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Along the Riviera, Part One By John Mariani

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When considering Italian vacation spots, the usual suspects always come to mind—Portofino, Venice, Rome, Florence. But what and where is Alassio? It's a small town located on the Italian Riviera that never seems to be part of the conversation is the home to one of the most marvelous estates and scenic views you can find in Italy.

In the late 19th century, two Scottish noblemen took up permanent residence here for their entire winter vacation. Quickly recognizing the beauty of this small town, they bought two pieces of land along the hillside and began constructing what would end up being one of the most beautiful and breathtaking natural parks and landscapes I have ever set my eyes on.



The property has changed hands a couple of times over the last century and quarter, but what was always a major focus and commitment by all of the owners, was the appreciation and dedication to preserving this estate's aesthetic landscapes and gardens. What began as one's infatuation with horticulture owing to their travels around the globe led to the planting of hundreds of exotic plants amidst the regions indigenous varieties. What was created was a natural park of such beauty; just to walk the grounds for a day is worth a visit to Villa della Pergola.

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Villa della Pergola, as well as the estate's Villino della Pergola and La Casa del Sole, has a number of different suites all dedicated to different residents who might have stayed at the estate over the course of history or were once owners that perpetuated its glory. The night we stayed here, we were shown to the Thomas Suite, also called "the blue room," dedicated to Sir Thomas Hanbury, a British businessman who at a young age of 25 years old created the great botanical gardens at Capo Mortola in Ventimiglia.

The walls were painted a soft periwinkle blue with white crown molding. Furniture was adorned with plush white quilted cushioning a bow window looked out over the gulf of Alassio, and 19th century portraits of Sir Thomas hang over the head board, paying homage to the estates history.

Villa della Pergola isn't home to just beautiful gardens and luxurious suites. It also has restaurant NOVE, which marked itself as one of the best meals I had over the course of my two weeks of travel. My wife and I settled in for lunch here at a table outside in the garden underneath what I believe is one of the oldest trees on the property. The tables were adorned with dove grey linen tablecloths, white linen napkins and fine silverware.



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We started off with a glass of Champagne, then moved into a multi-course menu showcasing Chef Giorgio Servetto's impressive talents. The cuisine at NOVE is definitely elevated and takes a page from more modern contemporary techniques and philosophy. But what can oftentimes get lost in such an approach, as happens with too many young chefs, is a focus on the food itself in an effort merely to dazzle. Here at NOVE, the essentials of good cooking don't get lost.



We started off with an *assagio* of creamy *burrata* enrobed in tomato jelly over a dollop of basil *spuma*, a beautifully successful rendering of the old classic Caprese salad, followed by *verdure con bagna cauda*, a dish of raw or barely blanched vegetables with a "warm bath" of anchovy dip and a touch of heat. *Albenga zucchini* was presented in what looked like a colorful camouflage of dried and powdered fruits and vegetables—a display of modernism in cuisine as visual appealing as it was tasteful. This was followed by al dente risotto made with *seppie ink* and a touch of lemon and a *besugo*, a local fish, with spring pea puree, pole beans and quenelles of tomato confit. This was all finished off with a perfectly made espresso, and a hazelnut mousse sandwiched between a thin sheet of chocolate and passion fruit *gelato* (above).