

Magazine Archives: Oct 31, 2016



View the entire table of contents for the Oct 31, 2016 issue.

Alto Piemonte: New Wave Nebbiolo

New Wave Nebiolo

Bruce Sanderson

Issue: October 31, 2016

◀ 11

◀ 1



Print this page

Nebbiolo is having its moment. The great wines of Barolo and Barbaresco are earning the acclaim, and the high prices, they deserve. Now discerning wine lovers are turning to a nearby source of less-expensive versions with unique character: Alto Piemonte.

Located about 90 miles north of the Langhe hills, home to Barolo and Barbaresco, Alto Piemonte comprises a cluster of appellations that straddle the Sesia River in the Alpine foothills west of Milan. Gattinara and Ghemme are the most important, along with Boca, Fara, Lessona and Sizzano. There are also two broader DOCs: Colline Novaresi on the river's eastern flank and Coste della Sesia to the west.

All the Alto Piemonte appellations are small, with two or three leading producers in each DOC or DOCG. These passionate vintners, often from outside the region, have saved the best parcels of Nebbiolo from fading into obscurity. Antoniolio and Travaglini in Gattinara, Monsecco and Il Chiosso in Ghemme, and Pietro Cassina and Massimo Clerico in Lessona are all producing outstanding wines. Others, such as La Prevostura, which has labels from Lessona, Bramaterra and Coste della Sesia, offer reliable quality from multiple areas.

The biggest difference between the Nebbiolos of Alto Piemonte and their Langhe cousins has to do with their lacier textures and more refined tannins. This makes them more approachable on release. Prices for Alto Piemonte wines range from \$20 to \$80, with most less than \$50, compared with \$75 to \$350 for the top crus of Barolo.

The Nebbiolo grape, known locally as Spanna, is the common denominator in the region. Many producers bottle it as a varietal, yet it may be blended to varying degrees in certain appellations—up to 50 percent in Bramaterra, Fara and Sizzano. Blending varieties are used to enhance specific qualities in the wine: Uva Rara for body; Vespolina for color, fruit and spice; and Croatina for color, fruit and structure, though it's only allowed in certain areas (Fara and Sizzano as well as Colline Novaresi and Coste della Sesia).

Historically, the wines of Alto Piemonte were commercially successful. Through the 19th century, they were even more highly regarded than Barolo. But phylloxera took its toll, as did the lure of well-paying factory jobs that came with Italy's industrialization. Gattinara, the largest appellation in the region, declined from a peak of 1,700 vineyard acres a century ago to 260 acres today, according to Lorella Antoniolo.

Due to the proximity of Monte Rosa, the second highest peak in the Alps, the climate in Alto Piemonte is distinct from the Langhe hills to the south. Hot days, cool nights and frequent rainfall allow for ripening, but also enhance the elegance of Nebbiolo, creating light, fresh wines.

The region's mineral-rich volcanic and granite soils also differ from the limestone and clay of the Langhe, making for a more acidic rather than alkaline mix (as in Barolo) and further enhancing the minerally and earthy components in the wines. There are also variations among the appellations. Ghemme's clay plateaus give its wines more body than in Gattinara, while Lessona's sandy, marine sediments lend finesse and refinement. Fara and Sizzano occupy some of the lowest elevations, lying to the east of the Sesia, and Bramaterra, on the opposite side of the river, commands some of the highest-altitude vineyards in Piedmont, rising to nearly 2,000 feet.

The aging requirements differ from zone to zone, ranging from a minimum of 22 months to as long as 47 months for Gattinara riservas, which spend more time in wood and are often released when they're ready to enjoy. Interestingly, most Alto Piemonte reds have the same minimum requirements for aging in oak as Barolo, and all see more time in wood than Barbaresco.

For even more extreme winemaking, there is the tiny Carema DOC, which is technically part of Canavese and not Alto Piemonte, on the Valle d'Aosta border north of Turin. Two wineries keep viticulture in Carema from extinction—family-owned Ferrando and the local cooperative. Ferrando's Nebbiolos are ethereal, with warmth and richness belying their elegance and ripe fruit.

With prices for Barolo and Barbaresco continuing to increase, there is no better time to veer from the familiar path and explore the outstanding Nebbiolos being made in Alto Piemonte.

Recommended Wines from Alto Piemonte

Score Wine Price

93 Antoniolo Gattinara Osso San Grato 2011 \$65

93 Ferrando Carema Black Label 2011 \$83

92 Cantine del Castello Conti Nebbiolo Colline Novaresi 2012 \$24

- 92 Monsecco Ghemme 2009 \$38
- 91 Pietro Cassina Lessona 'Tanzo 2011 \$81
- 91 Massimo Clerico Lessona 2009 \$48
- 91 La Palazzina Bramaterra 2006 \$33
- 91 Travaglini Gattinara Tre Vigne 2011 \$50
- 90 Il Chiosso Gattinara Riserva 2008 \$62
- 90 Nervi Gattinara 2011 \$35
- 90 Noah Bramaterra 2011 \$38
- 90 La Prevostura Coste della Sesia Muntacc 2012 \$28
- 90 Rovellotti Ghemme Chioso dei Pomi 2008 \$42

See Also

Italy's Cutting Edge

Tuscany *Grand Cru*

Sardinia: A Cornucopia of Grapes

Aglianico: The Next Big Red

The Rise of Rosato