

Piemonte – more about wine and truffles



By Terry Sheehan

This month's column is the last in a series of articles that were written last October during a thoroughly enjoyable wine trip: several days in Lyon on the French side, followed by a week or so in Piemonte, that northwestern corner of Italy that is the home of many good wines.

Last month's writing was about the wines made around the old city of Alba, the best, by far, of the red wines of Piemonte. They're made with the Nebbiolo grapes, and carry the names of Barolo and Barbaresco, two hill-top villages near Alba.

The wine area of Piemonte is much more than just the area around Alba; the vineyards extend some distance to the north, to somewhat beyond the city of Asti, and to the east in the direction of Tuscany. Anyone interested in visiting Piemonte is advised to choose Alba as a place to stop. It's smaller than Asti, and much more attractive. Asti is a busy and more industrialized city, the home of a number of small companies that manufacture car parts for the gigantic Fiat plant in Torino just to the north.

Moving down the quality scale from the "big names" of Barolo and Barbaresco, the two best red wine grapes in Piemonte are Barbera and Dolcetto. Of the two, the Barbera is more highly regarded, and commands higher prices.

The wines made with the Barbera grape, the most widely grown grape in Piemonte, are dark in colour, slightly tannic when young. Wines that are interesting, good accompaniment for a hearty meal on a winter evening – particularly a meal that leans in the direction of Italian dishes made with tomato-based sauces and plenty of garlic. You'll find a good Barbera in the LCBO, with the Bersano name on the label. The Bersano Barbera sells for \$13, a good buy.

The Dolcetto wine is different. The grapes ripen earlier, and produce wines that are

lower in acidity. They're fragrant, fruity and round – much more approachable when young than the other Piemonte reds. The name Dolcetto, by the way, means “little sweet one”, which refers to the grapes, not the wine, which is dry, like all Italian red wines. Unfortunately, Dolcetto wines are hard to find here.

Piemonte produces a few interesting dry white wines, but you won't find them at the LCBO. The two most prominent white wine grape types are Arneis and Cortese, both indigenous to Piemonte. If you happen to visit the area, the Arneis wines are the better ones to try; they're soft and flavourful, and very reasonably priced.

And that leaves the sweet wines of Piemonte, all of which are made with Muscat grapes – Moscato in Italian. I always think of Muscat wines as the ones whose flavour stays nearer to that of the original grape than any other. The still sweet Moscato wines, quite low in alcohol, are pleasant wines to sip with dessert, or as an aperitif if your taste runs to wines that are on the sweet side.

Finally, there's Asti Spumante, the sparkling wine that's made from the Moscato grape. And they make millions of bottles. When I worked in London many years ago, Asti Spumante was a “must” at office parties, and is still popular around the world as simple inexpensive sparkling wine, most of which is semi-sweet.

A most enjoyable trip: interesting wines, pleasant people, delightful scenery. We ate in some good restaurants and, on one occasion, in a simple restaurant near the railway station in a small town, when nothing else was open. Our lunch companions were a bunch of truck drivers and road workers. The atmosphere was cheerful, and we left quite satisfied with the meal, which cost very little, in any currency.

This series of articles on northwestern Italy's Piemonte and its wines started with a story about the truffle festival that we encountered in Alba at the beginning of October. I'd like to finish with an amusing truffle anecdote related to me at one of the wineries we visited. The winery recently was host to a German wine writer who wanted also to write about the truffle harvest – which is done, of course, by local truffle hunters and their dogs. The journalist met up with a truffle hunter, with dog, but the German chap seemed not to believe that this scruffy mutt was talented enough to seek out and find valuable truffles under the ground. The winery people offered him a demonstration: two truffles were immersed underground at different places on the property, and the dog was let loose to see whether he could find them. The challenge was complicated by the fact that there was a light covering of

snow on the ground. Within minutes the “scruffy mutt” found four truffles, the two “demonstration” truffles, and two more!

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