

Wine Guy: The peerless red wines of Italy's Piedmont

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Piedmont in northwestern Italy arguably is the country's most famous wine region.

That fame is mostly centered on two wines from the Langhe subregion: Barolo and Barbaresco. These wines always are made completely of the indigenous nebbiolo grape. Curiously, nebbiolo appears capable of reaching such heights only in Piedmont, as there are few examples of similar quality produced elsewhere.

There's something about this grape grown in this place as expressed in the resulting wines that testifies to the synergy of grape and terroir. Named after towns in the area, Barolo and Barbaresco are considered among the world's great red wines.

Presenting different expressions of nebbiolo, Barolo most often is characterized as more muscular and tannic, larger scaled, and somewhat austere but with dramatically intense fruit. Barbaresco's more fertile soil often yields less tannic but better balanced wines. Still, both exhibit substantial tannins, enticing cherry fruit and aromas of roses and what has been described as tar.

There are many fine producers, but good values often seem hard to find, as most of the wines approach \$100 a bottle and some exceed that handily. But I found two excellent values that should be available in the U.S.

The 2014 Vietti Barolo Castiglione (\$52) happens to be vegan. The Currado family was among the first to produce single-vineyard Barolo in the 1960s. It's very aromatic and somewhat angular, with firm yet elegant tannins that unfold across the palate.

The 2014 Marchesi di Grésy Barbaresco Martinenga (\$60) also is a fine choice. The di Grésy family's roots in Piedmont date to the 1600s and the vineyard dates to Roman times. Its bright red fruit is accented with rich earth and suggestions of mint, presented with supple tannins and finishing with piercing vibrancy.

If you want a sense of what all the fuss is about at a more affordable price, try Langhe Nebbiolo. Usually featuring grapes from younger vines and sourced from multiple vineyards, wines such as the 2015 Vietti Perbacco (\$26) give a reasonable preview. This one is typically friendly and flavorful with notes of licorice and spice and the structure of a Barolo.

Piedmont is more than nebbiolo, however. Also significant is barbera, the most widely planted grape in the region. A juicy, easy-drinking character with full-bodied fruit, hints of licorice, good acidity but softer tannins, it is an ideal everyday wine. Barbera from the towns Asti and Alba are what you want to buy.

I recently tasted three fine Barbera d'Asti: 2016 Vietti Tre Vigne (\$26) — fresh and sleek, glides across the palate; 2017 Renato Ratti Battaglione (\$20) — notable for deep, lively fruit and lavish mouthfeel; and 2017 Marchesi di Gresy Monte Aribaldo (\$18) — floral notes and fine structure.

Dolcetto is Piedmont's other important variety. The grape is appealing for its exuberant fruitiness and tangy bitterness. The 2016 Marchesi di Gresy Dolcetto d'Alba Monte Aribaldo (\$18) is typically supple and fresh.

There are also several commendable whites wines, which I will review in a future column.