

Take a hike to savour Italy's many flavours

by KEREN LAVELLE



PIEDMONT, a region in northern Italy, is famous for food. It's where the "slow food" movement started in the 1980s, as a reaction to the global spread of "same-same" fast food outlets.

Apart from its majestic capital Turin, the rest of Piedmont is the opposite of a city: it's very rural, with small towns filled with the love of the good life and people whose energies are directed towards wine and gastronomic festivals.

Autumn is the peak season here, both because it's harvest time and the time when truffles – the black and the rarer white – are fruiting underground in the forests.

It's the season I've chosen to travel on Hedonistic Hiking's Jewels of Piedmont tour, which places great focus on food and wine, balanced with a moderate amount of walking. The tour also includes lots of other surprises.

At the start I'm not sure what I'm looking forward to the most: probably the food!

Our first stop is at lunchtime, in Racogniggi, at the Ristaronte Da Mose.

Cinzia Long, our specialist local food guide, liaises with all the restaurants to choose our menus. Breads, mineral water and wine quickly appear, followed by antipasti.

Cinzia explains the dishes and wines we are being served. I learn that grissini (breadsticks), were invented in the regional capital Turin (where we have all just met up), and that handmade, uneven, crispy ones dusted with cornmeal are the local favourites.

The antipasti include one of my favourites, vitello tonnato, thin slices of veal in a creamy tuna sauce. It's surprising just how well these disparate ingredients team up together. I'm also very happy with the tartra piedmontese (a savoury flan), and a fresh cheese, tomina, dressed with herbs. I somehow make room for the dessert, semi-freddo ice cream with a chocolate pudding called bunet, named after the hat-shaped copper mould it's traditionally set in.

I imagine that Jackie and Mick Parsons, Hedonistic Hiking's owner-operator guides, must have fun dreaming up their judicious holiday mixtures: hikes – through man-made landscapes, towns, farms and vineyards, and wilderness areas – interspersed with doses of culture

and history (these last two are intermingled in Italy, that's for sure), and punctuated by great meals (picnics you hike to are a specialty), sampled with local wine, beer and spirits.

We sleep each night in boutique hotels – four nights in a restored medieval farmhouse, three nights in an elegant establishment in a tiny town, La Morra.

On this trip Jackie is our lead guide, aided by Cinzia, while Mick is busy leading a tour in southern Italy.

Jackie weaves a history lesson of the region throughout the week.

After our lunch, we begin in the 17th century on our private visit to the Castle of Racogniggi, the summer palace of the royal house of Savoy. Our guide Fulvia explains how the castle was originally a fort in the possession of the marquesses of Saluzzo in the 13th century, but in the 16th century it was acquired by the House of Savoy, a family with territory in France and Italy, who turned it into a pleasure palace.

The Savoy family – and the Piedmont region – became key players in the unification of Italy, and united Italy's royal family. The last King of Italy, Umberto II, was born in this palace in 1904.

After checking into our farmhouse



NUTTING IT OUT – The first day's hike through chestnut forests (above). Opposite page, a good truffle dog is worth his weight in gold.

hotel on the outskirts of Saluzzo, we head back further into the medieval past with a visit to Staffarda Abbey, founded by a marquis of Saluzzo in the early 12th century. The monks have long gone, but there's a great bar, where we are treated to an extra-dry spumante sparkling wine, cheeses and meats, and the restaurant Il Sigillo, where we manage to consume a banquet featuring dishes such as risotto with dried porcini mushrooms, and roast guinea fowl with a muscat wine reduction.

Cinzia later explains that "the purpose of restaurants here is to do things you can't do at home", so despite her requests for vegetables to be included, they very rarely are.

Il Sigillo manages to serve what it calls an eggplant stew, but it's topped by a hearty almond-encrusted trout fillet. As we are leaving, there's a glimpse of a beautiful mountain on the horizon.

"That's Monviso," says Jackie, "where we will be hiking in a couple of days' time."

We get some practice the next day by hiking into the centre of Saluzzo, where the Saturday markets are in full swing.

While there are clothing and shoe stalls, most of the market is devoted to food: an autumnal array of vegetables, plus fresh pastas, cured meats and even fresh fish.

We walk up a narrow cobbled street past a more improvised market: people from out of town have brought in their hand-picked harvests.

We keep climbing up and up, past a film set where actors in 1930s-40s period dress lounge around waiting for their cue ("No photo, no photo!" insists a wrangler).

We pause for a visit to the Casa Cavassa, a Renaissance-era palazzo restored in the 19th century, now a museum. We stroll further, along lanes through chestnut woods, arriving outside the 13th century castle, Manta.

Before we enter Manta Castle, it's picnic time. To make up for the lack of vegetables in our restaurant diet, Cinzia has prepared two salads – one of roasted capsicum (red and the local yellow variety), and a mixed green salad – and she has shopped for cheeses and salamis, breads, wine, fruit and cakes.

Jackie entertains us by reading one of the Tales of the Decameron by Boccaccio – the story of patient Griselda, the much put-upon wife of Gualtieri, a fictional marquis of Saluzzo.

One stunning feature of Manta, home to the real marquesses of Saluzzo, is a hall with well-preserved frescoes painted in the 1420s. These have unusual subject mat-

ters: nine male "worthies" such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and their female equivalents. Alas, our guide knows nothing about the women. On the opposite wall are somewhat risqué scenes of rejuvenation at the Fountain of Youth: it's all a bit different from church frescoes.

The worthies in our group are inspired to walk back to the hotel before we regroup for dinner.

Jackie and Cinzia take us to the restaurant Quat Taulin, specialising in regional cuisine, with a menu written entirely in the Piedmontese dialect. The several courses of fairly simple, fresh food – especially the feather-light gnocchi with a judicious mixture of cheese, cream and butter – are delightful. We don't manage to get around to sampling any of the fascinating local cheeses on a table at the back of the restaurant.

The hiking ante gets upped the next day after we drive to the Colle di Sampeyre, a mountain pass 2285 metres high in the Cottian Alps. We take it easy by descending to begin with, walking through a farm where the family is starting to pack up to move their herds into the valley for winter. Piedmontese cows seem very happy to be confined in fields fenced in only by

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Step out to taste Italy

■ From Page 5 stopping at the medieval town Cherasco en route, where we pay a visit to master chocolatier Riccardi Mauro.

Since the 17th century chocolate has been big in Piedmont. Both drinking chocolate and gianduiotto, the hazelnut-chocolate spread (later reaching brand fame as Nutella), were invented here.

Mauro makes a diverse and imaginative range of chocolates. I become particularly fond of his chocolate-coated sage leaves.

Somehow, all this sampling doesn't dampen our enthusiasm for lunch at La Morra's Bovio restaurant overlooking valleys full of vineyards. This patchwork landscape of carefully cultivated slopes sprinkled with hilltop villages, castles, Romanesque churches and farmhouses, was recognised with a UNESCO World Heritage listing in 2014.

This landscape is our new walking terrain over the next few days.

We also learn from winemakers who make Barolo and Barbaresco, the classic wines which Piedmont produces. We visit Alba, home of a truffle festival, and have an exciting evening excursion with a professional truffle-hunter and his truffle dog, searching for the aromatic fungi worth almost as much as gold.

We spend our last



STEP IN TIME – Walking through the vineyards in UNESCO-listed heritage areas.

IF YOU GO...

THE Jewels of Piedmont tour will be offered from June 23-30 and October 25-November 1 at a cost of 2895 Euros per person with a single supplement of 200 Euros – www.hedonistichiking.com.au

evening at the Castle of Grinzane Cavour. The historic castle was once the home of Count Cavour, the statesman of Italian unification, and it is the only built element of the UNESCO World Heritage landscape listing.

It houses a showcase enoteca (wine shop) and a museum featuring displays on Cavour and wine production. It's also where the annual fundraising auction of white truffles takes place as part of the Alba Truffle Festival.

Naturally, truffles are on

the menu when we dine in the castle's Michelin-starred restaurant and, of course, we drink Barolo.

Moreover, one of our tour party, an opera singer, decides to pay homage to Italian culture, entertaining us and the restaurant staff by singing an aria from Verdi's *La Traviata*.

What to say about the whole experience, but "Brava!"?

** Keren Lavelle travelled to Italy at her own expense and was a guest of Hedonistic Hiking on this tour:*