

Piemonte – wine and truffles



By Terry Sheehan

Piemonte in northwestern Italy: a new wine area for me. The wine names – Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera – were familiar. But the area was a new one to explore. A trip by car, through the mountains from Lyon, at the beginning of October, turned out to be a good idea: sunshine, blue skies, good food and interesting wines. And an opportunity to drive around picture-postcard scenery – rolling country with an endless display of hillside vineyards and hilltop villages.

A good choice of location for accommodation and meals, and a convenient centre from which to visit vineyards, was the old city of Alba, about an hour's drive south of Turin – Torino, to give the city its proper Italian name, that big Italian city where they make all those FIAT cars.

Alba's roots date back a few thousand years, to when it was little more than a dwelling place for early European tribes. In about 170 B.C. it became part of the Roman Empire, and by 90 B.C. it had become an important provincial Roman town. Today's Alba is a handsome small city of about 30,000. It looks Italian, but not quite Mediterranean, and it's a great city for walking around. With attractive architecture and many areas reserved for pedestrians, it seems a happy place for strollers – most of whom are eating ice cream at all hours of the day – and their dogs.

I realized that I was back in Italy when I arrived at our hotel and learned that the parking garage was halfway down the block, in the direction from which I had driven. The lady at the hotel reception instructed me to turn around and drive back to it. But, I said, that would have me driving the wrong way on a one-way street. Her raised eyebrows and shrug indicated: So what? I was reminded of something Mussolini once said: it's not impossible to govern Italians, it's merely useless.

October in Alba is festival time – in this case their annual international truffle celebration. The little fungi are found, as in France, by truffle hunters who own

trained dogs, but there's a difference: French truffles are black, whereas most of the ones that are located around Alba are white. The Italians claim that their white truffles are the finer ones. I'm not sure, but somebody must think so – the little white gems were selling last October for roughly \$3,500 a kilo.

Alba is on the same latitude as the part of France's Rhône valley that produces many fine wines, but Piemonte's vineyards are spared the mistral, the arid wind that funnels down the Rhône and they're protected by the mountains that serve as a natural French-Italian border. The region is also sheltered from the northern winds by the high Alps, and, by a coastal range, from the Mediterranean heat.

There's a huge factory in Alba that manufactures chocolate products that carry the firm's name, Ferrero, and that are sold throughout the world. Otherwise, the area's commercial activity centres around the growing of grapes and the making and marketing of wine. And we're talking about quality wine, most of which is red. The vineyards are everywhere. Very few are on level ground; in fact, some of the best grapes are grown on slopes at altitudes about 1,000 feet above sea level. And most of the vines are planted in soil that's clay, with a substantial amount of calcium. Perhaps they grow grapes because their soil is not suited to any other form of agriculture. That wouldn't surprise me; in my travels over the years I've seen world-class vineyards on soil that wouldn't produce a decent crop of carrots. But there's no question about it; Piemonte is a great source of fine wines.

For a start, you have to get used to the lack of consistency in the naming of some Italian wines, including those of Piemonte. Whereas in France, where wines are almost always named after regions, villages or vineyards, the Italians sometimes use grape names, but sometimes not. Two of the best known wine names in Piemonte are Barbaresco and Barbera. Simple? Not really. Barbaresco is the name of a town around which the wines of that name are produced. Barbera, by contrast, is a grape type, but Barbera grapes are in no way related to the wines of Barbaresco.

See what I mean?

And with all of this for a start, I'll be back next month, or the month after, with a close look at the fine red wines of Piemonte, thanks to the warm reception I encountered at my many stops along the way.

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