Alba, City on the River

Gianmaria Testa (March 30, 2016)

Gianmaria Testa (17 October 1958 in Cavallermaggiore - 30 March 2016 in Alba) The author of this article was a great Italian musician that just passed away. His very poetic songs tell the lives of ordinary people, immigrants and workers. We would like to say good bye to Gianmaria with this special description of Alba, his birthplace. "Now foreigners from around the world come to Alba on the scent of its truffles, wines, hazelnuts. But they, like all of us, are also looking for beauty."

Cities with rivers are never alone. Alba feels the silent slap of the Tanaro on its sides. Sometimes, in summer, the river's bare. Other times it's majestic, swollen with water that has traveled down mountains that face the sea.

But the city doesn't extend beyond the river. The Tanaro is a border, and cities that bear a border inside them are sad. Besides, if Alba did cross over the Tanaro, half of it would be in the hills of Langhe and half in the rest of the world. So the city lies entirely on the river's right shore, its foundations set deep in the soft rock of the earth it belongs to and which it oversees.

Built to welcome people

To an outsider, Alba is soothing, geographically speaking. The roughness of the hills suddenly drops off, as if the immense force driving the land upward had suddenly remembered to leave room for a place less difficult to live in, a spit of earth that requires less sweat and elbow grease, with a river beside it.

The people of the Langhe [2] don't say "Let's go to Alba," they say "Let's go into Alba."
Coming down from the surrounding hills that's exactly the impression you get—you don't feel like you're arriving somewhere, you feel like you're entering inside a place, a kind of welcoming room.

Alba was built to welcome people. To Piazza Savona and Piazza del Duomo. To Via Maestra and Via Cavour. Under the Crocefisso di Sacchetto in San Domenico. To its bars, trattorie and ristoranti. Alba welcomes people because, as a strip of flatland below the hills with a river running by it, that's its job.

The day of the week it does the most welcoming is Saturday, market day.
People come from all over, speaking foreign tongues and strange dialects. They come down into Alba for a look around. They stroll. They chat. For many, the Saturday market in Alba is a respite for normal and frenetic swarm of humanity that meets up, as if for a date.

I still haven't found my place in Alba, one of my favorite places, nor do I know whether people will see me as living here, but I'm not from here and the city seems to be seriously self-satisfied. It welcomes guests, true, but it's reluctant to admit it.

Alba deserves the gold medal, militarily speaking, for being the first city to free itself, thanks to the partisans, during the delirium of the Second World War, a story told magisterially by Beppe Fenoglio [3], the city's native son and one of the great Italian writers of the latter half of the nineteenth century. His books contain all the cantankerous humanity of these places. He, better than anyone, knew his city and its people.

Looking for beauty

Now foreigners from around the world come to Alba on the scent of its truffles, wines, hazelnuts. They are led here by the nose—and the palate. Clearly they're not wrong to do so, but once they've come here, I see them look past the shop windows, and down the streets in search of something more than just a food stand. Like all of us, they're looking for beauty.

And I, who haven't found my real place in Alba yet? I've seen that beauty on clear mornings when a wedge of sky between the bells of the cathedral and town hall seems to bless whover's standing here below. And I've seen it on foggy winter nights, when the cold weather clears streets and Alba seems alone, alone but for the river, that river by its side.
* Gianmaria Testa is a famous Italian Italian author, guitarist and singer

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