

Liguria, Italy is a crescent-shaped narrow strip of coastline stretching from the French border all the way to the top of Tuscany. Liguria is the third smallest region of Italy (2,092.7 sq. miles) but is the fourth most densely populated with 1.6 million inhabitants. Located in northwestern Italy, Liguria has four provinces, Genoa (the region's capital), Imperia, La Spezia, and Savona. Liguria is bordered by France to the west, Piedmont to the north, and Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany to the east. About 90% of the population of Liguria live along the coast with 40% of them in Genoa. By contrast, the hilly and mountainous inland has been progressively abandoned as the population has moved to the coast where jobs are predominantly in the service industries.

This coastal region, also known as the Italian Riviera, boasts some of the most beautiful scenery in Europe and is well marked as a major tourist spot with famous resort towns sprinkled among fishing villages and rocky coastline. Like so much of Italy, Liguria is a land of contrasts, home to lavish seaside resort towns in the style of Cannes and Monaco, dozens of fine golden sandy beaches, rocky coves and the country's largest commercial port and largest naval port.

This unique geography of mountains and sea has produced a wonderfully mild climate and Mediterranean vegetation that you would expect much further south in Italy. Palm trees, almonds, chestnuts, citrus fruits and olives share the terraced growing space with Liguria's famous flower industry.

Genoa is the capital of Liguria and is one of Italy's most historic places. The city has a glorious past as one of history's great maritime powers and as an ancient center of commerce. It is Genova that marks the Ligurian coastline into two "Rivieras". The Riviera di Ponente (Shore of the Setting Sun) lies on the west between the French border and Genoa. This stretch is more resort-oriented and is marked with a succession of long sandy beaches. The Riviera di Levante is to the east. In the past, the Riviera di Ponente was the more famous side, with famous resort towns like Sanremo

(Italy's flower capital, Casino and Festival della Canzone), however the jet set have also discovered the jewels of the Riviera di Levante such as Portofino and the Cinque Terre.

A Brief History

Classical historians considered the Ligurians to be the most ancient and primitive people of the Italian peninsula. The region derived its name from the Ligurians, its pre-Roman inhabitants. The region has been occupied since the 5th century BC by the fiercely independent Ligurians and then by the Romans in the 3rd century BC. Liguria's inaccessibility by land led to a level of autonomy and the Ligurians did not take to Romanization for many centuries with small enclaves like the Cinque Terre never being conquered by Rome.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Liguria was conquered by the Longobards, Saracens and Normans. These violent, constant raids led to the development of a more powerful defensive system. Towards the middle of the 10th century, Berengario II divided Liguria into three feudal territories, Obertenga, Aleramica, and Arduinica.

The two subsequent centuries had an even greater impact on the division of the region and many extensive feuds emerged in Liguria and adjacent regions. Taking advantage of the many conflicts present in the region, Genoa started to extend its territory to subdue the entire area up to the two coasts. In fact, the city managed to establish its landmarks in Taggia, Sanremo, Portovenere, Ventimiglia, and Porto Maurizio. By the Middle Ages, Genoa ruled the entirety of Liguria and was a powerful maritime republic, in many ways more powerful than its rivals in Pisa and Venice. Genoa was often at war with other sea-trading centers like Savona and Venice. It was in these wars with Venice that Marco Polo was captured and dictated his adventures while in a Genoese prison.

The late 13th through the early 16th centuries saw a continuing struggle for regional supremacy between Savona and Genoa. The struggles between the two fractions continued until Genoa triumphed over Savona in 1528. Liguria found its most



complete unity under the government of Admiral Andrea Doria.

Soon after the fall of the Doria government, Liguria was seized by Napoleon Bonaparte for France following the French Revolution. The Republic of Genoa disappeared and the Republic of Liguria emerged. However, this new republic was annexed by Napoleon into three sections, Montenotte with the capital at Savona, Genoa, and the Apennines with the capital at Chiavari. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna annexed the whole of Liguria under the name of the Duchy of Genoa to the Kingdom of Sardinia under the Savoy family. Liguria experienced a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Italian emigrants from the port of Genoa to destinations overseas starting in the mid 1800's.

The important point is that this loss of independence led to Ligurian patriots like Mazzini (born in Genoa) and Garibaldi (born in Savoy) to start the Italian Risorgimento, the movement for Italian unification and establishing the nation of Italy. Liguria joined the union of Italy in 1860.

Genoa simultaneously became the center of new political and social ties. After the First World War, the Greater Genoa was created by annexing surrounding smaller towns

and villages growing the population from 335,000 to 580,000.

On June 10, 1940, Italy entered World War II. Genoa and the surrounding areas were sensitive targets because of its industry and because it was the country's most important port. The area was constantly bombarded and attacked by the allies from sea and air. In five years, the city endured 86 air raids, of which 51 occurred in 1944. The city center of Genoa was almost uninhabitable. 50,000 were left homeless. Roads were not accessible as they were covered in rubble, churches and historical palaces were seriously damaged, and most hospitals were inoperable.

Post-war rebuilding saw the rebirth of industrial development. Genoa became one of the main centers of the famous Genoa-Milan-Turin triangle, not just as a "gate" for raw materials and finished products, but also, from an industrial point of view, becoming one of the main manufacturing areas in Central Italy. At the same time, the spread of tourism made the coasts along the whole region one of the most popular vacation destinations in Italy.

Did You Know?

Liguria was the birthplace of many world famous people. They include the navigator and explorer Christopher Columbus, the violinist and composer Niccolò Paganini, the politician Giuseppe Mazzini (one of the fathers of unified Italy), the poet Eugenio Montale (Nobel Prize), the chemist Giulio Natta (Nobel Prize), the astrophysicist Riccardo Giacconi (Nobel Prize), the architect Renzo Piano (Pritzker Prize), and the comedian and political activist Beppe Grillo.

The town of Sanremo is located on the western coast of Liguria, in the province of Imperia. It is considered the Town of Flowers because its flowers and rare species which are exported all over the world.

Sanremo is probably best known for its most important and popular annual event, the Italian Song Festival. This internationally renowned song contest, started in 1951, is a highly anticipated event for

Italian singers, journalists, and the Italian public, and is held at the Ariston Theatre. The participants, many of whom got their big break performing during the festival, reads like a who's who of Italian popular music with such international stars as Andrea Bocelli, Nilla Pizzi, Tony Solo and Al Bano. The world-famous Italian song "Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu", also known as "Volare", performed by Domenico Modugno debuted during the 1958 festival. The Festival draws millions of fans worldwide to cast their votes for the two categories of best song in the established artist and newcomers' categories. The festival takes place in spring (usually in February or March) for five evenings and keeps everyone with bated breath until the final winners are chosen.

Portofino is the picturesque harbor town located in the province of Genoa and is one of the most popular and glamorous yachting destinations.

Cinque Terre, translated means Five Lands, are five little villages of extraordinary beauty. Since 1977 this part of the Italian riviera in Liguria is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This popular tourist destination cannot be reached by car from the outside. Monterosso al Mare, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore are connected only by walking trails. One path is called La Via Dell' Amore (Path of Love)! The villages have not been influenced by modern development. That simple, original look combined with pretty colorful houses arranged one upon another like stairs gives this piece of the Ligurian coast quite a charm.

Cuisine and Wine

The food of Liguria is representative of the area's unique climate and is characterized by many ingredients that would be more reminiscent of southern cuisine than that of a place closer to the Alps. Northern Italy tends to have a rather cold, alpine climate but Liguria's unique landscape creates the perfect climate for 'southern' vegetables to grow in abundance. The region is home to copious amounts of tomatoes, olives, garlic, artichokes and more, all of which contribute to a diet that leans heavily on vegetarian dishes.

You can find fantastic olive oil all over Italy, but the delicate olive oil made in Liguria boasts a reputation that far outstrips most of its peers. Most of the region's olives are grown in Imperia, the mountainous province in the far west that borders France. Olive trees grow thick along steep, terraced groves here and are harvested in mid-November to be pressed into liquid gold. The most prized olive oil of the region is known as Olio di Oliva della Riviera Ligure and is protected by a PDO designation.

The most famous of all culinary masterpieces from Liguria is that it is the original source of pesto, one of the most popular sauces in Italian cuisine. Pesto Genovese's reputation is unparalleled, and careful preparation is required using seven basic ingredients: DOP Genovese basil (freshly picked, crushed with a mortar and pestle), Ligurian extra virgin olive oil, pecorino, parmigiana, garlic, salt and pine nuts.

All other types of basil pale in comparison to the verdant, deep green variety grown in Genoa. It's so good that it has its own PDO protection. Taste the fresh basil grown in the region and you'll find it far sweeter and more flavorful than the packaged bunches in the supermarket. It is the key ingredient of a proper pesto. The word "pesto" comes from the verb "pestare", which means to crush into a pulp. Legend has it that focaccia, minestrone soup and ravioli, or stuffed pasta, were also invented here in Liguria.

Ligurian cuisine not only makes use of fish, as you would expect from a coastal region, but also of wild herbs, white meat, and locally made cheese. Rabbit is particularly popular in the hills and mountains of Liguria since it is abundant and doesn't require acres of farmland to rear. The rocky coastline of Liguria does allow for cheese production, but imports from other regions of Italy have been incorporated, most notably the use of Parmigiano-Reggiano for the making of pesto.

One of Liguria's most famous cheeses is Prescinsêua. It's a bit like ricotta but softer in texture, think thick yogurt. Prescinsêua is stirred through sauces, used to top toast or most famously sandwiched between two thin slices of focaccia to create Focaccia di Recco.

Cappon magro is a dish originally cooked at Christmas by the fishermen of Genoa. It is one of Liguria's most ancient and sophisticated dishes. Once a "poor man's" specialty, it is now considered a real delicacy. The dish is essentially a salad containing the best fish and shellfish available, hard-boiled eggs and vegetables, laid on top of hardtack biscuits, toasted bread or crackers rubbed with garlic, soaked in vinegar or water and topped with a green sauce that is kind of a cross between salsa verde and mayonnaise.

With its long coastline, it seems fitting to find seafood so prominently featured in the region's cuisine. Ciuppin soup is made from fish leftovers and stale bread, flavored with white wine, onion, and garlic. Other popular seafood dishes include Friscieu, a fritter made of small fish and herbs, and octopus salad. All the usual fare can be found in the markets, but the Ligurians particularly love their sea bass, mussels and seppie, tiny little cuttlefish that are cooked simply and eaten as a snack or main meal. Ligurians also prepare their anchovies with stuffing, fried or marinated in lemon and olive oil. Swordfish, tuna, sardines and sea bass are also popular fish.

The contents of condiglione, Ligurian tuna salad, change depending on the season, but for the most part, it's a salad of onion, tomato, pepper, anchovy, salted olives, garlic, boiled egg, tuna and plenty of Ligurian olive oil.

There are different kinds of pasta which have Ligurian origins. Ligurian pasta includes trenette and trofie and the fresh pasta pockets called pansoti. Wheat, chickpeas and chestnuts are all used to make flour for both breads and pastas. Trofie is a rolled strip of pasta cut into little pieces which are twisted into their final shape. Trenette is a pasta very similar to linguine or tagliatelle and pairs wonderfully



with pesto sauce, cooked green beans and potatoes.

Corzetti, little discs of pasta dough, is the perfect example of artisan pasta. They're still made fresh in specialist pasta shops across Liguria. What makes them unique are the different designs embossed into the dough by specially made wooden corzetti stamps. Corzetti is typically served with pesto or sauces made from walnuts and mushrooms.

Torta Pasqualina is popular all over Italy, particularly over Easter when it's eaten at family gatherings, but it originally hailed from Liguria. Torta Pasqualina is made with 33 layers of very thin pastry, one for every year of Christ's life on earth.

If pesto is Liguria's most popular claim to fame, then focaccia comes in at a close second. Focaccia can be found all over Italy, but Focaccia Genovese is the original and considered by many to still be the best. Focaccia Genovese is thinner and only flavored with salt and olive oil, but there are other regional specialties too including Focaccia di Recco (baked with soft cheese in between) with anchovies or sardines on top.

One special pastry of the region is Castagnaccio. It's a gluten and dairy free cake which sounds very modern but this chestnut flour cake has been baked and enjoyed in Liguria and Tuscany for centuries. A combination of chestnut flour, water, pine nuts, raisins and olive oil is baked into either

a thick cake or thin torte and topped with honey, ricotta or orange zest.

Artisan winemaking is growing in the region. Founded as recently as 2003, the Poggio dei Gorleri company's aim was simple – to create a modern wine that would represent everything that Liguria has to offer while also leaning towards modern winemaking techniques. This eye for innovation and continued improvement has meant that the wines produced by the company have already attained a level of quality that puts them up there with some of the best Italian wine of the day. Perhaps their most famous vintage is the Poggio dei Gorleri Riviera Ligure di Ponente Pigato Albium.

The vines cultivated on the mountain terraces in the Cinque Terre yield delicious, rather dry white wines, which should absolutely be sought out during any visit to Liguria. The wines of Liguria are tailor made to suit the region's cuisine, some grown within spray-shot of the region's crashing waves. Reds include the fruity Rossese di Dolceacqua (DOC), a Dolcetto known as Ormeasco, and an amazing dessert wine, the Sciacchetrà Rosso. The white wines of Liguria are rightly praised as some of the most unique with the dry Cinque Terre and sweeter Sciacchetrà (both DOC) being very popular and excellent with any seafood. The straw-yellow and very aromatic Colline di Levante (DOC) is just being discovered by wine lovers outside of Liguria. Spirits range from the citrus based Limoncello Ligure to walnut-infused Nocino and the ever-popular Grappa, still made at home in many areas of Liguria.