

The Piedmont region of Italy offers affordable wines

Expand your tasting notes with these options from Italy.

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Wine writers and competition judges are a veritable magnet for tough questions: What's the best bottle you ever had? How can you taste and assess 100 wines in a day? What pairs best with artichokes?

But my favorite is this: If you could drink wines from only one region, what would it be?

I used to say the Loire, because that French region has an amazing array of über-food-friendly reds, whites and sparkling wines. Then I went east to Burgundy, because the chardonnays and pinot noirs from there are generally harmony incarnate, sometimes stupendous and often mystical, raising more questions than they answer.

Well, now I have journeyed a bit farther east, just across the border to Italy's Piedmont region. It is renowned for profound reds from Barolo and Barbaresco, but the escalating quality of more affordable reds and whites has sealed the deal for me.

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In fact, my transitional moment came last month via an insanely delicious bottle of Vietti Roero Arneis. Showcasing a grape that almost became extinct — rescued a half-century ago by Alfredo Currado, father of current Vietti winemaker **Luca Currado** — this crisp, vibrant, delectable wine provided as much bliss as any white I have tasted this year. Similar pleasure can be derived with arneis from Bruno Giacosa, Ceretto and Paitin.

Another worthy white comes from the subregion of Gavi, using the cortese grape. The best of these combine bursts of pear and citrus fla-

vors with bracing mineral notes. I especially love Banfi's Vigne Regali Principessa and Enrico Serafino's Gavi di Gavi, and the Villa Sparina, Regali and Giordano Lombardo are worth seeking out, as well.

A couple of more obscure white Piemontese grapes are starting to hit the hinterlands, thanks to savvy and aggressive local importers: nascetta (Elvio Cagno) and favorita (Malvirà and Negro Angelo & Figli). Not only are they great additions to those seeking membership in the Century Club (for those who have tried at least 100 grape varieties), but they're just darn tasty.

Ah, I almost forgot moscato, the sweet white grape that for many of us finds its foremost expression in versions labeled moscato d'Asti. Most domestic renditions are pleasing but simple fruit cocktails. The Piemontese versions tend to be more effervescent and show more backbone and complexity. Look for Elio Perrone, Virgin and the crazy-delicious Saracco.

At almost the opposite end of the spectrum are Piedmont's reds: dry and often quite tannic and/or acidic — but equally delectable. And a bit confusing; this is Italy after all. Cliff's Notes: Dolcetto and Barbera are grapes, while Barolo and Barbaresco are regions.

Dolcetto has the least acid of the bunch, but it's far from the "little sweet one" that is the translation of its name. It's meant to be drunk young and often provides "black" notes: black cherry, blackberry and licorice. Recommended brands: Cantina del Glicine, Cantina del Pino, Réva and Andrea Oberto.

Higher in acidity but still

lowish in tannins, barbera is a crowd-pleaser that often resembles European pinot noir in texture, juiciness and red-fruit flavors. Check out Marchesi di Barolo, La Spinetta Ca Di Pian, Parusso and Andrea Oberto. But for the most part, consumers should be happy with most barberas from Italy.

Which brings us to the "big boys" — although for this palate, Barbarescos tend to be more "feminine" than Barolo, with softer tannins but plenty of oomph. These are spender wines, usually more than \$50 all the way up to hundreds of dollars, but they also rank among the world's foremost wines (think Burgundy, Bordeaux, etc.).

The nebbiolo grape can be an acquired taste. The wines are bigger and bolder than their lightish color would suggest, and the tannins, especially in their youth, can lay a "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" on the palate. Those who don't want to explore and not spend quite so much money should look for wines labeled "Langhe Nebbiolo," from the likes of Malvirà, Sobrero and G.D. Vajra. (Vajra, by the way, has a wonderful "entry-level" Barolo called Albe for around \$40.

Otherwise, be prepared to shell out some serious dollars, and be advised that you might have to wait awhile before popping the cork. But also that compared with the most ballyhooed French regions, there's generally a higher quality-to-price ratio for these wines.

Yes, Virginia (and Minnesota), there can be "value" in \$60-plus wines, such as Barbarescos from Produttori di Barbaresco, Ceretto and Cantina del Pino, or Barolos from Paolo Scavino, G.B. Burlotto and the sublime Paolo Scavino Bricco Ambrogio. There's



much, much more for those with the means.

But exploring Piedmont's many vinous wonders also can be as affordable as it is edifying and entertaining.



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