

FINANCIAL TIMES



The Milanese are a rather spoiled bunch. Italy's fashion- and design-capital offers an embarrassment of riches on its doorstep, from the Italian lakes to the Alps — and some of the country's [most accomplished wine regions](#).

Just over an hour's drive south-west from Milan, the landscape transforms as you travel upland from the smoggy Po Valley into the citrus-coloured villages of the lower Piedmont region, with a patchwork of vineyards piling up the chalky hills. This is the land of Gavi: the light, crisp and easy-drinking white wine made from Cortese grapes, named after the village from which it originated. While Gavi wines are popular internationally — around 90 per cent of its 14mn bottles produced annually are exported, mostly to the US, UK and northern Europe — in Italy, they are mostly enjoyed locally in Piedmont and the north.

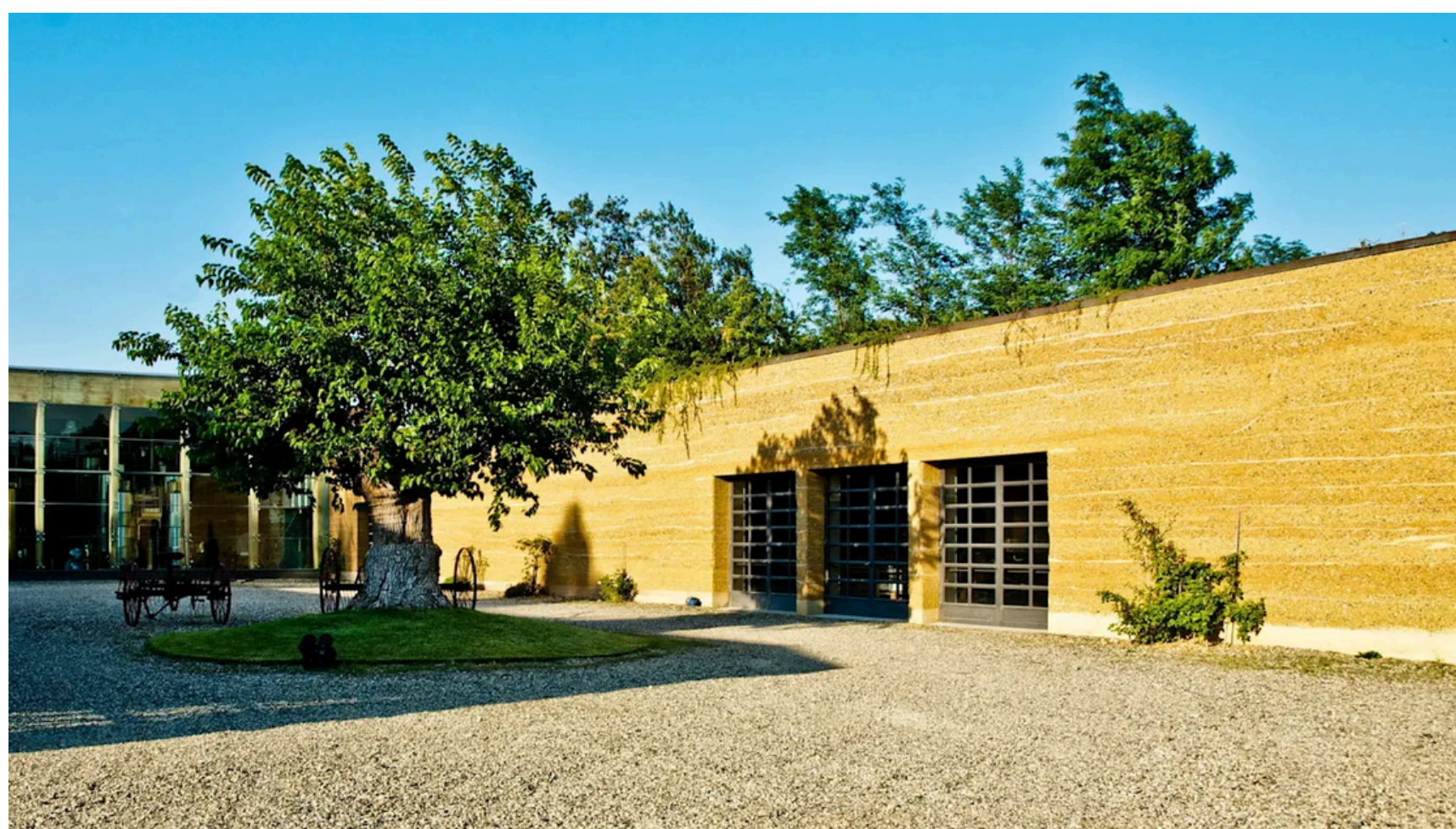


Spring and autumn are the ideal times to visit the Gavi region, so at the tail-end of September my husband and I decamped to its foothills to catch the end of the harvest. We are visiting the family-run [La Raia](#) — a biodynamic wine estate celebrated for its commitment to sustainability, biodiversity and award-winning bottles. Its 200 hectares are also home to [Locanda La Raia](#), a modern, 12-room guest house with a Michelin-listed restaurant, a heated pool and spa. Guests can opt for one of the estate's complimentary itineraries, which include wine tastings, guided tours of its outdoor artworks or nature walks, while off-site activities such as truffle hunting can be arranged by the property.



First on our agenda, of course, is wine, so after dropping off our bags we make our way across the grounds, past rows of freshly picked vines and a herd of cream-coloured Fassona cows, lazily grazing next to chestnut woods and near the glistening lake at the heart of the estate. On a crest overlooking the water stands the cellar, where Elena Passi, La Raia's wine tour manager, meets us, and first explains the organic, chemical-free practices and biodynamic principles used to emphasise soil health. "The fields are farmed in rotation and allowed to rest," she puts it simply. "Wine is made in the farming — the cellar comes later. Good grapes make good wine."

After exploring the winery (once an old cattle shed), powered by solar energy and its walls crafted from layered earth, we settle into the rustic tasting room, where shelves hold jars of corks, old bottles of La Raia and chunky books on wine. Passi brings out bottles for tasting and lays the table with the estate's honey and salami, local cheese and focaccia.



If Gavi seems like a curiosity in Piedmont, an overwhelmingly red-wine-producing region, that could be because it has been produced here for centuries — longer than the land was considered Piedmontese, before the unification of Italy. Cortese grapes were allegedly served at the court of Genoa, which inspired planting in the Gavi hills, a holiday destination for Ligurian noble families.

La Raia's production — around 350,000 bottles in a good year, Passi says — is predominantly Gavi wines from 60 hectares of Cortese vines, with 4.5 hectares dedicated to Barbera. (The estate is owned by Giorgio Rossi Cairo, an Italian entrepreneur and investor; his son Piero runs the business and its sibling winery, Tenuta Cucco, which produces Barolo. Giorgio and his partner Irene Crocco, a Milan gallerist, established an [art foundation](#) at La Raia in 2013.)

Like winemakers everywhere, La Raia is grappling with the increasingly unstable growing conditions caused by climate change. "This year [2025] has been really good, there's been lots of sun and it's not been too hot, but last year was rubbish," Passi says. "It's the unpredictability that's so challenging for everyone."



We taste three different bottles of Gavi, starting with the most classic expression (and the style most recognised internationally): a quaffable wine ([£24 at Passione Vino](#)) that could be enjoyed as an aperitivo or with fatty food. It is light, fresh and simple, with lemony notes, a green apple-like crispness and a touch of minerality.

The Gavi Riserva ([£32](#)), made with grapes from a single vineyard, is surprising in its smoothness, complexity and elegance — a wine that, unlike the first we tried, you could not imagine necking back on a hot day but rather enjoying along with white fish or a light pasta. "It is less direct than the classic Gavi," Passi says. "It wants you to love it. Classic Gavi says, 'You can like me or not.'"

Lastly, we sip the Pisé ([£38](#)), the product of one of the estate's oldest vineyards. It is aged in oak barrels — a relatively recent experiment by the winemakers to illustrate how Gavi can age for longer than expected. The wine is deep and buttery, with a long finish on the palate, first offering sweetness then acidity, a bit like pineapple.



Visiting the estate itself is the result of another experiment: La Raia was among the first producers in Gavi to offer wine tastings and tours when it started doing so a decade ago. “Piedmont is still relatively closed, so we’re trying to open it up more,” Passi says. Still, most wine tourism is centred around the Barolo wine region. “We are the poor cousins in Gavi,” she says with a laugh. “But if Barolo is the king of reds, Gavi is the king of whites.”

Later at the cellar, we meet Irene Pacini, who hosts biodiversity and art tours of the grounds, for a sunset walk back to the locanda. Since 2013, with the founding of Fondazione La Raia, international artists have been commissioned to craft outdoor works for the estate.

Down a cypress tree-lined path, we spy a work by Bolivian artist Tami Izko that has been built into a grotto, now decorated with a kaleidoscopic array of glass and porcelain objects, and inside which is a small natural spring. It is a habitat for amphibians: we see a giant toad cannonball into the water.



The link between biodiversity and art becomes clearer as we clamber through vineyards and continue to the lake, where an upside-down pyramid has been created out of stone by Parisian artist Adrien Missika. With 2,300 holes in its sides, it is inspired by the structures used by gardeners to attract pollinators. Residue on its walls offer a clue that some have moved in.

The most striking work, however, is outside of the locanda: nine fluorescent bales, made from plastic straws, by Berlin-based artist Michael Beutler — originally a protest piece against pollution that has become a signature of the property.



The bales also nod to the history of the locanda and its former guise as a 19th-century coaching inn, used by travellers along an ancient merchant path from Piedmont to Liguria, before eventually becoming a post office. Its structure remains almost entirely original, aside from the addition of larger doors and floor-to-ceiling windows to showcase the *bella vista*.

The spirit of a guest house also remains intact. There is no formal reception area; instead, guests are welcomed into the lounge for an espresso or a glass of wine. On the first floor, outside the upstairs bedrooms, is a table laden with bowls and jars of sweets and biscuits, much like what are usually dotted around Italian homes. The decor throughout offers a stylish juxtaposition of modern design pieces and contemporary artworks with antiques that the owners have collected over time. Our lodgings are large and comfortable, with a picture window and seating area overlooking the landscape; the bathroom features an enormous tub and a skylight for soaking beneath the stars.





Tucked into a corner of the ground floor is the elegant, white table-clothed restaurant, which was awarded a Michelin green star (the award for sustainability) last year for its farm-to-table practices. The majority of the produce used in the restaurant is grown on the estate's biodynamic farm; otherwise ingredients are locally sourced. Chef Tommaso Arrigoni's menu is centred on traditional Gavi cuisine, which is influenced by both Piedmontese and Ligurian flavours.

At dinner, our server, Ali, takes the lead with the wine, proffering options from both La Raia and its sibling winery near Barolo. It feels like we are dining at a friend's, and he is enthusiastically pulling bottles from his excellent cellar.



Our friends, however, do not cook like Arrigoni: the ravioli are tiny and so skilfully made, stuffed with a mixture of pork loin, beef belly and rabbit, and served in *fondo bruno*, a stock-like sauce that after three days of reduction is intense, thick and glossy. Meaty and rich, the dish is exactly what comes to mind when imagining Piedmontese cuisine. His excellent gnocchi dish conjures Liguria with a version of *tocco*, the traditional Genoese ragù, here cooked for eight hours and served with heaps of black truffle. There are other standout dishes: *vitello tonnato*, prawns with a white bean purée and, even though we are stuffed to our eyeballs, irresistible desserts.

The next morning, we wake to the sun lifting over the dewy vineyards, as a little orange tractor grumbles along in the distance. Breakfast is served in the restaurant, with simple hot dishes to order and a buffet of homemade yoghurt, muesli, crostata and fresh fruit. After a spot of truffle hunting in the morning, we spend the afternoon at the heated pool, swimming in the autumn sunshine and working up an appetite for another round at the restaurant. It's hard to believe how under the radar this beautiful, peaceful region remains, despite (for us Londoners at least) the ubiquitous nature of Gavi on wine lists. The "poor cousin", as Passi says, may have secretly won the lottery.

Niki Blasina was a guest of La Raia. Each stay at Locanda La Raia includes a wine tour and tasting (with the wine itinerary), a tour of the foundation's artworks (art itinerary) or a guided nature walk of the estate (biodiversity itinerary). Private transfers can be arranged from and to Milan, Genoa or Turin. Rooms start at €390 per night



CAMPAIGN FINANCED
ACCORDING TO EU
REGULATION N. 2021/2115



MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE,
FOOD SOVEREIGNTY
AND FORESTS

