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The 2010 Italy issue

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PIEDMONT'S ODD COUPLE

Barbera and Dolcetto make excellent, food-friendly, good-value wines. They've lived in Nebbiolo's shadow for far too long, says **TOM MARESCA**

Long ago, as I was preparing for my first serious wine trip to Piedmont, a canny veteran of the Italian wine trade told me: 'Barolo and Barbaresco are what they sell; Barbera and Dolcetto are what they drink.'

Back then, that cynical observation turned out to be spot on – for many Piedmont residents, Barolo and Barbaresco were commodities too costly for home consumption. But surprisingly, my most recent incursion showed that it continues to be true 35 years later, even though prosperity has made the region's two premium wines more readily available to the locals.

The reason? Well, economics certainly continue to play a role: both Barbera and Dolcetto remain far less expensive than either Barolo or Barbaresco – a fact that shrewd wine lovers everywhere ought to weigh heavily in these economically parlous times. But a week of tasting my way through the Langhe, the Piedmont hills that constitute home base for Barbera and Dolcetto, showed me that a whole other battery of facts accounts for the continuing popularity of these two humbler wines in their homeland.

Nearly noble

Most importantly, Barbera and Dolcetto are 'humbler' only in comparison to the grand Nebbiolo-based wines they co-exist with. Both boast distinctly different flavour profiles, and each – as every Piemontesi will proudly tell you – tastes equally characteristic of the territory. They both match beautifully with all sorts of foods, particularly with some of Piedmont's superb *antipasti* and *primi*, be

it steak tartare, tagliarini with a meat sauce, risotto con funghi, or ravioli with butter and sage. Further, both wines can be drunk day in and day out. In fact, if the Nebbiolo-based wines didn't exist, Barbera and Dolcetto would very likely be stars in their own right: they have been described as 'nearly noble' grapes for years, and many growers do not agree with the 'nearly' tag. Combine this with the modest prices, and you've discovered the value side of Piedmont wine.

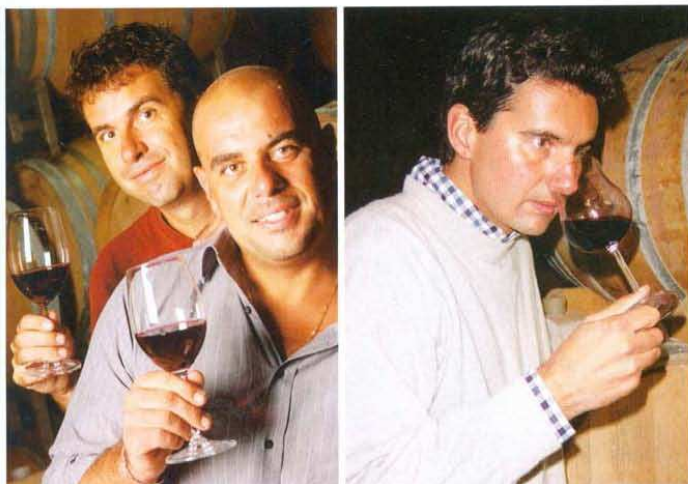
Taste wise, Barbera and Dolcetto claim the middle ground. Freisa and Grignolino undisputably own the light end of Piedmont's red-wine spectrum, and Nebbiolo claims the heavyweight championship, but the middle ground – in weight, intensity, style and substance – belongs to Barbera and Dolcetto.

Both grapes tend to yield wines that are dark, richly coloured and scented, but there the resemblance ends. Relatively low tannins and high acidity distinguish Barbera, giving its sour cherry/berry fruit a bracing raciness, and making it super food-friendly. Carlo Revello, winemaker at the family firm, explains his affection for the variety: 'Maybe it's a generational thing. My father used to drink Dolcetto every day. My brothers and I prefer the fruitiness and acidity of Barbera.' That combination of low tannin and high acidity, plus its rich colour, also makes Barbera a tempting complement for winemakers to the normally tannin-rich and colour-deficient Nebbiolo.

To see how potent that blend can be, witness Angelo Gaja's former cru Barbarescos, which he has declassified to Langhe Rosso since he began blending



BARBERA AND DOLCETTO



Above: Lorenzo and Carlo Revello are advocates of Barbera, which Pietro Ratti (right) says is a grape that shows the hand of the winemaker. It excels in Monferrato (below)



5%–8% Barbera into each. That same high acidity and low tannin also leaves Barbera highly receptive to vinification techniques that exploit differing degrees of exposure to oak – so the wine has become a darling of experimentalists, with the result that Barbera blends far and away lead the pack of “Super Piemontesi” wines (a phrase that all Piemontesi despise and never use). According to Pietro Ratti, owner of Renato Ratti winery, and who has just completed several highly successful years as president of the Alba

‘Dolcetto is gentler than Barbera – a warm hug rather than a brisk handshake’

Consorzio: ‘Barbera reflects the hand of the winemaker. He can determine the kind of wine he wants, which you can’t really do with our other grapes.’

Dolcetto goes in another direction entirely. ‘Dolcetto isn’t like Barbera,’ says Valter Fissore, winemaker at Cognò. ‘It’s not an easy wine to work with. You have to be extra careful to preserve its freshness, its cleanliness, the purity of its fruit. Freshness, particularly, is essential to Dolcetto.’ Lower in acidity and higher in tannins than Barbera, Dolcetto’s fruit often tastes strawberry-like, with peppery undertones. It is rounder in the mouth than Barbera, and gentler, with a less aggressive, more welcoming attack – a warm hug rather than a brisk handshake. Its tannins, though abundant, are typically quite soft. As Fissore says: ‘In Piedmont, we drink Dolcetto every day; it’s a daily wine because it’s very easy to drink, and it still lets you work.’

In the zone

Unlike the Langhe-based wines, which generally bear the names of the places they are grown (Barolo, Barbaresco, Gattinara, Ghemme and so on), the widely planted Barbera and Dolcetto are always called just that – the names of the grapes from which they’re made. To find out where they come from in Piedmont, you have to look to their DOCs and DOCGs, of which there are many – a source of simultaneous joy and confusion. The two largest designated areas for Barbera, and those most commonly available in foreign markets, are Alba and Asti, the former normally fuller-bodied >

BARBERA AND DOLCETTO



Above: Quinto Chionetti, who produces a pure style of Dolcetto. Top: Mario Olivero of Marchesi Alfieri believes that the best Barberas can age for up to 15 years

and rounder, the latter generally leaner, more acidic, racier. Monferrato, a zone north-northeast of both Alba and Asti, provides another very significant base for Barbera: the area is hillier, more forested, and more rural than Alba or Asti, with soils quite different from both. The soils produce wines that are midway in body between the Barberas of Alba and Asti, with the same abundant fruit of both, but with a special mineral inflection that marks them off from either. No zone is regarded as better than the others, just different, though many winemakers concede that Monferrato has a vocation for Barbera. Fabrizio Iuli of Iuli explains: 'We have distinctly stratified soils here – you can see *terra bianca* and *terra rossa* with the naked eye – so we can work different soils for different effects.' He adds: 'With Barbera, terroir depends 90% on the producer and only 10% on the soil.'

For Dolcetto, there are even more designations than for Barbera, since many

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THE BEST OF PIEDMONT, ON A BUDGET

It is important to bear in mind that almost every serious winemaker in Alba and Asti also usually produces at least one Barbera and one Dolcetto. If they make multiple Barberas, almost certainly one will be barreled and more costly than the same maker's 'basic' Barbera. That basic Barbera, like every winemaker's basic Dolcetto, almost invariably offers very good value for money and is pretty much a staple of every producer – so this list of good-value names is very arbitrary



Einaudi Another large, long-established company producing the whole range of Piedmont wines at almost every price point. Particularly good value are its Dolcetto di Dogliani and its basic Piedmont Barbera. **L&S; Try**



Marchesi Alfieri This fine house can be regarded as a Barbera specialist. Barbera d'Asti Alfiera tops its list: sourced from a single vineyard containing the estate's oldest vines, it is produced only in the finest harvests, and is costly – but worth it. The Barbera d'Asti La Tota is produced from all the estate's Barbera vineyards and represents excellent value. **Dec**



Bersano This large, long-established firm produces a whole gamut of wines, including several Barberas, all from the Asti zone, but with slight variations in style (such as Costalunga, Superiore Nizza, Superiore Generala). All represent solid value. **UK agent: Ali**

Ca' Viola This is the home estate of consulting winemaker Giuseppe Caviola. It is famous in the zone for its award-winning Barberas and Dolcettos, all of which are somewhat more expensive than 'basic' wines and worth every penny of the extra expense. Look out for Dolcetto d'Alba Barturot and Vilot, Barbera d'Alba Brichet, and Langhe Rosso Bric du Luv (95% Barbera, 5% Nebbiolo). **NwG**

Marchesi di Barolo This distinguished, large firm makes everything from fine cru Barolo to the humblest Barbera – one of which, a lovely Barbera del Monferrato called Maraia, constitutes a real bargain. Further up the scale in quality and (still quite fair) price are its two Alba Barberas, Paialgal and Ruvei. Also excellent quality and value are its two Alba Dolcettos, Madonna di Como and (more complex and pricier) Boschetti. **Vsm, Fri**



Chiarlo Michele Chiarlo produces, in addition to some lovely cru Barolos, two distinctive Barberas. The Barbera d'Asti Superiore La Court takes all the prizes and commands a high price to match, but the Barbera d'Asti Superiore Le Orme sells for a fraction of its cost, and provides solid Barbera character and pleasure. **HaL**

Pecchenino Two brothers, Attilio and Orlando, took over the family estate a few years ago and quickly moved its wines into the top rank of the Dogliani zone. Their Dolcetto di Dogliani San Luigi is great value; the prize-winning Dolcetto di Dogliani Siri d'Jermu and Dolcetto di Dogliani Bricco Botti cost more, and are worth it. **Wtd**



Renato Ratti Famous for its lovely Barolos, the house also produces classic Alba Barbera and Dolcetto at very fair prices. Look for the lovely-fruited Dolcetto Columbè and Barbera Torriglione. **Buc**

Chionetti Quinto Chionetti is a regional treasure, and his two Dolcettos – Dolcetto di Dogliani Briccolero and Dolcetto di Dogliani San Luigi – show, in its purest form, everything that Dolcetto has to give – at reasonable prices. Would that every winemaker gave such quality and value. **N/A UK; +33 0173 71179**

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BARBERA AND DOLCETTO

small areas – Ovada, for instance – have won their own DOC, but Dolcetto d'Alba still constitutes the chief zone and style. It is followed closely by Dolcetto di Dogliani, a very small area not far from Alba, centered on the Valle di San Luigi and hills surrounding the town of Dogliani. This tiny zone has a special aptitude for Dolcetto, making wines with bucketsful of fruit and greater-than-normal acidity – softer, less tannic, more berryish than Dolcetto d'Alba. The grand old man of this micro-zone, Quinto Chionetti, of the eponymous winery, offers the view that Alba's Dolcettos are 'Nebbiolised,' while Dogliani's are the pure thing.

Dolcettos are best drunk within five years, although exceptional vintages can last up to 10 years. Cellaring won't hurt a wine, but it won't substantially improve it, either. Barbera is the opposite. Its high acidity enables it to live long and stay fresh for many years. Because there is no uniform release date for either of these wines, you will find many different vintages of both on the shelves. This is not a problem: only 2002 was a bad vintage for either, and anything younger than that should still be drinking well.

Mario Olivero, winemaker at Marchesi Alfieri, says flatly, 'Barbera can age for 15 years with good character.' I can vouch for

that: I've enjoyed 20-year-old Barberas that still had lots of life and fruit. But the key fact is that you don't have to cellar Barbera to enjoy it. Sure, it will last, and it will be very interesting to drink – but it won't change dramatically beyond what it was as a young wine. Both Barbera and Dolcetto are wines meant to be drunk young and fresh, with all sorts of food – perfect wines for immediate gratification. From the economic to the gastronomic, they are the wines of the moment. **D**

Tom Maresca specialises in the wines of Italy. His most recent book is La Tavola Italiana (Trafalgar Square, £10.89)

BARBERA AND DOLCETTO INNOVATORS: THE NAMES DARING TO BE DIFFERENT



Boroli A fast-rising, family-owned estate with properties in the right places (often smack in the middle of prime Barolo vineyards), Boroli produces a lovely Dolcetto d'Alba Madonna di Como, two Alba Barberas (Quattro Fratelli and Fagnani) and a notable Barbera/Nebbiolo blend, Langhe Rosso Anna. **UK agents: BWL, Old**



Braida This is the estate that created modern Barbera. The late Giacomo Bologna was the first to experiment with dramatically restricting yields and vinifying Barbera in barrique: the result was Bricco dell' Uccellone, still a benchmark for the grape. The estate is now run by Bologna's son and daughter, and Bricco dell' Uccellone has many siblings: Barbera del Monferrato La Monella (inexpensive and charming), Barbera d'Asti Montebruna (fragrant and vivacious), Barbera d'Asti Bricco della Bigotta (a big, polished Barbera), Barbera d'Asti Ai Suma (for lovers of powerhouse wines: a big, almost super-ripe Barbera), and Il Bacialé (a characterful and fruity blend of Barbera and two or three international varieties). **Gau, L&W, Nsn, SoC, Tan**

Cogno Nadia Cogno inherited this property from her father Elvio, a winemaker of great repute. The wines are now made by her husband Valter Fissore, who continues to produce the whole line of Alba specialities. His

Barbera d'Alba Bricco dei Merli, although a touch costly, thoroughly justifies its price by its style and depth (especially in 2007, a great year for Barbera). His Dolcetto d'Alba Vigna del Mandorlo is simply and straightforwardly great value. I found Cogno's Montegrilli, a half-and-half blend of co-fermented Barbera and Nebbiolo, potentially a great wine, showing real ageability and great balance and complexity. **Pas**

Iuli Another rapidly rising star, Iuli is small, family-owned (Fabrizio Iuli is the self-taught winemaker) and something of a Barbera specialist. He makes three Barberas, all of which he ages much longer than normal before release: the basic Barbera del Monferrato Umberta (light-bodied and mineral-inflected), then Rossore (darker, smoother, fuller) and finally Barabba (30 months in barrique, yet still tasting of fresh, dark fruit). He also makes an intriguing 50:50 blend of Barbera and locally grown Nebbiolo, Malidea, which may remind Piedmont fans of the flavours and elegance of Ghemme. **www.iuli.it**



Pio Cesare A few years ago, this prestigious and traditional Alba house took the bold step of consigning some prime Barolo vineyards to Barbera – a bit of a local scandal at the time. The result is Barbera d'Alba Fides, a monumental wine, usually of very generous proportions. **MMD**

Poderi Colla No estate could be more firmly rooted in the Langhe than this

one, run by the brother and daughter of the near-legendary Beppe Colla. They make the whole range of Piedmont wines: Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera (Barbera d'Alba Costa Bruna), and Dolcetto (Dolcetto d'Alba Pian Balbo). Most notable, however, is the pioneering blend of Dolcetto (85%) and Nebbiolo (15%), the much-honoured Bricco del Drago. **BoW**

Revello The Revello brothers' vineyards and winery are located in the heart of La Morra. In addition to award-winning cru Barolos, they also produce the very sleek and stylish Barbera d'Alba Ciabot du Re and L'Insieme, a blend of Barbera, Nebbiolo and Cabernet. Their line also includes very moderately priced basic Barbera d'Alba and Dolcetto d'Alba. **Gdh**

Rocche dei Manzoni Operated by the heirs of the much-missed Valentino Migliorini, this estate still produces the Langhe Rosso Bricco Manzoni, once a pioneering mix of Barbera and Nebbiolo and now a benchmark for all such non-traditional blends. **Dec**

Vietti This long-established, family-owned firm makes the whole range of Alba wines (and a few with Asti designations) and makes them very well indeed. The line-up includes several top-flight Barberas: Barbera d'Alba Scarrone and Scarrone Vigna Vecchia, and, especially, Barbera d'Asti Superiore Nizza La Crena. Three 'basic' wines, Barbera d'Alba Tre Vigne, Barbera d'Asti Tre Vigne and Dolcetto d'Alba Tre Vigne (three different vineyards in each case) represent superb value. **Vin**

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