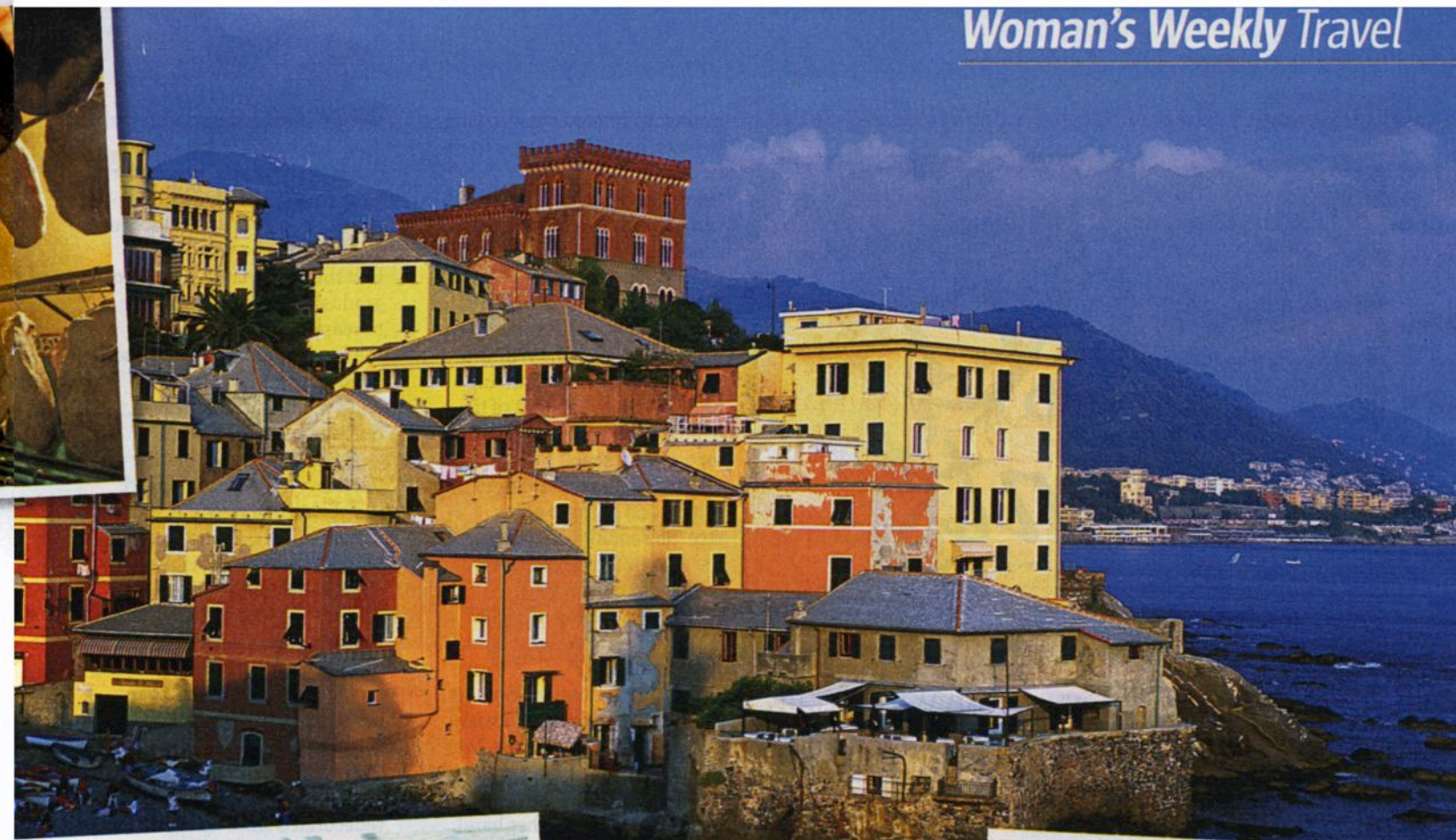


A Feast For Foodies

Chris Parker samples mouth-watering cuisine in Liguria, a gourmet mecca in north-west Italy



Good hams come to those who wait, knows Mirco Bertini



Genoa's historic old town has much to offer



Reasonable prices and a relaxed ambience make an afternoon at Genoa's trendy *caffés* and bars a real pleasure

Having long heard of Liguria as an area filled with regional delicacies, I was curious to find out more about its food heritage — in particular, its pesto made from the traditional “magnificent seven” ingredients of basil, garlic, olive oil, salt, pine nuts, pecorino and Parmesan cheeses.

I decided that the easiest way to make my tour of discovery was by car, and chose to base myself in the regional capital, Genoa, which is surprisingly easy to miss when you drive along the raised concrete section of the highway that brutally bisects the city.

Although it is sandwiched between sea and mountain with the French Riviera to the east and Tuscany to the west, first impressions of the city can be rather disappointing.

But tempting as it is to simply dismiss Genoa as an industrial cargo port, I found it fascinating. The historic old town has a labyrinth of medieval lanes and piazzas that make you want to explore further. You won't find many tourists, so you'll have the art galleries and museums pretty much to yourself.

Delicious *Trofie al pesto* is a traditional Ligurian dish



The waterfront, meanwhile, boasts a new and futuristic aquarium and a massive maritime museum, as well as plenty of stylish bars and restaurants.

In fact, with a two-hour flight time from London and an airport situated just minutes from its historic centre, Genoa has to be one of my favourite top-secret weekend destinations and one in which your money goes further than at its more famous neighbours.

A passion for pesto

My first foodie stop was to meet Alberto Sacco, whose family have been growing basil since 1851 in Pra', the heart of the basil-growing area and protected by DOP certification (Denominazione di Origine Protetta, or Protected Designation of Origin, is a quality mark found on food and wine products produced in Italy).

Alberto invited me into one of the greenhouses, where he hand-picked a bouquet from the thick green carpet of basil.

I was in for a treat. Nothing beats a freshly prepared pesto sauce and Alberto was going to show me how to make it.

Garlic, salt, pine nuts, various hard cheeses, basil and a locally-sourced olive oil were added to a mortar and pounded with a pestle.

The smell, colour and flavour of the sauce

was so fresh and intense — far removed from any supermarket product I've ever tasted — that I couldn't resist mopping it up with some freshly-baked bread.

La dolce vita

From pesto to vino. I headed west towards the French border in search of the pretty little fortified village of Dolceacqua.

Nestled in the Nervia valley, surrounded by vineyards and olive trees, Dolceacqua was once described by impressionist Claude Monet as “beautiful, with a bridge that is a jewel of lightness”.

Fortunately, the view that led Monet to paint a series of studies, back in 1884, has hardly changed, but I was searching for a different kind of inspiration in the form of the vineyards of Rossese, birthplace of Liguria's most renowned red wine.

A friendly old dog greeted my arrival at Terre Bianche, the family vineyard of Filippo Rondelli, situated on a hilltop above Dolceacqua with views out to the sea and beyond.

I was given a short tour of the estate before settling down to a civilised afternoon of wine tasting and bonhomie. The wines were excellent and it was a wrench to leave such a beautiful location. I toyed with the idea of extending my stay in one of the comfortable overnight apartments, but had an appointment to keep in the nearby town of Badalucco.

I was heading for the olive mill of Franco Boeri Roi and his wife, Scarlett, but was having trouble

locating them. My guidebook advised me to look out for an old stone-grinding wheel, but said nothing about a large vintage movie projector that also happened to be placed outside. I never did get to the bottom of the projector riddle, but I did get to sample some of finest extra virgin olive oil I've ever tasted, including a delicious selection of olive oil-infused savoury and sweet appetisers.

But don't take my word for it — the couple's office walls were crammed with prestigious awards and prizes including a thank-you letter from Clarence House, which stated that HRH Prince Charles thought the oils were splendid and truly tasted of Italy. Praise indeed.

Heavenly hams

My final taste-bud destination took me to the historic village of Castelnuova Magra, where I'd arranged to meet Mirco Bertini at his family's delicatessen.

The shop was packed with all the usual goodies, but it was the contents of his garden shed that caught my eye. Instead of the usual gardening paraphernalia, Mr Bertini had transformed his Tardis-like shed into a treasure trove of cured hams.

Strict temperature control and a low exposure to light were crucial factors in a process that's taken Mirco two decades to perfect. Quality is tightly monitored to ensure a superior taste, and I must remember to return in six years, when Mirco's gran riserva, extra-mature hams are ready for tasting. I can't wait.



Sweet, fresh basil is the key to perfect pesto



Excellent oil relies on the flavour and quality of the olives used

Enjoy fine wines and good company at beautiful Terre Bianche vineyard



Fact File

- For an advance view of Genoa, watch the DVD of the 2008 film *Genova*, starring Colin Firth — in my opinion the city slightly upstages Mr Firth for star quality.
- For more information about Liguria, visit www.turismoinliguria.it
- Chris flew from London Gatwick to Genoa with British Airways — visit www.ba.com
- Seasoned Travel is a specialist foodie tour operator offering packages to Liguria — call 0844 809 2599, or visit www.seasonedtravel.co.uk



Photos: Chris Parker