verse by downing his
glass. He disappeared a short while later
lamenting the fact he needed to lie down.

In Italy, as in France and Spain, wine is
still the preferred drink of the majority of
adults, especially at lunch and dinner and
hopefully the younger generation will fol-
low, even in this age of Mojito and bottled
lager. The *trattoria* will still serve a jug of
wine, which in Piemonte generally means
Barbera, to the table. There's something
intrinsically rustic and satisfying about a clay
jug of red wine placed in front of you.

There is also something deeply satisfy-
ing about those words at the cantina: "that'll
be €1.50 a litre." 

*Chris Farley, was born in
England, and now lives in
Switzerland, where he can be
found, sometimes with a drink
in hand, continuously in
search of his muse.*