

Piemonte

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

In a nutshell: Italy's most *terroiriste* area with strong similarities to Burgundy.

Main grapes: Nebbiolo, Barbera, Dolcetto (red); Moscato, Cortese, Arneis (white).

Of all wine regions of the world, Piemonte has won my heart for its sheer *joie de vivre*. And the use of French is not too undiplomatically inappropriate here, for this region is only just over the alps from France and the local dialect is perfectly comprehensible to a French speaker. I have to admit that Piemonte has also stolen my stomach. I know of no other part of the world where every café and restaurant in the smallest village, no matter how unprepossessing, seems able and willing to serve course after course of stunningly fresh, stylishly but minimally prepared food. The raw meat- based antipasti, the risotti, the tartufi...but I must stop. This is supposed to be about wine.

The scenery is stunning, too, especially in autumn at the height of the white truffle season when each patch of vines turns a different shade of pink, orange, brown, purple and green. Whenever the fog, or *nebbia*, clears, the tightly folded Langhe hills which expose the Barolo and Barbaresco vineyards, Piemonte's most famous, are dwarfed by the snow- covered alps to the north and west. Most of Piemonte's excitingly varied wine is produced in conditions of enviable beauty and gastronomic luxury. Do these people pay tax?

Unusually for Italy, Piemonte is a wine region to which grape varieties are the key. The region's great, intense, subtly perfumed, alcoholic, long- lived, occasionally unbearably tannic red wines owe everything to Nebbiolo (supposedly named after the fog), but enormous quantities of much juicier lively Barbera and softly mouth- filling Dolcetto are also grown as well as some local rarities such as strawberry- flavoured Brachetto, curiously sweet and sparkling Freisa, light and tangy Grignolino and historically interesting Ruché or Rouchet.

Piemonte is also home to a variety of local white grape specialities, which to my palate share delicacy, dryness and an aroma that often reminds me of ripe pears. Cortese is the grape of the most respected white, **Gavi**; the perfumed Arneis has been very fashionable as **Roero Arneis** while **Favorita** (the local form of Rolle or Vermentino) is also grown in Roero just north of Barolo and Barbaresco country, which is also famous for its Nebbiolo. Erbaluce makes small quantities of sweet white wine but the most prolific white grape of Piemonte is Muscat, which is responsible for oceans of Asti and various other featherlight, grapey Moscatos, many of which are sparkling, or *spumante*.

Many of these wines are labelled varietally, as in **Nebbiolo delle Langhe**, **Barbera d'Asti** and **Dolcetto d'Alba**. **Monferrato**, **Dogliani**, **Diano d'Alba**, **Ovada** and **Acqui** are other geographical zones. One of these wines labelled Nebbiolo can offer some of Piemonte's dark, satanic majesty in a bottle at a fraction of the cost of a great Barolo or Barbaresco, although so can some of the best Barbera. **Barbera** is grown in great quantity all over the region and used to be regarded as the light, tart, quaffing wine to be drunk as young as possible. However, its fortunes have changed entirely with the widespread adoption of small French oak barrels for maturing the produce of low- yielding Barbera vines. These are serious wines designed for ageing.

Wines here, as throughout Italy, were traditionally matured in large, old Slovenian oak oval casks, but French barriques have also been used for Nebbiolo grapes in Barolo and Barbaresco too, which initially caused a stir and some revision of wine styles, making some of them more open and less distinctive (or, to put it another way, earlier- maturing and less cussed). Much has been made of the modernists v traditionalists debate in the Langhe, but in truth the wines have in general gently evolved so that none of Nebbiolo's extraordinarily haunting resonances are lost but these relatively expensive wines are generally approachable much earlier than in the past.

Piemonte's most friendly wine is Dolcetto, which should burst with fruit while being impressively deep- coloured and, often, quite alcoholic. Dolcetto is particularly useful for growers because, unlike ultra- fussy, late- ripening Nebbiolo, it will ripen even on less favoured sites.

It is beyond question, however, that Piemonte's greatest wines are **Barolo** and, very slightly lighter and earlier maturing, **Barbaresco**. These are two of the wine world's pinnacles but, as Aldo Conterno placidly observes, they are not easy to understand and, since they are made in small quantity, that matters little. The Langhe hills around the town of Alba with their different altitudes and expositions are Italy's answer to the Côte d'Or, and different vineyards can, similarly, produce quite different wines, which is why there are so many single- vineyard bottlings – a phenomenon presaged by the likes of Gaja's Sorì Tildin (which he now chooses to bottle as Langhe Nebbiolo rather than Barbaresco). Other particularly notable producers abound and include Elio Altare, Azelia, Giacomo Bologna, Ceretto, Clerico, Giacomo Conterno, Bruno Giacosa, Elio Grasso, Marchesi di Gresy, Mascarello, Prunotto, Ratti, Vajra, Vietti and Voerzio.

Another group of slightly earthier, lighter- bodied Nebbiolo wines is made in communities around the town of Gattinara in subalpine hills almost due north of Alba: **Gattinara**, **Ghemme**, **Boca**, **Lessona**, **Bramaterra**, **Sizzano**, **Fara** and, right on the border with the Valle d'Aosta, **Carema**.