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## Bounty of the Alba Hills

In the cuisine of an Old World wine-producing area, certain food products or preparations stand out as keys to unlock a better understanding of the place and, therefore, its wine. In the Barolo area in the hills of the Langhe in the region of Piedmont, three such 'keys' immediately come to mind....

Clockwise from top left: *Brasato al Barolo* at *Ristorante Bovio*; Franco, Martina and Andrea Sandrone at *Maccelleria Sandrone*; Alessandra and Marco Boschiazio of *Ristorante Bovio*, with daughter Elisa; Franco Sandrone; Salvatore Leo; laying the breadsticks at *Panetteria Cravero*.

## Barolo, Butchers and Beef

In many places, food shopping is a perfunctory task; get in, get what you need, pay and get out, in as little time and with as few words as possible. Italy is not one of these places. In the Barolo area, for example, a visit to the butcher is as much a social activity as a shopping excursion and the simple objective of getting some meat often takes longer than you think it will (which might explain why many shops have a few chairs). The last time I visited my butcher Salvatore, he and a regular customer, a middle-aged woman, got into a protracted discussion that began with a recent trip Salvatore took to Milan and ended with homosexuality, gay marriage, politicians, the church and the essence of humanity, punctuated by the preparation of a long list of meat items, one by one, and periodically interrupted by the butcher stopping to look out the window and comment on some (usually female) passerby.

This is not unusual. And while such a thing can happen in the course of most any transaction in Italy, in Piedmont it happens mostly in butcher shops. For Barolo still has real butchers, people who begin with an entire carcass and carve it into its component parts, then slice, pound, bone, weigh and wrap the meat to order—all of which naturally entails discussion and time.

The Piedmontese are also steadfast carnivores. And while

they consume just about everything possessing feathers or hooves, beef is the favorite of the animal kingdom much as nebbiolo is the favorite grape. And just as Barolo is the highest pedigree of nebbiolo, the *Razza Piemontese* is king of the cows.

It's a mainstay on the menu at *Ristorante Bovio* in La Morra, a reincarnation of *Ristorante Belvedere*, a regional classic opened in the 1950s. Marco Boschiazzo, the son-in-law of the original owner, says that the sweet flavor and melt-in-the-mouth texture of *Razza Piemontese* sets it apart from the meat of other breeds, but that its low fat content means it's typically either served raw, or cooked long. He rattles off some typical raw preparations: *battuto al cotello* ("chopped-by-hand" raw beef minimally seasoned with extra-virgin olive oil, salt, pepper and thinly sliced fresh garlic); *fettine Albese* (thin slices of raw meat drizzled with lemon, olive oil, salt and pepper); *saliccia di Bra* (a delicately spiced sausage said to have been created by Bra's butchers for the town's once-sizeable Jewish population, though it now often includes a bit of pork). "If not eaten raw, the meat is usually stewed (*spezzatino* or *bocconcini*), braised (*brasato al Barolo*), or boiled (*bollito misto*). Though low in fat, the meat has an exceptional flavor that can withstand the long slow cooking without losing its structure."

It's not just flavor that makes the Piedmontese partial to *Razza Piemontese*. The breed has long played a central role in the lives of the people of the Langhe just as wine has. Up until a generation ago, it was common for families in rural areas to have a stable on the ground floor of their house with a few cattle that produced milk and meat, and worked in the fields. The real workhorse of the breed, the ox known as *Bue Grasso*, was once used to pull wagons and plow vineyards, and is still used for *bollito misto*. Excess animals were sold for additional income, and, in the cold of winter, residents of rural hamlets would gather in the stable of one of their neighbors for a *vià* to sing songs, tell stories and bask in the warmth generated by the animals.

Today, most of the stables have disappeared. But there are still some old-fashioned *cascine* scattered throughout less populated areas of the Langhe and the raising of *Razza Piemontese* is still primarily a small-scale family operation.

I like to drop by Macelleria Sandrone, Barolo's butcher shop, on Tuesday mornings

when the sides of beef are delivered and chat with proprietor Franco Sandrone while he breaks them down. "Look at this!" he says, pointing his knife at a bright red rib of beef. "*Bello, no?*" This is not really a question but an indisputable observation and he continues without waiting for my affirmation: "We know the people we get our animals from and we've known them for a long time. Most of these breeders have a small number of animals. They give them healthy food and take good care of them, almost like members of the family. This is the old system and not much has changed; many of these guys still calculate their transactions in lira! And that's how it should be: small farmers speaking Piedmontese and thinking in lira, raising *Razza Piemontese* in Piedmont on hay from their farm, not cut-rate meat in supermarkets from who knows where. We'll continue to work this way as long as it lasts and as long as there are people who want our products. After that, we'll close up shop and start eating fast food like everyone else. Or maybe we'll just become vegetarians!"

“That’s how it should be: small farmers raising *Razza Piemontese* in Piedmont, from hay on their farm, not cut-rate meat in supermarkets from who knows where.”

— Franco Sandrone

### RAZZA CUTS

**“The *Razza Piemontese* has different subgroups,” said my butcher Salvatore Leo, one of three in the little town of Gallo. “Fassone [the name comes from the French word “façon”], which is also called *Albese* or *da Coscia* for its high hind legs and straight back, is the purest form of the breed. Then you have *vitella* or *vitello*, the one- to two-year-old**

calves. Their meat is the best for *carne cruda*. *Manzo* is adult beef, which is at its best around Christmas, and *bue* is the huge four- to six-year-old ox. Filet or *scamone* are the most tender (and most expensive), and meat from the leg has the most flavor. But it’s not just a question of the cut; you have to know where to get the best animals.”

### WINE + RAZZA

**With *insalata di carne cruda* Marco recommends an *Arneis* from the Roero or a *Nascetta* from the town of Novello.**

He says it is perfectly fine to use a good Langhe Nebbiolo to prepare *brasato al Barolo* but the best wine to drink with it is a Barolo.

A Barbera Superiore, he says, provides a good accompaniment to many stews, and a Dolcetto di Dogliani is the best wine for *bollito misto*. [The nearby town of Carrù is considered the capital of *bollito misto* Piemontese and hosts the annual Fiera del Bue Grasso in December.]

## Grissini fatto al mano

Most afternoons, an alluring aroma wafts through the town of Barolo, an aroma that once sprang from the hearts of many small villages in the Langhe area but has become increasingly rare: the aroma of freshly baked bread.

Follow its magnetic pull, and you'll find yourself in the center of the village, at the ground floor of an old building with a distinctive peaked roof, where you zero in on the source of this perfume: an open green door. A blast of heat will hit you as you peer inside. The bakery is a flurry of activity, with people bent over large trays, their elbows opening laterally in a

rhythmic motion, and trays moving in and out of the ovens. Each tray is lined with thin sticks laid like the slats of a shutter. A fresh wave of toastiness hits you.

Then it registers: the scent is not of bread but *grissini*, the long, deliciously crunchy breadsticks that are as much a part of Barolo (the area) as Barolo (the wine).

In the Langhe, grissini pop up wherever there is food or wine, which is just about everywhere. Gathered in a napkin like a bundle of twigs or splaying out of a basket, they are a fixture on restaurant tables where they provide a crispy counterpoint to the mostly soft-textured dishes common to the local cuisine. As a snack, they are often paired with *salame (cotto or crudo)*, prosciutto or fresh robiola cheese. And they are *de rigueur* at wine tastings where their yeasty crumble refreshes the palate without

intruding on the taste of the wine. In fact, you could think of grissini as a kind of bridge or interface between the food and the wine of Piedmont.

As if on cue, a fistful of breadsticks appear in front of your face followed by a voice: "*Volete provare?*" The voice belongs to Guglielmo Cravero. Along with his wife Daniela and their son, Stefano, he runs Panetteria Cravero and is one of the people chiefly responsible for the flurry going on inside. "*Sono fatto a mano*," he says proudly, as if you needed to be convinced.

Just as a handcrafted wine is different from a mass-produced one, there's a world of difference between these grissini and the anonymously uniform sticks sold at the grocery store in little plastic envelopes. Authentic Piedmontese grissini are long—anywhere between 12 and 24 inches—and stretched out by hand. This is an important detail: Some sticks end up a little thicker or thinner, or maybe a bit curved or slightly bulbous or pinched at the end. Each one has the subtle imprint of the person who made it, and these slight irregularities give them a

unique mouthfeel. Even the snap of a handmade grissini is different than the industrial version, less brittle and somehow more invitingly savory, at once toasty, yeasty, slightly sweet and salty.

Panetteria Cravero, a fixture in Barolo for decades, began as a bread bakery but now makes only grissini, which they sell in the adjacent shop along with a variety of other foods. (The panetteria is the only place in town to buy food except for the butcher shop; residents use it as a sort of general store between trips to the market.) The dough is made in small batches using extra-virgin olive oil from Liguria and organic stone-ground flour from Mulino Sobrino in La Morra. And Panetteria Cravero is one of the few bakeries that still pulls every grissino by hand.

Besides the shape, texture and flavor, there's another thing that characterizes these grissini: they have a tendency to disappear without your knowing it, leaving behind a few crumbs and a strong desire for more. So, before carrying on, it might be advisable to pick up some for dinner.



Daniela, Guglielmo and Stefano Cravero of Panetteria Cravero

*De rigueur* at wine tastings where their yeasty crumble refreshes the palate without intruding on the taste of the wine, grissini are a kind of bridge or interface between the food and the wine of Piedmont.

## Plin & Tajarin

For some of the best pasta in Barolo, head to Castiglione Falletto. In the central piazza—really just a small patch of asphalt with parking spaces for four cars—there's a bar, a grocery store, a tobacco shop and a trattoria called *Locanda del Centro*.

That's where you'll find Andrea Scarzello, who worked at the Michelin three-star restaurant *Duomo* in Alba before he took over this place, a modest space specializing in the region's traditional food—or, as Scarzello puts it, "what I grew up on."

His kitchen is near the bar where I get my coffee before work, and the door is often open. Each time I stop by, I seem to catch him at various stages of the pasta-making process, a

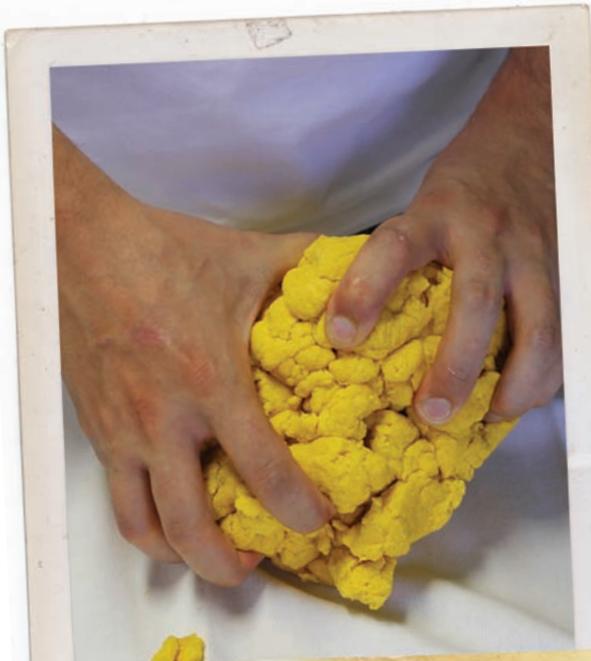
process that is, in one form or another, going on in restaurants and homes throughout the area. Sometimes he's just turning the dough out of the mixing bowl, a dough that is bright yellow-orange due to the high number of egg yolks typical of Piedmontese cooks. Other times he's rolling out the dough into long, thin sheets and turning them into one of the two classic pastas of the Barolo area.

For *tajarin* (Piedmontese for

tagliatelle, or 'little cuts'), he feeds the sheets through the fine cutter of the pasta machine or rolls it up and slices it very thin with a sharp knife. In Barolo, the thin, toothsome noodles are usually served with *sugo di carne*, a sauce of ground meat (or Bra sausage) and tomato. They also make the perfect foil for the white truffles of Alba, which give up their bewitching scent when they hit the warm noodles. If truffles are scarce (which they usually are), sautéed

fresh porcini or other wild mushrooms work well, too.

Then there are the *agnolotti del plin*, more labor-intensive and even more special. These little stuffed pasta packets are found nowhere but the Langhe, and can be made only by hand. (*Plin* means 'pinched' in Piedmontese dialect after the technique used to make them.) The traditional stuffing recipe calls for boiled rice and Swiss chard to be ground up with an array of meats and



Andrea Scarzello kneading dough for tajarin.

mixed with egg, cheese and a touch of nutmeg, but some (like Scarzello) leave out the rice and Swiss chard. “The dish actually originated as a way of using leftovers,” Scarzello tells me, as he spoons dabs of stuffing at even intervals along the edge of a sheet of pasta. “People ate meat from animals on their farm—rabbits, chickens, pigs and cows—cooked in the wood stove. They collected leftovers and picked the meat off the bones and used it to make the

common; *sugo di arrosto* (a sauce made from roasting-pan drippings) is the most traditional; and *al fumo*, named for the smoke-like vapor rising up from the naked steaming ravioli just out of the boiling water with nothing whatsoever to mask their flavor, is the most courageous.

However they are prepared, the thin noodles and the pinched ravioli are as emblematic of the Langhe region as the people who eat them and the wines that are

“Agnolotti originated as a way of using leftovers. People ate meat from animals on their farm—rabbits, chickens, pigs and cows—cooked in the wood stove. They picked the meat off the bones and used it to make the stuffing.

You used what you had. Nothing was ever wasted.”

—Andrea Scarzello

stuffing. You used what you had. Nothing was ever wasted.”

In fact, the most important thing about plin (besides the pillow-like shape) is the filling. Every cook has his own recipe, and the three principal ways of dressing the pasta seem specially designed to showcase the flavor of what’s inside: Melted butter, fresh sage and grated cheese is the most

drunk with them. And while you might think that a yolk-heavy pasta topped with red sauce or stuffed with roasted meat and tossed in butter would be heavy, they are actually surprisingly, deliciously light. Sort of like a fine Barolo, the kind that is earthy and intensely tannic yet beautifully transparent, elegant and understated.



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## Razza Piemontese Sources

**Ristorante Bovio**, via Alba, 17bis - 12064 La Morra (CN); (39) 0173.590303, [ristorantebovio.it](http://ristorantebovio.it)

**Macelleria Leo**, via Garibaldi 124, Grinzane-Cavour (CN); (39) 338.9141392

**Macelleria Sandrone**, via Roma 41, Barolo (CN); (39) 0173.566430

## Wine and Pasta

Because *tajarin* and *agnolotti* are *primi piatti* and thus usually served between appetizers and a main course, wine choices can vary widely, especially depending on the sauce.

### Meat-filled agnolotti with butter and sage:

a crisp favorita or a young, fruity dolcetto.

**Fonduta-filled agnolotti** could stand up to a white with a bit more heft, such as a **sauvignon-based Langhe Bianco**.

### Agnolotti with a meaty *sugo di arrosto*

would pair well with a **Langhe Nebbiolo**.

**Agnolotti al fumo** could provide an excellent partner for an **old Barolo** that has shed its tough tannins but retained its dried-flower-petal aroma and subtle hints of black cherry, licorice and leather.

**Tajarin al ragu:** A medium-bodied **Barbera d’Alba** (or perhaps a Langhe Rosso blend of barbera and nebbiolo) is the ticket.

**Tajarin with wild porcini mushrooms** calls for **Barbaresco**.

Should you get your hands on some fresh **Alba white truffles** to shave over tajarin, you might want to do what the Piedmontese do and skip wine altogether with that course so as not to have anything interfere with the pungent but elusive flavor and aroma of the precious tubers.