

Nebbiolo an elegant spring sip

Wine is aromatic
with red fruit flavors



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ON WINE

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

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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 ages her classic Barolo in large oak casks. 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 2½ 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 Barolo producers is Vietti, which makes some expensive, hard-to-find single-vineyard Barolos. However, the 2008 Barolo “Castiglione” (\$48), a blend of several vineyards, is a fine value, with rich red fruit, notes of cedar and rose petals and firm but approachable tannins. Renato Ratti also makes several Barolos. The bright, spicy



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2008 Barolo "Marcenasco" (\$50) is quite elegant, with fine tannins. The 2007 Fontanafredda Barolo "Seralunga" (\$45) is rich and a little earthy, with red fruit, rose petals and firm but approachable tannins.

For a less expensive alternative, 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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