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The Slow Life in Italy

By **Barbara Graham**
Photographs by
Clay McLachlan

Within the wine lands of Piedmont, a fast-paced mom downshifts to reconnect with her son in his adopted home

The author, flanked
by fifth-generation
winemaker Luca
Roagna and grand-
child Isabelle Eva.
Opening pages:
Racconigi Castle.



I feel as if I'm in an Italian movie

and my son, Clay, is the director. Today's location is a hillside in Castiglione Falletto, a village in the Barolo wine region of Piedmont. The October sun warms me as I stumble along a row of grapevines in a pair of men's rubber boots two sizes too big. Before long, my fingers are the same deep purple as the clusters of plump *nebbiolo* grapes I pluck from the vines. It's the last day of harvest but my first day on the job. My costar is five-year-old Isabelle Eva, Clay's daughter. I may be a rookie, but she's a pro, having taken part in her first harvest at age two. She casts a critical eye on my pickings, then decisively rejects the grapes that resemble raisins.

"The wine from these grapes will be ready to drink on Isabelle's 20th birthday," shouts Luca Roagna, as he inches the tractor piled with baskets of fruit up the muddy hillside. Together with his father, Alfredo, Luca runs the family-owned vineyard, which was founded in the 1880s by his great-great-grandfather.

Even though I'm not really a field hand or a character in *Piemonte Paradiso*, the title of my imaginary movie, I'm thrilled to be traipsing around northwestern Italy with my only child, who, most of the time, is on the far side of the Atlantic from me. This trip is special; it's the first time Clay, a professional photographer, and I have worked together on a story. I love watching him take pictures—his concentration, his gift for capturing moments that I don't even see, his relaxed manner that puts his subjects at ease. Clay is by nature a keen observer with an artist's eye and a patient sensibility. People meeting him for the first time might even find him a bit reserved; but once he lets you in, you're as good as family.

Blood or no blood, Italy is all about *la famiglia*. So when we arrive at the vineyard for our grape-harvesting adventure, Clay and Luca greet one another like long-lost brothers. They even call each other *fratello*. I'm intrigued by everything that Luca and his family represent to my son: tradition, family togetherness, reverence for the soil, a long view of life that encompasses generations.

I'm especially intrigued because these are the very things that inspired Clay, along with his wife, Tamar—who both grew up in San Francisco—to purchase a 400-year-old farmhouse in the nearby hamlet of Bonvicino (population 119). “Luca and his family epitomize what I love about Italy,” Clay tells me. “To me, the way of life that’s normal here is very special.” Indeed, Clay speaks Italian, drives like an Italian, swears in Italian, has a posse of Italian friends, and knows his region inside out. Even physically, with his blue-gray eyes, buzz cut, and two-day-old stubble, he passes easily for northern Italian. As for me, I eat Italian—but that’s about it.

Which is partly why I did not react with joy when Clay announced in 2005 that he had bought a weekend house in Piedmont. I worried that the distance would threaten our bond. But I wasn’t surprised my son was drawn to a world so different from the one he grew up in. His father and I were hippie nomads who made sure to keep a wide buffer zone between ourselves and our parents. If there was a defining tradition in our little family unit, which dissolved when Clay was two, it had to do with breaking free. “Your parents drove you up the wall,” Clay reminds me. “The message I got was to stay as far away from family as possible.” Touché.

But in another sense, Clay and Tamar’s decision to plunk down roots in Piedmont is all about family—their family, which in addition to Isabelle includes two-year-old Azalia Luce, who was born here. “We wouldn’t have bought our house if we weren’t planning to have kids,” Clay explains. “This is where the four of us come to relax and connect. And it’s where the things I love most come together. Food, wine, natural beauty. The ultimate trifecta.”

I’ve visited Bonvicino before, but this time my mission is to puzzle out why Clay finds this little-known corner of Italy so compelling. I want to experience his Piedmont, so I’m letting him plan our days—a first for a control-freak mom. My timing couldn’t be better. We’ll be celebrating a milestone in both our lives: his 40th birthday.

CLAY AND I FLY to Turin from Paris, where Isabelle is enrolled in the French equivalent of kindergarten, and where my son’s family has been living when school is in session. “Now I’m at home in my soul,” Clay says, beaming, the minute we set foot on Italian soil. “Just look around. In Paris everyone seems to frown all the time. Here, they’re smiling.”

We head for the Alte Langhe, an area about an hour south of Turin and the setting for my *Piemonte Paradiso*. As we approach Barbaresco, Clay begins to glow with excitement. “The light just knocks me out,” he says. “Every time I come back, it’s as if I’ve never been here before.” There is magic in this storybook landscape of hilly vineyards bathed in the luminous oranges, reds, and golds of autumn and flanked by the Alps. Piedmont literally means “at the foot of the mountain.” And though the region is often fogbound—the prized nebbiolo grape has its root in *nebbia*, Italian for fog—the afternoon is bright and clear. So clear that Clay can’t keep from pulling over every few minutes to shoot the view from another angle.

We finally arrive at the town of Barbaresco, home to the Roagnas’ winery, which the family owns in addition to its vineyards in Castiglione Falletto. Clay asks his fratello if he would kindly educate my ignorant palate. Luca tries his best, instructing me how to sniff, swirl, taste, spit, and compare vintages. I’m an avid pupil, but when

Gentle slopes, cool temperatures, and mineral-rich soil enable Barolo to produce coveted red wines.



Later, while lying in bed, I wonder how my California kid turned into an Italian. How did the boy who for years refused to eat anything except “flat eggs” and Cheerios wind up an expert omnivore and oenophile with a villa in Piedmont?

we leave after sampling several bottles, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to tell a Barolo from a Barbaresco, let alone a Pajé from a Montefico—just a few of the sublime bottles we tried.

Still, though I may never be as discerning about wine as my son, I am nearly his equal when it comes to food. We both care passionately about sources, flavor, ingredients. We go to ridiculous lengths to procure the best. “Food is a religion in Piedmont,” Clay says, en route to Dogliani—the nearest sizable village to his house in Bonvicino. “It makes sense that Slow Food started in Piedmont,” he adds, referring to the culinary movement that prizes, among other things, a farm-to-table approach to cooking.

It also makes sense that Clay loves Dogliani, because Dogliani obviously loves Clay. Every place we stop—the butcher shop, the hardware store, a local wine bar—he’s greeted like a returning son. Likewise at Osteria Battaglino, where, after much hugging, we’re seated at the family table. As the “mamma,” I’m treated with great deference and respect. I could get used to this.

I don’t have high expectations for this simple restaurant in a town that doesn’t make most guidebooks. Besides, after a long day I care far more about sleep than food. So I am blown away when chef Marco Battaglino presents us with exquisitely refined regional dishes made with local ingredients—most from within a 20-mile radius. Nothing can possibly top the seasonal artichoke flan appetizer, I think, until I taste the pumpkin-porcini gnocchi that follow. It’s among the most transporting dishes I’ve tasted.

“Piemonte is crazy,” Clay says, shaking his head. “Tourists hardly come here. Expats don’t move here. But if this restaurant was in New York, you couldn’t get a table.”

EARLY THE FOLLOWING morning we drive to Pollenzo, an old Roman town that’s home to the University of Gastronomic Sciences (Università degli Studi di Scienze Gastronomiche). Like other Slow Food nonprofit ventures, the UGS is an expression of its founder, Piedmont native Carlo Petrini. With its turreted, red-brick buildings laid out around a courtyard and surrounded by greenery, the campus looks like something out of an academic dream. Built in 1835 as a country getaway for King Carlo Alberto, the complex draws students and visitors from all over the world.

We’re met by one of the university registrars, Hanna Spengler, a German expat married to a local, and another friend of Clay. As Hanna shows us around the stables turned classrooms, I’m surprised to learn that cooking isn’t part of the curriculum. “The focus is on the science, culture, and politics of food,” she explains. “People come here to learn how to put the values of Slow Food into practice.” Chief among those are biodiversity and sustainable agriculture; also important are pleasure and taste. In the Laboratory of Sensory Analysis, students, often blindfolded, learn to tease apart the complexities of taste in the same way sommeliers study wine.

It’s late afternoon when we finally tear ourselves away. I’m determined to squeeze in a walk before dinner, so we head to Bra. After stops in the official Slow Food store and Giolito Formaggi, a famous cheese shop with its own cheesemaking exhibit, Clay ushers me into a *pasticceria*. It looks as if the whole town has turned

out for a predinner quaff. “I love this ritual,” he says over espresso. “Friends and families out together. It’s so vibrant and lively, but not because of tourists. No English spoken here.”

Once again I’m moved by my son’s appreciation of strong family bonds and community—which, incidentally, I share. Genuine community may be the only antidote to the dizzying rush of our e-world. Still, the fact that Clay has found his ideal of family and community so far from his actual family back in the U.S.A. is not without a dose of irony. When I say this, he replies, “One’s own family is always a bit more challenging than other people’s, don’t you think?”

I refrain from pointing out that, for me, there’s also a soupçon of sadness in the current arrangement. Clay knows just how much I wish that he and his family lived closer to me; there’s no point in discussing it. Besides, I don’t have a leg to stand on. I often wonder if the fact that we live at such a distance is my karmic comeuppance. I, who as a young mother never dreamed of living anywhere near my own parents. I, who had my number unlisted (when I had a phone) so my mother couldn’t call me and tell me I was ruining my life. I, who, when Clay was six months old, moved him to a plywood shack in the mountains of northern California, where we had no running water, no electricity, and our nearest neighbors—sometimes way too close for comfort—were bears. Not only that, as a free-spirit hippie mama, my mantra was—and still is: Be true to yourself.

Even though I haven’t said a word, I know that Clay knows exactly what I’ve been thinking. To relieve the tension, I ask, “So, what are you going to do with me when I’m old and feeble?” This line is the standard opener to one of our little mother-son routines.

He turns his head in my direction, cocks an eyebrow, and admonishes faux-darkly, “You’d better learn Italian.”

We both laugh. The image of me as a wizened, toothless, ancient signora cloaked in black and living in a Piedmontese old-age home doesn’t exactly fit. “*Perfetto*,” I say as we get ready to zip along the winding country road toward our next destination.

I’ve been warned about this dinner. I’ve been told I’ll be eating “bunny candy”—that is, crisp, juicy rabbit roasted on a spit over an open fire. But as far as I’m concerned, rabbits are either hairy vermin or adorable fuzzy pets—take your pick—but not dinner, and I’m dreading this meal. I may be a foodie, but a vegetarian-leaning one who is game-phobic. “Have I ever steered you wrong, foodwise?” Clay asks confidently.

As it turns out, Filippo Oste is an unexpected prize. Located in Albaretto della Torre, a two-block village, the osteria looks like somebody’s house. We even have to ring the doorbell to get in. We’re met by the gracious owner, Filippo Giaccone, a one-man band who runs the front of the house, waits tables, and periodically pops back to help the lone chef in the kitchen. And Clay is right. Once I get past my bunny phobia, the *coniglio* tastes as good as promised, crisp and smoky, without being overly pungent. I commend Filippo, then ask him what impact Slow Food has had on his restaurant.

He just chuckles. “My family has been making slow food since way before Carlo came up with the idea. Slow food is part of our culture. The movement is much more important outside Italy.”

Even though just about every bite that’s passed my lips since arriving in Piedmont has been local, seasonal, and delectable, I’m afraid that if I continue my eating jag I’ll be waddling down the aisle by the time I board my plane back to the U.S. “*Basta!*” I tell Clay on our way home. “Isn’t there something else to do in this place besides eat and drink?”

Osteria dei Binelli’s dining room (below). Opposite, from left: Ancient Romans prized “Caesar’s mushroom,” a valued ingredient at Filippo Oste; sliced prosciutto and country bread make for a study in local cuisine at the University of Gastronomic Sciences.



"Nobody visits Piedmont unless they're obsessed with food and wine," he counters. Still, my son knows my limits. "Tomorrow I'm taking you to the Parco Naturale delle Alpi Marittime, where we can hike from Italy to France. We'll fast all day." But in the morning we learn that the snow has come early and the road into the park is impassable. We take a gentle hike on a path that crosses the vineyards between the towns of Novello and Barolo. Stands of golden poplar shimmer in the afternoon light; across the valley, the church tower and red tile roofs of La Morra complete the scene.

I think I'm starting to grasp why Piedmont resonates so deeply with my son. Why he and Tamar, who have traveled the world, chose this place over, say, Tuscany, with its incredible art. Here, the way of life is the art. The people are warm and welcoming. The region remains authentic, even as it keeps pace with the modern world. It's the slow life at its best.

T

HE NEXT DAY our mother-son interlude comes to an end. First to arrive are Tamar and the bambini, followed by my husband, Hugh. Suddenly I'm Nonna again, and I'm making macaroni necklaces, playing ballet teacher, and turning out "flat eggs" as fast as Isabelle and Azalia can eat them. Our itinerary changes radically. There are daily excursions to the playground in nearby Bossolasco, followed by

stops at Eugenio Truffa, an award-winning pasticceria that serves what may be the world's best hot chocolate. And because the girls really believe they're princesses, Clay and I take them to Racconigi Castle, an estate renovated, with mixed results, by nearly every royal who owned it since the Middle Ages. With Isabelle dressed as Rapunzel and Azalia in a fairy princess outfit, we time-travel back to the 1800s and sweep through the grounds by horse-drawn carriage, past a large conservatory, a lake, and a grotto dedicated to Merlin the magician.

Later, we rush back to Dogliani to meet Hugh and Tamar at Osteria dei Binelli, a converted farmhouse on a hilltop overlooking a grove of hazelnut trees that Clay calls "one of my favorite spots on Earth." Here, Sunday lunch is as much about family as it is about food. We're joined by Clay's neighbors Karel and Filiberto Pinca ("the Italian grandparents"). The couple had planned to move from her native England to his childhood home of Sorrento after they retired, but high housing prices drove them north. "Piedmont is the best kept secret in Italy," Filiberto proclaims. "We pray it never becomes the new Tuscany."

At last, it's the morning of my son's 40th birthday *fiesta*. Doug Polaner, a wine importer from New York State and Clay's good friend, makes a confession. "I feel as if I'm packing heat," he says, referring to his cache of *tartufi bianchi*, or white truffles. We've just spent an hour sniffing, studying, weighing, and comparing the prized but ugly fungi in the back room of a truffle emporium that reminds me of a drug den. Now, rushing through the cobblestone streets of Alba, *tartufi bianchi* capital of the world, we're getting pounded by rain. Our soggy crew includes three of Clay's pals from Paris who have flown in for the feast. Doug is our chef, as well as my truffle tutor. "The stinkier the better," he says.

We spend the day shopping in the freezing rain: vegetables and cheese from the Friday market in Bra, fresh pasta and molten chocolate cake from Osteria dei Binelli, eggs and meat from Rolfo Elio Macelleria-Salumeria in Dogliani. Our afternoon is capped by a private tasting with winemaker Roberto Conterno at Giacomo Conterno Winery in Monforte d'Alba, which Clay calls "the holy grail of Barolo." The guys all have looks of ecstasy on their faces as they sniff and swirl. They talk cherries, berries, iodine, pears. Only Isabelle, who turns the cavernous cellar into her playground, is more clueless than I. It's past five o'clock when we finish, leaving Doug little time to whip up dinner before the guests arrive.

But whip he does, and a few hours later we gather around the long table in the former hayloft that Clay and Tamar have transformed into a beautiful entertaining space. Outside, rain seems to be washing the world away; inside we dine on five truffle-laden courses. We sip rare wines and Champagne brought by Doug and two other guests, Roberto Conterno and Luca Roagna. Some bottles are from 1971, the year Clay was born. Back then I never could have imagined my sensitive boy a self-assured man—let alone a married man and father of two daughters—at home in Italy, surrounded by family and friends celebrating his 40th birthday in multiple languages.

In his toast, Hugh, Clay's stepfather for 30 years, tells him: "People who succeed later in life are people who live their passion. I see you as someone who already knows this secret." If I'd wished for anything for my son back in 1971, it was this. Maybe I wouldn't have wished for his passion to take root several time zones away from me, but parents don't get to script their children's lives.

Sitting at the table, I realize that our children are ours but not ours. When they're small they're almost entirely ours. Then, little by little, they take their place in the world, until they hardly need us at all. Forty seems like another one of those cardinal crossings. But I needn't have worried. I know now that the love we share hasn't shifted over time, no matter where my son's dreams take him.

Writer **BARBARA GRAHAM** edited the best seller *Eyes of My Heart*. Her son, photographer **CLAY McLACHLAN**, specializes in food and wine.

