

## The fine wines of piemonte – Barolo and Barbaresco



**By Terry Sheehan**

Last month's wine thoughts provided an introduction to the wines of Piemonte, based on an enjoyable week that I spent in Alba last October. I had been invited to visit a number of wineries, and I was welcomed everywhere with the warmth that one hopes to find in one's travels.

Piemonte's vineyards cover a large geographic area: pretty scenery, rolling hills and valleys, with vines on virtually every hillside. And some of those hillsides are very steep slopes, where heavy rain can wash some of the topsoil down to the bottom.

The wines of Piemonte break down fairly simply: there are the wines made around the city of Alba, and there are the rest of the Piemonte wines. The reason for this simple distinction is that it is only around Alba that the Nebbiolo grape is grown, and it makes far and away the best of the Piemonte red wines. The other suitable grape types, the best of which are Barbera and Dolcetto, are grown in abundance, but those wines never live up to the wines made with the Nebbiolo grapes.

The Nebbiolo wines are easy to keep track of, because there are only two names to remember: Barolo and Barbaresco, in that order in terms of quality, and price. Barolo and Barbaresco are the names of two small viallages, Barolo about 15 kilometres to the west of Alba, Barbaresco about the same distance to the east, both surrounded by hills that contain thousands of acres of vines.

Anyone who has a working knowledge of Italian will know that the Italian word nebbia means: fog. And therein lies a bit of Piemonte wine lore. It has been known for a long time that the Nebbiolo grape takes some time to reach its peak of ripeness, much longer than the area's other grape types. The local grape growers decided that the grapes that would eventually be called Nebbiolo should not be harvested until the arrival of the autumn fog that lies on the vineyards in the early morning at the end of September or beginning of October. The grapes then have

plenty of sugar, and in fact the wines of Barolo and Barbaresco are required by law to reach 13% alcohol, with no additional sugar permitted.

The recent history of the development of Barolo wines is interesting. Until a couple of decades ago it was customary to ferment the Nebbiolo grapes for a lengthy period – as long as a month – and to leave the wine in wood for three or four years. The result was great wine, eventually. But the initial wine was one that has been described as one of the world's most uncompromising wines – wine that could take as long as 20 years to reach its peak. Much time was required to turn the youthful mouth-puckering tannins into a silky smooth roundness.

Wine lovers who were patient, and who planned ahead, could enjoy fine Barolo wines.

Changes in winemaking techniques were introduced in Barolo and Barbaresco a couple of decades ago. The fermentation time for the Nebbiolo grapes was reduced to about ten days, resulting in wine that was less harsh and that could be aged much more quickly. And the changes were codified in the wine law. Barolo now must be aged three years: two years in wood, followed by one year in the bottle. The result is still a robust, complex and assertive wine, that's ready to drink about four or five years after the harvest, and will reach its peak when it's about seven years old. And it will last for fifteen years or so after that.

All of that, you'll realize, translates into fine wine that's worth waiting for – but it doesn't come cheap. Barolo wines can cost as much as \$60 or \$70, but there are a couple of reasonably priced Barolos at the LCBO. Try Fontanafredda Barolo, made by one of the largest and best of the Barolo wineries. It's a big, fullbodied red wine, rich and flavourful. A good match for a hearty winter evening dinner of pot roast or a slow-cooked leg of lamb. The Fontanafredda Barolo costs about \$30, higher than my usual recommendations, but worth the price.

The wines of Barbaresco are similar in many ways to their 'big brothers' in Barolo, with no grape other than Nebbiolo going into the production. The Barbaresco vinification process is slightly different: only one year in wood, followed by one year in bottle. The resulting wine has a bit less body, and not as long an aging potential, but is undoubtedly good wine. It also improves with aging, and is good value at about half the price of most Barolo wines.

*This article originally appeared in the February 2010 issue of Forever Young Newspaper.*