

Barolo, Barbaresco provide wine tales of two Italian cities

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You're a wine lover, right? Good. Now picture yourself living in Italy's northern Piedmont region, in the hamlet of Barolo, population 750, or Barbaresco, population 650. The towns are only 10 miles apart, both about 30 miles from the metropolis of Turin, with its auto industry and its glittery international fashion shows.

You wake up in the morning to dense, chilly fog, from your location between the icy Alps and the warm Mediterranean. But by mid-afternoon it's sunny and hot, the fog departed to reveal spectacular views of the mountains.

It's a perfect climate for growing grapes. The sun ripens them during the day, and the fog preserves their lively acids at night.

So you're probably growing the little publicized but highly revered grape called "nebbiolo," from the Italian word "nebbia," which means fog.

Historically, the nebbiolo grape is famous for wines that start out with fierce, palate-searing acids and tannins, but after a decade of aging resolve into lush, opulent, hearty wines that famously smell of tar and roses, of mint and licorice and earthy truffles.

But that was then, a decade ago. Now big-name producers have learned how to hurry the mellowing process,

producing wines that can be drunk in maybe five or six years without losing their ability to age.

The funny thing is that the nebbiolo-based wines grown around the towns of Barolo and Barbaresco, only 10 miles apart, can be quite different from each other.

It's because the nebbiolo grape is finicky, extremely sensitive to tiny variations in altitude, soil, temperature, sun exposure and such. Barbaresco's richer soil produces grapes with thinner skin and softer tannins. Barolo wines are sturdier. The difference is great enough that the wines are known by the names of the towns, not the grape. So you buy a barolo or a barbaresco rather than a nebbiolo.

Both have the basic aromas of roses, tar and cherries. But barolo is said to be the masculine king, hearty and powerful, and barbaresco is the feminine queen, lighter and paler, though still packing full flavors. It's a tale of two cities, or at least two hamlets.

With one exception. Nebbiolo grapes from the slightly less desirable Langhe subregion of Piedmont are softer, less expensive and ready for earlier drinking. Their wines are called simply "nebbiolos."

Because of their similarities, food pairings tend to be similar for barolo, barbaresco and nebbiolo wines —

grilled or roasted red meat, wild game, hearty stews, mushroom sauces, aged hard cheeses.

If these wines are new to you, they can be a good start in broadening your palate.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

● 2011 Pio Cesare Barolo, DOCG Piedmont (100 percent nebbiolo, 14.5 percent alcohol): dark red hue, hint of oak, complex, shifting flavors of black cherries and anise, big, ripe tannins, hearty and generous yet subtle, capable of significant aging; \$64.

● 2011 Barolo Castiglione DOCG, by Vietti winery (100 percent nebbiolo, 14.85 percent alcohol): floral aromas, flavors of ripe red raspberries and menthol, full body, big, ripe tannins, long finish; \$50.

RECOMMENDED

● 2011 Pio Cesare Barbaresco "Il Bricco" (single vineyard) DOCG (100 percent nebbiolo, 14.5 percent alcohol): hint of toasty oak, complex aromas and flavors of black plums, black coffee and earth, spices and tar, powerful acids and tannins, age-worthy; \$115.

● 2012 Nebbiolo Perbacco, Langhe DOC, by Vietti winery (100 percent nebbiolo, 14.12 percent alcohol): bright ruby hue, aromas and flavors of red plums and cinnamon, firm tannins, smooth finish; \$25.

● 2011 Pio Cesare Barbaresco, DOCG Piedmont (100 percent nebbiolo, 14 percent alcohol): deep red hue, hint of oak, aromas and flavors of black cherries, black coffee, mint and tar, youthful, full body, softening tannins, long, smooth finish; \$64.

