



Jul 14 2019

12:00PM ET

Source:

San Antonio Express-
News

Market Name:

USA

Wine; How the Piemonte's once-humble nebbiolo grape remade its image

Not so long ago, as in well less than a century ago, grape growers in the Piemonte in northwest Italy were mostly subsistence farmers, scratching out a living selling their fruit in bulk to cooperatives. Then, World War II made a mess of the region's economy - its industrial center, Turin, was badly bombed - and the world's wine consumption, outside of France and Italy at least, was minuscule compared what it is today. You couldn't have found one American in a hundred, or probably a thousand, who had even heard of Barolo or Barbaresco. But those vineyards in the vertiginous rolling hills of the Langhe, south of Turin, had an inherent value their owners couldn't have imagined back in the day. Once global wine culture began to evolve, starting in the mid-1980s and cellar practices followed suit, the nebbiolo grape took its rightful place on everybody's short list of top-drawer varieties. Many barberas and dolce. os, as well as the white wines made from arneis and erbaluce, must be taken seriously, too, whether from the Langhe or the neighboring Roero. In fact, barbera from the new DOCG (Denomination of Controlled Origin) Nizza in the Ast region is now considered Grand Cru caliber, which represents a remarkable remaking of the once-humble grape's image. The earth beneath the vines in Barolo and Barbaresco ranks among the most expensive agricultural real estate on the planet, rivaling Burgundy, Bordeaux and Napa Valley. This would be confirmed when, in 2017, Poderi & Cantine Oddero purchased 1.8 acres in the Monvigliero cru of Barolo for way north of a million dollars. And the really big news in that transaction was that longtime grower Giovanni Corino had actually put his land up for sale. Vineyard property in the Langhe almost never changes hands. (No do family-owned wineries, although the prominent producer Vietti was purchased by American grocery store magnate Kyle Krause in 2015.) So unique is the Langhe terroir that it has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. "My hands were shaking," Isabella Oddero admitted, "when I signed the check." The Oddero "brand" ranks among the oldest in the Piemonte dating to the 1878 vintage, but it wasn't until Isabella's prescient grandfather began acquiring outstanding vineyard tracks in the early 1970s for a veritable song - certainly compared to what their new plot of gold in Monvigliero cost - that Oddero's modern business began taking shape. At about the same time, the man who became the Piemonte's most iconic producer, Angelo Gaja was starting to change pretty much everything - although not without pushback. Inspired in part by a conversation he'd had with Robert Mondavi, Gaja concluded that fundamental changes were needed to make nebbiolo fashionable with sophisticated global palates. For starters, it needed to be easier to drink when young. Gaja released his first single-vineyard wine with the 1967 Sor San Lorenzo and he later vinified his 1975 Barbarescos in French barriques that soften the varietal's potent, in-your-face tannins. He even went so far as to plant cabernet and chardonnay. The traditionalists - not to mention the government bureaucrats - were mortified, but Gaja refused to yield and today he belongs on any oenophile's Mount Rushmore of producers, having truly reinvented the wheel in the Langhe. The globe-trotting Bruno Ceretto, in turn, proved to be a master marketer, figuring out as fast back as the early 1960s how important it was to get up close and personal with his potential customers, particularly in the U.S. Ceretto's hosting a legendary dinner in 1986 at the Four Seasons Hotel in New York, not so long after the whole of Italy's wine reputation had been badly wounded by a scandal involving methanol-laced bottles, is remembered as a significant turning point for how Barolo and Barbaresco would be perceived - at a time when too many Americans still thought the be-all, end-all Italian wine was cheap Chianti in a wicker-clad bottle. It didn't hurt that Ceretto could present his outstanding 1982 Barolo Bricco Rocche, one of the most seductive wines I've ever had the privilege, never mind pleasure, of tasting. Then there were the game-changing young guns of that era such as Bruno Rocca in Barbaresco, whose trademark "feather" label came onto the scene with his decision to stop selling the Rocca grapes and start making Rocca wine, which debuted with the 1978 vintage. The image is that of a writing quill, representing the wondrous story the wine inside the bottle has to tell, that of the symbiotic relationship between the Langhe's life-blood vineyards and the people who have tended to them for centuries in the long shadow of the Alps. Folks who sell wine, fortunately, are well aware of my affinity for nebbiolo and the other Piemontese grapes. I've singled out a couple from respected producers here that recently passed muster with my team. The Rocca and Gaja wines have good distribution - sadly, less so Ceretto and Oddero for the moment - and I'd heartily recommend trying any that you might encounter on a store shelf or a restaurant list. The good news is the across-the-board consistency, from one vintage to the next, is an absolute given for all of the above. But, no, they're not cheap. The Langhe superstars still proudly call themselves farmers, but the "subsistence" adjective is no longer applicable. **2014 Marchesi di Barolo della Tradizione Barolo Overall score: 19 (9 for quality, 10 for value) It's a blend of nebbiolo grapes harvested from the 430 prime vineyards owned by the Abbona family, which, in 1929 took control of the historic winery overlooking the Marchesi's landmark castle in the heart of the town of Barolo. Price: \$47.49 at Spec's. The 2013 Marchesi di Barolo Cannubi (one of Barolo's most celebrated Grand Crus) also earned a unanimous recommendation from our tasters. It's \$99.99 at Spec's. 2013 Pio Cesare Barolo Overall score: 18.5 (9.1 for quality, 10 for value Sourced from seven different Grand Cru vineyard sites but primarily Serralunga d'Alba, it checks all the classic Barolo boxes. Pio Cesare, one of the Piemonte's most iconic names, has been producing wines since 1881. The estate is run today by Pio Boffa, Pio Cesare's great-grandson. Price: \$63.64 at Spec's. The 2013 Pio Cesare Barbaresco scored almost identically and sells for \$79.79 at Spec's. sportywineguy@outlook.com twitter.com/sportywineguy**