

## Varese Ligure

**Once in seemingly terminal decline, the Ligurian community of Varese Ligure is thriving like never before; and all because of one man's vision of organic agriculture and sustainable energy**



It's a sunny and breezy day as I walk around the old centre of Varese Ligure, a small rural community in the heart of Liguria. Like many a tourist I take in the medieval stronghold in the main square, the winding alleyways, the burbling river and its stone bridges, and the circular borgo of ancient houses with freshly painted and renovated facades. But that's not why I'm here.

People first started deserting the Ligurian hinterland for the coastal cities of Genoa and La Spezia in the 1950s. By the end of the 1980s the situation had reached a critical point: the population of Varese Ligure had dropped from 6,000 to 2,200, essential services had vanished, and unemployment was widespread, forcing locals to commute to jobs in factories in nearby Sestri Levante instead.

Varese Ligure's mayor Maurizio Caranza, however, hadn't given up hope. He believed that the factors contributing to Varese Ligure's decline - its isolation (the only road to the town is winding and slow and there is no train service), lack of industry, decaying property and rudimentary farming techniques - could also become its strengths and provide the basis for regeneration and renewal. Seen from a glass half-full, here was a 14,000-square-kilometre environmental haven 'untainted' by pollution, free from real-estate speculation and development, and filled with verdant and productive valleys, woodland, olive groves and hilltop villages.

Fourteen years have passed since Caranza began his mission, but it is easily apparent that Varese Ligure, or the Valle del Biologico ('Organic Valley') as it is also known, goes from strength to strength.

I'm walking through the town with Caranza and current mayor Michela Marcone. (Caranza had to step aside as mayor in June 2004, following Italy's introduction of a new law limiting mayors to three consecutive terms. He is now deputy mayor and environment councillor to his longtime younger ally Marcone.) The pair tirelessly point out the World Wildlife Fund's environmental education centre; the board in the main piazza highlighting all the local tourist sights; the new shoe shop and bakery that have sprung up since the community went organic and energetically self-sufficient; and the hotel that has reopened its doors. Locals greet Caranza and Marcone with a smiling 'buon giorno', which is tantamount to genuine affection for a Ligurian and very different from the reserved, wordless nod they give to visitors.

The reason for this affection is obvious. More than 140 new jobs have been created in Varese Ligure's agriculture, food, tourism and services sectors; people are staying and having babies (there are 15 new births a year and almost 50 children in the local kindergarten, despite its seeming doomed to closure ten years ago); and tourism has tripled over the last decade, with a season lasting six months a year instead of the previous typically Italian 40-day period around August. Family-run Hotel degli Amici now stays open year-round and several B&Bs, farm holiday houses, and restaurants or bars have opened up for business. "It's been difficult," smiles Caranza when we first meet, "because inland areas are not popular as tourist destinations in Italy, and they have to have a very strong identity to attract people at all."

With this in mind, Caranza and his administration embarked on a radical programme for rehabilitating the depressed and dwindling local community. He started by asking the locals: "If the public administration obtains public



funding to redo the roads, the sewers, the aqueducts, and the lighting, will you, in return, repair and renovate your houses?"

The funding for the communal infrastructure was to come from the EU and would provide for, among other things, 21 new aqueducts, two water purification plants and two giant wind turbines. The administration also promised EU incentives to citizens willing to renovate their century-old homes. However what was remarkable and innovative was the "integrated" nature of this large-scale renovation project. "For every lira we put towards renovating the old borgo, another four came from the citizens themselves".

There was a psychological factor at work here, or as Caranza likes to call it, a "virtuous circle". "If you go to someone's house and it's much nicer and cleaner than yours, then when you go back to your home you realise you want to improve it too". So, though only 20 per cent of the old town's inhabitants bid for renovation at first, many more soon followed suit, and in the 14 years of Caranza's administration more than 200 houses were renovated.

As a heady mix of hard facts and socio-political jargon stream out of Caranza's mouth, it seems hard to believe that this eloquent and loquacious man is locally born and bred. Marcone sums him up by saying, "he could talk to a stone".

Indeed, in this region where people are loath to talk in public or to strangers, Caranza, both literally and politically, speaks for everyone. Varese 2000, the left-leaning party of which he is the leading candidate, has won the local elections with more than 65 per cent of the votes for the last 15 years. Given the amount of convincing he has had to do over this same period, this is an amazing result. And an even greater achievement, Caranza proudly points out, considering that conventional "green parties usually get about 1 or 1.5 per cent of the vote in this country".

The next step in the Caranza project was encouraging farmers to switch over "officially" to organic methods. Most, he explains, were already farming organically "unofficially" but just had not gone through the necessary certification procedures. "This is a poor area," he add, "so no one had the money to use fertilisers and so on."

Caranza and his deputies explained that organic agricultural products could be sold at higher prices and without the presence of wholesalers and intermediaries. They also told farmers the EU had grants to help subsidise organic farms.

Just a few years on and now more than nine out of 10 local farms are organic and two cooperatives dedicated mainly to organic meat and dairy produce have been founded. The cooperatives sell from two outlets in the area and also to other shops nearby, such as the socially minded Coop chain of supermarkets, and school canteens. "It is difficult for us to compete on price with production in the plains, so going organic has given our products added value," says Mauro Figone, a member of the meat cooperative Carni San Pietro Vara, with the sort of simple practicality typical of the region. "This is the future for places like this."

But why, I ask Caranza, has an innately conservative community with simple agricultural roots accepted such far-reaching and radical policies?

The main reason is simple: economic survival. Add to that a quality the region is well-known, even infamous, for: thriftiness. "We Ligurians are exceptional at saving," Caranza chuckles. The roofs of the council building and the secondary school are fitted with photovoltaic panels providing them with almost 100 percent of their energy needs cost-free. In the same way, the two wind turbines installed on a wind-swept promontory about an hour's drive from Varese Ligure produce 4 million kilowatts of energy a year, enough for 8,000 people: more than three times the population of the municipality. Thanks to an agreement with the public company that runs the wind farm, the public administration receives 30,000 euro a year for the excess energy produced. Later this year the administration will install another two turbines, bringing

more money into the administration's coffers and providing clean, carbon-dioxide-free energy to even more people.

"Some people say wind turbines are ugly," says Caranza, "but that's only a problem if you put 40 of them up together." As we stand at the evocatively named Centocroci ('Hundred Crosses') mountain pass in the hamlet of La Cappelletta ('the Little Chapel') and gaze upwards at the two white whirring giants, I am awed both by their size and by how naturally they seem to fit with their environment. Caranza later tells me how another rural municipality in Italy once decided to paint all its electricity pylons shades of green so that they would blend in with the landscape, and how this well-meaning move had made them stand out even more.



Another reason Caranza has succeeded where others have failed is simply that his administration knew it was possible to obtain the same sort of certification for a municipality that you can get for a business. In the name of "absolute transparency" the inland Ligurian community became in October 1999 the first Italian municipality to be certified ISO 14001 (the international benchmark for environmental management), and in November 1999 the first European municipality registered under the EU's Eco-Management and Audit Scheme. "Many public administrations don't even know that these schemes exist," Caranza says. "I think there is an interest in not letting people know about them."

And unlike most politicians, who are typically ambitious and career-minded, Caranza and Marcone seem to be made of different stuff. "If you want to carve out a career for yourself," says Marcone with a hint of self-deprecating sarcasm, "you don't do it by becoming mayor of Varese Ligure." Whereas Caranza seems driven by a desire to keep his birthplace alive, Marcone is spurred on by what she calls a "strong civic sense". "It is not about going back to a golden age that never existed," she insists. "It's about integrating man and the environment".

Importantly, the pair are in total agreement about the significance of education and communication. "It seems simple, but it isn't," says Caranza. "Nowadays the only thing that counts are the figures," says Marcone, "the amount of people that will use something, how much it will cost..." She pauses. "I don't think it is useful to fit oneself to that kind of logic." Given the option to build either a new football pitch (as the nearby municipality of Sesta Godano did not long ago to much fanfare), or to put in a waste-water purification plant, most administrations will opt for the crowd-pleasing first scenario she says. The Varese Ligure administration, in contrast, decided to opt for a different tack: two water purification plants were installed and the whole community was informed about the environmental benefits they would bring. "Of course a purification plant is expensive," says Marcone, "but this is politics to my mind. If you want to please the overwhelming majority but not give a damn about their health..." She shrugs. Later, when talking about the pressure the council came under not long ago to eliminate the first year of one of the secondary institutes, she says: "If you don't maintain services in marginal areas, it's obvious that there will be a gradual decline. But it doesn't seem to interest anyone. Most politicians know they'll be long gone before the consequences are felt."

Recently, growing media and tour operator interest has led to an inevitable demand in the Val di Vara from out-of-town and foreign home-buyers. So far at least, prices have remained contained. In the old borgo a small house with its own garden is going for 50,000 euro, a much bigger house for 130,000 euro. "There's a lot of demand for buildings that could be turned into B&Bs, or used for second homes," says local real estate agent Cristina Vair. "Many houses have been bought by Genoa or Milan-based residents, and also by English people," she says.

London-based journalist Mandy Bentley is one of those English people. She decided to buy, in her words, a "slice of Italian rural life". She first bought a flat with friends two years ago, and has now bought her own property in the same building. She comes to stay about once a month. "The municipality's commitment to the environment was an important factor in my

choosing to buy in the area," she says, admitting she feels increasingly frustrated by her life in London. "Long commuting distances, unsafe and unreliable public transport, the disappearance of local shopping facilities in favour of out-of-town centres" all contributed to her decision to "find a home with a more naturally sustainable lifestyle". She believes that there are places in England that could learn a lot from the Varese experience, but is worried that it may be too late. "The UK seems more influenced by the American way of life, which is inimical to environmentalism," she comments sadly.

There may be time, however, for other European countries to adopt such innovative measures to safeguard their rural communities. As Bentley points out, the new EU member states "still have an agricultural structure dominated by smallholdings". Nor is it too late for other Italian rural communities vulnerable to potential depopulation, degeneration and decline. Indeed, one of Caranza's other full-time activities is presiding over umbrella association Qualitambiente, which brings together 40 Italian provinces and municipalities that in the wake of the 'Varese Ligure effect' have obtained European certifications for environmental management. Yet these marginal and often marginalised communities remain fragile. Caranza once likened Varese Ligure to "a transplant patient who you worry about at the slightest cough". It would take very little for the fine balance to be overturned: organic food going out of fashion, for instance, or the tourist influx waning.

Another even greater concern is the alarming lack of farmers. For example, an organic yoghurt factory which has just opened in the municipality can't get enough milk locally so has to buy it in from Tuscany. Yet this makes little sense in the context of sustainability. As Marcone sadly points out, the problem is that "farmers' children are embarrassed about what their parents do", and worryingly few want to follow in their footsteps. And the few young farmers there are can't seem to find wives. Ever pragmatic, Caranza suggests the solution could come from abroad through immigrant men and women wishing to become farmers or marry locally.

In the meantime, new resident Bentley sums up the current state of affairs: "I think there will always be a tension between maintaining the environmental quality of life, which has been a major achievement of Caranza and Marcone, and the inevitable modern-life demands for employment, housing, transport facilities and other services. For me this might be a golden age. I hope it will be sustainable, for others to enjoy in the future." This is what Caranza and Marcone are working so hard to achieve. "Going organic has allowed local companies to stay in the area," says Caranza. "What we need now are more reasons to stay, or reasons to come back," he continues, his eyes alight. "That's the only possibility for the future."

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