Piedmont: The New Dolce Vita

Benedetta Grasso (May 28, 2010)



Discover Piedmont, a region filled with natural beauty, adventure, delicious food and wine and a thriving and exciting capital.

When I try to describe Piedmont [2] to an American friend I always say, in very general terms, that Piedmont is to Italy what Northern California is to the United States. I find fascinating and funny that in Northern California there's also a region called Piedmont.

In both countries these areas are associated with elite tourists, usually foodies and wine-lovers, as well as more of a rough crowd that enjoys extreme sports and the beauty of nature – those who like to hike, explore, and are drawn to adventurous physical activities. Both regions have hills famous for their vineyards, and they both have big National Parks. There are mountains and ski-resorts but the sea is not too far away.

The similarities between the two regions don't end there: if Napa Valley [3]is synonymous with technology, innovation, and industry, Turin and Piedmont are associated with Italy's industrial revolution and modernity. Companies like FIAT [4]and Olivetti [5]are the giants among many other companies located in this progressive region which was pivotal in the computer revolution.
The main cities, Turin and San Francisco, tend to live in the shadow of their more famous counterparts (Milan and Los Angeles) but they are the ones with the most potential and a higher quality of life.

Food is important in these areas, and both have become the epicenters of movements that place a strong emphasis on natural, authentic products and a food culture that respects nature while revolutionizing the way we think about eating. Slow Food for example, founded in Piedmont, has created the University for Gastronomic Studies in Pollenzo [6].
Not far from Palo Alto, Pixar Studios [7]are forever changing the way we think about movie-making while in Turin the Museum of Cinema [8] and the growing film industry there are essential resources for developing and experimenting with new cinematic technologies.

When I think of Piedmont as an Italian, I realize that there is a deeper, hidden aspect to it – one that is often even hard to explain to other Italians. There is a history that goes back to the beginning of time. Turin was founded by the Romans; there are famous little towns that are exquisitely preserved with castles, streets, and churches dating back to the Middle Ages; there is a heavy Napoleonic influence that runs through the architecture; and jumping centuries ahead Piedmont played a central role in the unification of Italy and the resistance during World War II.

Piedmont is reflected in the pages of history as well as in books written by famous writers like Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio or more recently by Paolo Giordano [9], all of whom have captured the spirit and essence of the land. Piedmont is also the center of Italy's publishing industry. In the 1930s it was Giulio Einaudi [10] (the son of Luigi Einaudi, one of Italy's first presidents) who created an historical publishing house that had a profound effect on Italian culture. Italy's most important book fair, the Salone del Libro [11], is also held in Turin.

In the heart of Langhe and Monferrato, where the hills are filled with vineyards and gorgeous fields and woods, one can get a taste of real country life, one that is still regulated by the rhythm of the seasons. Farmers in Piedmont are not easygoing types; they are precise and determined, men of few and incisive words. As a border region, Piedmont is heavily influenced by its neighbors to the north, south, and east. Piedmont's dialect has borrowed certain words from the French, as well as a passion for a pleasurable way of life that includes summer trips to seaside resorts on the Côte D'Azure and a distinctive panache for fashion and perfume. In the more northern mountainous region, there are several villages in areas such as Val Maira where the language spoken is still the ancient Occitan (or Provençal), a variation of French and Catalan. Many Swiss and Germans live in and frequently visit the region, perpetually exchanging products and traditions. Americans are also spending more of their vacations there and discovering a new side of Italy in the process.

The Italian Government Tourist Board [12] recently hosted a wonderful presentation of the region in New York. Tour operators, journalists, and representatives of various Italian and American cultural institutions were welcomed at SD26, the restaurant founded by famous chef Tony May, with a menu featuring some of the best specialties from Piedmont, including carne cruda (raw beef dish similar to beef tartar) , ravioli, and chocolaty desserts.

Special guests from Piedmont included Giuliano Lengo, Chief Operation Officer of the Agency for Investment, Export and Tourism; Angelo Feltrin, Executive Manager of the Agency for Piedmont Tourism; and Anna Martina, General Manager of the Agency for Turin Tourism.
As Riccardo Strano, director of ENIT [13], remarked, Piedmont is the embodiment of a "new dolce vita."

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The tourist attractions in Turin are plentiful and the city is easy to navigate since, like Manhattan, it was built on a grid system. The list includes the Mole Antonelliana (which houses the Museum of Cinema), Turin Cathedral, the river Po, Palazzo Reale, Parco del Valentino, Racconigi Castle, and so on.

Upon leaving the city, your senses of taste and smell are awakened. If you walk through the woods you will immediately sense the strong, unique smell of truffles, and if you are really lucky it might be a white truffle, one of the rarest and most prized foods in the world. Walking up a hill you can smell the grapes. At the end of summer when they are mature, the grape juice (also known as must) fills the air before becoming barbera, nebbiolo, barolo, dolcetto, or one of the many other wines produced in the region. Passing through Alba, even by a car, you are completely overtaken by the smell of chocolate; you can smell it from the highway.

The Ferrero [14] factory which makes Nutella [15]is located in Alba. The creamy chocolate and hazelnut spread is a cherished reminder of childhood for many Italians, sort of what peanut butter and jelly is for American kids. Ferrero makes a ton of little snacks, like chocolate eggs and pocket-sized sweets that you can find practically everywhere.

Gianduiotto, a small milk chocolate shaped like an upturned boat, is a symbol of Turin and is sold in every pastry shop.

Some traditional dishes from Piedmont may even be obscure to other Italians, but if you have the opportunity to try them they will give a precise glimpse into a particular way of life and culture: tajarin (pasta), agnolotti, risotto, various vegetables, bollito misto, brasato, bagna cauda (served and eaten in a manner similar to fondue, it’s made with garlic, anchovies, olive oil, butter, and cream in some parts of the region) or bonnet.
As a child, I used to crave bonnet every day; the chocolate pudding mixed with macaroons, if done well, is simply delicious. Some of the region’s signature cheeses include toma, bra, raschera, robiola, and gorgonzola.

Last but not least, most tourists come to Piedmont for natural sights like Gran Paradiso [16], to ski in various resorts, and to enjoy Monte Rosa, the highest mountain in the area.

We asked Angelo Feltrin some questions about Piedmont at the event.

What does the American tourist look for when visiting Piedmont?

We need to divide the market in two sections. First, there is a group that we usually call “empty nesters” – people who are over 40, have a particular lifestyle, and essentially come for two reasons. The first reason is for the lakes. We have incredibly beautiful lakes that are very much appreciated by American visitors. It is a very relaxing vacation. At the lakes you can basically live as if you were at the seaside, since there are many beaches, but you are also surrounded by mountains where you can take walks and hiking trips. The weather is much better than at the seaside for it’s more temperate and the heat is not oppressive.

The second reason is the hills. The hills in Piedmont, especially in the Langhe and Monferrato areas, are famous for their great food and wine. We are the only region in Italy and one of the only places in the world where you can find an exceptional and rare product: the white truffle of Alba.

If we are talking about a young American tourist, someone more modern and more interested in something original and exciting Turin is definitely the answer.
The city has changed immensely after the 2006 Winter Olympics [17]. Once a quiet, somehow reserved town, it is now an international crossroads and an explosion of cultural initiatives and youth culture. It’s a city filled with students, workers, and immigrants from all over the world.
Turin is now a cosmopolitan and multicultural city, and a lot of money has been invested in reshaping this aspect of the city and modernizing it.

Is Turin becoming the second "cinema city" in Italy, after Rome? How is this affecting its image?

Technically Turin was the first “cinecittà” (cinema city), the place where cinema was born in Italy and where many movie production studios were created. Then under Fascism, Rome became the center of film production but Turin still remains anchored to its history, and our Museum of Cinema demonstrates this since it preserves the history of movie-making in Italy in a very interactive environment.Nowadays Turin is again producing more movies and is a central location for film shoots.

This is important not only for Piedmont’s industry and pride but also because it is a way to shift the image of Italy abroad, to include Italian locations in movies and make the audience identify a place and dream of going there--like it happened for Rome's Piazza di Spagna in "Roman Holiday." This works particularly well for the Indian market, but we are targeting the American market as well. There is a film commission which is working on using Turin as an additional “character” in movies.

One of the region’s main strengths is food and wine tourism. Does this tend to appeal to younger generations of tourists?
Well, food and wine tours can be appreciated by anyone but the only issue is that they might still be considered a bit expensive. We are studying less expensive options to attract a younger set. The mentality is changing though, thanks to “gastronomic universities” like the one in Pollenzo that are bringing young people and good food together. In any case, what people often remember about a trip is what they ate, regardless of their age, and in Piedmont food is part of the experience. You don’t eat to survive, but to share a moment with your loved ones, to chat, to enjoy yourself, to relax, and get to know each other.

In what way is Turin much more youth-friendly than before?
Nowadays there are people out every night, not only duning weekends. Nightlife is definitely exciting and modern. A few decades ago Turin was regulated by the “rhythm” of FIAT. It was an industrial city. There were three shifts at FIAT: 6am to 2 pm, 2pm to 8pm, and 8pm to midnight. There was much less time to have fun. The city is becoming more like Milan, a post-industrial city that offers services and attractions, where it’s great to go out.

Is there an emphasis on Jewish-themed tourism, given the history of the region?
We are obviously aware of the importance of the Jewish communities that have been here for centuries in Piedmont. Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor who wrote Se Questo È Un Uomo (If This Is A Man) was born in Turin. There is a considerable Jewish presence in Piedmont and in the towns near Casale Monferrato with beautiful and historically significant synagogues. We are in contact with various tour operators in Tel Aviv that work with us and organize specialized tours. What’s interesting is that the food and wine culture is also moving towards the appreciation of and the emphasis on kosher products and kosher wine-making. There are over 20,000 Jews who visit the region every year, generally staying for an average of four to five days. They come to ski and visit certain areas, but most of them have the opportunity to rent villas or hotels to gather their families, sometimes with relatives coming from Israel or the United States for religious holidays like Passover. Every time we go to Tel Aviv we promote our region to the Israeli market and we are aware of its importance in Italian-Jewish history.

The ENIT event also focused on the upcoming 150th anniversary of Italy’s unification. Turin, which was once the capital of Italy, is central to this event. Various programs, displays, exhibits, and shows will allow the public to remember and celebrate. Four programs have been proposed: "Fare Gli Italiani" (focusing on the history, identity, and journey to become one Italy), "Futuro" (a large workshop that will explore how people will live in Italy tomorrow), "Dalle Italie all’Italia" (a cultural and artistic spin on the topic), and "Il Gusto" (focusing on taste and the Slow Food revolution). As the director of ENIT Riccardo Strano pointed out, it’s an important event that will bring together several national issues and initiatives. This is not a “one shot” event but the beginning of a collaboration between Piedmont and the United States.

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