



Fontana delle Ninfee
at the Piazza Italia

Michelle Fabio

Acqui Terme

Hot, Hot, Hot — and Not Just the Thermal Springs

By Michelle Fabio

Perhaps no more aptly named city exists in all of Italy than Acqui Terme — a charming gem of a place nestled into the province of Alessandria in Piemonte. Its name pays homage to the ancient, natural, thermal springs (terme in Italian) that run beneath it and attract people from all over northwestern Italy and beyond for therapeutic spa treatments, often with a prescription from their doctor in hand. “Acqui,” of course, comes from the Latin for water.



A hot spring fountain
“La Bollente” in the
Piazza della Bollente

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The town's spas date back to Roman times. And while they are extraordinary, there is so much more to appreciate about Acqui Terme, starting with its location in the Montferrat — Piemonte's gorgeous wine country, one of the most important oenological regions in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. To accompany the wine, piemontese cuisine is among the finest in Italy, with its rich, rustic and soul-warming flavors.

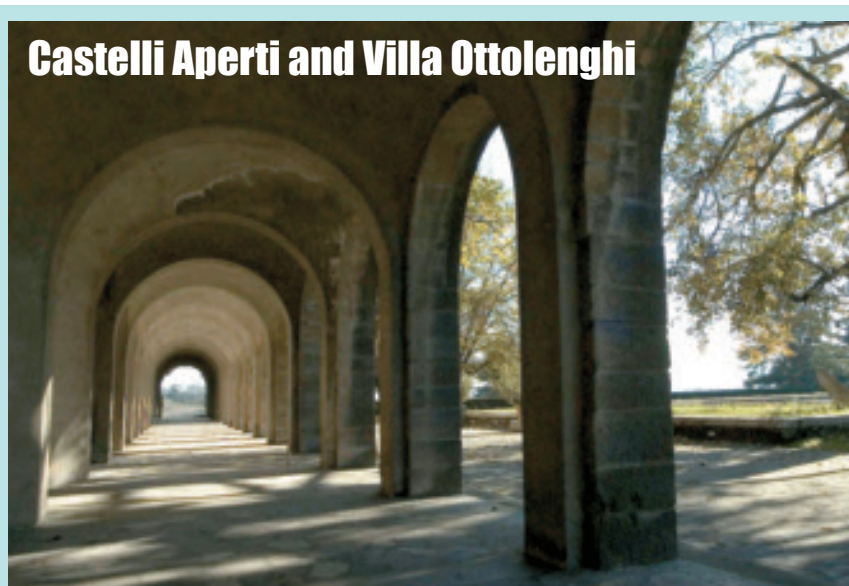
Like everywhere in Italy, Acqui Terme is steeped in history and culture. But what sets it apart is that it manages to balance this with the vibe of a vibrant, even trendy, city that has attracted countless artists and other creative types — all while keeping the feel of a small town, thanks to friendly locals who love the intrepid travelers who find their way here. No wonder humble Acqui Terme has become one of the hottest, must-visit locations in Italy.

History of Acqui Terme

Over 2,000 years ago, the Romans conquered the lands of the Liguri Statielli, built a new city around the steaming waters, and named it *Acquae Statiellae*. The settlement soon became an important trade center and strategic battle location thanks to its protected position surrounded by hills. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the city was abandoned. But it came back to life in the 4th century as part of the Kingdom of Lombardia.

In the 12th century, it became an independent comune only to be annexed by the Marchese of Montferrat. In the 17th century, the Savoy family took control of the city and turned its thermal facilities into a popular spa destination. The spas suffered both financially and structurally under Mussolini in the mid-20th century, however, and were in near ruins before the revitalization of the city, including the investment of tens of millions of euros, over the past 30 years or so.

Although not much in Acqui Terme remains from Roman times, you can still see ancient baths, a theater, a fountain, an artisan workshop,



Castelli Aperti (Open Castles) is a collaboration between Piemonte and the provinces of Alessandria, Asti and Cuneo that runs from May to October. Its aim is to introduce visitors to castles, villas, palazzi, forts, churches and museums that otherwise might be inaccessible.

One of the Acqui Terme properties in Castelli Aperti is Villa Ottolenghi, lauded as the only example in Italy of a close partnership between artists, architects and patrons of the arts,

which has culminated in a villa and surrounding grounds that are spilling over with impressive artwork and incredible beauty.

The project began in 1920, by Count Arturo Ottolenghi and his wife Herta von Wedekind zu Horst, with the objective of bringing painters, sculptors and other artists to the villa to be inspired and create. The villa, now owned privately, was constructed with attention to every detail, and the grounds include sprawling gardens,

a pool, a wisteria arbor, a winery, a wine-tasting room in the old artists' studios, and a grand cistern. Its mausoleum, "The Temple of Herta," the portal of which is engraved in bronze, nickel and copper, is the work of Masters Ernesto and Mario Ferrari.

Villa Ottolenghi offers something spectacular at every turn, so stop in if you're in the neighborhood! For more information, visit www.castelliaperti.it and <http://villaottolenghi.it/>.

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and other ruins in and around the city center, and part of the old aqueduct around the confines of the city.

The archeological museum, housed in the 11th-century Paleologi Castle on Via Morelli, displays artifacts from the Iron Age, the Roman, and the late-medieval periods. Inside the castle is also "il Birdgarden," a botanical garden with an unmatched, panoramic view of the city out toward Villa Ottolenghi.

More About the Thermal Waters

One of the coolest — yet hottest — features in the city is La Bollente, which sits in the main square in the center of town. In Piazza della

Bollente, thermal waters come to the surface and never drop below 165°F. A pavilion was built around the water source in the late 1800s and residents still visit La Bollente daily for a quick wash and even a sip.

While La Bollente offers a small taste of the waters, for full spa treatments with thermal baths you'll want to head to the Grande Hotel Nuove Terme in Piazza Italia or Lago delle Sorgenti on Viale Donati. You can stop in for a few hours, or get a day pass, for mud therapy, massages, hydromassages, sound therapy and more.

Why Acqui Terme's spas? The sulfuric, steaming water is said to ➤

Diana and Micha Baur

Babarolo Loves Piemonte

In 2003, Italian American Diana Strinati Baur moved to Acqui Terme with her husband, Micha, and for nine years they ran one of the most successful, well-loved B&Bs in Piemonte.

Baur credits Acqui Terme's "gentle microclimate, its beautiful 2000-year-old ambience and the shy yet accepting nature of its residents" as contributing greatly to how well the couple was able to complete the renovation

of a rustic, centuries-old property and turn it into a luxurious oasis for travelers nestled in the Montferrat. Baur's novel, "True Vines," published by Gemelli Press in 2012, is an ode to her beloved adopted region.

Although life has pulled the Baur's in a different direction — to the Black Forest in Germany — the couple knew Acqui Terme would never leave their hearts. Their attachment led them to create Babarolo, an

online shop (www.babarolo.com) for wine and gourmet gifts from Piedmont through which they offer the region's famous wines and culinary delights.

Babarolo products are available only for shipment within Europe because of customs regulations, but the Baur's are working on spreading the word about Piemonte's rich gastronomy and oenological heritage to the United States as well.

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increase blood circulation through the absorption of various minerals, including calcium and sodium bicarbonate, which in turns helps the body's organs function more efficiently. People also soak in Acqui Terme's waters for pain and stress relief.

Food and Wine

Acqui Terme is part of the "Alto Monferrato" (High Montferrat) and its vineyards produce the sweet, red DOCG Brachetto d'Acqui as well as the dry, red DOC Dolcetto d'Acqui. The rolling hills covered with grapevines make for stunning scenery surrounding the city.

Meanwhile, the streets of Acqui Terme are full of bustling *enoteche* — wine shops and bars — offering a fantastic selection of local varieties, including worldwide stars Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera, Moscato d'Asti

and Asti Spumante. One of the best is Ristorante Enoteca La Curia, noted for its impressive *aperitivo* — appetizer portions of food served with your choice of wine by the glass.

Speaking of sustenance, Acqui Terme restaurants and trattorie offer decadent, traditional piemontese dishes like *brasato al Barolo* (beef braised in Barolo wine), *vitello tonnato* (cold, sliced veal topped with a thick, tuna-based mayonnaise), *bollito misto* (up to 14 types of meat boiled with vegetables and served with different sauces), and *carne cruda* (raw,

local beef served either sliced thinly or ground and mixed with olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper). The region's signature pasta is famously eggy and includes the long, thin and ribbon-like *tajarin* as well as *agnolotti del plin*, a kind of tiny ravioli. Truffles and mushrooms are also darlings of piemontese menus.

An absolute must when you're in the region is *bagna càuda*, a mouthwatering blend of garlic, anchovies, olive oil and butter served like fondue for vegetable-dipping. *Bagna càuda* is often served as part of the traditional piemontese Christmas Eve meal and throughout the colder months.

One of the most delicious local specialties, though, is also one of the simplest: the quintessential piemontese street food, *farinata*. This salty focaccia made with chickpea flour can be eaten plain, or sliced and filled with prosciutto and cheese, or whatever you like.

Hip Urban Culture

Also lining Acqui Terme's cobblestone streets are chic boutiques, modern home design shops, and happening cafes like Caffè dei Mercanti on Portici Saracco — full of fashionable locals and busy with wine tastings, book presentations and "*aperitivi musicali*," happy hours with live bands. A quick look at Acqui Terme's website shows there's always something happening on the weekends through temperate months.

With around 20,000 residents, Acqui Terme is a decent-sized city, but it seems smaller with a neighborhood-like feel. Of course, it's entirely walkable as long as you remember cobblestones and heeled shoes don't get along.

So, whether you're looking for a relaxing visit to a thermal spa, full immersion into the world of piemontese food and wine, a stay in a hip but historical place, or all of the above, the answer is the small, charming, old-but-modern Acqui Terme.

For more information, visit <http://comune.acquiterme.al.it/>. ▲

Michelle Fabio is a freelance writer based in southern Italy and the author of "52 Things to See & Do in Calabria."



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