

WINE

North Piedmont Saves the Best Wine for Last



Eric Pfanner/International Herald Tribune

A nebbiolo vineyard in the Gattinara region of Piedmont, Italy.

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GATTINARA, ITALY — A black-and-white photograph in the Antoniolo winery shows the vineyards of this town in northern Italy 100 years ago, when vines seemed to cover every inch of the Alpine foothills that begin to rise here, along the banks of the Sesia River. The scene is different now. Only a few patches of vineyards are left, tucked away in the forests that climb toward the snowy peaks along the Swiss border.

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Antoniolo wines also are made from the nebbiolo grape variety that plays the leading role in the best red wines in the region.

Few wine regions have experienced as sharp a decline as northern Piedmont, where the vineyards of Gattinara and neighboring towns like Ghemme and Boca used to cover more than 40,000 hectares, or about 100,000 acres. Like other European vineyards, these were decimated by successive plagues of phylloxera, a pest that feeds on grape vines. But there was less incentive here to replant with phylloxera-resistant vines, because factories and textile mills in nearby cities like Novara and Milan were luring away the agricultural work force with higher-paying jobs.

Now, a mere 1,500 hectares of vines are left. But what northern Piedmont lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality, originality and authenticity. As word spreads, these vineyards are putting themselves back on the maps of wine lovers interested in trying something different.

“Today, people are looking for more traditional wines, wines with a natural rapport with the place where the grapes came from,” said Lorella Zoppis Antoniolo, one of two siblings who run the family-owned winery. The valley of the Sesia, which descends from the glaciers of Monte Rosa, the second-highest peak in the Alps after Mont Blanc, delivers.

In the old photo, Gattinara, with its concentration of vines, resembles the better known Langhe region of Piedmont, about 150 kilometers, or 95 miles, to the south, around the city of Alba. Langhe is home to some of the greatest wines in Italy, including Barolo and Barbaresco. Because of the renown of those names, Langhe kept expanding, even as northern Piedmont faded.

Even though their fortunes have diverged, Langhe and northern Piedmont share one important thing — the nebbiolo grape variety, which plays the leading role in the best red wines of both of these regions. Nebbiolo, sometimes called spanna in northern Piedmont, is a fickle variety, seemingly ill at ease anywhere outside of Piedmont and a few stretches of neighboring Lombardy.

At its best, nebbiolo is one of the world’s greatest red varieties, producing wines of considerable structure and power, despite their relatively light color. Because of its perfumed complexity, it is sometimes compared with pinot noir, but nebbiolo is a more brooding, tightly wound wine, with smoky, mysterious undertones.

“Nebbiolo is not a wine, it is a drug,” one producer in Piemonte said over lunch, insisting that his name not be attached to such a politically incorrect sentiment. His eyes then lit up as he buried his nose in his glass and inhaled deeply.

Most people who fall for nebbiolo get their introduction to the variety through one of the wines of the Langhe — Barolo, Barbaresco or the more modest wines labeled by the variety. Not only are they more plentiful than the wines of northern Piedmont, but they are also, sometimes, more accessible than their northerly counterparts, which can be a bit austere, at least when they are young.

The reason for this became clear during a visit in February to both regions. As I walked through the vineyards in Langhe, my feet sank deep into the greenish-yellow, clay-limestone soil, a mix that produces rich, full-bodied, mellow wines — to the extent that any wine made from nebbiolo can be considered rich, full-bodied or mellow.

A day later, in Gattinara, Ms. Antoniolo, preparing to take me for a spin through her vineyards, looked quizzically at my dirty boots. “You won’t need those here,” she said.

Indeed, the terroir of Gattinara and neighboring towns is very different from that of Langhe, ranging in color from reddish-brown to nearly black. In places, it is of volcanic origin, and the water drains away quickly from the steep, rocky slopes. Nothing squishy here; the word “osso,” applied to vineyard names in the local dialect, means “bone” in Italian.

The acidity in the soil is also among the highest of any vineyard in Italy. As a result, the wines are sometimes lighter in look and feel than those of the Langhe, but they can have a thrilling intensity. In good years, the best wines can rival those of Barolo or Barbaresco, usually at a considerably lower price.

The business conditions can be as tough as the soil. To assemble a modest-size estate of eight hectares in Boca, one newcomer to the region, Christoph Künzli, had to sign about 80 separate purchase agreements, so fragmented was the ownership of the land.

“That’s why you won’t see any big players coming here,” said Mr. Künzli, a former wine importer from Switzerland, “only people who are a little bit crazy, like me.” Mr. Künzli said he “fell in love” with the wines of Boca during a visit to the region, when he tasted old vintages from one of the last producers in town, Antonio Cerri.

Mr. Cerri died in 1997, and Mr. Künzli bought the vineyards, which now form part of his estate, called Le Piane. With the vineyards, Mr. Künzli also acquired a stock of old wines that were still in the barrel. He has bottled some of those. A 1990 wine from Mr. Cerri shows what attracted Mr. Künzli to the area: It certainly shows signs of its age, but the velvety texture, spicy complexity and mouthwatering vestiges of red fruit are a testament to timeless winemaking and a beautiful terroir.

“For me, this is a great wine region, not a good one,” Mr. Künzli said.

While Boca, Ghemme and Gattinara share certain qualities, there are subtle differences, too. The wines of Gattinara seem to be the ripest, with the sweetest fruit and the smoothest tannins, making them the most Barolo-like. Ghemme wines are often more linear and direct; those of Boca may be somewhere in between.

There are also a handful of other tiny appellations in northern Piedmont that specialize in nebbiolo, including Lessona, Bramaterra, Sizzano, Fara and Carema, but wines from these areas can be hard to find outside Italy. More widely seen are two regional designations, Colline Novaresi and Coste della Sesia, which allow a broader range of grapes.

Mr. Künzli makes one wine from more than a dozen varieties, all planted together in one of the old vineyards he acquired, and another that consists largely of croatina, a rarely seen grape that yields dark-colored, powerful, slightly more rustic wines than nebbiolo. Each of these, like his Boca, is unusual and delicious.

To Alberto Francoli, who runs a family-owned distillery that also owns one of the larger wine producers in the area, Torracchia del Piantavigna, the proliferation of appellations is problematic, because it confuses consumers. How many people have tried a Gattinara, a Ghemme or a Boca, let alone a Lessona or a Bramaterra, and how many can tell the difference between them?

Yes, these are fairly obscure wines. But they are worth hunting down, for there was a Darwinian aspect to the shrinkage in the region’s vineyards.

“The good thing is that only the best sites are left, and you can see this in the wines,” Mr. Francoli said.