

Piemonte

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

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

Main grapes: Nebbiolo, Barbera, Dolcetto (and Moscato), Cortese, Arnes, Favorita (white).

Of all wine regions of the world, Piemonte has won my heart by its sheer joie de vivre. And the use of French is not too unobtrusively inappropriate here, for the 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 cafe and restaurant in the smallest village, no matter how unimpressive, seems able and willing to serve course after course of stunningly fresh, subtly but minutely prepared food. The few meat-based antipasti, the risotto, the braised... 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, descends, the lightly hilled Langhe hills which separate the Barolo and Barbaresco vineyards, Piemonte's most famous, are shrouded 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 for?

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 unobtrusively tannic red wines owe everything to the finicky, local specialty, the late-ripening Nebbiolo vine (apparently named after the fog), but enormous quantities of much juicier (and usually mouth-filling Dolcetto are also grown as well as some local varieties such as aromatic-throated Brachetto, curiously sweet and sparkling Favein, light and tangy Grignolino and historically interesting Roche or Rouchet.

Piemonte is also home to a variety of local white grape specialties, which to my palate show delicacy, dryness and an aroma that often reminds me of ripe pears. Cortese is the grape of the most respected white, **Gavi**, the perfumed Arnes has been very fashionable as **Barolo Arnes** while **Traveti** (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 Moscato, which is responsible for oceans of Asti and various other sparkling, grapey Moscatos, many of which are sparkling or sparkling. For many years it was fashionable to be rather snobby about this style of wine but as usual every sector is followed by a reaction. Some of the finest pinot in the wine business are now great fans of the best examples of the varietal category, Moscato d'Asti. These wines have the great virtue of being extremely light, often less than 10 per cent alcohol, refreshingly easy and fully sweet – which makes them a good choice for serving with dessert after a heavy meal.

Many of these wines are labelled centrally, as in **Nebbiolo della Langhe, Barbera d'Asti** and **Dolcetto d'Alba, Monforte, Dogliani, Cuneo di Alba, Orade and Azzul** are other geographical zones. One of these wines labelled Nebbiolo can offer some of Piemonte's dark, extreme majesty in a bottle at a fraction of the cost of a great Barolo or Barbaresco, although no can some of the best Barolos. **Traveti** 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 ageing the product of low yielding Barbera vines. Taking the lead from the late Giacomo Bonavia's prototype called Barbera, Bricio dell'Orade, hundreds of producers have now made changes to their Barbera production in both vineyard and cellar. These are serious wines designed for ageing. Although the historical essence of Piedmontese wine was as light, 100 per cent varietal, an increasing number of producers now experiment with blends: Nebbiolo blended with Barbera, Merlot, Cabernet or even Syrah.

Piemonte's most famous wine is **Dolcetto**, which should have with but white 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, even north-facing ones. Dolcetto is called that (meaning little sweet one) because, being so much lower in acidity than Barbera, it really does taste sweet in comparison. And, unlike most Piedmontese reds, it is designed to be drunk within the first three to five years of its life. Many of the best examples are labelled **Dolcetto di Alba**, with **Dolcetto di Ovada** and **Dolcetto di Dogliani** also providing some of the best value choices for Piedmontese wine fans. More and more producers are beginning to look at the wider world of wine (for reasons I don't entirely understand. I find wine here to be an incoherent incoherence). The result is that many of them have plunked little plots of 'international' varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, some Chardonnay which can be transformed into very elegant wine, thanks to barrel fermentation; some Sauvignon Blanc; and even some Riesling and Viognier. If the Piedmontese are importing grape varieties, it's no wonder the rest of the world is.

It is a hardy question, however, that Piemonte's greatest wines are **Barolo** and, generally very slightly lighter and earlier maturing, **Barbaresco**. These are two of the wine world's pinacles but, as Eric Corson placidly observes, they are not easy to understand and, since they are made in small quantities, that makes life. The Langhe hills around the basin of Alba with their different altitudes and exposures are Italy's answer to the Côte d'Or, and different vineyards can, amazingly, produce quite different wines, which is why there are so many single-vineyard bottlings. Notable producers abound and include Elio Altare, Avela, Giacomo Bologna, Cerevis, Clerico, Giacomo Conterno, Bruno Giacosa, Elio Grasso, Michele di Gesù, Macavello, Pavesi, Ratti, Vigna, Vietti and Vioata.

Barolo conventionally known as Italy's 'wine of kings and popes', is particularly rich in different wine characters, created by the sun of a hillside, a basin of sandstone or mud. It is majestic in every sense, the most concentrated expression of the Nebbiolo grape which has needed cooling and a bit of autumn to ripen properly. But there are huge and demonstrable differences between different parts of the fine and patchwork that make up the Barolo DOCG. Wines made from grapes grown in the western villages of La Morra and the village of Barolo itself tend to be a little lighter and more open than those made in Castiglione Falletto, Monforte d'Alba and Serralunga d'Alba to the east and north.

Barbaresco, another DOCG, has more in common with the lighter wines of Barolo, with its softer lower vineyards planted on generally warmer, lower land which means that both grapes and vines mature slightly earlier – though this can mean making only 10 years rather than 20. These wines are cool to the touch, and it is a tribute to the historic acclimation of these anachronistic vines that they are held in such high esteem even in this impatient age of the fast forward button. The man who can take considerable credit for this is the most famous inhabitant of Barbaresco, Angelo Gaja, as talented a winemaker as ever. Gaja was the first consistently market-led – or the 'big game' – single vineyard wines from either Barolo or Barbaresco. Today, there are hundreds of such wines from each area, many copying the early Gaja or Bruno (and others) for specific sites on the hillside and Gaja himself has now expanded out into Barolo but also Monforte and the Valle d'Aosta. Wines are approachable after a decade or so in bottle – and sometimes even earlier.

Factors other than ripened and French barrels have nudged these wines into the 20th and even 21st century, producers today use a mixture of techniques and larger steel oak containers. It was only relatively recently that Langhe winemakers produced from barrel-fermented grapes selling grapes in their own distillery rather than in huge merchant bottles to becoming sophisticated winemakers with their own labels. They have now learnt to control fermentations, particularly the temperature of them, so that they extract just the best bits of the grape, not ferociously astringent tannins. Another reason why the character of Barolo and Barbaresco has changed recently is climatic. Global warming seems to have targeted this part of the world in particular, delivering a consecutive run of great vintages in which even the late-ripening Nebbiolo managed to reach full and glorious maturity – and even occasionally overmaturity – throughout the second half of the 1990s and this century. Even the colour of the wine seems to have changed. Traditionally Barolo and Barbaresco were not notably deep-coloured and often had an orange tinge at only a few years old. Today the wines are in general much deeper-coloured and more likely to be crimson than orange. This may be partly because of the evolution in winemaking and partly because, like Pinot Noir in Burgundy, the Nebbiolo grape matures early and has been adapting itself to local conditions. But there is more a whopper that these deeper colours owe much to a judicious slug of Barbera or even Cabernet or Merlot – even if Barolo and Barbaresco have officially been meant to be 100 per cent Nebbiolo. There are dozens of inspired producers in these two small wine zones. My favourites include Elio Altare, Avela, Clerico, Aino Conterno, Giacomo Conterno, Conterno-Falotto, (several vineyards of) Formignone, Gaja, Bruno Giacosa, Elio Grasso, Michele di Gesù, Macavello, Pavesi, Ratti, Bruno Rocca, Sardinone, Vigna, Vietti and Roberto Vioata.

Another group of slightly earlier, lighter labelled Nebbiolo wine is made in communities around the basin of Gattorna in subalpine hills almost due north of Alba where Nebbiolo is known as Spina. **Gattorna, Chianella, Boca, Lessona, Bramaterra, Cossola, Fara** and, right on the border with Valle d'Aosta, **Carema**. These wines are still likely to have an orange rim but can often provide a much better value Nebbiolo experience than the world-famous grapes of the Langhe.