

Asti

Urban Itineraries

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Asti, a true medieval capital.

“Considering the length of the journey from Rome, Asti meant Turin by then. But Asti, in some ways, was more and better than Turin. I cannot tell you the beauty of Corso Alfieri. The joy of our arrival, since the large civilian crowd and the music of the dialect, the well-lit shops and the signs with the familiar names, told us clearly that we had arrived; and the additional joy of still wishing we had arrived, since Turin would still be waiting for us. One could not, alas, go back further than Turin. And once we arrived in Turin we would have found the sadness of not being able to get there since we were already there. Asti, therefore, or rather Corso Alfieri, which crosses Asti on the way to Turin, was the peak of happiness.”

Mario Soldati

The city of **Vittorio Alfieri** is undoubtedly one of the richest in history and art in the whole Piedmont. It is also distinctly Piedmontese, especially in its shyness, almost reluctant, in telling its story and knowing how to be a source of admiration. And yet, even before the historian Nicola Gabiani, Asti's chroniclers have never failed to narrate its glory, from De Canis to Incisa, especially those who did so in their own time: the chronicles of Guglielmo and Secondino Ventura, Ogerio Alfieri and the extraordinary corpus of the *Codex Astensis* allow us today to retrace Asti's history, sometimes down to the smallest detail.

As if Asti were a beautiful 18th-century lady who often appears today in her rustling baroque stucco robes, made up by the "tailor" **Benedetto Alfieri**, while sparing no fabric; but those who know how to conquer her, perhaps in the intimacy of the event-filled summer evenings, will find the candid Renaissance elegance of the marble petticoats and then also the bare but solid medieval structure which, just like any rich 18th-century dress, Asti cannot do without. Here come the plastered palaces with their polychrome arches and loggias, mullioned windows and severed towers, as silent yet faithful witnesses of so much past glory that, especially at night, still seems to shine through.

Asti, situated on the Tanaro plain and blocking the way to France as well as

the Po Valley, was for two centuries the richest city in Europe, the first real banking centre, with the so-called "*casane*" (local pawnshops) that lent money to kings and financed wars and crusades (Asti's bankers were known abroad as '*Lombard*', a name we find even in London). Asti, a Free Commune since 1095, with its own laws written in the **Codice Catenato (Code of the Chain)**, which is still kept in Palazzo Mazzola, and a proud independence ensured by an army that was feared and respected by all its mighty neighbours. Asti which in 1275, out of mockery, ran around the walls of besieged enemy Alba its traditional **Palio**, and thus made it the oldest in Italy and a genuine reason of pride for every citizen still today. Asti, which for a century founded on its borders some *villanovas*, fortified market centres free from feudal rights but permanently tied to the city by a loyalty pact. Asti, that would fight Alba then Chieri and would always oppose, like an insurmountable wall, the ambitions of the Marquisate of Monferrato, which in fact never conquered it. Asti, a Roman city that preserves the identity of its Latin memories, including its patron saint, **San Secondo**, a martyred Roman soldier. Asti, a very ancient diocese dating back to the 4th century that once extended as far as Ceva, whose powerful bishop was the only one in southern Piedmont, along with those of Alba and Acqui Terme.

Asti, which finally fell on 14 August 1342, was submitted to the Visconti family and then passed from hand to hand, from lord to lord, but only because of the infighting between its too many rival families, where in the end the Guelph or Ghibelline party was merely a pretext to fight for a power that was too great, an ambition that was to prove disastrous. Asti, ingloriously given as a wedding dowry to Valentina Visconti, betrothed to one of the Orléans family, the sad epilogue

and perhaps a warning of the uselessness of huge wealth, rather than the ephemeral duration of people's lives.

In fact, anyone who walks through the streets of the centre today will think that the noble families of Asti, with their names and their blind fury, still claim "power" over Asti at night and that, from towers and palaces, loggias and hallways, through these centuries-old stones, they still whisper their stories. Stories that are always tragic,



stories of bloodshed and struggles for the domination of the city, stories that are inextricably tied to violence and wealth, just like the magnificence of the interiors of their impregnable fortified houses, stories of repeated rises and falls, like the 120 towers, at times very high and at times severed, that filled their ambition and at the same time gave the city a fairytale vision. But also, a thousand stories of soldiers and

foundlings, of servants and beggars, both protagonists and victims of these same streets, like the bishops and kings called from afar.

Nevertheless, their stories and buildings are still here, all to be discovered.

"I do recall a dream. I was coming from purgatory. There was a whole confused atmosphere; it was a kind of place made of sand and yellowish, ochre-coloured



mist. I was quite certain that it was purgatory. I went up the slope of a hill and realised that I was going towards a familiar place. Then I realized that I was reaching the farm, my grandfather's farm, his countryside... And it was paradise.

This dream has stayed in my mind because it makes me realize how much I am imbued with that family property where I lived the intense moments of

my childhood: hard times during the war, but also privileged moments of direct contact with nature. The Asti countryside is so beautiful: rigorous and laughing at the same time; a hint of wildness softened by the undulations of the hills, rich in fertile soil. These are divine sensations."

Paolo Conte - "Conte", edited by Enrico De Angelis (Franco Muzzio Editore, 1989)





Asti, the Duomo district.

“Asti, with its glorious past ...nitet mundo sancto custode Secundo! It has illustrious sons, ancestral palaces, a luxuriant countryside and some urban eyesore. I am writing these two lines sitting on a rickety bench in the Boschetto dei Partigiani. The noise of the cars going up and down Corso Dante seems far away, while I imagine the Boschetto full of children’s cries, of young mothers gathered around a gazebo with a small orchestra and a merry-go-round, with the bar and the dehors, dispensers of Asti delicacies. Further on, there is also a football pitch.

What’s on in Asti? In Asti there is Asti Teatro and Asti Musica, the Tapestries, the Douja, the Sagre festivals...

In Asti there is the Palio!

In Asti... in Asti... in Asti... yet they say that nothing ever happens!”

Giorgio Conte

For those who love to capture even the most subtle aspects of a city, the rarefied atmosphere and hidden details, Asti's cathedral district has endless pleasant surprises in store.

This Gothic-Romanesque masterpiece, the heart of the old town, is in fact the most faithful testimony to the district's history and traditions: just think that foreigners, soldiers, those killed in the city, merchants, wheat sifters and those condemned to death also had *jus funerandi* in the Cathedral.

Therefore, it is not difficult to picture the actual, teeming life of this city in the 14th century, walking through these timeworn streets: from Piazza Cattedrale we turn onto Via Cardinal Massaia where, past a turnout, we immediately spot the imposing **Palazzo Mazzola**, which still looks like a fortified house but with Renaissance windows, staircases and loggias and, inside, some remarkable coffered ceilings; here in 1693 Captain Renato di Blagnac founded the Opera Pia to assist abandoned girls. Today it is home to the invaluable **Archivio Storico (Historical Archive)**, with the famous *Codex Astensis "Malabayla"* and the fundamental Codice Catenato which contains the city's statutes.

The ground floor rooms house the **Museo del Palio (Palio Museum)**, a historical memory and city identity.

Next we turn onto Via del Varrone: at number 54 we find **Palazzo Pelletta**, also known as "Pilate's House", perhaps because it was the site of a processional station during the popular re-enactment of the Passion; three polychrome Gothic windows are still on display on the top floor. The Pelletta family, bankers in Valle d'Aosta, Savoy and Cologne as early as the 12th century, were one of the town's richest families, as is evident in the side portal of the cathedral, dating back to the first decades of the 14th century, which was donated by them. At number 30, Via del Varrone, you can also see the remains of a **Roman Domus**, with its splendid mosaic floor, a legacy of *Hasta Pompeia*. The name of the street is also reminiscent of the Roman Varroni Castle (*Castrum Vallonii*) built to guard the western gate. A stroll through the maze of narrow streets which unexpectedly unfold behind the medieval walls is highly recommended, both along Via Testa and the romantic, circular Via Gabiani.

Via del Varrone leads to the paved Corso Alfieri, the old *Contrada Maestra*, once the city's decumanus and still the heart of the city centre. The western gate of the *castrum* was here, as can be seen by the 16-sided **Torre Rossa (Red Tower)**, one of the most beautiful in Asti, of Roman origin (it is entirely reminiscent of Turin's Porta Palatina), later raised in a delightful Romanesque style and finally used as the bell tow-



er of the nearby Church of Santa Caterina. The church is a fine example of Baroque with an elliptical plan, built on the former site of San Secondo (the city's martyred soldier, imprisoned here in 119 AD, as the statue inside the tower reminds us).

A little further on, the remains of the city's massive walls (14th-century) are clearly visible, walls which continue beyond Porta Torino behind Viale dei Partigiani, up to the ancient *Castrum Episcopii* (or Castel Vecchio, Old Castle). The ancient walls can be walked along

a pleasant pedestrian path immersed in the greenery up to the Partisans' Wood, from where the walls and path descend towards Piazza Alfieri down to Via De Gasperi.

But it is time to enter, just like a merchant or a pilgrim, the monumental Corso Alfieri. To the right, at number 422, was the Mocambo bar, a tribute to the great artist **Paolo Conte**, the lawyer from Asti who started out as a young provincial jazz musician and went on to have an extraordinary career in theatres all over the world. Nearby, at num-



ber 381, is the **Building of the Ex-Orphanage Michelerio**, with its delightful courtyard, the bare but impressive Chiesa del Gesù and the fascinating **Museo dei Fossili - Parco Paleontologico Astigiano (Fossil Museum - Astigiano Palaeontological Park)**, which tells the story of the prehistoric sea and its fossils, hidden beneath the Monferrato hills: especially the legendary whale “Tersilla”.

Beyond Piazza F.lli Cairoli, known by the people of Asti as the “Piazza del Cavallo” because of the equestrian monument to King Umberto I, in the shade of imposing plane tree, is the first work by the great architect from Asti, Benedetto Alfieri, one of the fathers of Piedmontese Baroque, who “renovated” the 13th-century house of his

cousin Vittorio, namely the imposing **Palazzo Alfieri**.

Asti’s most illustrious citizen was born here in 1749, at number 375 on the street that now bears his name, and then travelled all over Europe with his travels and writings. The palace, which was later donated to the city by Count Ottolenghi, now houses, as a museum, Alfieri’s private rooms and the immense bulk of the archives of the **Centro Studi Alfieriani (Alfieri Studies Centre)**: the rediscovered mediaeval tower, with a free open plan in the latest restoration work, is quite fascinating. The labyrinthine cellars house the surprising **Museo Guglielminetti (Guglielminetti Museum)**, with a unique collection of works, sketches and models by the great stage design-

er from Asti who had already carried out the installation in the garden.

Once past Palazzo Alfieri, everything is back to the Middle Ages: the tall **Torre Comentina (Comentina Tower)** stands out on the horizon along Corso Alfieri, while the 13th-century octagonal Tower of the Ghibellines **De Regibus** appears on the right, opening onto an esplanade that has always been called “Angolo dei Tre Re” (Corner of the Three Kings); it consisted of three towers: an octagonal one that used to be nearly 40 metres high, a triangular one that is now inside the houses and a square one. This last tower was probably the one which today is called “**del Quartero**”, set on the corner of Via Roero and Corso Alfieri, which looks clearly “cut” along the Corso side, perhaps to make room for the regular size of the Liceo Alfieri out front.

Opposite, just beyond the Astense Library, you will find the aristocratic 19th-century Classical High School, which was built on the remains of a large convent. The huge basement of the high school is another pleasant surprise: today it houses the **Museo Lapidario - Cripta di Sant’Anastasio (Lapidary Museum - Crypt of Sant’Anastasio)**, one of the city’s most charming museums (soon to be joined by the Archaeological Museum relocated from San Pietro in Consavia), which provides access to the magnificent Lombard-era

crypt (dating back to the 11th century, with capitals from earlier periods) of the long-lost Church of Sant’Anastasio, one of Asti’s greatest artistic treasures.

Benedetto Alfieri’s baroque style appears again in the next stretch, where he “signs” two of the richest palaces in Asti: at number 357, he created the sumptuous **Palazzo dei Mazzetti di Frinco**, which over the centuries hosted kings and Napoleon I and today is home to the **Pinacoteca Civica (Civic Art Gallery)**; opposite is **Palazzo Ottolenghi** (at number 350), where, in its splendid frescoed rooms, are preserved rediscovered masterpieces of the Renaissance, which can be seen in a dedicated museum, and that also hosts the **Museo del Risorgimento (Risorgimento Museum)**.

Next, you get to Piazza Roma, between the beautiful Alganon Gardens and the monument commemorating the Unification of Italy. Here, almost everything reflects the work of the great benefactor Leonetto Ottolenghi. The very tall Comentina Tower (or San Bernardino Tower, the highest medieval tower in Piedmont, with its 38.5 metres) is an intact 13th-century masterpiece, it has not to be confused with **Castello Medici**, the early 20th-century neo-Gothic building that surrounds it.

Next, we turn left onto Via Rossi to cross Via Carducci, at the corner of which stands the massive **Palazzo**

Bunei, which has been the seat of the Bishopric since 1400; Opposite is the **Seminary** (also designed by Alfieri, particularly beautiful is the monumental staircase) and between the two, under the trees of the small square, stands a stone column which is called “della misericordia” (the mercy column), at whose feet the tools used in capital punishment were burned.

Palazzo Bunei was one of the city's most powerful fortified houses (on the façade, three of the towers that have been severed are still visible today) and the bishops, once they left the *Castrum Episcopi* (formerly at number 9, Via al Castello) in 1409, settled there around 1450. It should perhaps be remembered that the bishop of Asti was very powerful for a long time, since, in addition to representing the religious authority over the diocese, he was also the holder of civil power, having been appointed count by the emperor, so in fact - prior to the Statutes - he governed the city in full.

Via Carducci takes us, after a few steps, to the only surviving building of the **Solaro** family: a late tower from 1350. The Solaros were the noblest and richest of Asti's families but, after their defeat, this is what is left; in fact when Manuello Solaro was murdered by Guglielmo Turco in 1302 a fierce civil war began between Guelphs and Ghibellines. In 1303 the Solaro were driven out with

the help of the Marquis of Monferrato but returned victorious a year later (with the help of Alba and Chieri) and then destroyed the houses of their enemies and ruled the city for 35 years: it seems they had 24 fortified houses in the city alone. In 1314, in order not to yield to the Ghibellines, they handed the city over to the Anjou, exiling the De' Castello consortium and their descendants. But the fighting continued, and after the Anjou came the Viscontis and finally the Orléans, putting an end to the republican history of the city that had begun in 1095.

We stroll along Via Carducci to reach the tree-lined Piazza Castigliano, where the front of **Palazzo Amico di Castell'Alfero** stands out (the main façade overlooks Piazza Cattedrale). Opposite is **Palazzo del Collegio**, home to the Lapidary Museum - Crypt of Sant'Anastasio. On the square, beyond the remains of a crenellated curtain wall, there is also the imposing **Palazzo dell'Opera Pia**, founded by the illustrious bishop Innocenzo Milliavacca, to whom the street is dedicated.

We continue along Via Carducci to finally reach **Palazzo Zoya** (at number 65), one of the best preserved in Asti. The side facing the street has six Romanesque windows surmounted by a cornice featuring three rows of rare hanging arches; the ogives of the ground floor show the pavement of the

street used to be much lower, whereas the back boasts a magnificent Renaissance loggia with stone columns, which once overlooked the cathedral, amidst vegetable and herb gardens. Inside, you will find original vaults on the ground floor and 16th-century coffered ceilings on the other floors.

We enter Via Borgnini to come out again in front of the Cathedral and then walk across the square, from the Pelletta Portal towards the magnificent bell tower, and then pass by Palazzo Amico in the narrow Via Cattedrale, one of the quietest and most romantic streets in the city.

When you reach Via Giobert, if you turn right to return to Corso Alfieri, you will see **Palazzo della Rovere** to the right, a 13th-century fortress that is almost intact, and **Palazzo Strata** to the left, almost at the corner with Via Carducci, featuring mullioned windows with two lights and polychrome ogival arches in sandstone and brick. If, on the other hand, from Via Cattedrale you turn left, at number 15 you will find another historic fortress: **Palazzo Falletti**. Today, it has a simple brick façade enhanced by a Renaissance portal, but it was here that Marquis Giovanni I of Monferrato settled in 1303, in defiance of the Guelph Falletti family, after they fled the city (the Falletti family then branched out into the Langhe and Roero: Barolo, Castiglione, Serralunga, Pocapaglia and La Morra).

Next, we turn onto Via Natta to find first **Palazzo Verasis-Asinari**, which mixes medieval ogives with Renaissance cross-shaped sandstone windows and presents a 16th-century loggia in the courtyard, then the **Palace and Tower** of the **Natta** family, as well as the already mentioned other Palazzo Pelletta. The Natta family was one of the most ancient in the city, and legend has it that they were descendants of Numa Pompilio. This tower was commissioned by Guglielmo Natta in 1300 and it was much taller than the present one.

We continue on to the Church of San Giovanni (9th-14th century), which houses the fascinating **Museo Dio-**



cesano (Diocesan Museum) and preserves an ancient crypt; the church, with its cloisters and sacristy buildings, forms an integral part of the Duomo complex. And it is right to the Cathedral that we finally return: the project was started by Guido di Valperga in 1309 and completed in 1354 by Baldracco Malabaila. It is only the last of three older buildings and the 13th-century bell tower (1266), as well as the baptismal font and holy water fonts, are proof of this. The **Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta e San Gottardo** stands on the site of Roman temples and is still an archaeological site.

The church was therefore for centuries a “factory” in which many of the city’s treasures ended up (the last major work was done by Vittone on the apse in 1764): magnificent and imposing, it is one of the best examples of Piedmontese Gothic style. Apart from the façade, which has three large rose windows near the three old entrance portals (of which only the cen-

tral one still exists), the south façade with its narrow, very tall windows, the Romanesque bell tower (1266) and the already mentioned **Pelletta Portal** in flamboyant Gothic style, which is today’s entrance to the church, are also worth visiting. In the centre of the tympanum, which features a large ogival arch surrounding the statue of the Assunta, appears a small female head, the Madama Troyana who married the eldest son of the Pelletta family, who donated the portico for their wedding. Inside there are works by **Gandolfino da Roreto (or d’Asti)**, **Giancarlo Aliberti** and **Moncalvo**; a rare gem is the beautiful “Compianto sul Cristo Morto” (Lamentation over the Dead Christ), a complex 16th-century polychrome terracotta statue of poignant expressiveness.

And so we explored the heart of the city which, in the silences of the night, still really knows how to combine history and fantasy.





Asti, among the fortified houses of San Martino.

“I miss Asti even when I am there. Because it cannot be grasped, no one can claim to really know it. It is clammed up, but in times of floods it reveals itself to be an indivisible atom. It suffers from a longing for somewhere else, but nowhere else would do. It seems to be asleep, but it is capable of sudden passion. Asti is not easy to replicate, for better or for worse.

I have travelled the world and always put a piece of my city in my pocket before leaving, so I can say that I have never left. True Asti inhabitants will always complain, but they will never leave. Because here there is everything they haven't found yet.”

Massimo Cotto

The area south of Corso Alfieri is also rich in medieval remains, testifying to the immense wealth of its noble families. Almost all the streets to the south of the *Contrada Maestra* still bear the name of the family that once inhabited its fortified houses and palaces.

It is hard to imagine what Asti must have looked like to a bewildered 14th-century merchant, a city where houses occupied entire blocks and around a hundred tall towers soared into the sky, where its inhabitants financed distant states and wars and were used to dealing on an equal footing with emperors. It is true: many towers were lowered between the 17th and 19th centuries, and in the last century part of the massive inner wall, the so-called “enclosure of the nobles”, was demolished; the other part, commissioned by the Visconti family, was known as the “enclosure of the burgesses” and had already disappeared almost naturally in centuries past, along with their citadel built in Piazza Alfieri.

Nowadays, Asti is experiencing a small renaissance: together with the definitive setting up of the complex Asti Museum system, dignity has also been restored to the far too many houses downgraded by time, often by bringing to light hidden frescoes, forgotten ceilings, Roman roads, log-

gias and vaults... in short, the whole history of this city is coming back into the limelight thanks to its stones, bricks and the living testimony of its noble palaces.

We start our tour from the **Torre Rossa (Red Tower)** and turn right onto Via Isnardi, enclosed by low houses and high walls that conceal the gardens created on the site of the old Nobles’ enclosure: the road makes a 90-degree bend and, just beyond, the *Porta Paradisi* gateway leads to the Sanctuary of the Madonna del Portone, an imposing 20th-century church designed by Gualandi, a native of Bologna but very active in the Asti area; the present passage uses the ancient San Giuliano gate, the only one surviving of the ten gates of the first medieval wall.

Via Isnardi then joins Via Mazzini, where there were many houses belonging to the Guelph Malabaila family. Their palace, at the street entrance on the left, bears witness to their wealth: an imposing Renaissance façade with sandstone friezes. Even with the signs of time, it retains its charm and it is not surprising that Francis I of France was hosted here.

A little further on the right, at number 4, we can see the façade of the **Casa-forte dei Montafia**, adorned with a tower (now lowered) with two ogival windows in terracotta, surmounted

by another two with the original mullioned windows. We turn onto Via Malabaila, a charming little street where the houses of the Asinari di Grésy, Cacherano della Rocca and Busca del Mango families used to stand on the right. Many of the existing buildings show considerable traces of this past; at number 6 we find **Palazzo Ponte**, now restored, and opposite, at the corner with Via Asinari, the imposing structure of another **Palazzo Malabaila** (of the Antignano lineage) where, even among the marks of time, the tower can still be seen. The following **Palazzo Roero di Settime e Mombarone** (which overlooks Piazza San Martino) is also noteworthy.

Still in Via Asinari, it is possible to feel nostalgic about **Palazzo Crivelli di Canelli**, which retains its original forms, despite the complex stratigraphy of the centuries. Via Malabaila leads straight to Via Roero where, as a perfect backdrop, the **Torre dei Roero di Monteu (Roero di Monteu Tower)** stands out: in the past, this was three storeys high, all decorated with mullioned windows; to the left, a low pointed arch acted as a service entrance, as the palace opened onto the square (and still overlooks it). The **Casa-forte dei Roero** was very large, extending all the way to the corner of Via Sella, and, like all houses, was completely self-sufficient: it consisted of a well, an oven, pantries, stables

and vegetable gardens, as well as loggias and a garden.

There were many houses on the homonymous Via Roero belonging to this noble and powerful Ghibelline family, whose branches had fiefdoms almost everywhere, but mainly in the lands to the left of the Tanaro river that still bear their name. In Via Roero, alongside the Monteu branch, there were the already mentioned Roero di Settime, those of Cortanze and those of Piea. The monumental Palazzo dei Roero di Settime now has a baroque façade with frescoed interiors and an imposing staircase leading to the main floor.

Via Roero joins Corso Alfieri right at the corner with the **Torre De Regibus (De Regibus Tower)** - see route Asti, the Duomo district - and in the opposite direction it goes as far as Piazza San Giuseppe; part of Palazzo Roero di Cortanze, now called **Casa Costacurta**, and the nearby **Palazzo Roero di Piea e Monticello** are clearly visible along this stretch. To the west of Piazza San Giuseppe lies the area known as "delle caserme" (the barracks), once occupied by two convents (of Sant'Anna and of the Carmelites) and used for military purposes since the 19th century. The complex, one of the best examples of homogeneous construction from the century, is undergoing complete renovation: it houses

the **Archivio di Stato (State Archive)** and the Law Courts.

The baroque Church of San Giuseppe is now the **Kor Theatre** (one of the venues of the AstiTeatro National Festival) and the restoration work carried out here allows us to enjoy the surviving frescoes. Beyond **Palazzo Traverseri** we enter Via Grassi, where, on

the corner with Via Brofferio, we find the 17th-century Church of San Rocco, with its sober brick façade, which houses two wooden statues, a rich altar, polychrome marble and several remarkable paintings.

If you walk back, you will see on the right at the corner with Via XX Settembre the peculiar **Casa Baussano**,



of medieval origin but painted at the beginning of the 20th century by this well-known family of decorators from Asti who also painted some Palios. The imposing volume that defines the corner of Via XX Settembre, Piazza San Giuseppe and Via San Martino is the most important **Palazzo dei Pelletta**: it houses the largest medieval fondaco (merchant's warehouse) in the city and stood strategically in front of one of the gates, that of San Martino, which gave its name to the street we are about to walk along.

The first stretch is one of the most charming views of the neighbourhood: in the silence of the pedestrian precinct, the street winds quietly among a large group of restored buildings, such as the side street of Via Cotti Ceres (to the right), overlooked by the homonymous palace, as well as other noble buildings and, at the corner with Via Solari, the **Palazzo dei Galli** (perhaps once owned by the Solaro family) marked by a cornerstone featuring the two birds. So we walk along this narrow, picturesque street to arrive in front of the Augustinian Convent, at the corner of Via Solari and Via Bonzanigo.

Via Bonzanigo is another quiet, romantic street with a rare oddity: a real farmhouse set within the former convent, the Cascina del Racconto, a venue for events, gatherings and literary

readings. We are now in the so-called *Contrada della Campana* (district of the bell) because in ancient times a small portico with a "*cioca*", in dialect a bell, stood on the corner of Piazza Statuto; the portico was connected to a house belonging to the Natta family, one of the oldest fortified houses in Asti, where the first prisons were later to be built, right on the corner of Via Sella (already "Via del Carmine" and then known as "delle prigioni", street of the prisons). This street, the parallel streets Via Garetto and Via Alberti, and various side streets are embellished by numerous noble palaces, which time has transformed, hiding their ancient origins, because the soul of Asti's houses is always medieval.

In the final stretch of Via Sella, where the road comes to a wide turnout (dedicated to the architect Benedetto Alfieri), we have a long stop to take a look at **Palazzo Gazelli di Rossana** (formerly belonging to the Cotti di Ceres and Scurzolengo families) and the fortified house of the Roero di Cortanze family. The first palace is one of the best Baroque buildings in Asti, which was again designed by Alfieri. The elegant lines of the façade, with its portal and Spanish ironwork grilles are just a hint of the richness of the interiors: the atrium, the staircase, the loggia and the terrace are all decorated with stucco work, among which the coats of arms of the commission-

ers stand out. The palace, which also houses a secluded botanical garden with an adjoining chapel, preserves in its noble rooms 16 wooden scenes from the Palio of 1758. Alfieri's work also involved the base of the massive tower that adorned the outer corner; the tower, known as the **Torre dei Ponte di Lombriasco (Ponte di Lombriasco Tower)**, the first owners of the fortified house, is one of the most imposing in town and although it has been obliquely severed, it retains, more than other, the austere look of an impregnable fortress, betraying the exclusively defensive function that these structures once had, originally. Legend has it that it inspired Carl Barks to draw Uncle Scrooge's Storehouse.

The **Palazzo dei Roero di Cortanze** is completely different, with elegant mullioned windows on the second floor and polychrome arches whose harmony and grace are difficult to reconcile with its original function as a fortified house; in the outer corner stood a tower, which today has been lowered and refined by mullioned windows. According to the statutes, the towers of Asti could not be any higher than the Bertramenghi-Scarampi tower (which is still recalled on the façade of the palace in Piazza San Secondo), i.e. they had to be less than 40 metres high, just like the Troyana and Comentina today, and the De Regibus and Roero until the last century. These

two, however, were lowered well before that, as they no longer appear in their full size in the essential *Theatrum Statuum Sabaudiae* map dated 1682. In the same block stands the aforementioned Casa Costacurta: the solid red of the bricks leaves room only for the rhomboidal motifs of the ironwork panels (a typical Asti decoration) and the gracefulness of the mullioned windows; the Roero di Cortanze family occupied the entire block and also this building was once part of a single large fortified house.

From Via Sella we turn right back onto Via San Martino and reach the homonymous square, passing by the Barnabite convent that marks the eastern corner. The complex also includes the 17th-century rectory beside the Church of San Martino, a Baroque building with a rich interior, built by the Barnabite Fathers in 1696.

Opposite San Martino, nestled between **Palazzi Crivelli di Lumello** (to the right) and **Cacherano della Rocca** (to the left), stands the **Former Brotherhood of San Michele**, whose bell tower was once the tower of Palazzo Crivelli. Today the church is the dynamic centre of many cultural initiatives, dedicated to the glory of the "Diavolo Rosso" (Red Devil), aka Giovanni Gerbi, a cycling legend and the protagonist of a famous song by Paolo Conte.



The last stretch of Via San Martino, at the crossroads with Corso Alfieri, is marked by **Palazzo Ottolenghi** (see route Asti, the Duomo district) to the left and the Roero di San Severino and Sciolze palace, which almost reaches Piazza Roma. From Piazza San Martino we follow Via Garetti, today the heart of the city's "movida", where at the crossroads with Via Balbo we find **Palazzo dei Leoni** (or dei Parati), marked by the cornerstone with a griffin, once belonging to the wealthy Alfieri family. This 14th-century building does not show its antiquity so much in the façade as in the courtyard, where the two columns and the portico can be admired, and especial-

ly in the interior: the medieval warehouse on the ground floor has ogival vaults, while on the main floor, the splendid 16th-century coffered ceilings, painted and decorated with pure gold, have been recovered, as well as the original ironstone floor.

Along Via Balbo, but on the corner with Via Aliberti, stands the austere and almost intact medieval **Casa Gardini**; Via Balbo was once known as "dei macelli" (of the slaughterhouses) and, in fact, there was a butcher's shop on the ground floor of Casa Gardini. At the other corner, beyond the boundary wall, you can spot the garden of **Palazzo Gastaldi**, a fine ex-

ample of Art Nouveau, today home to the Consorzio di Tutela dell'Asti (the Asti DOCG Consortium). Overlooking Piazza Roma, it was built by the patron Count Ottolenghi, who also commissioned the monument dedicated to the Unity of Italy, for the 50th anniversary of the Statuto Albertino (the Albertine Statute).

On the eastern side of the square, a short flight of steps leads to Via Ottolenghi, where the *Contrada degli Israeliti* (the **Jewish Ghetto**, established in 1723, stretched between Via

Ottolenghi and Via Aliberti, and was closed at night by two gates) began. In this street you will find the **Synagogue of Asti**, one of the most interesting in Piedmont, both for its interior and for its unique position in the city centre. Built in the early 19th century, it was conceived in its present form by Count Ottolenghi in 1889; today it is no longer used, the glorious Jewish community of Asti having almost disappeared, but it also houses the rare **Museo Ebraico (Jewish Museum)**. In the Jewish ghetto began the “city of merchants”, the subject of our next itinerary.



Colours, passion and emotions: the Asti Palio



Apparently it was already being run in the year 1000 and, as a matter of fact, this ancient game has spanned over a millennium. Ten centuries well spent, judging by the passion with which every year Asti celebrates this rendez-vous with history and tradition. An event that enlivens the city for twelve months, colours it with flags, with its key moments in spring, during the patron saint celebrations, and those at the end of summer when boroughs and villages compete in an exciting horse race in Piazza Alfieri.

The May rituals kick off on the Saturday preceding the first Tuesday of the month, which is usually the day of San Secondo. The Estimate of the Palio, the Rectors' oath and the Paliotto or "Flag Wavers' Palio", where the young people of the districts compete in acrobatics and bold flag-waving challenges. These are preparatory events leading up to the great September parade (with more than 1200 walk-ons), the joyful propitiatory dinners and the adrenaline-filled race: 21 horses of incredible beauty mounted bareback, representing as many boroughs and villages, lined up at the canapo. The Palio of Asti, with men, horses and banners goes on stage: three heats, a final race, only one winner, but many emotions.



Asti, the city of Merchants.

“In Paris, in Florence, in Rome, the river runs through the city. In the middle of the city it creates two balconies from which people can communicate. Different habits and customs come to life on the two banks. The bridges serve to bring dialogue between those on the right and left bank (...) The river itself carries things from other places (...) In the past, the river carried news, thoughts of mountains, scents of the countryside...”

In Asti, the river does not run through the town but outside the walls. Set aside, forgotten. This partly explains our character.”

Paolo Conte

“Conte”, edited by Enrico De Angelis
(Franco Muzzio Editore, 1989)

Asti's mercantile fortunes date back to 19 July 992, when a diploma signed by Emperor Otto III for the bishop of Asti, Pietro I, granted the merchants of his city the right to trade freely their goods throughout the imperial territory, without being hindered by anyone. This opened up a large market to Asti's merchants, stretching from Burgundy to present-day Croatia, within which they would be exempt from paying expensive customs duties.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the city of Asti was re-built from the ashes of *Hasta Pompeia* and in a few decades became one of the most flourishing centres in Europe, thanks to its favourable position at the crossroads of some of the key transit routes in northern Italy.

So now let's go and discover this city of merchants, with its towers and ancient palaces, its squares designed as commercial areas and still today vibrant with colours and fragrances, let's go and look for the ancient hospices that provided shelter for wayfarers and the 19th-century factory houses that produced the red nectar of the vine right into the city, let's go to the place where the Solaro Guelphs finally defeated the Guttuari, their rivals on the French markets, razing their houses to the ground and then establishing a "herb market" on those empty spaces.

It is very easy to get to the San Secondo district, the heart of the city: from the railway station in Piazza Marconi, follow Via Cavour. This was one of the ancient access roads to the city, running through the popular village of San Quirico to one of the ten gates of Asti, the one called *Sancti Pauli* (first documented in 1292). In the *extra muros* borough there were no noble palaces, but hovels and shops and a mill to which the *bealera* (the name of the system of artificial canals that surrounded the walls and by extension today identifies every irrigation canal) brought water, which also supplied the many local silk and wool factories (and the canal passed right along Via dei Filanti, today's Via Brofferio).

Today, Via Cavour is more vibrant than ever with the shops and their windows throughout all the street, and so only an attentive eye will notice, amidst the modern houses and shop windows, the historic buildings nestled between the palaces: among them, on the west side of the street, the Church of the Holy Trinity (seat of an archconfraternity founded in the 14th century) with an elegant 19th-century façade and bright 18th-century interiors. The two medieval windows with terracotta and tufa arches incorporated into a modern building next door are all that is left of the former **Hospice of Sant'Evasio**. Hospices or hospitals were the hotels of the past, almost al-

ways run by religious orders and usually located at the city gates.

Before reaching the square, the road splits and attention is drawn to the left, up a flight of narrow steps, to the late 18th-century Church of San Paolo, all in terracotta, which houses a “Madonna del Rosario” (Our Lady of the Rosary), traditionally attributed to Moncalvo’s daughter, Orsola Caccia.

Still on the left, you will find the entrance to Via XX Settembre, the ancient *riva Carrera* (i.e. cart road), which takes you to the San Martino - San Rocco district (see route Asti, among the fortified houses of San Martino) with one of the most beautiful fortified houses in the city: **Palazzo Catena**, whose terracotta façade still preserves the two-coloured frames and lintels of the mullioned windows.

Retracing our steps, we come to Piazza Statuto - the ancient Piazza delle Erbe or dei Guttuari. The **Torre Guttuari (Guttuari Tower)**, symbol of the noble family, after they were banished, was severed off to an inclined plane until 1898, when it was topped with new Ghibelline battlements. On the same square stands the austere **Palazzo dei Tribunali** (13th-14th century), whose terracotta windows are clearly visible amidst the more recent plasterwork. It is not always easy to identify the history of a palace, especially when several destructions and reconstructions have been carried out on top of each other:

for example, the other palace in Piazza Statuto, with its large and elegant Gothic windows, has only recently been identified as the **Palazzo del Podestà**.

Now let us move on to “Asti’s parlour”: Piazza San Secondo, known to the people of Asti as Piazza del Santo (Saint’s Square), a place where people meet and bargain, where people like to take a walk, a place of gatherings and even intense clashes. In 1797, in Via Incisa, a group of young people sang the praises of the Revolution and started the short-lived Astese Republic and, under the Porticoes of the Librai (booksellers), the first victim of the revolution fell, an innocent passer-by; it lasted three days, then the Savoy soldiers restored order by shooting 17 revolutionaries (a commemorative plaque on the former Casa Littoria in Piazza Libertà pays tribute to them). The beating heart of town life since the ancient days of the Free Commune, Piazza San Secondo is a perfect summary of Asti, including the collegiate church, the Palazzo di Città and the historic porticoes.

The **Collegiate Church of San Secondo** is truly remarkable: the mid-15th-century terracotta façade, with its elegant central terracotta rose window (it seems to be in the late Lombard Renaissance) and three portals, introduces the Gothic interior of the building, marked by the red of the bricks and

the straw-yellow of the soft sandstone (on the capitals, the coats of arms of the noble families of Asti and of the powerful Orléans alternate with those of the municipality of Asti, with a red and silver cross shield). The church, which legend has it that it was built on the site of the patron saint's martyrdom, dates back to the second half of the 13th century, but preserves treasures from various periods, including the 10th-century bell tower and crypt (where the 16th-century silver reliquary of the saint is kept), the extraordinary polyptych with the "Adorazione dei Magi" (Adoration of the Magi) by **Gandolfino da Roreto (or d'Asti)** on the left-hand wall of the entrance, and 18th-century altars in coloured marble. Of equal importance to the city is the **Carroccio del Palio** (a modern copy of the one carried into battle in the Middle Ages). It was located in the chapel immediately to the right of the main door, where the various Palios donated by the municipality of Asti to the Collegiate Church on the first Tuesday in May are also kept, and which will be contended for in September.

Next to the Collegiate Church lies **Palazzo di Città (Town Hall)**, whose medieval aspect is now completely disguised by the radical renovation carried out in the first half of the 18th century by a very young Benedetto Alfieri. In the vaulted atrium we find the medieval "touchstone", for the lin-

ear measurements of the "*mon*" brick and the "*cop*" roof tile, strictly enforced on the city market. The motto *Aste Nitet Mundo Sancto Custode Secundo* (Asti shines in the world thanks to its patron saint, San Secondo) appears on the first floor, and a copy of the Laveglia painting preserved in **Palazzo Mazzetti** (see route Asti, the Duomo District) depicts the magnificence of the city in the 17th century with its countless towers and churches rising above the walls.

All the names of streets and porticoes around here are reminiscent of the medieval guilds of arts and crafts... on the other hand, the market held on the square was one of the two most important city markets. The other, which took place all around the Cathedral, was competing with this same market for the goods quality, the prestige and above all for the amount of money in circulation, part of which was certainly flowing to the respective churches.

The Bertramenghi-Scarampi Tower, which according to the Statutes no other tower could exceed in height, stood between Piazza San Secondo and Piazza Statuto and can still be seen today among the bricks left on the façade of the porticoed buildings on the southern side. However, if you walk under the opposite Portico degli Orefici (Goldsmiths Porticoes) with



their beautiful capitals (this used to be the Palace of the Guard), you will get to the other side of the square, in the short Via dei Cappellai: at the crossroads with Via Incisa (the ancient Contrada dei Pellicciai, district of the furriers) you will find the Gothic palace once known as “**del Podestà**”. This elegant-looking building, with a sturdy central column supporting the splendid vaults of the hall, visible on the ground floor and in the cellars, was renowned as the seat of the notaries’ Guild, the powerful professional association that was in charge of the over-all city records.

If you continue along Via Incisa you will find yourself on Corso Alfieri: the majestic brick building on the corner is

Palazzo Montalcini (belonging to the family of Nobel Prize winner Rita Levi Montalcini) and it covers the whole block as far as the Portici dei Librai (the booksellers’ porches). Along the Corso, on both sides, there is a series of shops, including early 20th-century shop windows and original Art Nouveau decorations.

As you continue the “struscio”, the stroll along the main street, from Via al Teatro you can reach the 19th-century **Alfieri Theatre**, built for a bet by the city’s nobility, including Ottolenghi, in just two years. On the corner of the street there is also the **Palazzo degli Spagnoli**, another sumptuous residence of the Alfieri family, later sold to the captain of fortune Giangiacomo

Trivulzio (appointed governor of Asti in 1494 by Charles VIII, King of France): the interior courtyard has a beautiful colonnade... about a century later it became a hospice for Spanish soldiers, after which it is still named.

Back on Corso Alfieri, we turn onto the small Via Della Valle to see the tall **Torre Troyana (Troyana Tower)**, or Clock Tower, a little further on in Piazza Medici, which a careful renovation work gave new life. The tower, built by the Troya family in the second half of the 13th century, changed hands after various vicissitudes and became the property of the Savoy: in 1560 Duke Emanuele Filiberto donated it to the Town Hall, which then installed a bell (still at the top of the tower) and a clock; with its 199 steps, it provides a priceless view of the whole old town and its surrounding hills.

Piazza Medici, where we are now, was completely remodelled at the beginning of the 20th century: the fountain, dating back to 1908, recalls the construction of the new city aqueduct, while some of the private houses (the Ivaldi-Vercelli House at number 2 with its Art Nouveau interior or the Taricco House, slightly medieval in style, on the corner with Via D'Azeglio) are evidence of the rise of the Asti petit bourgeoisie.

Next, in Via Hope, we find the former Cistercian Monastery of the Consolata and the modest neoclassical church

with a beautiful rococo altar inside, at the corner with Via Orfanotrofio; the narrow street then reaches Via Morelli where, round the corner, we find the remains of **Palazzo Pergamo** (later taken over by the Cistercians) and, on the opposite side, the small, intimate Church of San Silvestro, very old but completely rebuilt in the 18th century, alongside **Palazzo Visconti**. The Ghibelline Isnardi family had many houses in this triangle of streets, but no traces of them remained after their ousting.

From Via Morelli we return to Piazza Medici and turn onto the opposite side of Via Cesare Battisti, which holds other surprises for us: a splendid late 15th-century coffered ceiling in the vault of a shop (formerly Casa Rostagno) and other rooms with wooden vaults dating back to the same period in the ancient Casa della Piuma d'Oro (once a Carthusian hospice). At the end of the street, you enter Corso Dante, an avenue created in the 19th century in place of a large part of the eastern city walls, but in fact you are already in **Piazza Alfieri**, an unusual triangular-shaped square marked by the beautiful Piedmontese porticoes (those on the left are known as the Anfossi, on the right the Pogliani, while the short side is known as the Portici Rossi), with tree-lined avenues and the statue of the Dramatist in the centre. The newspaper and coffee rituals in the historic bars are unmissable city

events, as is the ritual of the aperitif with the Americano, the world-famous Vermouth-based cocktail.

In September, the oldest **Palio** in Italy is run in Piazza Alfieri; in historical times the race was run “in lungo” (in length) starting from the Pilone (roughly Piazza 1 Maggio) along the entire ancient *Contrada Maestra* up to the Torre Rossa (Red Tower). This is also where the main Asti market is held twice a week (on Wednesdays and Saturdays); this is where Garibaldi, from the windows of the Reale (as a plaque on the wall of the hotel testifies), urged the young people of Asti to follow him in the expedition of the Thousand, and this is where one of the main gates, known as the Arco, once stood. The medieval walls then continued northwards along the current Corso Dante, bending westwards around the *Castrum Episcopi* (where today we find Bosco dei Partigiani, the Partisans’ wood), running along the whole northern side and ending at the **Torre Rossa (Red Tower)**.

But let’s return to Piazza Alfieri: here the Visconti family also built their citadel (the remains of the tower have been found, and are now marked on the south-west corner of the square with a special paving). The modern provincial building is counterpointed by the headquarters of the Cassa di Risparmio di Asti in Piazza della Libertà, of eclectic taste but not lacking

a certain rhetorical elegance. Opposite, the former Casa Littoria (local Fascist Party headquarters) is a precious work of architecture.

Next we head east, still along the main street: to the right, after a short distance, is the Ortodox Church of Santa Maria Nuova (which is of ancient origin, as shown by the 11th-century bell tower). Built in a mediaeval village outside the walls, it was renovated several times and today houses two of the most interesting works by Gandolfino da Roreto (or d’Asti): an “Adorazione dei Pastori” (Adoration of the Shepherds) and a splendid “Madonna in Trono con Santi” (Madonna Enthroned with Saints - 1496); the 18th-century altar with its precious tabernacle and the beautiful wooden choir from 1572 are also of great interest. Walking along Via Ospedale we return to Corso Alfieri, continuing in the opposite direction (along the route you will find the complex of the old barracks, which over the centuries housed several infantry and cavalry battalions, and today is home to the Palafreezer and the Astigiano University campus). This brings us to one of the most interesting medieval monuments in the whole region: in Piazza 1 Maggio, we find a group of buildings known as “del vecchio San Pietro” (of the old St Peter). Actually, the building consists of a **Rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre** (built before





1169), then a Baptistery, a 15th-century square hall and a cross-vaulted cloister which probably included a hospice for pilgrims (namely **San Pietro in Consavia**). In fact, the complex was originally a commandery of the Order of the Knights of Malta, set up to house and protect wayfarers on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This is the last treasure of Asti, also recently renovated and educationally updated.

Top Art and Culture

- Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta e San Gottardo
- Church of San Giovanni: Diocesan Museum
- Collegiate Church of San Secondo
- Complex of San Pietro in Consavia
- Loggia del Palazzo di Città – Town Hall
- Palazzo Alfieri: Alfieri Museum and Guglielminetti Museum
- Palazzo del Collegio: Lapidary Museum and Crypt of Sant’Anastasio
- Palazzo Gazelli di Rossana
- Palazzo Mazzetti: Civic Museum
- Palazzo Mazzola: Historical Archive and Palio Museum
- Palazzo Michelerio: Fossil Museum – Astigiano Paleontological Park
- Palazzo Ottolenghi and Risorgimento Museum
- Synagogue and Jewish Museum
- Varroni Roman *Domus*





Asti and its Towers

- **Comentina Tower**
Corso Alfieri, on the corner of Piazza Roma – second half of the 13th-century
- **De Regibus Tower**
Corso Alfieri, on the corner of Via Roero – 13th-century
- **Guttuari Tower**
Piazza Statuto – first half of the 12th-century
- **Natta Tower**
Via Natta – 14th-century
- **Red Tower**
Corso Alfieri – 1st-century
- **Solaro Tower**
Via Giobert – 14th-century
- **Tower of Palazzo Bunei**
Bishop's Palace, Via Carducci – 15th-century
- **Tower of Ponte di Lombriasco**
Via Q. Sella, on the corner of Via San Martino – late 13th-century
- **Tower of Roero di Monteu**
Via Roero – 13th-century
- **Troyana Tower or Clock Tower**
Piazza Medici – 13th-century



Asti, a stroll through the “ventine”

“The suburbs of Asti, in the immediate post-war period, were a parallel world that in the collective imagination was detached from the real one.

To briefly summarize what I mean, I think it's enough to say that everyone in the neighbourhood where I lived, instead of saying “I'm going downtown”, used to say “I'm going to Asti”, as if it were a journey that involved passing through the Pillars of Hercules instead of Porta Torino.”

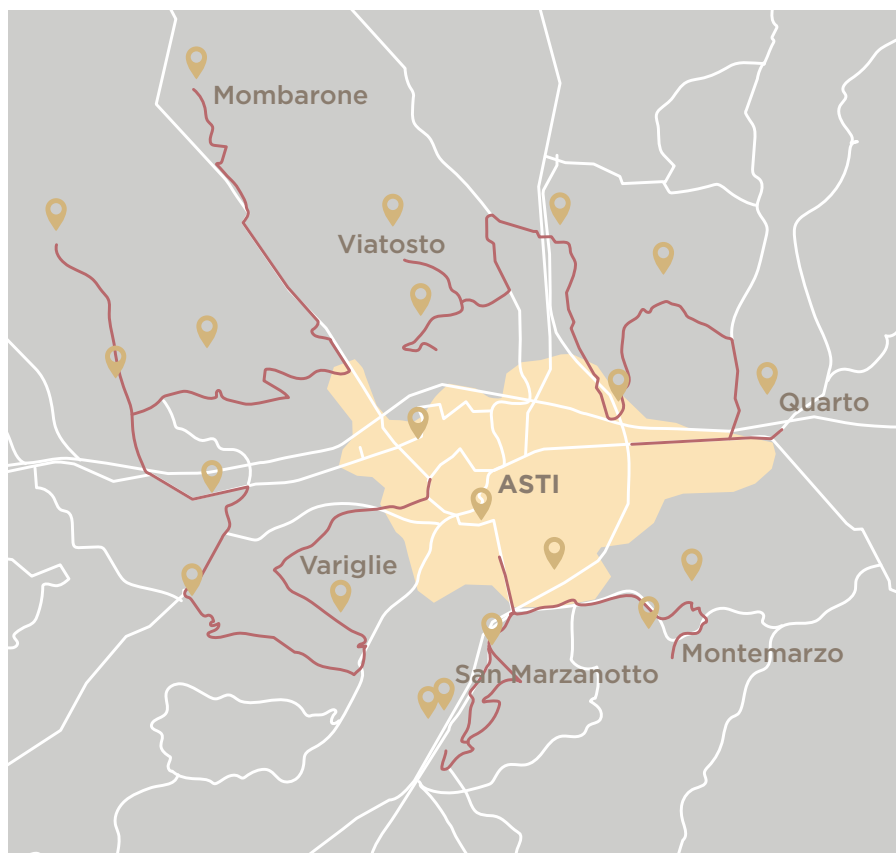
Giorgio Faletti

“Da quando a ora”, (Einaudi Editore, 2012)

A visit to Asti can go beyond the city itself. As a matter of fact, and this is a very rare if not unique case in Italy, Asti has an incredibly vast district of about 10-15 km radius, including several villages or hamlets that were once elevated to the status of autonomous municipality and which, with the establishment of the province of Asti (in 1935), were eventually absorbed by the “new” capital. The people of Asti conventionally call these hamlets “**ventine**” not because there

were twenty of them: the term, according to G. Bera writing on “Il Platano”, actually derives from the word “*vicinia*” which in the Middle Ages used to describe the smallest settlement.

Therefore, Asti enjoys a genuine loop in the open countryside. We will not trace a single route, also because the “ventine” are not an organic system, and in many cases coincide with ancient and often isolated settlements.



From San Marzanotto to Montemarzo

We can suggest an initial route along the right bank of the Tanaro, leaving Corso Savona to immediately reach **San Marzanotto**, an extraordinary balcony over the surrounding hills, all arranged around the parish Church, which preserves its typical circular medieval structure.

It is amazing how, just a few kilometres from the city, you can find a place so far from the hustle and bustle: green, quiet, a classic country place, full of narrow lanes and scenic roads that plunge into the thousand hills of the south of the Asti region. And if on the side overlooking the Tanaro river, the woods and rocks well represent the wildest nature, on the southern ridges, that languidly thin out into a hundred valleys, you can see the order and cleanliness of the vines: rows of vines as far as the eye can see, dotted with manor farms, which are a perfect synthesis of the most classical Piedmontese landscape. An additional feature of San Marzanotto are the Murals that adorn many of the town centre's façades, and were painted by some of the most important contemporary artists (including Casorati, Fresu, Soffiantino and Guglielminetti).

Not far from the village, on the way to Alba, stands the Castle of **Belangero**

(but you can reach it by going up the road to Mongardino), a very old building (it was a fief of the Asinari family). The hillock is enchanting, adorned by a centuries-old park, a beautiful farmstead and a small chapel.

Because of its position, San Marzanotto has long been chosen as a “buen retiro” (retreat) for many Asti residents, and there are many beautiful villas dating back to the beginning of the 20th century that bear witness to this tradition; among these, Villa Badoglio stands out just outside the old town, where Pietro Badoglio, the first Marshal of Italy, a native of Grazzano, loved to stay.

We leave the villa to descend again onto the Tanaro and, once past the village of **Torrazzo** (with its early 20th-century proto-industrial architecture and its large brick factories), we pass by the river towards Azzano and finally reach the valley of Montemarzo (turn right at the level crossing). The village, which is perched on the hill but arranged in triangle shape along the ridge, preserves evident signs of past fortifications in the first houses and overlooks a particularly airy valley. It seems that during the fighting of the 14th century, the Ghi-

belline Guttuari and Pallii (or Pallidi) barricaded themselves here and were defeated and captured by the Solaro Guelphs. Another must-see is also the beautiful Baroque parish Church.

In **Montemarzo**, a hike through the countryside towards Santa Caterina

di Rocca d'Arazzo is a must, possibly on foot, on horseback or by mountain bike... but please be aware of the frequent, sudden and deadly climbs. Right here you will find the so-called "ascent of the Gerbido", an epic challenge won by Giovanni Gerbi, known as the Red Devil, riding his trusty bike.



From Variglie to Mombarone

An alternative route could start from Piazza Torino: from here, as you cross the Borbore towards the cemetery, you can explore the almost secret green hill of Vallarone, full of stretches of pure countryside and then, from Strada Valle delle Orfane, turn onto the old road to Alba heading towards Revigliasco. Here is the village of **Variglie**, overlooked by the small Castle with its watchtower; it was here that the peace treaty of the First War of Succession of the Monferrato was signed on 22 June 1615 and, being perched on the spur of the hill, the village offers a pleasant panoramic viewpoint. At the bottom, the large farmhouses so typical of the Asti area bear witness to the importance and agricultural wealth of the Tanaro Valley: here, it is the fields and plantations that decorate a very gentle landscape rather than the vines.

Once past Variglie, we turn right towards **Vaglierano** and the road begins to climb steeply; we advise you to follow the “Monferrina” junction which will take you, after a short climb, straight to the ridge that runs along the hillside, revealing some truly evocative views: a row of grapes acts as a fence for the farms while the road widens out just enough for the car.

At the end of the Monferrina Road, turn left and you will soon see the silhouette of Vaglierano, immersed in the quiet of the woods that gradually slope down towards the Borbore. We passed through the valley that runs from Asti to San Damiano d'Asti and we immediately perceive the sudden change in the landscape, which is very reminiscent of nearby Roero. Vaglierano stands on a rock overlooking the stream and the only road winds along the ridge between two rows of low houses before reaching the parish church and then abruptly descends through the “terraced” houses along the rock.

Next, from Vaglierano we can descend to the plain below, towards **Revignano**, a small farming village nestled between the fields and the stream. The hills here are nothing more than simple movements of the land and large isolated farmsteads rise up everywhere, often organized as true self-sufficient villages. It was here, in the Cascina dell'Orto in Strada Calunga, that a Genoese anti-fascist professor came to live with his family...his name was De André and his son Fabrizio, the most brilliant of our songwriters, lived here for a decade and kept the nostalgia of this corner of the countryside in his heart forever, as it is clearly visible in many of his songs



like “La canzone di Marinella”, “Volta la carta”, “Coda di lupo” and “Ho visto Nina volare”.

From Revignano you can go back towards Asti along the state road to Turin and pass through the historic hamlet of Palucco, now a simple cluster on either side of the main road. Alternatively, you can follow the state road towards Turin, pass by the houses of Bramairate, and then turn right at the junction to **Valleandona**. This is a Special Nature Reserve that has turned a pleasant little valley into a little paradise for geologists and palaeontologists. Marine fossils, there are plenty of them throughout these hills, prove the presence of the sea around 5 million years ago,

while the establishment of a protected area has favoured the survival of a very rich fauna.

The valley, perhaps the greenest of those around the city, extends for about fifteen kilometres, the homonymous hamlet is located in the middle, at the junction with Casabianca and Montegrosso Cinaglio. We continue on to **Montegrosso** as the road begins to climb and soon becomes a meander through the hillside. The village sits right at the top of the valley and has the classic rural atmosphere of bygone days. The church is still the monument around which the houses gather, those in the village being slightly more pretentious than those scattered across the green.

If you get there during the patron saint's day celebrations (a classic for gourmands and lovers of dancing in all the "ventine"), you will find yourself sitting on a wooden bench in the middle of a table surrounded by joyful and certainly not teetotal people, with a small orchestra next to you and a clear sign for the evening: you will hardly make it to the end of the gargantuan menu!

If, on the other hand, we go from Val-leandona to **Casabianca**, we leave the Reserve and reach another rural area where wine, honey and fruit producers prosper. The landscape is changing from almost mountainous to a more rural setting, with vegetable gardens and orchards, and is dotted with patrician residences: many late 19th-century houses with a certain air of decayed nobility embellish the hilltops, while horse stables stand out prominently.

After Casabianca the road descends to join the state road to Chivasso: this is the least travelled of the Asti state roads, and perhaps the most scenic. The first hill to our right is the Viato-sto hill (which we will reach only later), while to the left we can see **Sessant**, a tiny, narrow village overlooking the wide valley. We can wander through the charming local villages (a detour to San Grato or Bersaglio is recommended) or continue on to **Serravalle**, once on the opposite side of the Rilate stream, rebuilt in the 16th century on

this side after a terrible plague, there is still a 14th-century cemetery chapel. Serravalle also preserves the Castle known as Belvedere.

Legend has it that a servant girl, Ninetta, fell in love with the lord of the manor, but as she could not be reciprocated, she preferred to commit suicide by throwing herself into the nearby lake. The moved nobleman then commissioned to erect a statue in the lake on the spot where the poor unfortunate's body was found: the statue, known as "della Ninetta", is still there in the middle of the lake.

Once past Serravalle you enter the beautiful Rilate Valley to reach the last stage of the route: **Mombarone**, one of the most rewarding surprises of this route. Mombarone stands opposite Settime, with which it once formed a single feud of the Roero family. And Mombarone, just like Settime, has a Castle, which today has been refined into a sort of "hunting lodge", and has a great tradition of country residences. Its fellow citizens include some of Asti's best artists: Giovanni Pastrone, a genius in the early days of the film industry and author of the famous "Cabiria" with D'Annunzio; and Secondo Pia, mayor of Asti and a pioneer of photography (he was the first photographer of the "Holy Shroud"), who used to live in the castle; but our attention also turns to another great photographer, Carlo Franco, a

pupil and colleague of Pia's, who truly embodies the heroic times of the roaring years of photography.

Still in Mombarone you can find the peculiar "Case-Grotta" (cave-houses), a sort of primitive dwelling dug out of the soft yellowish tufa, built from the

18th century onwards and inhabited until the early 20th century, a real gem of rural history.

Here, every road opens out onto an unspoilt landscape, immersed in the most authentic countryside, such as the routes to Valmonasca or Valdeperno.



From Quarto to Viatosto

A third route takes us out of Asti on Corso Alessandria to reach **Quarto**, divided into a lower and an upper village, with the parish Church almost on the balcony of the hill. A curious Palio degli Asini (donkey race) is held here (as in Alba, Cocconato and Calliano) in defiance of the noble and equine Asti Palio. The inhabitants of the village claim to have known about it since at least the 18th century.

Going back towards Asti you turn right at the junction on the state road to reach the hamlet of **Castiglione**. Probably founded by the Franks, Castiglione is one of the oldest “ventine” (hamlets) and has been documented since 899. The place was meant to be a real fortress for the city of Asti, and for this reason it has been destroyed many times over the centuries: no trace remains of the castle, but the first parish Church (15th-century), just outside the town heading towards Asti, is worth a visit. On 2 January, a very impressive ceremony is held to celebrate the Fagiolata di San Defendente (the Bean Soup Festival of San Defendente), which was once distributed to the poor, in deference to the wishes of a certain Guglielmo Baldissero, who paid a debt on behalf of the Canons and asked that after his death, once a year, they celebrate a

mass in his memory and donate an *emina* (a handful) of beans to the poor. This was back in 1200 and the tradition has been carried on ever since.

Castiglione takes us back into the wild: the woods are still dominant here, thanks to a harsh and demanding hillside that is ill-suited to being farmed: only a few steps further on and the Portacomaro vineyards offer an entirely different landscape, however, here the spontaneous overgrown land persists. We descend towards Asti and turn right towards **Caniglie**, a remote rural centre consisting mainly of scattered houses: we are now on the main road to Moncalvo and Casale Monferrato.

The densely populated hamlet of **Portacomaro Stazione** is noteworthy thanks to its good wine producers, whereas **Valmaggione** is again a charming peaceful place, very green, with lots of horses and many beautiful residences. From there, passing through **Valgera**, where the same combination is repeated, we reach **Valmanera**, where the homonymous ancient Carthusian Monastery is a must-see. This was one of the most important monasteries in the Asti region together with the one in Azzano; half-destroyed by Napoleon, it still preserves a section of the original quadrilateral and is



a significant monument in Asti. Inside, it houses the impressive manufactory of Arazzeria Scassa, founded by the legendary Ugo Scassa in 1957, who was one of the world's greatest tapestry makers, and it also hosts a restoration laboratory and museum.

Finally, from Valmanera we can easily climb up to **Viatosto** to reach the splendid Church of Maria Ausiliatrice, a Romanesque three-nave treasure, first mentioned in 1194 and whose oldest parts date back to the 13th century. During recent restoration work, most of the original 14th-century frescoes emerged (five subsequent cycles of frescoes from the 14th to the 20th century) and

today the Viatosto parish church can be fully enjoyed in all its essential richness. The church is also a rare treasure trove of works of art: the wooden statue of the Madonna (14th-century) in the apsidal niche is beautiful, as is the wooden panel of the "Madonna delle Ciliegie" (Madonna of the Cherries) from the 14th century and the painted sandstone group, "Incoronazione della Beata Vergine Maria" (Crowning of the Blessed Virgin Mary) dating back to the late 15th century.

The natural balcony of the churchyard (which can also be reached on foot from Asti) is a beautiful viewpoint over the city and the hills of the "*ventine*".

Top Art and Culture

- Mombarone - Case-Grotta (Cave-Houses)
- San Marzanotto - Murales
- Valmanera - Arazzeria Scassa
- Viatosto - Church of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice

Top Nature

- Vallendona - Special Nature Reserve of Valle Andona, Valle Botto and Val Grande

Download all the routes of Asti



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