

Scottish Tuscany

It's nestled high in the Tuscan hills, but the little town of Barga sounds (and tastes) distinctly Glaswegian

Featured April 11 Words by Sarah Lane



At first glance, Barga looks like any other pretty medieval Tuscan hill town. It's got it all: the white-stone cathedral, the stunning views across green hills and an old town centre with steep, narrow lanes. But listen carefully to the voices of passers-by and you'll hear impeccable Italian, softened by an unmistakable Scottish burr.

"It all dates back to the late 19th century," explains Vanda Bartolomei, originally from Dumfries, who now runs the ice-cream shop La Gelateria (*14 Via di Mezzo*). "There was a lot of emigration from Italy at that time, but this was a particular area of depression."

Barga had flourished for five centuries under Florence's rule, but the town suffered severe economic depression after Italian unification in 1861 when scores of locals emigrated to Glasgow and its surrounding area. It's estimated that, today, 60% of Barga's residents have relatives in the west of Scotland, while many of the original emigrant families have made the return journey and now live in Barga. Indeed, Vanda's husband Roberto is a returnee - he moved back in 1976.

With so much movement between the two towns it's not surprising that this corner of Tuscany has developed a distinctly Scottish flavour - literally. This year, the town's Burns Night Supper saw a haggis flown in from Glasgow (via London) that very morning so that 52 residents could enjoy a traditional feast in honour of Scotland's best-loved bard. Guests at Da Riccardo (*Piazzale del Fosso*) dined on cock-a-leekie soup, the fresh haggis and a dram or two of whisky. And on match days, the scent of a full Scottish breakfast wafts through the air at Bar Paologas (*8 Via Marconi*) as the Barga Celtic Supporters Club get together to watch their team play.

Ron Gauld moved over from Scotland with his wife Susi nine years ago. He opened the Casa Fontana B&B (*casa-fontana.com*) and has started making what he hopes will be his own contribution to

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Barga's gastronomic melting pot: Birra di Barga. "We're still very much at the experimental stage with the beer," he stresses. "Currently, we're using three types of malted barley for the brewing process, plus local hops and spelt, an ancient grain that has grown around this area for more than 2,000 years."

Gauld hopes to start marketing his Barga-made beer soon. "We've been granted permission to use the town's coat-of-arms on labels," he said, "and we've had the occasional tasting session. It's gone down very well so far!" There's already plenty of interest in Barga beer - Roberto Bartolomei has even made a batch of beer-flavoured ice cream to sell in the shop.

The Bartolomeis were also among the first fryers at Tuscany's most curious food festival, the *Sagra del Pesce e Patate*. The annual fish and chip festival started more than 20 years ago with the aim of maintaining Scottish links and providing funds for the local football club. The festival now draws crowds of up to 10,000 and lasts for 17 days through July and August.

But Barga's Scottish connection is about more than food and drink. John Bellany, one of Scotland's best-known painters of the last century, made the town his home after a liver transplant in 1988. He says he was mesmerised by its "enchanted landscape", and now has a small gallery in the town.

Upon hearing Bellany's passionate description of Barga in a radio interview, Scotland's top bagpipe-maker, Hamish Moore, was inspired to book a flight and see the town for himself. Following a year in Barga as craftsman-musician in residence, Moore set up a two-week summer school covering all aspects of Scottish culture, from music to dance, taught by a team of experts from Scotland. The course has run for the last three years, and residents hope Moore will be back again this summer.

But the most famous musician to wax lyrical about Barga is Paolo Nutini. The Scottish pop star's great grandparents left the town for Paisley, just outside Glasgow, where they set up a fish and chip shop. Nutini regularly visits Barga, performing every year at the Lake Angels festival in July and the annual jazz festival in August. What else would you expect from "the most Scottish town in Italy"?

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