

# Long live the king

The nebbiolo grape reigns in Italy's Piedmont region, but the wines provoke differing opinions.



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The nebbiolo grape is named after the fog that frequents the valleys of barolo country in Piedmont, north-western Italy. By blocking sunlight, the nebbia moderates the temperatures, which can otherwise get quite hot.

Nebbiolo is one of Italy's greatest grape varieties, and in a country that has more than 1000, that's saying something.

In the Langhe, the local name for the wine-growing district around Alba, it's used for the flagship wines, barolo and barbaresco, both 100 per cent nebbiolo wines grown in separate but neighbouring regions. It's also used for the less-known Roero appellation - a lighter, cheaper alternative - and beneath all these is the entry-level wine, simply labelled Langhe nebbiolo. This is an introductory wine, often made from young vines or less-prized sites, but can be high quality. It's released young and often without the mandatory wood-ageing of the other wines. The Langhe also grows barbera and dolcetto to make reds, often of high quality but not as long-lived nor as grand as nebbiolo.

Nebbiolo is the star, the "king of wines and the wine of kings" as they like to say around Alba. For this reason, it's the focal-point of a week-long tasting every year called Nebbiolo Prima, to which dozens of members of the media and wine buyers come from all over the world to taste the upcoming releases of roero, barbaresco and barolo - this year '09 roero and '09 barbaresco, '08 barolo, and barbaresco riserva '07 and barolo riserva '06. We tasted about 350 wines at the Nebbiolo Prima tastings: about 70 each morning, blind, before lunch. The rest of the day was spent visiting wineries.

Winemakers hosted dinners at local restaurants, showing off their wares with the meal.

Even after such an intense tasting session, it's almost impossible to form a firm picture of the latest vintages because the wines



are so varied. We could generalise and say 2007 is an excellent vintage, close to top-level, while '08 is very good, and '06 and '09 are merely good. Indeed, there hasn't been a lesser vintage since '02 and '03.

Nebbiolo is also fascinating because it tends to divide opinion. One's preferred drink is another's poison.

Central to the intense but usually good-natured arguments is the concept of traditional versus modern wines. Oak is fundamental. In the simplest terms, modern wines are raised in small barrels such as the 225-litre French barriques common in Bordeaux. Traditional means ageing

only in large, old barrels of about 2000 litres but often much bigger, which impart no actual oak flavour. Modern wines are typified by new-oak aroma and flavour derived from small barrels, but the grey area comes when you realise most producers use a combination of both. How much is too much oak? In the cellars of arch-traditionalists such as Giacomo Conterno, you won't find a single barrique. Most modernists don't seek to make oaky wines, yet often their vast underground cellars are stuffed with barriques.

In the end it comes down to personal preference. Modern winemaking is about more than maturation vessels, though: it emphasises brightness, freshness and fruit. Traditional wines emphasise mellowness and

earthy and sometimes leathery notes. Charcuterie or roasting-pan aromas are plentiful as they age, cigarbox and truffle also creeping in. Barolo is fuller bodied and more tannic than barbaresco, but nebbiolo is a high-tannin wine, especially barolo. However, the tannins should never be hard or astringent: good tannins are gripping when drunk alone but seem to dissolve in the company of protein-rich foods.

complexity. In fact, there are plenty of excellent examples of both modern and traditional wines. The traditionalists include Giacomo Conterno, Bruno Giacosa, Vietti, G. D. Vajra, Brezza, Produttori del Barbaresco, Bartolo Mascarello and Giuseppe Mascarello.



Expensive taste ... Gen Ys are happy to pay more for champagne.

cautious with their finances, the manager of Canstar Blue, Rebecca Logan, says. In other findings from the nation-wide Australian survey,



Out of the fog ... (above) Mauro Veglio nebbiolo vines at harvest time last year; (below) Vietti barolo.



## Extra years can make or break

THE greatest wines of Barolo and Barbaresco should, in theory, be the reserve bottlings, called riservas. These must be aged longer than the regular appellations: in Barbaresco, 50 months in total (nine in wood) compared with 26 months for the "normale"; in Barolo, 62 months (18 in wood) compared with 38. At Nebbiolo Prima, I was disappointed to find many riservas stale, and a distressing number afflicted by spoilage such as brettanomyces.

The great riservas are truly stunning, however. At Vietti, riserva wine is made only from the Villero vineyard and only in outstanding vintages. There have been only eight released since the first (1982, '85, '89, '90, '96, '97, '01 and '04).

I tasted the last six plus the '06 (to be released this time next year) at Vietti and found in them a mesmerising array of vinous beauty. It was the greatest nebbiolo vertical I've ever tasted.

There were other wonderful line-ups. At Mauro Veglio, Rocche dell'Annunziata vintages '08, '07, '06, '05, '04, '03 and '01 were poured, and that, too, was a transcendental experience. At Paolo Scavino, they poured 13 vintages of Barolo Bric del Fiasc stretching from 2008 back to 1985. Neither the Veglio nor the Scavino were riservas, but both were magnificent arrays of wine.

oaked wines. The best way to avoid oakiness is to buy a humble Langhe nebbiolo, some of which are in fact un-oaked (expect to pay about \$45-\$50), or learn which wineries use little or no barrique. Barolo and barbaresco, like any iconic, collectable wines, vary widely in price, but few of the good ones are less than \$100 these days; some are four times as much. There are still bargains: Produttori del Barbaresco, arguably the world's greatest co-operative, still charges less than \$100 for its barbaresco "normale".

All brands mentioned are available in Australia; try Five Way Cellars, Ultimo Wine Centre, Annandale Cellars and Cremorne Cellars.

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## TASTINGS BY HUON HOOKE

**MAKING THEMSELVES SCARCE** McLaren Vale's first Scarce Earth project wines have been launched, celebrating the region's best shiraz vineyards through limited-production, single-vineyard bottlings. These will be released every year, only available from the participating wineries' cellar doors during May, June and July. The wines highlight McLaren Vale's sub-regions and geology, as well as individual blocks of vines by showcasing the very best quality wines produced in the area. They will be released two years after vinification, so 2010 is the debut vintage. I have tasted only

the wines produced by d'Arenberg so far and can vouch for their extremely high quality and distinctive characteristics. They're selling for \$99 a bottle.

**GEN Y HAPPY TO SPLASH CASH** Members of Generation Y are twice as likely to be flashy with their choice of wine and champagne as baby boomers, despite tending to have less personal wealth, according to new research by Canstar Blue, an Australia and New Zealand researcher of retail and finance information. Baby Boomers live up to their reputation of being more

males and Generation Y are most likely to splash their dollars on wine and champagne retailing for more than \$70 a bottle. Results showed 32 per cent of males had treated themselves or others to top-shelf wine or champagne in the past year compared with 21 per cent of females, and 44 per cent of Generation Y respondents had bought high-end wine or champagne compared with 34 per cent of Generation X and just 17 per cent of baby boomers. Three out of 10 respondents overall had spent more than \$70 a bottle for a special occasion in the past 12 months.

## KNOW YOUR GRANGE?

Could you pick the 2006 Penfolds Grange (pictured) from the '06 Brokenwood Graveyard, Mount Pleasant Maurice O'Shea and Thomas Kiss shiraz? The challenge has been set by the Icon Lounge in the Hunter Valley Small Winemakers Centre, Pokolbin, during Hunter Wine and Food Month. Blind tastings of the four wines are available for \$56 throughout June. There's a prize if you get it right. You also have the option of joining in a Grange masterclass at 11am every Saturday in June. For bookings phone 4998 7668.

