

VIVA VERCELLI: AN ITALIAN LOVE AFFAIR

by Allison Levine



Vercelli is the heartland of Italian rice—and is also the home of Gattinara and Ghemme, Nebbiolo-based wines that rival their Piedmont neighbors, Barolo and Barbaresco.



From a scenic standpoint, the mare a quadretti, or sea of squares, is breathtaking, extending for miles and miles. (Photo by Johanna Jacobson/Ambientimage.com)

Thirteen years ago, I was a recent college graduate ready to explore the world. Eager to travel and study in Europe, I started to dream about Italy. In a roundabout way, I met an Italian woman and told her about my dream. Next thing I knew, she offered me jobs as an au pair in Italy.

I began to think about the chance to go to Florence, the heart of Italian art and culture; Venice, the city of romance; Rome, the ancient city or Milan, the fashion capital. Instead I was invited to go to a little town called Vercelli, located in the heart of Piedmont, between Milan and Turin.

I had never heard of Vercelli, but I spent the next six months living in this town of 50,000, learning the language and exploring the culture. I fell in love with this little town, with its people, with its food, with its wines... in short, with everything.

When I returned home and in the years that have followed, every time someone asks me how I learned Italian or where I lived, I answer "Vercelli" and get a consistent and resounding "Ma, PERCHÉ???" (But, WHY???), along with an astonished look.

Unexpectedly this year, another invitation came to explore Vercelli once again. As I flew over my old stomping grounds in a small prop plane, looking down at rice fields that spread as far as the eye could see, I realized that I could finally explain why Vercelli is so important and why it has so much to offer.



photo by Johanna Jacobson/Ambientimage.com

THE HOURGLASS



The province of Vercelli is shaped like an hourglass, with Turin to the west, Milan to the east and Genoa to the south. Vercelli is an island between the River Po and the Alps. The town of Vercelli lies at the center, with Valsesia to the north and La Grange to the south. Vercelli was strategically positioned during the Roman Era, and today offers a wide range of things to do and see, from museums and art to craftsmanship and outdoor activities.

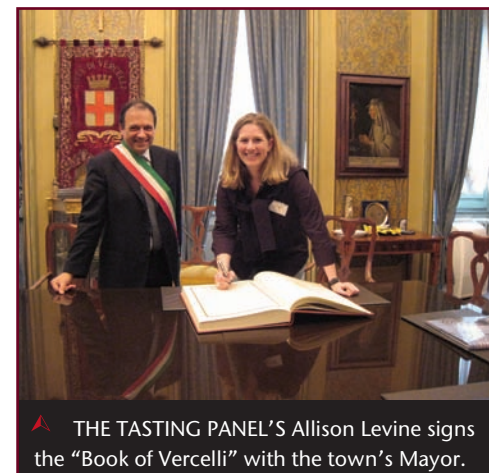
To the south is La Grange, Vercelli's lowlands. This is the heartland of Italy's rice industry. With over three hundred million kilos of rice cultivated, harvested and transformed each year, Vercelli is the fourth leading economic region in Italy and Europe's most important rice market.

A SEA OF WATER

In Vercelli, rice is important not only economically but also from an historical, environmental and scenic standpoint. The cultivation of rice has influenced the culture of the region since medieval times. The area's large granges (rice storage barns) date back to the Cistercian monks of Lucedio Abbey, who introduced the cultivation of rice in the 15th century. Environmentally, the climate is perfect for rice because of the high humidity and average temperatures of 68 degrees Fahrenheit. Due to melting snow from the Alps, the soil is full of water—another requisite for rice.

From a scenic standpoint, the mare a quadretti, or sea of squares, is breathtaking, extending for miles and miles. As one passes through the rice fields in the spring months, the expanse of water reflects the lowland villages. In summer the scene changes, the bright green of young rice shoots dominating the countryside. In September the color shifts again as the ears ripen and form immense expanses of warm, golden colors. The plants are now ready to be cut. Afterwards, the fields will remain in shallow water until the following spring.

RICE AND REMEMBRANCE



THE TASTING PANEL'S Allison Levine signs the "Book of Vercelli" with the town's Mayor.

Vercelli may not have been one of the more typical destinations for an American to live abroad, but it is a region well worth exploring. The province of Vercelli is full of history and culture; it is a region filled with kind and generous people; and it is the heartland of rice, a staple of the Northern Italian diet.

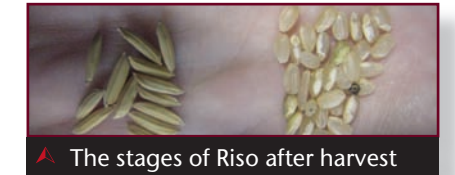
An Italian saying summarizes the connection between the wine of Valsesia and the rice of La Grange: *Il riso nasce nell'acqua e muore nel vino*: Rice is born in water and dies in wine. A poetic sentiment that could only originate in Vercelli.

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Italy-America Chamber of Commerce West ASCOM - Associazione Commercianti della Provincia di Vercelli

RICE ROSTER

There are more than 100 types of rice cultivated in the Vercelli area. Some examples:



The stages of Riso after harvest

Arborio – With the biggest grains of all the varieties, Arborio cooks evenly, leaving the center al dente.

Baldo – Large translucent grains that don't overcook; rich in starch, Baldo is perfect for risotto and oven baking.

Balilla – The oldest Italian variety of rice; best in soups.

Carnaroli – Long elegant grains that cook uniformly and absorb large amounts of liquid.

Nuovo Maratelli – An historical variety with a round shape, suitable for fresh and aromatic risotto.

Roma – A short-grain rice that absorbs a large volume of liquid; excellent for creamy desserts such as rice puddings.

Sant'Andrea – Compact texture and semi-tapered grains; suitable for soups and rice cakes.

Venere – Named after Venus, the Goddess of Love, a whole-grain rice known for its amazing color, aroma of baked bread and sweet flavor; requiring a longer cooking time, Venere is best with butter and Parmigiano-Reggiano

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The Antoniolo family in Gattinara, just north of Vercelli, is one of the most celebrated wine producers in the region. Founded in 1949, this remarkable estate bottles small quantities of wines made from the best cru vineyards in the Gattinara appellation. Current releases include the 2001 Gattinara "Le Castelle," an intense and superb wine with pure spice and Nebbiolo fruit (**\$43 retail, 92 points**); the 2003 Gattinara "Le Castelle," equally intense with exquisite balance (**\$49, 92**); the 2003 Gattinara "San Francesco" (from 47 year-old vines), ripe and elegant, complex, long and fruity (**\$49, 90**); and 2003 Gattinara "Osso San Grato" (also from 47-year-old vines), dense, juicy and bursting with berry fruit (**\$56, 91**). Imported by Estate Wines Ltd., 1-415-492-9411. —Anthony Dias Blue