

A “sonic” sanctuary in Italy’s wine country



CFlisi

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foto supplied by La Ninna

Are hedgehogs oenophiles? One might think so, given the location of

Italy’s first hedgehog rescue center, right next door to

Piedmont's most

renowned wine-growing area — Barolo.

But no, hedgehogs don't eat grape leaves. (They are insectivores). Nor

was I headed to one of the 286 vineyards in the province of Cuneo,

where Barolo is located. I was headed to Novello, a tiny town bordering

Barolo, for an experience unique in Italy and impossible to find

anywhere in the Americas. Novello is the location of Italy's first

hedgehog sanctuary, The Centro Recupero Ricci "La Ninna" (the "La

Ninna" Hedgehog Rescue Center).

Novello is a village of about 1,000 people. Its origins date back to Roman

times but it appears as a medieval town perched atop a hill, with narrow

streets, a cream-colored castle, squared no-nonsense stone buildings,

tiled roofs, a few watchtowers, and limited parking. Nothing screams

“tourist attraction” here because what you are getting is the Real Deal —

Piedmont as lived by the locals.

A municipal parking area tucked away between the castle and the center

was the best place to leave my car. Then it was just a few steps to the

17th century home that is both animal sanctuary and the personal

residence of its founder.

The Center’s primary guests are *Erinaceus europaeus*, the common

European hedgehog. The popularity of Sonic the Hedgehog

notwithstanding, *Erinaceus europaeus* is not found in nature in North or

South America. These prickly little creatures with black quills and

pointed noses are exclusive to Europe and can be found across the

continent, from Sicily to Scandinavia. Britain is so attached to them that

it holds a Hedgehog Awareness Week every year.

I wanted to see a hedgehog up close, and — more importantly — meet

Massimo Vacchetta, the veterinarian who is dedicating his life to their

conservation. A buzzer beside the carved wooden door gave me access. Up to

the second floor (what Italians call the first floor) and my first glimpse of Dr.

Vacchetta — his back. He was sitting at a table hunched over something,

and invited me to watch him at work. He was feeding one of his charges,

Musetta (meaning “little snout”), a two-year-old hedgehog whose nose

had been sliced off by a grass cutter eight months earlier.

Without

treatment — antibiotics and hand feeding — she would have died within

days. “But she seemed to have the will to live,” recalls the doctor, “so I

decided to try and save her instead of euthanizing her, and she is still

here. “

I watched as he fed her protein puree with a metal spoon, the excess (a

lot) falling on a towel placed on the table for that purpose.

Then he gave

her a shiatsu massage, rubbing behind her ears, until she fell asleep.

With Musetta taken care of, Dr. Vacchetta focused his attention on me.

He is a boyish 53, with more than a passing resemblance to the English

actor Hugh Laurie. He has a long face, a shock of brown hair, and pale

blue eyes that reflect some of the pain of his shiny brown-eyed charges.

His slender hands have cuts and scratches, since hedgehogs have

formidable teeth (to aid in their consumption of insects and slugs).

Dr. Vacchetta began with the history of his involvement with hedgehogs.

He is from Piedmont, and, after graduating from veterinary school, he

spent 24 years specializing in bovine medicine. His life changed in May

2013 when he met Ninna. “This was a time when my personal life was in

pieces. I had been focused on material things like clothes, cars,

restaurants. My then-girlfriend had left me. I wasn’t satisfied with my

work with cows, keeping them healthy so they could be killed and eaten.

I became a vegan and began shifting my practice to small

animals. One

weekend I was substituting for a vet with a small animal clinic. Someone

brought in a week-old hedgehog in a shoebox. Her helplessness and

solitude touched me.”

A newborn may weigh less than an ounce; it is blind and totally

dependent on the mother, who not only feeds it but helps it evacuate for

the first two weeks by licking it. Eyes open at two weeks and teeth sprout

at three weeks. Not till four weeks is the animal relatively independent.

Vacchetta knew this much but (like most of his colleagues) nothing

about the care and feeding of orphans. So he searched for information

online and found a knowledgeable hedgehog forum to guide him. He

already realized that cow's milk would kill a baby hedgehog;
the forum

experts advised a formula for puppies low in lactose and high in
protein.

He fed this to the hedgehoglet 10 times a day by medicine
dropper. Sleep

became an occasional option for him, but the baby thrived and
Vacchetta

was utterly smitten with his patient.

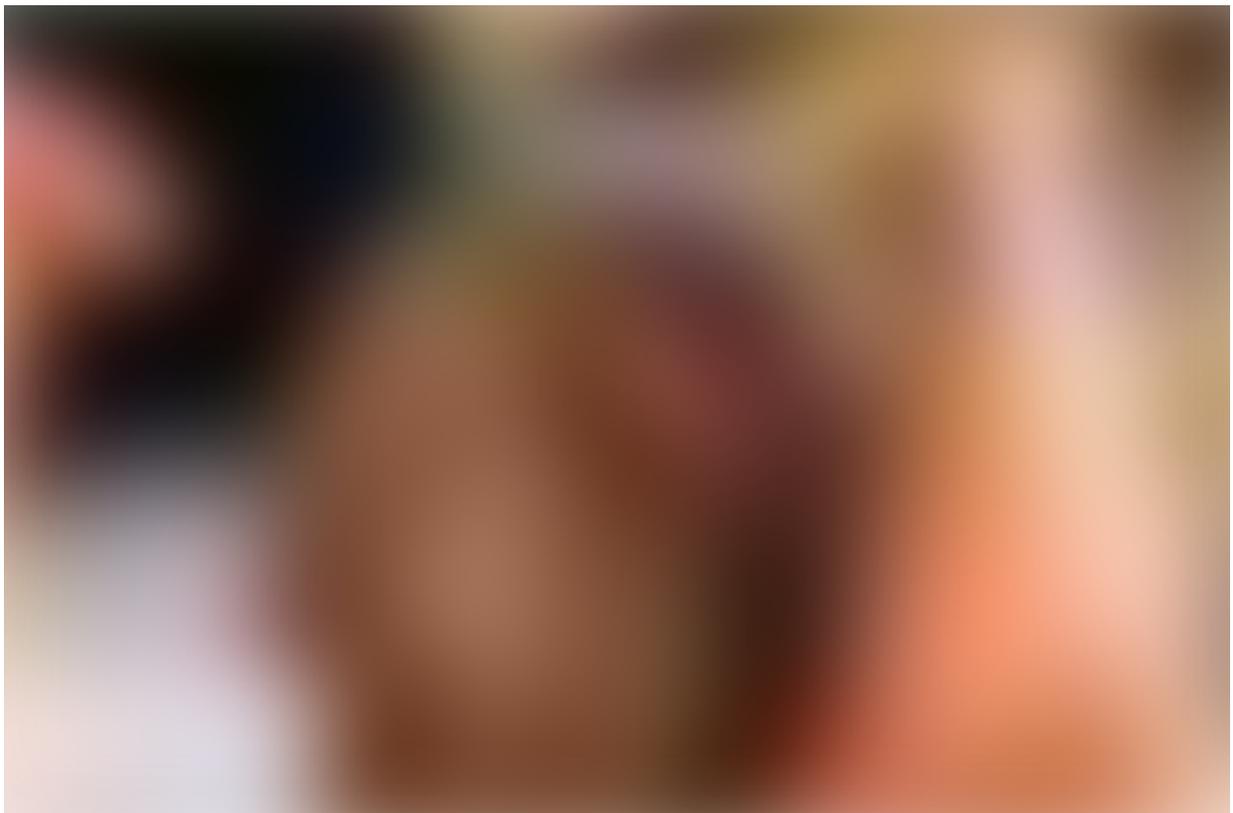


foto supplied by La Ninna

In October 2013, with Ninna growing nicely, the doctor found

an

underweight male hedgehog in his garden. The problem with hedgehogs

weighing less than 600 grams (1.3 pounds) just before winter is that

they won't survive hibernation. They need the extra fat during this

prolonged period without food. Plus the physiological stress they

undergo: their heartbeat decreases from 200 beats per minute to 10,

and from 40 to one breath per minute. In fact, one-third of all hedgehogs

die during hibernation, Vacchetta explained. So he took in the young

male and called him Ninno.

A few months later the doctor found a half-dead hedgehog by the side of

the road. By the time he had nursed Trilli back to health, the idea of a

center for injured and orphaned hedgehogs had taken shape in his mind.

He obtained the required permits and opened the center, named for

Ninna, in June 2014.

As of January 2018, the center had hosted 400 hedgehogs and had rereleased

the majority of them back into the wild — including Dr.

Vacchetta's beloved Ninna. During my visit, 80 hedgehogs were

hibernating in Novello. Fifty of these were to be released in April,

provided they were of proper weight, age, and health.

Where they are released is the result of careful study. Dr. Vacchetta

purchased a 20-hectare property about 30 miles from Novello, which he

calls Paradise, meaning a paradise for hedgehogs . . . and not only. It has

lush green forests, waterfalls and ponds (hedgehogs love

water), and of

course hedges. What it lacks are aggressive dogs, busy roads, agricultural fields (and the equipment used to work them), and swimming pools. Hedgehogs can swim, explains the vet, but there is no

way for them to get out of a swimming pool. He hopes eventually to

enlarge this natural enclave for the benefit of more hedgehogs and other

indigenous wildlife.

Another dream was a fully-equipped hospital for hedgehogs on the

ground floor of the center. That became operational in the spring of

2018, and is especially helpful for permanent guests — animals too

handicapped to survive on their own. Like Musetta, or Pipino, who can't

urinate properly without manual assistance. Or Ditina, born

without

rear legs. Or Zoe, blind in one eye and with a mutilated leg.

As a visitor, I saw some of these residents. Hibernation isn't full-on for all

the hedgehogs at La Ninna. Some curl up in their little houses of

cardboard or wood, lovingly constructed by Dr. Vacchetta and a small

army of volunteers. Others move about in their enclosures, also during

the day. They may require feeding, treatment, or weighing. Then there

are the complications of global warming.

As Dr. Vacchetta explains, "When the temperature in January goes above

10 degrees C (52 degrees F), the hedgehogs wake up. This is a problem

because they expend far more energy waking than sleeping. So these

spells of warming mean that the animal must be heavier than it had to be

even 10 years ago to survive a winter.”

Global warming has also been responsible for a second arrival of

offspring in September. These babies are unlucky because they don't

have a full season to prepare for hibernation, and insects in September

are already scarce. So almost 90 percent of these hedgehoglets die.

Survivors of the winter acclimate in one of the center's outdoor enclosures in the early spring. Visitors during this period should see

more activity. However, hedgehogs are nocturnal animals so don't expect

Sonic the Hedgehog hustling, regardless of the season.



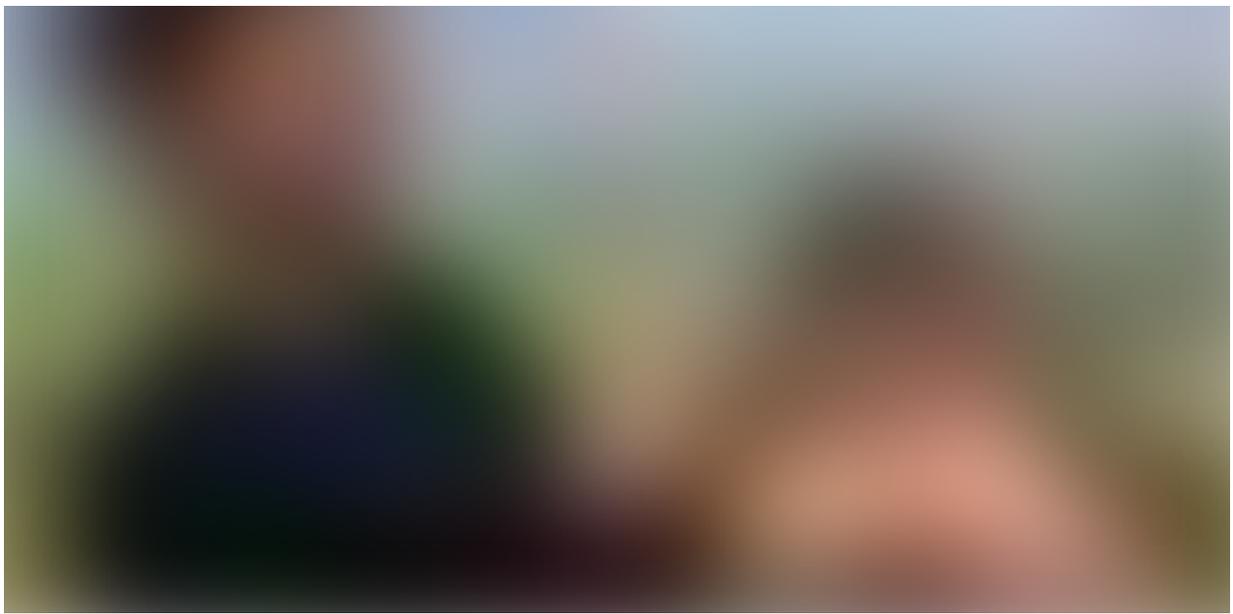


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I learned more about hedgehogs through my conversation with Dr.

Vacchetta than through my observation of his guests, however adorable

the latter may be. I was not allowed to touch the residents, since this

would stress them and create an obstacle to liberation. But I did get very

up close and personal. An added bonus: he is the co-author of a bestselling

book about Ninna and the birth of the center, “*25 grammi di*

felicità” (A handful of happiness). It has been published in more than 60

countries and dozens of languages, including English.

Sales from the book and donations from the center's website and

Facebook page are the only sources of funding for La Ninna. The

regional government of Piedmont is supposed to provide funds, as

hedgehogs are technically property of the state, but it has not done so:

hedgehogs don't vote or produce income and the hospital is not a major

tourist attraction. One collalary of the hospital's low profile is that

casual visitors overlook it on their way to the wineries. I can drink to

that.

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