

Italian Wine: Barolo and Barbaresco

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White truffle season is over in the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy, so people are most likely eating a simple meat ragu on their traditional tajarin pasta. But with either dish -- or any hearty food, for that matter -- a delicious companion is a wine made from nebbiolo, especially the region's great wines from Barolo or Barbaresco.

Legend has it that nebbiolo is named for the fog -- nebbia in Italian -- that blankets the hills of the Barolo and Barbaresco zones every fall. There are other grapes grown there, notably barbera and dolcetto, but the best sites generally are reserved for the more difficult nebbiolo grape. It needs good exposure to the sun and it ripens late, in late October or even November, when rain is an ever-present threat. Nebbiolo is grown elsewhere in Piedmont and outside of Italy (there are some good efforts in California), but the grape achieves its best expression in the Barolo and Barbaresco regions.

Wines made from nebbiolo generally are very aromatic, with red fruit flavors that are fairly delicate. Danilo Drocco, chief winemaker at Fontanafredda in the Barolo region, calls nebbiolo "a brother of the pinot noir. It is elegance that is the real character of nebbiolo." But the variety is also notoriously tannic. To combat that, the traditional practice was to leave the wine in large oak casks for an extended period. That often resulted in wine that was oxidized and dried out. So some vintners started introducing modern winemaking techniques and equipment, like temperature-controlled fermentation and small French oak barrels for aging. As is often the case, some took it too far, creating ripe, oaky wines that obscured nebbiolo's perfume and delicacy.

There are still plenty of modern wines around, but a lot of vintners are swinging back toward a more traditional (but not oxidized) style. Chiara Boschis of E. Pira in Barolo, for example, says she used to age her Barolos in 100 percent new oak. Now she's scaled that back, and she ages her classic Barolo in large oak casks. I haven't tasted her current releases, but the wines she showed me about 18 months ago were lively, aromatic and spicy, with a light touch of oak.

Barolo is situated to the south and west of Alba, while Barbaresco is to the north and east. Each is named for a town in the appellation's midst; Barolo is the larger zone of the two, with about 2 ½ times the vineyard acreage of tiny Barbaresco. The conventional wisdom is that Barolo wines are more muscular, the "king" to Barbaresco's "queen." But these days, the differences in power often are more reflective of the farming and winemaking practices. Aldo Vacca, the dynamic director of Produttori del Barbaresco, the local cooperative, thinks that Barbaresco can actually taste more tannic than Barolo because it has less richness in the middle.

Barbaresco's most famous producer is Angelo Gaja, an innovator whose wines are among the most expensive in Italy. Produttori del Barbaresco's wines are good values: The basic 2008 Barbaresco (\$37) offers bright cherry, some floral notes, hints of licorice, cedar and spearmint and firm tannins. There is also a series of nine outstanding single-vineyard wines, like the 2008 Barbaresco Riserva "Montefico" (\$67), which is intensely aromatic, with red fruit, licorice, cedar and floral notes, some mineral and drying tannins.

One of my favorite producers Barolo producers is Vietti. Vietti makes some expensive, hard-to-find single-vineyard Barolos, but the 2008 Barolo "Castiglione" (\$48), a blend of several vineyards, is a fine value. It offers rich red fruit with notes of cedar and rose petals and firm but approachable tannins. Renato Ratti also makes several Barolos, with the most affordable being the bright, spicy 2008 Barolo "Marcenasco" (\$50), which is quite elegant, with fine tannins. The 2007 Fontanafredda Barolo "Serralunga" (\$45) is also a good choice; it's rich and a little earthy, with red fruit, rose petals and firm but approachable tannins.

For a less expensive alternative to Barolo and Barbaresco, consider wines labeled as nebbiolo d'Alba or Langhe nebbiolo. These are often wines made from young vines; in other cases, they simply didn't make the cut for the top wines. They usually cost less than \$30.

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TASTING NOTES

One of the region's historic wineries is Pio Cesare. It was founded in 1881, and some of the cellar walls in Alba date to Roman times. But the winery is by no means old-fashioned. While some of the wines are fairly traditional, others are made in a more modern style. The 2008 Pio Cesare Barolo (\$65) is in the more traditional vein, with red fruit, spicy notes and firm tannins. The single-vineyard Barolo and Barbaresco (both \$110) are usually more modern. The 2008 Barbaresco "Il Bricco," for example, has plump fruit and some obvious oak, while the 2007 Barolo "Ornato" is ripe and powerful. (That said, the 2008 Ornato, which is arriving soon, actually tastes pretty traditional, with nice integration and balance.)

When Renato Ratti started his winery in 1965, the tradition in Barolo was to blend from various vineyards. But Ratti saw similarities between Barolo and Burgundy, where the best wines are from a single parcel. These days, most high-end Barolos and Barbarescos bear a vineyard name. In addition to the Marcenasco Barolo, the winery " now run by Renato's son, Pietro -- produces two more single-vineyard bottlings, the 2008 Barolo "Conca" (\$90), which is powerful yet elegant, with spicy red fruit, licorice and some savory notes, and the rich, plump 2008 Barolo "Rocche" (\$100), with its smooth red fruit, roasted coffee and a refined character.

Some other Barolos I've enjoyed in recent months include the 2008 Damilano Barolo "Cannubi" (\$89), which is ripe and lively, with plump red fruit, anise, tobacco and drying tannins on the finish; the 2007 Paolo Manzone Barolo "Serralunga" (\$60), an elegant wine with red cherry and notes of tea and tobacco; and the powerful yet elegant 2008 Parusso Barolo (\$48), with its rich cherry and hints of rose petals and chocolate.

In Barbaresco, Marchesi di Gresy produces some very aromatic Barbarescos from the winery's Martinenga estate, like the 2008 Marchesi di Gresy Barbaresco "Martinenga" (\$54), with its spicy red cherry and fine tannins. (The vineyard, curiously, is also planted with a little sauvignon blanc.)

Barolo and Barbaresco, especially wines from good vintages, can also age extremely well. During a visit last fall to Fontanafredda, I tasted a 1967 Barolo that was still quite fresh and elegant, with flavors of red fruit, truffle, earth and mineral.

Many of the aforementioned producers make some delicious, affordable Langhe nebbiolo. The 2010 Produttori del Barbaresco Langhe Nebbiolo (\$25), for example, is quite floral, with red cherry, licorice, a hint of tobacco and firm tannins. Vietti's 2009 "Perbacco" Langhe Nebbiolo (\$25) is also very floral, with red fruit and notes of roses and anise. The 2011 Marchesi di Gresy "Martinenga" Langhe Nebbiolo (\$22) has darker fruit notes and very firm tannins. Renato Ratti also has a good nebbiolo d'Alba called Ochetti that sells for less than \$25.