

# Condé Nast Traveler

THE WORLD MADE LOCAL

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THE 2025

# HOT LIST

THE BEST NEW HOTELS, CRUISES, AND RESTAURANTS



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IDAHO  
NORTHERN ITALY



# human touch

Across Northern Italy, skilled artisans are working to preserve the country's oldest traditions, from winemaking and set design to truffle hunting and textiles

By Thessaly La Force Photographs by Daniel Seung Lee



Clockwise from this image:  
Veteran truffle hunter  
Daniele and his trusty  
hound Bianca; ingredients  
for pesto at the Genoa  
restaurant Il Genovese;  
Nebbiolo grapes at the  
Langhe winery Azienda  
Agricola Lalù; a breakfast  
picnic of truffles and  
eggs in Piedmont;  
a weaver at Venice's  
Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua  
Opposite page: Vineyards  
in La Morra, in Piedmont





# it

is 4 a.m. and I am being led through the sleepy foothills of Berri, a small town in the Italian region of Piedmont, by Daniele, a licensed truffle hunter, and his petite white hound Bianca. The stars glitter in the cold, crisp air. These chilly nights are part of a delicate ecosystem in Piedmont and are, along with the bright, hot days, what makes both winemaking and white-truffle hunting so spectacular in this region. We walk through increasingly dense poplar and hazelnut trees toward a small ravine. As my American guide, Amanda, translates, Daniele explains that timing is everything. He will often return to the same location twice, even three times, a day, because a truffle can mature in just a few hours. Typical of many wild plants, truffles tend to repopulate in the same area, assuming that the truffle's mycelium—the invisible rootlike network that spreads underground—is not disturbed. Being a good hunter is about memory, he says.

Daniele's slow, learned approach and careful hand are hallmarks of an older way of doing things. In an age in which the word *fast* commonly modifies *fashion* and *food*, it is more important than ever to preserve these time-honored approaches. I am traveling across Northern Italy with Prior, an experiential travel company whose itineraries are designed to tell stories about the craftspeople who keep local heritage alive. "We want to spotlight these living cultures passed down by generations and their stewards," says David Prior, the company's co-founder (and a former contributing editor to this magazine). As he accompanies me from Genoa to Venice, he introduces me to artisans that specialize

in various foods and crafts along the way. Prior has named this trip *Fatto a Mano*, or "handmade." As with many of the company's itineraries, it seeks to connect travelers to a place's makers: In Italy that means winemakers, designers, bronze workers, and more. "Music, food, design," he says. "They are the essence of culture, which makes them the essence of the place." Introducing travelers to these increasingly endangered traditions helps raise awareness about the need to protect them.

Suddenly our conversation stops. Daniele runs toward Bianca, who is frantically digging under a tree and chewing wildly at its roots. She has been trained not to eat the truffle, no matter how delicious, but the closer she gets to one, the more feverish she becomes. Daniele leans closer, tugs Bianca away, and begins to dig with a small pickaxe. He stops and looks up at me, instructing me to lean down, to touch and smell the soil. Immediately I register the scent of the truffle: nutty, earthy, and intoxicating. Daniele digs patiently but with a heightened anticipation. Neither of us has to say it: What we want is to find a massive truffle, the kind that looks like a strange tumor sprung from the earth. But no. "Piccolissimo," Daniele says, his voice tinged with disappointment. It is so small that he feeds it to Bianca as a treat—not even worth selling on the market.

Dawn is creeping across the horizon, the warm, golden light arriving like a balm. As we bid farewell to Daniele, he slips Amanda three more truffles we've found. We are exhausted, ready to sleep, but also ravenous. Amanda takes us to a vineyard where ripe Nebbiolo grapes are growing—harvest season is upon us—and we sit at a concrete picnic table under a large oak tree. The mist of the early morning is beginning to evaporate in the sun. Amanda fries up some fresh eggs, serving them beneath a decadent pile of white truffles on bread toasted in the pan. These delicacies can be sold for hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars, but at heart they are humble food. Food of the land. And this, without a doubt, is one of the best meals of my life.

**I spend the next couple of days** exploring Piedmont with David. This basically means drinking wine, eating truffles, and talking about drinking wine and eating truffles. One afternoon in the town of Bra, David points to an elderly man walking along the street with quiet dignity. It is Carlo Petrini, the legendary

**Clockwise from top left:**  
In the historic village of Monforte, in Piedmont's Barolo area; tjarin pasta with white truffles at the Michelin-starred Trattoria del Bivio, in Langhe; Casa Cabana, the colorful Milanese home of *Cabana* magazine founder Martina Mondadori; chef Giuseppe Zen at Macelleria Popolare, his restaurant that highlights Italian nose-to-tail cooking

75-year-old founder of the organization Slow Food, which gave rise to the global slow-food movement and phenomena like Eataly, the international chain of marketplaces selling artisanal Italian provisions. A longtime food activist and writer, Carlo rose to prominence in the 1980s after protesting the opening of a McDonald's at the Spanish Steps in Rome. In 2004 he founded the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo, where David studied, which occupies a former castle worthy of *Harry Potter* beside ancient Roman ruins. Carlo's philosophy—that the food we eat should be grown locally, prepared with care, and eaten with consideration—is one that David has deeply absorbed.

Motivated by this ideal, David insists that we visit Langhe, the famous Piedmont wine region, to experience the harvest of two young winemakers, Luisa Sala and Lara Rocchetti, also graduates of the University of Gastronomic Sciences. During the trip David will introduce me to some of the most prominent Barolo wine families in the region—people who own land worth millions and sell some of the priciest bottles around—but Luisa and Lara are not of this ilk. They farm just five hectares of land and sell their wine, a simple Nebbiolo, under the label Lalù (a combination of their names), for \$40 in the US, even though these are essentially the same grapes that could be aged into a very expensive Barolo.

Friends of theirs, a dentist and two lawyers, have joined them this week for the harvest. They tell me they do this every year to help Luisa and Lara. A large plate of rough-cut prosciutto and freshly baked bread sits casually on a plastic table next to a large pitcher of water and an open bottle of wine. Wine-making has never seemed easy to me—harvests can be disappointing, and climate change is impacting the practice in unexpected ways. But this afternoon is pure joy. The sun is bright and the air is cool. The



**Clockwise from top:** Prior cofounder David Prior and designer JJ Martin at a dinner party at Martin's Milan home; a moody view of Venice's Grand Canal; handmade chocolates made according to centuries-old recipes by the Genovese master artisans from Romanengo 1780





grapes are a dense, almost bruised purple. As they are broken down in a giant stainless-steel crusher-destemmer, they release the scent of fruit and yeast into the garage. The group's camaraderie and intimacy are real and easy. I understand the beauty of this place, the spell that Langhe casts over everyone who sets foot here, and why Lara and Luisa insist on trying to bottle it.

**The next day David and I drive** across Northern Italy as the rain slants downward. By afternoon we've arrived in the industrial Milan neighborhood of Zona Solari. Even on a wet, overcast day, Milan is glamorous, its beauty luxurious and cosmopolitan. We duck into the entrance of Ansaldo, the workshops for the historic opera house Teatro alla Scala. Inside this 215,000-square-foot facility, 150 craftspeople oversee the set design, construction, sculpture, carpentry, mechanics, and costumes for every single production.

Initially I have difficulty seeing the magic of one of the world's oldest opera houses within this drafty, cavernous converted train factory, which couldn't feel further removed from Teatro alla Scala's famous gilded ceilings and dramatic red velvet booths. But it doesn't take long to discover Ansaldo's treasures. I am soon taken to a wide balcony overlooking the warehouse, where hundreds of maquettes from past opera productions have been stored. Here is Franco Zeffirelli's production of *Aida* from the 2006–2007 season. There is Piero Faggioni's stage design for *Carmen* from December 1984. I watch as a few people below paint three enormous panels for an upcoming production. Many of the maquettes are in decent condition, though some are dusty or torn. All are worlds unto themselves: enchanted forests, tropical oceans, grand European palaces, ancient ruins.

**Clockwise from top left:** Inside Casa Cabana; glassware at Laguna B made using traditional mouth-blown technique; Bacaro da Fiore in Venice, a small, typical Venetian bar serving cicchetti and wine; breakfast at the hotel Mon Suite, in Piedmont's Monforte; bronze worker Osanna Visconti in her studio in Milan

# Truffles are, at heart, humble food. Food of the land.

Each item is saved with the expectation that it will be used again in a future production, so preservation and restoration are of paramount importance.

We wander through another giant hangar of props, where gnarled trees sit alongside Egyptian busts and Greek and Roman statuary. We conclude our tour in the costume department. Lined up on a rack, the tutus worn by the ballerinas in *The Nutcracker* are ready to be cleaned and patched. One of Maria Callas's dresses from *Don Carlo* in 1953–1954 is on display. Everything here possesses a heightened sense of anticipation that comes with the drama of the stage—the orchestra quietly tuning its A, the hush of the audience as the curtain rises, the singers' first breaths before the performance begins.

Later we stop into the office of Osanna Visconti, a bronze worker and sculptor, located in a centuries-old apartment building wreathed in ivy. Her dedication to entirely handmade pieces is a stirring contrast to the modernity of fast-paced Milan. She first makes her pieces by hand out of wax, the heat of her palms warming the material into the forms she wants. She then shapes it into a little clay mold and makes the bronze fillings. "It's a very old technique that's been used for centuries," she says. "Medieval jewelry was made this way. I wouldn't make it any other way." Her work is not technically perfect: Handprints are sometimes visible in the wax. But this proof of the human touch makes the pieces even more beautiful. The imperfections are a badge of craftsmanship.

Milan is also the leader in Italy's contemporary cultural scene, and we have come to celebrate that too. One day David takes me to an unassuming standing lunch at Macelleria Popolare, owned by the young butcher and chef Giuseppe Zen. It couldn't be more different from the city's traditional dining rooms. Giuseppe serves me an exquisite multicourse meal that highlights the Italian nose-to-tail style of eating that has become popular throughout the world. We eat veal, marrow, pig brain, tripe, sausage, and more—none of it possessing the chewiness or gamy flavor I associate with offal. The food is modest and exquisite. That evening David arranges a very different dinner at the apartment of his good friend JJ Martin, the maximalist American fashion designer. We arrive to find salmon


pink walls, parquetry covered with bright rugs, and flower-printed dining room wallpaper. I chat with the Austrian designer Arthur Arbesser and the Armani executive Alan Prada, who compare notes on their outfits and where they've dined recently. It is intimate and friendly, the kind of setting where culture, art, and fashion mix effortlessly. In the kitchen Giacomo Pavesi, the chef at the beloved Osteria Fratelli Pavesi, in the nearby city of Piacenza, pushes out the food. The evening is a reminder that Milan, while a bastion of traditional Italian culture, is also the country's most contemporary and forward-looking city.

**We go next to the island of Murano in Venice** to visit the glass factory of Laguna B. The late French Italian aristocrat Marie Brandolini founded the housewares company after falling in love with the *goti de fornasa*, the cups the glassblowers would make from the leftovers of their trade. These informal objects never left the foundry, but Brandolini began to reproduce them, customizing and tweaking their design in playful ways. Even at the end of the last century, formal Venetian glassware remained overly ornate, with excessive flourishes, heavy with a nostalgic idea of formality. Since Brandolini launched Laguna B in 1994, it has become a cult favorite among the stylish set. When she died in 2013, her son, Marcantonio, a handsome sculptor and artist, took over. He takes me to their family's centuries-old palazzo, where a wisteria tree grows diagonally over the courtyard and water laps at the marble steps.

The day ends at Luigi Bevilacqua, a textiles company founded in 1499. Though its showroom is open to the public, the back room I visit is not. There I watch the women weave velvet on large, clacking wood looms. Through the windows I can see the water of the canals. The women must place the colorful silk bobbins then move the shuttles back and forth, all by hand. This slowly creates the velvet pile, which comes in a variety of dimensions. It is physical, time-consuming work. Some of the patterns were designed centuries ago. The wildly expensive fabrics have appeared in some of the most celebrated rooms in history, including the White House and the Fabergé Museum in St. Petersburg.

At first I was dismissive of the hand-operated looms, thinking it unnecessary to employ such a laborious technique when the work could easily be made

by a machine. Back in the showroom I'm shown machine-woven fabrics, which sell for less. But then I am presented with the same pattern, woven by hand. Seeing the two pieces side by side, I am astonished. There is an unparalleled dimensionality and depth to the handwoven fabric. The pile of the burgundy velvet is deeper. The images are in greater relief, the pattern denser and more varied.

The experience quietly throws everything into question for me. Modernity has undeniably improved our lives in countless ways, but how much have we lost? Even as Italy tries to keep pace with the modern world, there are people protecting the country's cultural history. Refreshingly, many of the artisans I've met are younger, ambassadors of a new generation carrying on crafts passed down from those who came before. Perhaps the most gratifying takeaway I leave Italy with is an understanding of how important it is to celebrate and preserve locality throughout the world, including back home. This may be the finest souvenir I could have hoped for. 

**Clockwise from top left:**  
Laboratorio Paravicini in Milan, which has a months-long waiting list for its hand-decorated plates; alfresco dining in Venice; a selection of mouth-blown glass at Laguna B; a vineyard view in Piedmont's Monforte

# about this trip

Prior offers both ready-to-book and bespoke itineraries in Italy that are meant to connect travelers with traditional makers. This custom six-day Northern Italy journey, appropriately dubbed *Fatto a Mano*, or "handmade," began in Genoa with a meeting with the chocolate makers at the historic **Romanengo 1780** and a tutorial in the art of pesto making. There were also opportunities to drink Barolo with local producers in Langhe, go on explorations through hazelnut groves alongside the growers of Piedmont, and dine

at Michelin-starred restaurants throughout. Two days were spent in Milan to visit the workshops of the artisans who are keeping traditional practices alive (**Osanna Visconti** for immaculate bronze work; **Laboratorio Paravicini** for hand-decorated plates) and the **Laboratori Ansaldo del Teatro alla Scala** to discover where the famous opera house's sets are designed and created. The trip concluded in Venice with stops at the glass factory **Laguna B** and the textiles company **Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua**.

Hotel stays ranged from five-star stalwarts to under-the-radar gems, including the new **Palazzo Durazzo Suites** (see this year's Hot List, starting on page 36) in Genoa, the intimate Langhe apartment rental **Mon Suite**, the landmark **Portrait Milano**, and the über-chic 40-key **Hotel Flora** in Venice.

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*Ready-to-book trips with Prior start at \$1,725. Bespoke experiences require a \$2,750 annual membership and start at \$1,500 per person per day.*

