

# Towns to discover between **Astesana and Monferrato**

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Urban Itineraries

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# Between Astesana and Monferrato.

*“Life went by calmly, with stages that were compulsory and fascinating for us: the wheat threshing in the courtyards, the corn cleaning, the grape harvest and, finally, the patron saint’s celebration in September: open-air dances, a few merry-go-rounds, an orchestra [...] A life with simple rhythms, the kind of life I like to remember.”*

Massimo Scaglione

“Fortunato il capostazione di Moncalvo!  
Racconti monferrini degli anni Quaranta”  
(Editrice Il Punto, 2009)

**C**anelli, Nizza Monferrato, San Damiano d'Asti and Moncalvo deserve great attention: located almost at the four opposite ends of the province, they are very different from each other, complementary in their architectural features and their different historical origins, a summa and epitome of the very complicated historical events which characterized Piedmont's late Middle Ages.

Two of them, San Damiano d'Asti and Nizza Monferrato, are *villa-novas* (one of Asti and one of Alessandria), another one, Canelli, is the result of the classic encastellation and the last one, Moncalvo, is a particular example of a ridge barrier protecting the Marquisate of Monferrato. They all preserve works of art and monuments of great interest and, above all, have developed completely different characteristics, atmospheres and reputations over time.

We are talking about small villages with a population ranging between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants, but with a reputation which is far greater than their size: for over a century Canelli has been and still is the world capital of Italian Spumante and a world leader in the branch of enological machines, Nizza Monferrato is the queen of Cardo Gobbo, the hunchback cardoon, (that perfectly pairs with *Bagna Cauda*, Piedmont's national dish) and Barbera, which has a specific and coveted appellation here (Nizza DOCG), San Damiano

d'Asti is the elegant living room of the Colline Alfieri, famous for its prized capons, whereas Moncalvo, formerly the capital of Monferrato, boasts *gourmet* traditions of boiled meats and truffles, as well as the legendary love of King Victor Emmanuel II for the beautiful Rosa Vercellana, a native of Moncalvo, first the lover and then the morganatic wife of the Gentleman King.

Moncalvo, which today is still blocking the road to Casale, watches over the province of Asti just as it was once the key and shield of Monferrato; San Damiano d'Asti, prior to the modern road system, served as Asti's watchtower to protect the road heading towards the "enemy" Alba. Nizza and Canelli overlook the same Belbo river that runs from the Langa to Monferrato and, like any self-respecting village anywhere in the world, they are fierce rivals.

Actually, these towns are also a good epitome of the character of the southern Piedmontese people, who were relatives of the Ligurians and pupils of the Lombards, who had no French features at all, but rather a certain Levantine touch, especially in their trading skills and creative genius.

Sometimes it is good to breathe the provincial air, it helps to look at things from a different perspective, often a winning one, although relaxed and joyful.

In short, it is the perfect synthesis of the virtues of the Bel Paese.







# Canelli, the “Gateway to the World”.

*“Ever since I was a boy and leaned on my shovel at the gate of the Mora and listened to the chatter of the idlers passing by on the main road, the hills of Canelli have been the gateway to the world for me.”*

Cesare Pavese  
“La luna e i falò”  
(Einaudi Editore, 1950)



To Cesare Pavese, **Canelli** was a border, an open door to a distant world beyond the Belbo Valley in-between the Langa of Alba and the Langa of Asti: the hills here merge into a thousand different views, in a few stretches of land the dark green of the chestnut trees and oaks mingle with the deep gorges carved into the blue tuff of the primordial streams, the gentle roundness of the hills, the rows of vines which our grandparents snatched from the steepest slopes and combed with proud geometry, the red clayey and compact soil, more suited to the kiln bricks than to the hard work of farming.

Canelli is a crossroads of history, in constant contrast between traditional hab-

its and the search for modernity: it is no coincidence that it was here, in 1850, that Carlo Gancia adapted the *méthode champenoise* to Moscato wine, producing the first Italian Spumante and marking the beginning of the technological revolution of bottle fermentation.

Past and present are always in the balance, between ancient traces and modern constructions. Here, history mentions archaic presences: the Celts, Ligurians, Romans, Saracens, Lombards, Spaniards, French. They all passed through this valley, where perhaps 2,000 years ago Moscato was already being cultivated (a vine that, it is worth remembering, is called Moscato



Bianco di Canelli). Testimonies of the past must be sought in the old streets, walking around to uncover memories and unexpected sensations. Sometimes it is the ploughshare that reveals glimpses of history, with shards and pottery, sculpted stones and ancient burials, like the funerary steles and Roman gravestones that today are part of a small, exciting lapidary in the Church of San Rocco.

Also of Roman origin is the baptismal font in the 17th century parish Church of San Tommaso, built on an ancient place of worship at the foot of the hill and worth a visit because of the countless works of art it houses: Baroque canvases and frescoes, including several paintings by Aliberti, Grozio and Taricco.

Canelli rests on a steep hill, between Gancia Castle and the Belbo river, like a woman bent over doing her laundry on the river, the houses like stretched out skirts on the bank. The historic part, curiously known as “Villanova”, is all built along the ***sternia***, the steep cobbled road that climbs from below up to the castle, amidst churches, small buildings, panoramic views and cats asleep in the sun. Villanova should be explored without haste, on foot, enjoying the view in the distance rather than the modern town below.

The itinerary starts from the central Piazza Camillo Benso di Cavour, set

against the old town bordered by a series of streets (Via Roma, Via XX Settembre, Via Solferino, Via Verdi, basically a compendium of the Risorgimento, as is often the case in Piedmont) running at the foot of the hill.

We turn onto Via XX Settembre to reach the cozy Piazza Amedeo d'Aosta, where **Casa Scarazzini** (formerly the medieval seat of the Municipality and the courts, later rebuilt in the 17th century) separates Via G.B. Giuliani (where there are two of the four Underground Cathedrals of Spumante) and Via Rossmini which, with the following Piazza Gioberti and Via Garibaldi, takes us to the beginning of the *sternia*, in front of the aforementioned San Tommaso. The Baroque portal of **Casa Cornaro** is significant, albeit showing the signs of aging, and is located on the corner of Piazza Gioberti and Via Garibaldi.

Here (between Via Rossini, Via Cairoli and Via D'Azeglio), in this maze of often dead-end alleyways, you can really perceive the old town, the one lying at the foot of the hill, without any sumptuous buildings or decorated capitals, but still beautiful in the original layout of the old houses on the narrow, winding streets, stone steps, vaults, porticoes and red tiles.

The small square of San Tommaso is very scenic, with the baroque Ex-confraternity of the Annunziata (now an Orthodox temple, also due to the pres-







ence of the local Macedonian community) acting as a backdrop to the climb up the steep cobbled Via Villanuova, which meanders through the old village, nestled in narrow bends between terraced vegetable gardens, dry stone walls and stone houses. Today it has been renamed **“Via degli Innamorati” (Lovers’ Street)** thanks to a brilliant insight that combines Peynet’s classic sweethearts (reinterpreted by various local artists) with the romantic views of this gem of a district, which is partially hidden to those who are absent-minded and in a hurry.

You can walk among houses perched on gardens and terraces dug with fatigue into the tufa, pierced by a thousand *infernòt* (the ancient storerooms where provisions and the best bottles were kept) and river pebbles worn out

by many feet, many battles, sieges, opulence and famine. So, as we climb up bend after bend, we reach Piazza San Leonardo, almost on top of the hill, with its breathtaking Belvedere and the homonymous Church, opposite the aforementioned San Rocco (1721), a small Confraternity built after a plague, an example of light Baroque where the Langa stone blends with the red brick of the decorations, in a suggestive chromatic balance.

In San Leonardo, in the side chapels, we find, among the many works of art, the “Pentecoste” (Pentecost), “Epifania” (Epiphany), XVIII century, and “San Rocco e gli appestati” (San Rocco and the plague victims) dated 1716, always by Aliberti, then the ingenious “machine” by Bonzanigo for the procession of the statue of the “Madonna del Rosa-



rio” and, above all, the refined decorations of the vault, the ultimate example of Baroque in Asti, by Carlo Gorzio.

The gentle structure of the **Gancia Castle** (once Scarampi-Crivelli, now owned by the Gancia family) overlooks the town. The castle has been remodelled, destroyed and rebuilt over the centuries, from a Roman fortified stronghold to a mediaeval fiefdom and now a villa; here were the Lords of Loreto, the Counts of Acquesana, the Galleani of Barbaresco. The castle is not accessible because it is private, but it boasts an Italian garden, charming alleys, outbuildings and walls that can be seen on special occasions.

The vineyards begin behind the castle, towards the panoramic hamlet of Sant’Antonio, which produce the best Moscato, because they are exposed to the strong midday sun. A small road runs along the hillside in a unique vineyard setting up to the enigmatic **Torre dei Contini (Contini Tower)** that stands out in the wind to mark the ancient boundaries of the town.

The surrounding hills are described in the Langa of Moscato itinerary.

From Piazza San Leonardo we climb the last stretch of Via Villanuova up to the painted decorations of the old toll station (**Dazio Comunale - Commu-**

**nal Duty**) and then descend slightly to the left into the alleyway of Costa Belvedere to soon reach a secluded and breathtaking panoramic balcony over the Belbo Valley. This is the **Terrazza degli Innamorati (Lovers' Terrace)**, the end point of the route and an enchanting UNESCO Belvedere.

From the terrace, you can descend down the stairs that run between the properties. The stairs end next to the small Church of San Giuseppe: from the hairpin bend below (*gir d'la mòla*), turn onto Via Pietro Micca (known here by everyone as *ij piagg* - the tolls), another steep flight of steps, alley, that crosses houses and courtyards to arrive under the large archway (once a customs gate) of Via Rosmini. From here, we continue downhill along the street to reach shortly afterwards Via Massimo D'Azeglio (known as '*l gir d'la sparzera*'), which runs alongside the historic **Palazzo Anfossi**, seat of the Town Hall since 1919, and opens onto Via Roma right in front of what was once the old Teatro Cinema Balbo, whose restored façade still survives on a building now clearly used for other purposes. (A new, more modern Teatro Cinema Balbo was built a few streets away). From Via Roma we turn right and shortly return to Piazza Cavour.

The **Cattedrali Sotteranee (Underground Cathedrals)** deserve a separate mention: there are four of them, three of which are in the old town (Bosca and

Contratto overlook Via G.B. Giuliani, Coppo overlooks Via Alba), while Gancia is across the bridge over the Belbo, next to the station. Also on Via Giuliani is the beautiful homonymous building, which houses the **Enoteca Regionale (Regional Wine Centre) di Canelli e dell'Astesana** and the Tourist Office. At the far end of the courtyard, in the rooms originally used by the Regional Wine Centre and now housing a restaurant, there is a beautiful mural by Antonio Catalano, a talented genius from the Asti area.

Opposite is the **MU.S.A. - Museo Multimediale del Sud Astigiano (Multimedia Museum of Southern Asti Area)**, which is a must-see, an ideal journey through more than 150 years of local history, which is inextricably tied to wine and landscape.

The Cathedrals are labyrinthic tunnels dug into the hillside to naturally ensure the humidity and temperature conditions that are necessary for sparkling wines. A visit to one (or rather all) of these wineries allows you not only to take a journey into the history of Piedmontese oenology (among *pupitres* and crown corks) and to become an expert in often obscure French techniques and appellations (*millesimé, pas dosé, brut*, etc), but, above all, to discover another Canelli, all secret and hidden, almost a journey through the looking glass towards the centre of the Earth.



## Top Art and Culture

- Church of San Leonardo
- Church of San Rocco
- Church of San Tommaso
- The Contini Tower
- The *Sternia*, the Lovers' Street

## Top Food and Wine

- Regional Wine Centre of Canelli and Astesana

## Top Nature

- Lovers' Terrace - Belvedere UNESCO

### **PLEASE NOTE**

The opening times of the sites listed in this itinerary may be subject to change. Keep updated and please check [www.visitlmr.it](http://www.visitlmr.it)

# The Underground Cathedrals of Canelli

- Cantine Bosca
- Cantine Contratto
- Cantine Coppo
- Cantine Gancia







# Moncalvo, Italy's smallest town.

*"I came to Moncalvo when I was one year old, which is why I consider this Monferrato town my home. Back in the days of my childhood, Moncalvo was considered a chic place to be, especially in September: fancy parties, horse races, high-class nobility, a synagogue, lots of scattered villas, charming and disturbing ladies [...]"*

Massimo Scaglione,  
"Fortunato il capostazione di Moncalvo!  
Racconti monferrini degli anni Quaranta"  
(Editrice Il Punto, 2009)

**S**tretched out on a hill like an impenetrable stronghold blocking the way to Casale and the plain, **Moncalvo** was, over the centuries, the property of the Marquises of Monferrato, the Gonzaga family and, finally, the Savoy. In 1705 Duke Ferdinando Carlo Gonzaga of Mantua named it Town, a title also confirmed by the Savoy family, specifically by Victor Amadeus III in 1775. Due to its natural position and fortifications (some of which are still visible), it was one of the main Fortresses of Monferrato from the very beginning and remained so until 1690. Part of the castle's imposing walls and towers are still visible. The Governor or Marquis of Monferrato used to live in the castle during his stays in Moncalvo.

The centuries-old prestige of the village was such that **Guglielmo Caccia** chose "**Moncalvo**" (he was born in Montabone) as his professional name, and it was under this nickname that he went down in history as the greatest painter of the Piedmontese Counter-Reformation, whose canvases adorn many of the churches in the area. Another local glory is the fine cabinetmaker Gabriele Capello, the last talent of the extraordinary Piedmontese school featuring Prinotto, Bonzanigo and Piffetti, who worked in a modern and highly personal style for Carlo Alberto and the whole Savoy Royal House.

Alongside its noble historical heritage and artistic treasures, Moncalvo also

has a strong gastronomic tradition, as shown by the colourful Festival delle Cucine Monferrine, the historic Fiera del Bue Grasso and, above all, the Fiera del Tartufo. As a matter of fact, the Truffle Fair of Moncalvo is, after Alba, the most important fair in Piedmont, boasting an ancient tradition and, above all, some of the best truffle grounds ever.

For all these reasons, Moncalvo is a treasure trove of history, art, taste and Italy's smallest town.

Our itinerary can only start from the large square in front of the castle (Piazza Carlo Alberto), for centuries an open space used for the cattle market, barely refined by the 19th-century porticoes running alongside the surviving ramparts, perfect both for parking and for enjoying the view of the thousand hills of Monferrato.

Leaving the castle behind, there are traces of the old Jewish ghetto in the **Synagogue**, which still shows the Jewish inscription on the façade (*"my home will be a house of prayer for all"* - Isaiah) while the interior decoration and furnishings were transferred to Israel long ago (moreover, a Synagogue overlooking a square is quite unique).

Then, the large square converges to join the peculiar nineteenth-century **Theatre** which, if it were ever needed, reaffirms Moncalvo's ambition and coat of arms: this is the city's parlour with its cafés and many historic shops, and



where the two main streets start: the one along the ridge, Via Cissello, known as “del Municipio (of the Town Hall)” and *Via Maestra* (Via XX Settembre), which everyone here calls “*la Fracia*”.

We first walk down the street towards the **Town Hall**, which is housed in a wing of the former Orsoline Convent, founded by Moncalvo’s first daughter, Orsola, a remarkable painter too (a rarity in those days); the building is worth a visit, especially for its monumental andron.

However, the most pleasant and unexpected surprise is undoubtedly the other wing of the convent, which houses in the **Museo Civico (Civic Museum)** the Montanari collection, donated by this famous ambassador to the city and which is truly astonishing in terms of the man’s wealth and good taste. It is practically a summa of the best artists of the 20th century, to which are added the African and Japanese collections, always of the highest level, as well as the art treasure of the Town Hall, which boasts oth-





er beautiful surprises. A museum that would not look out of place in a major Italian art city, but rather adds a surprise to this little gem in the Monferrato hills.

Prior to the Town Hall, **Palazzo Manacorda** with its beautiful coffered ceilings and elegant 15th-century mulioned windows with two lights is also well worth a mention. After the former convent, the street continues gently, between noble houses and historic plaques, past a first vault and towards the western gate (still marked by a severed turret near the small Church of San Marco), which sort of encloses the ancient fortified centre like a spearhead.

Next comes Via Asilo which, together with Via Caccia first and then Via Goito, runs at a lower level along the same south-facing ridge on which the oldest buildings and houses are arranged. Via Goito turns sharply south to end up on the ramparts of Via Roma, from which it immediately climbs back up Via Capello to join Via Testa-Fochi, which then surprisingly opens up beyond a large vault into a tiny square with two masterpieces by Magnocavallo, an important 18th-century Casale architect, poised between Baroque and Neoclassicism. To the left stands the Church of the Madonna delle Grazie, now the Sanctuary of Santa Teresa di Calcutta, with its stern, windowless façade, which, however, features impressive interior lighting and refined stucco decorations. To the right is **Palazzo Testafochi**, whose

grandeur recalls the splendour of the past, which was conceived by the architect as his own residence and was completed, guess what, in just two years, together with the church.

The street reaches Piazza del Teatro again, on the corner of what remains of the **Palazzo dei Marchesi del Monferrato**, a rich 15th-century building with two rows of round terracotta windows and elaborate stringcourses.

Now it is time to walk down the **Fracia**, the true commercial heart of the town and a paradise with ancient signs marking out both sides of the steep descent towards the ancient Porta Sottana gate of the village. Here we find the mediaeval **Casa Lanfrancone** which, although remodelled, is a fine example of Piedmontese Gothic, the **Casa Montanari** with the four commemorative Stolpersteine, the stumbling stones placed there in memory of the Jewish citizens deported and killed by the Nazis; and we also find the parish Church of Sant'Antonio, whose "separate" bell tower in Via Capello is the tallest building in Moncalvo.

We leave the centre only to go up Via Bolla, where, on the ancient hill of Monteguardo (where the first ancient settlement was built), we find the other treasure of the village: the Romanesque Church of San Francesco, with the tombs of Caccia, some of the Monferrato family and, as in Sant'Antonio,

several important paintings by Moncalvo and his daughter.

Further on, we are already almost in the countryside, between the ramparts that blocked the eastern access to the ridge and the cemetery. The Israelite cemetery is on the road to Grazzano Badoglio. The surroundings of Moncalvo are described in the itinerary Lower Monferrato of Moncalvo.

Walking back and up to the Castle from Via Vittorio Veneto, you will find the **Bottega del Vino (Wine Shop)** in the Bonaventura Tower: a must-see is the rediscovered secret walkway that

runs along all the walls up to the last tower, leading to the Tourist Office, and finally, you reach the most beautiful Sphaeristerium in Italy (but please take note that in Monferrato the local game is tamburello or *tambass* and not pallapugno or *balon*, which is typical of the Langhe), the **Fossa dei Leoni**, enclosed by the massive towers of the Monferrato fortress. Finally, by climbing one of the many staircases of the Belvedere, you return to your starting point, though certainly you leave with the desire to return to Moncalvo on one of the many mouth-watering occasions that are always available.



## Top Art and Culture

- Belvedere Bonaventura
- Civic Museum and Modern Art Gallery “F. Montanari”
- Ramparts and Walkways of the Castle of Marquis of Monferrato
- Synagogue

## Top Food and Wine

- Local Wine Shop of Moncalvo

## Masterpieces of Orsola and Guglielmo Caccia

- Church of Madonna delle Grazie – Sanctuary of Santa Teresa di Calcutta
- Church of Sant’Antonio Abate
- Parish Church of San Francesco and Open Sacresty of Moncalvo Museum

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# Nizza, amidst Barbera and *Bagna Cauda*.

*“When I got up it was still daylight out there, in the courtyard. The train from Nizza Monferrato was leaving later. I knew I had time, but I really wanted to leave at night so as not to see the countryside and the hills. (...) You see, my father and mother knew why I had to leave. I didn’t have to explain, sadness was common. But the land didn’t know, nor did the hills. Do you understand? The grass was still green. It was September. You cannot understand what the end of September is like in the countryside, the colours, the leaves, the trees, the rows of vines against the light, and the gentle wave that the evening breeze is rocking on the grass.”*

Davide Lajolo,

“I mé, racconto senza fine tra Langhe e Monferrato”  
(Vallecchi Editore, 1977)

**N**izza Monferrato, called with affection in dialect *d'la paja* (of the straw), is virtually the archetype of a Piedmontese small town which perhaps only lacks the old barracks to be perfect. With its avenues and terraces, the porticoed main street with its old shops with wooden signs and engraved shop windows, the square with the Town Hall tower, the secret courtyards dotted with shadows and gardens, the brick cellars that are home to restaurants and wine bars, the calf farming tradition (there are countless butchers with a long history and ancient fame here) and the Foro Boario, as well as old-fashioned games and challenges such as the *Corsa delle Botti*, the markets (the antiques market is a must-see) and the historic fairs (San Carlo, Santo Cristo, Bue Grasso), the churches and confraternities which physically guard the religious spirit of the town, block by block, and the country churches, always on top, which bless farmhouses and buildings. which describe a rural opulence that had already developed into an agrarian bourgeoisie with palaces and old villas.

**Nizza Monferrato** also boasts a well-known cultural and social activity that makes it a favourite destination for all the inhabitants of the villages between Acqui Terme, Asti and Canelli for aperitifs and after-dinner drinks, tastings and dinners.

Furthermore, this small town lying between the Belbo river and the Nizza

stream is proud to be the birthplace of a gourmet glory: the highly prized *Car-do Gobbo* (hunchback cardoon), the “king of *Bagna Cauda*”. The town also has a long tradition of Amaretti biscuits, wines (above all Barbera d'Asti, which in 2014 earned the specific DOCG status with the “Nizza” appellation), truffles and a thousand trades (from anchovies to olive oil, from salt cod to cheese) extending between the sea and the plains.

The “Piazza del Comune” (the town hall square), the heart of the ancient old town, right where Alessandria built the first nucleus of the *villa-nova* after defeating the Asti people, near the ancient Church of San Giovanni in Lanero (demolished in 1826), is the starting point: here the bell tower, known as ***El Campanòn***, soars into the sky. A key symbol of the town's independence, next to the **Palazzo Civico (Town Hall)**, it overlooks the sea of red tiles in the centre. The palace, which has undergone numerous restorations over the centuries, dates back to 1353, but its current shape dates back to 1883-84 when the battlements were restored and the tower, which is now 28 metres high, was erected. The Council Chamber houses the *Liber Catenae*, the book that collects the municipal statutes of *Nicea Palearum* or “Nizza della Paglia” (Nizza of the Straw) from the 13th to the 18th century.

The square, dedicated to the Martyrs of Alexandria, is surrounded by fine build-



ings dating back to the 1700-1800s, including the impressive **Palazzo De Benedetti**. We stroll under the porticoes of Via Carlo Alberto, the **Via Maestra**, with its shops and boiserie from the early 20th century. From Piazza Comunale we follow Via Pistone and then Via Gioberti, at the end of which, at number 39, we will find the so-called **Casa delle Tre Palle (House of the Three Balls)**, because the façade is decorated with cannon balls in memory of the numerous sieges suffered by the city in the 17th century.

Next we turn onto via Spalto Nord towards the district known as “del Castello”; these place names reveal that until 1647 Nizza Monferrato was a fortified town, that is, in its triangular shape, surrounded by walls; this was precisely the

Spalto to the north, protected to the west by the Castle, placed to defend the Porta di Belmonte, at the confluence of the Nizza and Belbo rivers: traces of the massive walls can still be seen in the cellars of the houses along the river.

Today, instead of the old gate, we find Piazza XX Settembre, or “of the vegetable market”, which features a very appropriate monument, the one to Francesco Cirio, the king of vegetables, who was born here in poverty and later invented in nearby Turin the process of preserving canned food that made him famous.

The Nizza-Belbo confluence is nearly invisible today, but we continue along the triangle of the old town along the Belbo, in Via Cirio, to reach Piazza Cavour





and cross one of the main exit routes, the one leading to Acqui Terme (the Nizza area is described in the Monferrato of Nizza itinerary). Just beyond the bridge over the Belbo river, to the left, there is Piazza Dante, where everything recalls the atmosphere of the early twentieth century of the dynamic and ambitious provincial town that sees the rush of progress in the twentieth century and wants to be part of it.

So this is the railway station (the Cavallermaggiore-Nizza line was one of the first railway lines in the Kingdom) and,

just opposite, the large winery founded by Arturo Bersano, one of the noble fathers of Piedmontese wine, whose motto "*If you want to drink well, buy a vineyard*" is still the cornerstone of the region's production philosophy; an unusual reality with thousands of family farms that make Piedmont a paradise for any wine tourist (and one of the best drinking regions in the world). The fine **Museo Bersano delle Contadinerie e delle Stampe Antiche sul Vino (Bersano Museum of Rural Artifacts and Antique Wine Prints)** which is much more than a collection of tools and covers the last four



centuries of wine history, and the “Raccolte” (Collections), a veritable archive of documentary memories of rural life, are all that is left of this heritage. The museum is also home to the goliardic Confraternity of *Bagna Cauda*, which awards the “*Paisan Vignaiolo*” prize: one of the first and most sought-after wine awards in the literary and journalistic world. An important part of the history of oenology has indeed passed through this square.

An interesting fact: Nizza Monferrato is also a small capital of sugar sachets, and so further on (Corso Acqui 254) there is a curious Museum called “**Sug@r(T)\_house**”, managed by the Figli di Pinin Pero company, which offers six guided tours to learn about the history of sugar.

We go back to Piazza Cavour where the neoclassical Church of San Giovanni in Lanero (which has inherited only the name of the ancient chapel) awaits us, with the chapel of San Carlo Borromeo in its interior. All the churches in Nizza, including San Siro and Sant’Ippolito, were rebuilt in the 18th century, although they still preserve earlier furnishings and vestiges (such as the 15th-century confessionals in Sant’Ippolito).

Next, we continue along Via Pio Corsi (the city’s historic modernist mayor) to reach the very elegant 18th-century Palazzo Crova: built based on a design by architect Di Robilant, it has characteristic arched vaults and terracotta

decorations. The first floor houses the **Palazzo del Gusto (Palace of Taste)**, a multimedia museum dedicated to Asti food and wine, and **Art ‘900**, 100 works of art, including paintings and sculptures from the Davide Lajolo collection (courtesy of his daughter Laura-na), while the ground floor houses the **Enoteca Regionale (Regional Wine Centre) del Nizza**, which enlivens the beautiful inner garden.

We then head towards the *cima di Nizza* (summit of Nizza) or rather Piazza Garibaldi (whose Foro Boario is now a beautiful multi-purpose centre) where many markets are held, including the remarkable antiques market, and where the *Via Maestra*, the main road ends. Just a few steps away (Via Pistone, at the corner of Via Cordara) and you can visit the **Auditorium of the Trinity**, a small deconsecrated church, restored by *Erca* (the Accademia di Cultura Nicese), the protagonist of numerous cultural events and the loving curator of the small Jewish cemetery (just think that in Nizza Monferrato, as in Jerusalem, there is also a **Garden of the Righteous**).

Once a year the barrels from the countless wine cellars race along the worn-out *sternie* (the cobbles) of the *Via Maestra* in a competition that has an antique flavour, whereas the elegant promenade in-between “shopping” and aperitifs is happening all year round. What are you waiting for?

## Top Art and Culture

- Church of San Giovanni in Lanero
- Converted Church of the Holy Trinity - Auditorium Trinità
- Garden of the Righteous
- Town Hall and Civic Tower *El Campanòn*

## Top Food and Wine

- Nizza Monferrato Regional Wine Centre

## Nizza and its Museums

- Bersano Museum of Rural Artifacts and Antique Wine Prints
- Museum Sug@R(T)house Figli di Pinin Pero
- Palazzo Crova - Art'900 - Contemporary Art Gallery
- Palazzo Crova - Palace of Taste

### PLEASE NOTE

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# San Damiano d'Asti, a chessboard on the Borbore.

*“The lady set off along the porticoes of San Damiano d'Asti, marvelling at their beauty, at the shops under the porticoes, which were as beautiful as ever, the shop windows carefully and lovingly designed, made people want to buy everything. She reached the Town Hall Square and sat for a moment on the bench to enjoy her new world.”*

Linda Pines

“La bicicletta bordeaux (Storia di Aisha)”  
(Sillabe di Sale Editore, 2020)

**S**ituated on the left-hand side of the Borbore stream, which has always accompanied travellers from Alba to Asti via Canale, the town dates back to 1275, the year of the great Asti victories against Alba and the House of Anjou (Battle of Roccavione). In that year, the people of Asti also destroyed several castles and villages in the Astisio area (approximately the present-day Roero), guilty of allying themselves with their sworn enemies. On the site of these villages and castles, near the market place of Marcellengo and the nearby Church dedicated to San Da-

miano, they built the walls according to a geometrically ordered layout of a fortified *villanova*.

**San Damiano d'Asti** was thus always inextricably tied to Asti, almost a village *extra muros* and, in the following centuries, experienced its ups and downs in the endless struggles between Guelphs and Ghibellines, between the Marquises of Monferrato and the Viscounts of Milan, between the Savoy and Gonzaga families, between the French and the Spanish. After the Treaty of Cherasco in 1631, San Damiano d'Asti passed into





the hands of the Savoy, who enfeoffed it to the Marquises of San Martino d'Aglié, who were later followed by the Carlevaris, a family of Aleramic origin who gave the town many illustrious figures up to the end of the 19th century, and whose historic residence today is the Town Hall.

Divided into ten symmetrical districts and enclosed by four massive ramparts, the centre still preserves intact the shape and charm of an *oppidum*, although the ramparts are now tree-lined avenues and the ancient gates

have been opened and modified, creating the market spaces that enliven many moments of the year, including the historic *Caritun* Fair in spring and the Saints' Fair in autumn.

The town's itinerary begins at the ancient *Porta Sottèra*, today the parish Church of Santi Cosma and Damiano, whose bell tower is one of the two towers of the gate itself (a bit like the Torre Rossa of Santa Caterina in Asti). The original parts of the church, once smaller, date back to the 15th century and still preserve a beautiful circular choir from





the same period and a wooden statue, the 17th-century “Madonna del Carmine” (Virgin Mary of Carmine) by Clemente. The nearby confraternity of the Annunziata, on the other hand, dates back to the late 16th century.

Next comes **Via Maestra** (the main street) with its one-kilometre long porticos, the classic carriage stones marking the way and several important buildings overlooking the street. Particularly noteworthy are **Casa Berroni** and then the 18th-century **Casa Castelli** (to the right-hand corner of Via Gioberti) with the terracotta architecture of the Church dell’Addolorata just opposite. Near the church, along the street, you will find the beautiful **Palazzo dei Padri Dottrinari**, with a space used for temporary exhibitions, and the impressive basements where a Live Nativity Scene is held every year at Christmas.

The imposing **Palazzo Vagnone**, on the corner of Piazza Libertà, has classic Umbertine features. The palace is connected by a gallery to **Palazzo Carlevaris**, today seat of the Municipality, and both are very well frescoed (the gallery in particular). The palace also houses the **Enoteca Regionale (Regional Wine Centre) Colline Alfieri**, while the funeral stele of Daniele Scarampi (1445) is preserved in the entrance hall under the porticoes of the Town Hall. The other side of the square is also overlooked by the imposing **Casa Demarie** and the **Palazzo dei Conti Ceca di Vaglierano**.

Opposite Palazzo Vagnone is the Church of San Giuseppe (with its sumptuous Baroque interior and peculiar polychrome ceramic roofing) with the **Torre dell’Orologio (Clock Tower)** at its side. You continue on to the last district (the tenth) to reach Piazza Camisola (the ancient *Porta Sovèra*) and turn onto Baluardo Palestro and then Baluardo Montebello. On the corner, you will see the prestigious **Palazzo Pescarmona** and then the elegant 18th-century **Casa Daneo**, but the terracotta bell tower of the Church of San Vincenzo, the symbol of the town, stands behind the Town Hall on the small square called Piazzetta Giroldi; inside, there is a magnificent painting celebrating the “Battaglia di Lepanto” (Battle of Lepanto), of the 17th century.

From here, along Via Bottallo, you cut horizontally across the centre and move to the western side of the ramparts, i. e. the Baluardo Magenta, where you will find the old **Casa Mac-cari** on the corner with Via Garibaldi; a little further along Via Rattazzi lies the imposing structure of the former prisons; from here, across the Baluardo Solferino, you will return to the starting point in Piazza Santi Cosma e Damiano.

The villages’ most extensive and interesting surroundings are well described and outlined in the Romanesque in and around San Damiano d’Asti itinerary.

## Top Art and Culture

- Church of San Giuseppe
- Clock Tower
- Parish Church of Santi Cosma e Damiano

## Top Food and Wine

- Colline Alfieri Regional Wine Centre

## San Damiano d'Asti and its Palaces

- Casa Berroni
- Casa Castelli
- Casa Daneo
- Casa Demarie
- Casa Maccari
- Palazzo Carlevaris - Town Hall
- Palazzo dei Conti Ceca di Vaglierano
- Palazzo dei Padri Dottrinari
- Palazzo Pescarmona
- Palazzo Vagnone

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## **Langhe Monferrato Roero Tourist Board**

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### **Alba Tourist Office**

Piazza Risorgimento, 2 - 12051 Alba (CN)

Tel. +39 0173 35833

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### **Asti Tourist Office**

Piazza Alfieri, 34 - 14100 Asti (AT)

Tel. +39 0141 530357

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### **Bra Tourist Office**

Palazzo Mathis - Piazza Caduti per la Libertà, 20 - 12042 Bra (CN)

Tel. +39 0172 430185



**LANGHE MONFERRATO ROERO**

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The Home of BuonVivere



Texts:

by Pietro Giovannini

Translation:

Raffaella Rolla

Photos:

Marco Badiani, Can't Forget Italy, Valeria Gallo, Mikael Masoero, Parallelozero (Davide Greco and Francesca Vettorello), Nicolas Tarantino - Archive Ente Turismo Langhe Monferrato Roero; Antonio Abruzzese

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[www.visitlmr.it](http://www.visitlmr.it)

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[info@visitlmr.it](mailto:info@visitlmr.it)  
Tel. +39 0173 35833

