



Piedmont's Everyday Red Wines

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Italy's Piedmont region has been my favorite area in the world for red wines for some time. When I made my first trip to Piedmont in the autumn of 1981, little did I know what I was about to discover. I fell in love with the region--its food and wine and its people--and have been returning regularly for 30 years now. Needless to say, I have more Barolo and Barbaresco wines in my cellar than any other type, by far.

And so one might think that I drink these great Nebbiolo wines all the time. But, as much as I love Barolos and Barbarescos, I do not drink them frequently. These wines are excellent with certain cuisines--beef dishes for sure, heavier pastas such as those with a Bolognese ragu (with meat and tomato sauce), or with full-bodied cheeses. But I eat lighter fare on a daily basis, and so I find myself drinking a lot more of Piedmont's lighter-bodied red wines.

I have five favorite Piedmontese everyday red wines. The first three are fairly well-known: Barbera, Dolcetto, and Nebbiolo Langhe. The other two you might not be familiar with: Freisa and Grignolino. These last two wines had almost disappeared, at least in American markets. But I'm happy to report that they are making a slight comeback--due, no doubt, to the increased popularity that more obscure Italian wines have been enjoying in the U.S. recently, thanks to sommeliers and other wine geeks.

Grignolino is a light-bodied, light-colored, completely dry red wine, with raspberry aromas and flavors, high acidity and considerable tannins for its lightness. And it is low in alcohol--seldom exceeding 12.5°. Its pale appearance is similar to that of a deep rosé wine.

In California, one producer, Heitz Cellars, has produced a Grignolino wine since 1961; Heitz's Grignolino is pleasant, but a bit sweeter and less acidic than the Italian version.

Grignolino has long been a favorite of mine; I love to have it with lunch or dinner in summer; it's particularly good with pizza, or simply as an apéritif. And so I was concerned when Grignolino declined in production recently. As short a time as a few years ago, it was even scarce in Piedmont. Many of the major Barolo and Barbaresco producers had stopped making Grignolino, and it was featured on only a few wine lists in Piedmont's restaurants. But fortunately, a few producers kept making it, despite the fact that it was not a big-selling wine.

Two Grignolino DOC wines exist, Grignolino d'Asti and Grignolino del Monferrato

Casalese. In fact, Grignolino is said to be native to the Monferrato hills, which are directly east of the Asti region and northeast of the Alba region. Grignolino d'Asti is more commonly found, but we're beginning to see more wines from Monferrato lately, especially Barbera, Freisa, and Grignolino. The cool-climate Monferrato district happens to excel in these three varieties. Most Grignolino wines retail for about \$15. A Grignolino I enjoyed recently is 2011 Grignolino del Monferrato Casalese, produced by Oreste Buzio. Pio Cesare, Michele Chiarlo, Marchesi di Barolo, Fontanafredda, and Bersano are some major Piedmontese producers who still make a good Grignolino.

Whereas Grignolino definitely resonates of raspberries, I always derive strawberry aromas and flavors from Freisa. Its wines are a beautiful hue of medium-dark red; perhaps scarlet is a good descriptor. Most Freisa wines are medium-bodied, very dry, very tannic, and high in acidity, with a somewhat rustic flavor. Freisa is sometimes referred to as a "farmhouse" red, because it's made primarily by small farmers. It definitely has its own unique flavor.

Freisa has long been popular among the Piedmontese, but is a difficult sell outside the region. Like Grignolino, fewer and fewer producers have continued to make it. A sweeter version of Freisa as well as slightly carbonated version of the wine exists, but the dryer, non-carbonated style predominates, especially in the export market. The two most commonly found Freisa wines are Freisa d'Asti DOC and Freisa del Monferrato Casalese DOC (the grape is native to either Asti or Monferrato). An outstanding Freisa d'Asti value is one made by Cascina Gilli; it sells for \$10 or less. Some serious Barolo producers, such as Bartolo Mascarello, Giuseppe Mascarello, and Burlotto, all make a very good Freisa Langhe. I recently purchased Burlotto's 2010 for \$18. The Mascarello Freisas retail for about \$21. Besides the usual Italian dishes, I have found Freisa to go well with seafood, such as calamari, as well as with fried zucchini.

Barbera needs no introduction to American wine drinkers familiar with Italian wines. In fact, quite a few California wineries make a Barbera, but for me the Italian versions of this popular variety are clearly the better choice. The most commonly found Italian Barbera in the U.S. is Barbera d'Alba from the Alba regions of Barolo and Barbaresco in the province of Cuneo. Vietti is one producer in this region that has always specialized in Barbera; any Barbera made by Vietti is invariably a fine wine.

With the exception of Vietti and a few other Alba producers, I generally prefer Barbera from the Asti or Monferrato zones. (In fact, Vietti produces Barbera d'Asti as well as Barbera d'Alba.) In the Alba region, Barbera and Dolcetto are planted in vineyards not deemed good enough for Nebbiolo, the star variety. But Nebbiolo does not grow in either Asti or Monferrato. The premier wine grape and wine in Asti and Monferrato is Barbera.

Another reason that I generally prefer Asti and Monferrato Barberas rather than the fuller-bodied

Barbera d'Alba style is that Barbera d'Asti and Barbera del Monferrato Casalese wines are leaner, sleeker, and more acidic. Also, Barberas from these two regions are more typically made without being aged in French barriques; they are simpler and purer Barberas, emphasizing the classic tart cherry aromas and flavors--along with the low tannin and racy acidity--of the Barbera variety. And they are considerably better values, retailing in the \$12 to \$18 price range. One Barbera d'Asti I always enjoy is Marchesi di Gresy's (2009 or 2010 retails for about \$17 to \$20). Barbera d'Alba wines, many of which are aged in barriques, often cost over \$20, and some are considerably higher in price.

Barbera is excellent with pizza or simple pastas, and hamburgers, but is versatile enough to go well with seafood dishes.

Dolcetto is a completely dry, tannic, dark red wine with moderate acidity--not nearly as much acidity as Barbera. It has black cherry aromas and flavors, and sometimes licorice. Dolcetto is typically served with antipasti or with the first course in a Piedmont dinner, such as vitello tonnato. Most Barolo producers make both a Dolcetto and a Barbera. The most commonly found Dolcetto on the export markets is Dolcetto d'Alba; it usually retails in the U.S. in the \$12 to \$18 range.

Two lesser-known areas than Alba are particularly renowned for their Dolcetto wines--vineyards around the town of Dogliani and the village of Diano d'Alba. Dogliani, south of the city of Alba and the town of Barolo, might even be the original home of Dolcetto. Dogliani is so well-regarded for its Dolcettos that it has its own DOCG for its wine; Dogliani DOCG simply refers to the town's Dolcetto wines from its vineyard locations within prescribed Dogliani boundaries. Two outstanding producers of Dogliani DOCG wines are Chionetti and Luigi Einaudi.

Diano d'Alba, high in the hills of the upper Langhe region, has also earned its own name for its Dolcetto. Diano d'Alba DOCG is the appellation for Dolcetto wines from this small village area. I recently enjoyed a 2007 Le Cecche Diano d'Alba (\$19).

Nebbiolo Langhe is the DOC appellation for Nebbiolo wines made outside the boundaries of Barolo and Barbaresco in the Langhe area--roughly, Alba and Roero in the Cuneo province, and into Asti province (but Nebbiolo is not a presence in Asti). The great part about drinking the relatively lighter-bodied Nebbiolo wines is that they have the same aromas and flavors of Barolo and Barbaresco in a simpler form, they are ready to drink when they are released, and they are affordable (\$20 to \$25). Even less expensive Barolos and Barbarescos need several years of aging before they are ready to drink.

Two Nebbiolo wines that I recommend are the 2010/2011 Marchesi di Gresy Nebbiolo Langhe,

Martinenga Vineyard (about \$20) and the fuller-bodied 2009 Vietti Nebbiolo “Perbacco” Langhe (about \$22).

I urge you to try some of the Piedmont wines that I have recommended in this column. They are ready to drink, affordable, and delicious.