

The Langhe. What Makes this Place so Special? The Answer is Blowin' in the Wind!

Letizia Airos (June 17, 2014)



The founder of Eataly talks about Alba and the Langhe, a thriving region located in the heart of Piedmont, between the sea and the Alps

“I was born on September 24, 1954, in Alba, the ‘capital’ of the Langhe hills. My father was from Barbaresco, my mother from Barolo,” says [Oscar Farinetti](#) [2], mulling over his homeland. The cities where his parents come from are also home to two famous namesake wines.

But today we’re standing in front of [Eataly](#) [3], the megastore on 5th Avenue, and Farinetti’s words are a breath of fresh air amid the traffic of Manhattan. Fresh air, it turns out, will be the subject of much of our interview.

“Alba is incredibly situated: south of Turin, in the plain of the Tanaro river, a 34-mile straight shot from the Ligurian seaside city of Savona. To the west are the beautiful hills of Roero, to the east



the beautiful hills of Langhe. The latter are 'kissed' by God because they produce slightly rounded hazelnuts considered the best in the world as well as important Italian red wines: beside [Dolcetto](#) [4] and [Barbera](#) [5], the legendary [Nebbiolo grape](#) [6], which is produced by the conjunction of the Marin (costal) winds coming from the shores of Savona and the fresh air of the maritime Alps that come down from Monviso. The winds create a distinctively humid microclimate that leaves a little morning frost on the Nebbiolo vines that we call, unsurprisingly, "Marin". Nebbiolo grapes, aged for three years in Barbaresco and four in Barolo, are used to make [Barbaresco](#) [7] and [Barolo](#) [8] wine."

Oscar could go on forever talking about wine. But we cut him off. We want to know about the older town of Alba. Then we can get back to its extraordinary natural surroundings and what men made with them.

"In ancient Roman times, the town was called Alba Pompeia. It was pretty well known, and it was close to Pollenzium (now Pollenzo), the most important Roman city in Northern Italy, now home to the [University of Gastronomic Sciences](#) [9]. [Farinetti is an affiliate of the school.] There was a coliseum that could fit 25,000 people. Back then, a city with over 25,000 inhabitants was like a city with five million today. It was the last "gate" before entering Gaul. In Julius Caesar's day, it was the last Roman outpost. North of Turin was Gaul. Afterward, the development of Alba underwent several different phases."

The Middle Ages being one fundamental phase, as it was for many Italian cities, especially in the center and north.

"Right. That marked the beginning of castles and municipalities. There were 100 municipalities in the Langhe, each with an average of 1,000 inhabitants. Every hilltop had a castle and surrounding village. You can still see many of them: Grinzane Cavour, Barolo, Serralunga d'Alba, Govone, Magliano Alfieri, Roddi, Mango and Beneve. Agriculture flourished."

A little way away is Savoy, a prominent territory since the Middle Ages, now split between France, Italy and Switzerland. Savoy is the seat of the Savoy dynasty, where the future kings of Italy came from...

"[The Savoys](#) [10] settled in the area and built a castle in Santa Vittoria for vacations. In the mid 1800s [Carlo Alberto](#) [11] built his court in [Pollenzo](#) [12]. He created the first prototype of a farmstead. He saw the enormous potential in Piedmont's cuisine and agriculture. His son, Vittorio Emanuele, the first King of Italy, bought Fontanafredda and settled there with his lover, Bela Rosin. That was a thriving period for the Langhe, too, up until World War One. Then came "la malora" ('ruin')."

You're referring to the title of [Beppe Fenoglio](#) [13]'s book. Fenoglio was an important writer who came from the Langhe. His home in Alba is now a museum and center for literary studies.

"La Malora (Ruin) is an extraordinary novel. It begins: "It was raining all over the Langhe, and up in San Benedetto my father was getting wet underground for the first time." So it begins with the rain, with the soil, with the death of his father. And it recounts the hunger of those times, the epidemics. The population dwindled. Farming dwindled. It didn't take a turn for the better till after the Second World War."

And today we have a new marvelous territory...

"I remember a lesson on change held in Fontanafredda by [Alain Elkann](#) [14]. He read the first three pages of La Malora, which takes place about sixty years ago, and then two pages from the [Michelin guide](#) [15]. What a contrast! In a span of twenty kilometers around Alba there are now 22 restaurants with Michelin stars. And besides Barolo and Barbaresco, there's another big secret: white truffles."

What's the reason for the Langhe's success compared to other nearby places? Why is the Langhe prosperous and rich while, for example, Monferrato, in the province of Asti, is



not?

"It's true. When you get off the turnpike in Asti, you pass poor Monferrato where they sell Barbera for next to nothing, whereas we sell Barolo for 30 Euros a liter. They have truffles, too, but no one knows about the truffles of Asti. It's chance. It depends on the men born in a certain time in history. In the Langhe we owe everything to one person, Giacomo Morra. He owned the Hotel Savona, the first place in Italy to get a Michelin star. In 1946 he found a truffle weighing two and a half kilograms and decided to give it as a gift to President Truman. It made headlines around the world! In 1947 he gave one to Hitchcock, then one to Sophia Loren, Brigitte Bardot. Every year he gave one to a big star. Around the world, the white truffle became synonymous with Alba."

So the truffle is the first ambassador of the Langhe?

"Yes, it put the Langhe on the map. But we have a phenomenal economy in all sectors. Ferrero produces the world's supply of Nutella. There's Miroglio, the second biggest Italian apparel firm. The Pallinis invented Famiglia Cristiana, the second biggest Italian weekly. Now we have Unieuro Elettrodomestici and Eataly...Alba is an insane hotbed of activity."

The Langhe area also has ties to the anti-fascist Resistance Movement.

"True. But it's not as though we did anything out of the ordinary. We just knew how to tell our story. Thanks to major writers like [Cesare Pavese](#) [16] and Beppe Fenoglio. Once told, a thing lives on. If it's not told, then it's already dead. The people of Alba have a great talent for telling their story."

And how do you account for that?

"We believe that everything happens on account of the wind. The answer is always in the wind. The moist winds from the gulf of Genoa and Savona reach the cold air from the Alps, so you can breathe in the sea air while you're in the hills. This biodiversity extends to the vegetables and animals as well as to human beings, to their creative minds..."

What part of the Langhe do you love best?

"I live in Novello, in the area of Barolo. Novello, Barolo, Morra and Monforte form a rectangle of beauty, a valley of splendors that is the valley of Barolo. Full of castles. Everything's special, and the period of the grape harvest is extraordinary. After that comes truffle season."

What about tourism? Is the area well known to foreigners?

"Tourism grows forty percent every year. It mostly attracts rich tourists. They eat well and sleep in castles... The number of rooms in agriturismi has tripled."

And how do you spend your time?

"Walking in the countryside, visiting castles, wine cellars, farms, museums. There's always something to do."

Do you have any advice for American tourists?

"Spend at least three days in the Langhe. It's the best place to eat in Italy. The quality of life is best. And the hilly panorama is first-rate. It's on par with Montalcino and Chianti. Tuscany only has one advantage over us - a hundred more days of warm weather! There's a reason the wine produced in Langhe is called Nebbiolo. We've got the fog (nebbia in Italian). But the Langhe is cooler. And it's good that fewer people come here. So come, but don't come all at once."

Finally, is there a particular dish and wine you'd recommend?



“We have the richest cuisine in Italy. A menu with 18 to 22 appetizers. Five first courses, various second courses. And then there’s the cheese, among them Robiola. Gourmands consider beef from Piedmont to be the best in the world. The only beef to eat cruda (raw) raw. I’d recommend eating carne cruda with a glass of Dolcetto. Then try agnolotti al plin (pasta stuffed with three roast meats) with Barbera Superiore d’Alba. After that, brasato al Barolo and a glass of Barolo. For dessert, a light amaretto cake, a delicacy you have to eat with a glass of Moscato d’Asti.

How’s that for the ultimate journey?

Breathtaking landscapes, hillsides dotted with castles, vine-laden slopes, a whole lot of history and one culture’s gift for storytelling. Not to mention Oscar Farinetti’s gift for keeping this story alive in the world.

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