



THE ANCIENT NICIA PALEARUM, NOW NIZZA MONFERRATO

NIZZA MONFERRATO

Nizza Monferrato lies on a plateau from 134 to 314 m above sea level, between the River Belbo and the River Nizza, in the province of Asti.

The inhabitants number a little more than 10,000.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The first historical evidences of Nicia, now Nizza Monferrato, whose ancient center is uncommonly triangular-shaped, go back to 1021. However, the year 1225 is usually regarded as the date of its foundation: the town seems to have sprung up thanks to the coming together of the inhabitants of seven castles destroyed by the battle between the population of Alessandria and the population of Asti. A more imaginative version of its origin tells about the rebellion of the population against the lords that exacted the "ius primae noctis" from the young girls of the place. Starting from the 16th century Nizza was called Nicea Palearum, referred to the tradition of covering the houses with thatched straw. Nizza was ruled one after another by the Marquis Guglielmo VII from Monferrato, Manfredi from Saluzzo, Charles II King of Naples, the Marquis Teodoro Paleologo and later by the Gonzaga family, longing to possess a land, in those times rich in excellent grapes, cereals, flax, hemp, saffron and other produce. The cultivation of the mulberry tree for silkworm-farming and the spinning of the thread from the cocoons completed its thriving economical existence. In 1613 the town, under the dominion of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga and allied with the Spanish, with fierce resistance drove out the troops of Carlo Emanuele I Duke of Savoia; since then, as a vow of thanks, a procession in the day of San Carlo Borromeo, now Patron Saint of the town, has been established. From 1708 Nizza was ruled by the Savoia family, whose domination was only shortly interrupted by the Napoleonic occupation.

HISTORICAL MONUMENTS

Nizza Monferrato must be discovered by walking among the beauties of its streets and its palazzi, such as Palazzo Comunale e the Torre Civica, Palazzo Crova, Foro Boario, Via Maestra, Palazzo De Benedetti and the Ospedale Santo Spirito. Also its churches and oratories deserve to be visited: Chiesa di San Siro, Chiesa del Convento delle Monache Benedettine, Chiesa della Madonna della Neve o del Bricco, Chiesa di San Giovanni in Lanero, Chiesa di Sant' Ippolito, Oratorio della Santissima Trinità and Santuario della Madonna di Loreto.

■ Palazzo del Municipio

Dating back to 1353 and modified more than once, it has an ancient bell tower, that used to be also a tower for defence. Its original medieval structure has been altered.

■ Palazzo Baronale Crova

It houses the Historical Archives and the Municipal Library; conferences and exhibitions usually take place in its halls. On the ground floor there is the Tourist Information Office and the Wine Shop "La Signora in Rosso", where you can taste Nizza Barbera and other excellent local wines together with special typical dishes, is located in its restored cellars.

■ Chiesa di San Giovanni in Lanero

This was the church of an ancient Franciscan convent, enlarged and modified in 1772. Now it hosts the ornaments of the abbey, built by the Queen Teodolinda in the town's square and demolished at the will of the Mayor Pio Corsi at the beginning of 1800. You can still see the significant Romanesque campanile of the old convent.

■ Foro Boario

Characterized by long walls with big arches, Foro Boario is the commercial symbol of the town. At the end of 1800 it used to host important agricultural and cattle markets, now it is the venue of events and festivals devoted to local wine and traditional food.

■ Chiesa di San Siro

It was originally erected in 1311, however the present structure dates back to 1790-1800. Alongside this Baroque styled Church, you can see some remains of the ancient Convent of the Benedictine nuns, now annexed to the hospital.

■ Chiesa della Madonna della Neve

Known as the Madonna del Bricco, because of its position on the top of a hill, the Church is situated in the neighbourhood of Nizza.

■ Chiesa di Sant'Ippolito

Built between 1750 and 1760, its interior was partly modified from the mid-1900s and the building and some paintings restored. Original works are the altar and the picture of St.Ippolito on the wall of the apse.

■ Chiesa della Santissima Trinità

It was constructed in 1448 and enlarged in 1526; its facade has a wooden portal with typical decorations of 1700. Above it, inside a niche, there is a sculpture of the Holy Trinity.

■ Santuario della Madonna di Loreto

Inside the Sanctuary, founded in 1631 and enlarged in 1666, the presbytery preserves a niche with the statue of the Madonna Lauretana.

TYPICAL PRODUCTS

In the 18th century Nizza was already famous for silk processing. Now the industrial activity is highly developed, as well as the cattle-breeding and agriculture, especially the cultivation of the typical "cardo gobbo" traditionally served with the local dish "bagna cauda". But most of all Nizza is an important center for the production of excellent wines such as the famous Barbera d'Asti Superiore Nizza and other sixteen DOC and DOCG local wines. Barbera d'Asti Superiore is produced in a small area around Nizza Monferrato. The high standard quality of wine production is guaranteed by strict viticulture and wine-making regulations. To preserve and promote this wine, the producers have formed themselves into an Association.

We recommend a visit to the Museo Bersano delle Contadinerie e delle Stampe sul Vino - Piazza Dante 21 - Tel. 0141721273.

LOOKING FOR WINE BARS

In the big-vaulted cellars of the 17th-century Palazzo Crova, there is the "Bottega del Vino", one of the public wine bars of the town, which offers excellent wine and typical Piemontese specialities cooked according to the available seasonal produce.

Open from Wednesday to Sunday - 11am to 1pm - 5pm to 12 pm

Wine served from 5pm to 12pm.

On Saturday and Sunday open also at lunchtime.

The Race of the Barrels

On the first weekend of June the traditional "Race of the Barrels", a competition that dates back to the beginning of 1800, takes place along the town roads. The competitors are the wine producers of the area.

The Cardo Gobbo

The Cardo of Nizza Monferrato, a vegetable rich in nourishing and healthful substances but low in calories, is called "Cardo Gobbo" for the form taken as a result of a special handwork. The variety of thistle grown at Nizza, recognizable by a mark of quality, is also named "Spadone" for its characteristic leaf and stalk. Unfortunately only small quantities of Cardo Gobbo are now produced and it has become as much in demand as the truffle, since the producers have agreed with strict regulations of production and Slow Food has established an Institution to protect this particular vegetable. The best way to taste it is with Bagna Cauda, but also the "Ravioli di Cardo Gobbo" and the "Sformato di Cardo Gobbo con Fonduta" are strongly recommended.

The Razza Piemontese Beef

Nizza has a successful tradition in the production of the excellent Razza Piemontese beef. This special meat, low in fat and cholesterol, is very lean and tender but savoury and internationally recognized among the very best of beef. You can find it in the butchers' shops of the town. Not to be missed is the traditional "Bollito Misto alla Piemontese" that attracts local connoisseurs and tourists.

"LA SIGNORA IN ROSSO" - Enoteca Vineria

Wine Shop

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FRANCESCO CIRIO

Several distinguished citizens have lived and brought honour to Nizza: Agostino Natta, a jurist of the 15th century, Carlo Giuseppe Pistone from Montalto (1739-1795), bishop of Alessandria and the writer Giulio Cesare Cordara (1704-1785); but specially remembered is Francesco Cirio, born at Nizza in 1836 and a pioneer of the fruit and vegetable cannery. He started his activity at Torino, at the very moment that the unity of Italy was being formed, and caught the opportunity of transferring his preserving industries to the south of Italy. Thanks to his original initiative and cleverness, Nizza and its produce have become known all over the world. Francesco Cirio died in Rome on 9th January 1900, leaving one of the biggest and most prestigious agri-food companies in Europe, and still now a leader of the sector. A marble bust in his memory was recently transferred to Piazza XX Settembre, the fruit and vegetable market place of Nizza.

PRO LOCO (TOURIST BOARD)

The Pro Loco of Nizza Monferrato organizes events of many kinds and promotes the typical local agricultural, handicraft and trading products as well as the cultural, historical and artistic heritage. Every year, on 26 December, together with the Local Council, it organizes the celebration of "Santo Stefano sotto il Campanon": at 12:30am the "Campanon" (the big bell) rings the tocsin (warning bell) to remind the Nicesi of their ancestors who fought against injustice. On this occasion an "aperitivo al lardo" is offered to the population. During the various celebrations, the Pro Loco carries out its activity in Piazza Garibaldi inside the "Ciabot", that in the Piemontese dialect means tool-shed, where they offer typical dishes of the local tradition.

LOCAL CUISINE

The "Belecauda" (Farinata). It is cooked on braziers, in big pans, on the occasion of feasts and festivals. The secret of this successful recipe consists of chickpea flour, spring water and an appropriate tinned-copper pan.

The "Torta Verde" is cooked at Easter and distributed at the "Ciabot".

The "Bagnacauda" con Cardo Gobbo. Typical Piemontese dish with garlic and anchovies that is usually eaten with the Cardo Gobbo.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Commune of Nizza Monferrato has agreed with a financial project of Regione Piemonte aimed at developing and improving the quality of tourist area of the lower Monferrato Astigiano, through the implementation of circuits, routes and well-equipped parking areas.

CARAVAN PARKING AREA : Caravans can stop in the urban area, according to the Rules of the Road, but it's advisable and more convenient to park in the appropriate area in Piazzale Pertini, a few paces from the town center. It is well-equipped and provides every kind of facilities.

To enter the Caravan Parking Area please call the following phone numbers: 3880653893 – 3385058712.

GETTING TO NIZZA MONFERRATO

By Car: From Torino: A21-E70 Motorway, exit Asti Est; follow the SS231 to Isola d'Asti then take the SS456 towards Nizza Monferrato (about 15 km).

From Milano and Genova: A7 Motorway. Suggested exit Alessandria Sud.

By train: From Torino to Asti Station - connection to Nizza Monferrato

By air: Torino Caselle - bus connection to Asti