

A costly obsession

Australian and Italian fanatics are united in their love for nebbiolo, despite its financial drawbacks.



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The impish, hyper-talkative Luca Currado is holding forth at his Vietti winery in Piedmont's Barolo region, Italy. He's worked in a South Australian winery (Primo Estate) and, in turn, he's had Australians working for him in Barolo. Notable among them are Peter Godden and Sally McGill of Adelaide Hills nebbiolo producer, Arrivo. "Arrivo is probably the best nebbiolo I've tasted outside Piedmont," Currado enthuses.

It's a relationship that's repeated in many Piedmontese wineries: Steve Pannell of S.C. Pannell (also an Adelaide Hills nebbiolo producer of note) has worked at G.D. Vajra; fellow Hills winemaker Peter Leske of La Linea has worked at Brezza, and so on.

They speak highly of each other; it's part of the global brotherhood of wine, a network that's especially tight when they share a passion for the nebbiolo grape.

Nebbiolo, whose home is in the Langhe hills of Piedmont near Turin, where it makes the great red wines, barolo and barbaresco, is hardly a mainstream grape. It

attracts eccentric and impassioned wine people, much like pinot noir. Like pinot, winemakers must be obsessive to grow it – more interested in beauty than money – so low is the likelihood of making a profit from it. As Currado reminds us: "All the vineyard work is done by hand: the land is too steep for mechanisation. And a very low yield is necessary, so one tonne per acre [2.5 tonnes per hectare] is normal for us. We have both low yields and high cost of production, so, unfortunately, Barolo is not a land of cheap wine."

Those yields – similar to those for the finest pinot noirs, with which nebbiolo is sometimes compared – work out to just a kilogram of grapes (or one bottle of wine) per vine, Currado says.

Luca's father, Alfredo, who died recently, married into the Vietti family, so Luca is much more than an employee. Hence, when he shows us an original Vietti bottle – from the 1873 vintage – it's with more than token pride.

Vietti is unusual for owning vineyards in nine of the 11 barolo-producing villages, and 15 of the 20 most famous grand crus. In contrast, many wineries have no vineyards beyond their own village. Luca praises the foresight of the Vietti family for acquiring the vineyards when it could: it would be impossible to build such a domaine today.

We've been incredibly lucky in the timing of our visit: he's poured a rare tasting of 13 nebbiolo wines from the excellent 2007 vintage, mostly pre-bottling samples of



Steep ... Luca Currado at one of his vineyards, near the village of Serralunga d'Alba, Piedmont.

individual barolo vineyards. Without describing all of them, suffice it to say that some (Lazzarito, Brunate and Rocche) show why they are bottled individually, while some others seem to need other components to build them into complete wines.

These blending wines (which plenty of other producers issue as single-vineyard bottlings) go into Vietti's bread-and-butter barolo, which is branded Castiglione – after their home town, Castiglione Falletto. This is a fine wine, as good as much dearer wines, and represents value at \$135 (for the '05).

At the base of the ladder is the varietal nebbiolo, branded Perbacco (the '06 is \$55). This is effectively a declassified barolo and gives a genuine taste of quality nebbiolo but in a softer, more approachable form, ready to drink, although cellaring for 10 years won't trouble it. The '07 is a typical

blend of seven vineyards, including the young vines in three top crus.

Across the valley in a neighbouring town, Barolo, winemaker Enzo Brezza of Brezza winery, is reminiscing with his Adelaide-based Australian agent, David Ridge, about their recent fishing trip to the Eyre Peninsula. Theirs is another of the key Italy/Australia relationships fuelling the swelling appetite of Australians for Piedmontese wines.

Like Vietti, Brezza is a family-owned winery using only estate-grown grapes from its substantial landholding of 16.5 hectares (Vietti has 35 hectares). Like Vietti, Brezza also makes superb barbera – in three different bottlings, the cheapest being the unwooded Santa Rosalia (\$44 and good value); the dearer ones are single-vineyard wines including Cannubi.

There's a naughty streak in Brezza, who is not a fan of cork. He

thinks it's crazy the law prohibits DOCG Italian wines from being sealed with anything other than cork. "More and more early-drinking wines such as vermentino and arneis are getting the DOCG," he says. They are especially vulnerable to cork taints and respond especially well to alternative closures. They should be allowed to use them. Brezza's '09 Santa Rosalia is sealed with the Vino-Lok glass stopper. Rather bizarrely, the new label depicts a wine cork – "for those who are nostalgic for the cork".

He's done trial bottlings of his excellent Barolo Bricco Sarmassa '03 and '04 (\$155) under Vino-Lok, and – as he demonstrates by way of a blind comparative tasting – the results are at least as good as the best cork. All you can do is sigh, reflect that this is the country of Berlusconi and La Cicciolina, and pour yourself another drink.