

Persistently Premier Piemonte

scritto da Karen MacKenzie | 30 Novembre 2018



If Piemonte is to Italy what Burgundy is to France, there is one quite remarkable difference among the people making the wine. Their humility.

Every producer – or more accurately stated, farmer and vintner – visited in the main production regions of Langhe, Roero, and Monferrato had two characteristics in common – a dedication to the preservation of indigenous varieties, and an overarching commitment to making their wines truly by hand. The farmers who grow the grapes harvest the grapes, make the wine, bottle and sell the wine. They make the beds in small agriturismo guest rooms, and prepare homemade meals for their visitors. They sit across the table from you and proudly pour you the end results of their labor.

Piemonte's wines are world class for two reasons: the farmer's respectful harmony with the land and the versatile characteristics of the quintessential Nebbiolo and Barbera grapes grown and supremely expressed in Piemonte. **Nebbiolo** is the dominant variety in five of the region's DOCGs and multiple DOCs. Nebbiolo wines are distinguished by their strong tannins, high acidity and distinctive scent – best described as “tar-like macadam and roses”. A less obvious characteristic, visible only over time, is their tendency to lose color. Within just a few years of vintage, most Nebbiolo

wines begin fading from deep, violet-tinged ruby to a beautiful siena.

Barbera is the second work-horse red grape most associated with Piemonte. Thought to be native to the Monferrato hills near Asti and Alessandria, Barbera is comfortable on the slopes of the Langhe, in the heart of Barolo. Barbera's best known DOC appellations include Barbera d'Asti, Barbera d'Alba, and Barbera del Monferrato. Once considered every day table wine among the peasant class, today's Piemontese winemakers are extracting elegant, velvety wines with Barbera.

Elena, Giovanni, Margherita and Marcello Rava live above a pietra da cantoni, or a winery carved in stone, chiseled by Elena's great grandparents in the Monferrato hillside village of Cella Monte. The family farms organically; Elena cooks vegetarian meals for guests who stay overnight at their room-by-room, lovingly-restored home that perfectly compliment their wonderfully-balanced portfolio of organic wines. Every bottle is touched on multiple occasions by the six hands of Elena, Giovanni, and daughter Margherita, as son Marcello is finishing his education. Aging Spumanti, made in the brut metodo classico style, are carried up a ladder by hand for remuage, partial disgorgement and labeling. They make a Grignolino "Poggeto" which is superb, complete with nuances of currants, rose, almond and cinnamon. Grignolino, once a noble indigenous grape in Monferrato, is making quite a comeback thanks to the efforts of farmers like the Ravas. Margherita believes that Grignolino will become a major Italian offering in the United States, because it's a new experience for a new generation of wine drinkers. www.lacasaccia.biz.

Women continue to ascend the winemaking ladder in Piemonte. Among them, Mariuccia Borio, proprietress of Cascina Castlet in Costigliole d'Asti. Mariuccia inherited the winery from her father in 1970, and has invested her heart, soul and mind to create absolutely beautiful wine, exceptionally packaged. As she succeeded with the wines, she acquired all the land once owned by her family hectar by hectar. According to importer Fran Kysela of Kysela Pere et Fils, LTD in Virginia, Cascina Castlet's producing the best of Piemonte for a modest cost. Try her Passum Barbera, appellation Barbera d'Asti, brimming

with dark berry, violet and tobacco aromas. The savory, structured mouthfeel delivers black cherry with clove and cardamom accents, perky acidity and subtle tannins. www.cascinacastlet.com.

Consider young Sara Vezza Saffirio, the daughter of legendary Josetta Saffirio, perhaps the earliest female pioneer in Piemonte to take the helm of the winery run by her family for five generations. Sara balances the demands of raising four children under the age of five while running Azienda Agricola Josetta Saffirio in Barolo's Monforte d'Alba.

Sara oversees the operation of the winery, and is very much in the vanguard of environmental sustainability. She manages five hectares of vineyards producing classic Piemontese wines, including a lively and provocative Nebbiolo d'Alba Spumante Metodo Classico. The best value hands down will be discovered in a bottle of 2015 Barbera d'Alba Superiore for \$20. If you are very lucky, you may be able to source their prized Barolo Persiera, as they produce a mere 100 magnums. This single-vineyard beauty is consistently wonderful vintage after vintage. Dark cherry, concentrated rose with graceful tannins proliferate. www.josettasaffirio.com.

The Incisa family has been making wine in the Monferrato region of Rocchetta Tanaro for over a thousand years and are considered one of Italy's most illustrious winemaking families. The Marchesi Incisa della Rocchetta 2016 Sant'Emiliano (Barbera d'Asti Superiore) is wondrous. Aromas of lilac, plum and clove first acquaint the nose, and dark berry, concentrated cherry, and clove are bracketed by sumptuous tannins. "Marchesi Incisa wines, produced in the Monferrato by one of Italy's oldest winemaking families, are exceptional across the board. Top quality at very moderate price points. Troy Kuhn, CEO of Austin, Texas-based importer Serendipity Wines, said "I've been importing these wines since 2006 primarily into Texas and this Spring, we hope to open up another 10 to 15 states."

The Marchesi Incisa La Corte Chiusa Agriturismo lodging experience was superb, with winery tours, cooking classes and truffle hunting as optional activities. www.marchesiincisawines.it.

It took a few twists and turns to get to Azienda Agricola

Castagnero, but the journey was ever so worth it. Proprietor, vintner and brewer Daniele Nori is exuberantly pursuing his passion for both winemaking and beer brewing, and his enthusiasm was infectious. Daniele left behind a high-flying international career in aerospace to join his wife on her family's farm. High in the hills in Agliano Terme, one of the areas most suitable for Barbera in Asti, we tasted his small production but splendidly intense Barbera d'Asti Superiore DOCG Cuntacc 2015 and the perfectly balanced perfumed Barbera d'Asti DOCG Barbisin 2016. His vineyards are among those of Langhe-Roero and Monferrato declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. www.vinicastagnero.it.

In the hills of Novello in the heart of Barolo's Langhe, we met brothers Mauro and Savio Daniele, who both worked as winemakers for the large Ceretto winery before deciding to go it alone and start Le Strette in 1997. They have assembled 3.5 hectares of vineyards and produce just 20,000 bottles per vintage in a small cantina. You'd think that without substantial funding and lacking economies of scale, life would be really tough for a producer like this, but in a few years Le Strette has achieved recognition in Italy and beyond for the sheer quality of their wines.

Though Mauro and Savio have received high marks for wines such as the 2016 Barbera d'Alba Superiore (superb acidity, structure and color), they are most proud of resurrecting the indigenous Nascetta, a lovely, full-bodied white wine grape that had almost disappeared. Now, Nascetta is considered the best expression of white wine from the entire Langhe. We tasted a 2002 that still had many years ahead in the bottle. Le Strette's Nascetta is as good as a fine Sauterne, at a substantially lower cost. www.lestrette.com.

When we left the little Le Strette, Mauro demurely told us that we were now going to experience a "very different style" of winemaking. He led us down the hill from Novello to the ultra-futuristic winery L'Astemia Pentita in the Barolo, where he is the consulting winemaker. Irony is the key to interpretation of the design of L'Astemia Pentita ("The Penitent Teetotaler"), envisioned by architect Gianni Arnaudo. The building is essentially two enormous wine cases stacked on an angle, and that structure is carried forward in the wines. They reflect a young, hip winemaking style, appreciated by

young, hip sippers. Open a bottle of L'Astemia Pentita's Barolo Terlo. The wine seems more modern in style with a touch of minerality, though it's aged three years in large oak casks with 30-35 days of maceration. www.astemiapentita.it

Rocche of Castiglione Falletto is the steepest and highest area in Barolo's Langhe, and considered by many as the most prestigious vineyard in the Barolo. There, the Monchiero family produces full-bodied Barolos with intense aromas with elegance. The tiny Rocche cru consists of eight hectares; the Monchiero's have nurtured the best wines from just one hectare, as Vittorio Monchiero's parents and uncle did before him. You must try their 90+ consistently-rated Rocche de Castiglione Barolo, complete with Rose petal, baked herb, with notes of balsam. That's a masterpiece you want to age for eight to fifteen years or more. www.monchierovini.it.

Last but absolutely not least, Podere Ruggeri Corsini, nestled in a quiet valley not far from the center of Monforte d'Alba, in the southern Barolo. The estate, encompassing nine hectares, is owned by a husband-and-wife team – Loredana Addari and Nicola Argamante. Both have advanced degrees in agronomy, viticulture, and oenology. Their wines have a warmth, expressiveness and smartness to them. According to U.S. importer Roy Cloud of Vintage 59, "Podere Ruggeri Corsini make intelligent, sophisticated wines at modest price points, and that's why we like them." The first wine to be imported into the United States is their wonderful "Armujan" Barbera d'Alba DOC Superiore, which retails for \$28-\$30. It should age beautifully for 8 to 10 years. Also try their Langhe DOC Nebbiolo, which has a full-bodied finesse. At \$23-\$25, it's a steal. Finally, splurge on a must-have wine – Barolo Bussia "Corsini" DOCG. Magnificent. Lay it down for 12 to 20 years and spend every day in anticipation. www.ruggericorsini.it.

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