



TAKING IT SLOW

In Italy's Piedmont, nothing is valued like the homegrown and the handcrafted **BY JANE DANIELS LEAR**

Fourth-generation winemaker Maria Teresa Mascarello stands in front of us, one slim, work-roughened hand on a magnum of wine, a 1986 Barolo. Bottles of the 2000 Bartolo Mascarello are lined up alongside. The style of the wine is arch-traditionalist, the translator explains. These people do everything by hand, including the bottling and labeling. He hesitates, then murmurs an aside: "The Mascarellos didn't get a telephone until 1989." I am seated in the family's salon, and out of habit I squint at the wall of books behind Mascarello. *Cento anni di socialismo*, I read. "One Hundred Years of Socialism."

The '86 is gorgeousness in a glass. Deep red in color, it has a haunting aroma and complex fruit on the palate. The 2000 is spicy, substantial, and deceptively simple.

I'm one of 19 people on a tour of the Piedmont, to the Langhe and Roero hills around Alba, home to Italy's seductive white truffles and noblest red wines. Our exploration of the romantic countryside—misty, vine-clad slopes and honey-colored castles and church towers—is led by Larry and Laura Martin of Sonoma County's **Food & Wine Trails** (800-367-5348; foodandwinetrails.com), experts in planning tours that explore a country's culture through its cuisine. This is their first official program for Slow Food, the Italian organization that's grown into a global network of people who are passionate about preserving regional food and wine traditions, as well as the pleasures of the table. This is the first of several visits we'll make to wine

producers in the area. I must admit that winery tours usually bore me stiff, but, in spite of myself, I'm pulled into Mascarello's antimacassared world. Later that morning, we cross the road to meet another Barolo producer, whose attachment to the land is no less profound than Mascarello's but who relies on new-oak *barriques* and a more contemporary approach. Whip-thin and impossibly chic, even in her rubber work boots, Chiara Boschis is an unapologetic modernist, a maverick who's taken over a venerable winery and turned it on its ear. Her 2000 is a delight—racy and powerful.

Most of my traveling companions are from a Slow Food convivium, or chapter, in Northern California, and a (thankfully) unforced conviviality rules on the minibus and at the dining table. This is an elite group of foodies, true, but their interest in the extremely local farmers we visit and what they produce—the ancient Piedmontese breed of cattle (the meat is classically pounded thin and eaten raw), a golden-skinned chublike fish called the tench (often fried, *then* marinated in vinegar, herbs, and spices), the tender alpine cow's-milk cheese called Bra Tenero (terrific with a handful of crisp, nutty, just-made *grissini*)—is genuine and inspiring. The chefs we meet respond in kind and cook their hearts out for us.

The best eating is not in Turin, where our jaunt began, but in the village osterias, and it ranges from the deeply traditional spread at **Agriturismo Fricandò** (*Via Nino Costa 23, Frazione Marocchi,*

Poirino; 011-945-39-06)—warm chestnut salad, *lardo*, eels, rabbit pâté, risotto, tench (buttery, meaty, and as good as it looks), braised beef, and carafes of an uncomplicated fruity red—to a simpler, sublime lunch at Davide Palluda's **all'Enoteca** (*Via Roma 57, Canale; 0173-95-85-7*), a Michelin one-star with an unpretentious wine shop downstairs. In the center of the sunny room is a sturdy table crowded with a friendly assortment of wine bottles and, on this October day, a deep bowl of truffles. Palluda is a wonderful cook who knows how to mingle elegant restraint with a reassuring hominess; his gnocchi with meat sauce is the most delicious thing I've eaten in ages, and I can't wait to return. When I do, I plan to stay at the year-old **Villa Tiboldi** (*Case Sparse Tiboldi 127, Canale; 011-39-0173-97-03-88; villatiboldi.it*), with its artful interiors and heart-tugging views of Nebbiolo vines that fan up the hills into the mist. One of Palluda's protégés runs the kitchen there, and he gives us a hands-on lesson in making the pride of every Piedmont kitchen—tjararin, a silky, finely cut long pasta golden with egg yolks. Maybe it's time to branch out, though. Food & Wine Trails also offers trips to France, Spain, Austria, and, even farther afield, New Zealand. Another company, **A Cook's Tour** (800-726-6388; acookstour.com), runs similar European trips, as well as ones to Oaxaca and South Africa.

The Piedmont's rustic elegance shines through in Canale, at Villa Tiboldi, and in the cooking of Davide Palluda at all'Enoteca.