

ROBERSON WINE FINE WINE TASTINGS

NEBBIOLO MASTERCLASS

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NEBBIOLO THE GRAPE

NEBBIOLO

This enigmatic red grape is responsible for some of the world's finest and most long lived wines, with a reputation for quality and complexity that is familiar to wine lovers throughout the world. Why then is Nebbiolo so rarely seen planted outside of its native North West Italy? Why has Nebbiolo's global status as one of the wine world's treasures not led to the same internationalisation as Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir or Pinot Grigio? The answer lies in Nebbiolo's sensitivity to its surroundings, as this is a variety with a fondness for its homeland and the ideal growing conditions found there.

As far back as the 13th century there are explicit mentions of a grape called 'Nibiolo' being grown for wine production in the hills behind Turin. By this time Nebbiolo was a firm fixture in the viticulture of the region, and it went on to establish such a reputation that by the 15th century it was illegal to cut down a Nebbiolo vine in parts of what is now Barolo. The punishment for this heinous crime could be as bad as having your hand cut off or even death by hanging! This was not a penalty that regularly had to be meted out, as the grape was highly prized and most of the best vineyard sites were given over to its cultivation. The origin of the grape's name is not certain, but there are two theories. When ripe, Nebbiolo has very prominent bloom that gives it a 'foggy' or 'frosted' look, so some people have suggested the name comes from the Italian word for fog - 'nebbia'. The other fog related possibility is that the name is due to the late ripening of the variety, with it not being ready to harvest until the arrival of the autumnal fogs.

The grape itself has an almost unique combination of high acidity, high tannin and lots of dry extract – the up side of which is wines that can age prodigiously, but the downside is that the grape needs a long and warm growing season to ripen properly. It flowers early, giving small berries with thick skins that need as long as possible on the vine to develop ripeness levels to balance the tannin and acidity. Southern Piedmont's long autumns may not always be hot, but they are dry enough to give Nebbiolo the time it needs – sometimes the harvest wont finish until into November! Similar climatic conditions exist in the other parts of Piedmont and Lombardy where Nebbiolo is grown, although the lower average temperatures in places like Valle d'Aosta, Carema, Gattinara and Ghemme tend to give wines that are lighter in body than their cousins from Barolo and Barbaresco. Another indicator of Nebbiolo's delicate constitution is its sensitivity to the soil in which it is grown. Ideally, the vine will be grown in vineyards with high calcareous marl content (like those in Barolo and Barbaresco), which in turn give the wine its charming perfume and mineral density. Sand rich and Porphyry soils can also yield good quality Nebbiolo, although the structure of the wine and some of the aromatic complexity may be compromised.

Most of the finest examples of Nebbiolo are made solely from the single varietal, although there are also plenty of examples of blended wines where Nebbiolo takes the lead. In Roero, wine makers can include up to 5% of the white grape Arneis, while in Gattinara and Ghemme 10% of Bonarda or 4% of Vespolina can be added. A number of other minor DOCs in Piedmont use Nebbiolo as their base, including Lessona (must be 75%), Bramaterra (70%), Boca (40%), Sizzano (40%) and Fara (30%). These DOCs are unheralded today outside their local area, but in previous centuries their wines were much more highly sought after than those of Piedmont. Today there are a number of excellent small producers trying to restore the DOCs to their former glory and, while blending is permitted, most of these quality focused wine makers will opt to make their wines 100% Nebbiolo. Down in the Langhe, almost 15% of the wines made under the general Langhe DOC are blends that feature Nebbiolo, but far more is made of single varietal Langhe Nebbiolo DOC. Moves to introduce an allowance of 15% Barbera for blending in Barbaresco were led by Angelo Gaja, but the idea was blocked and both Barbaresco and Barolo remain 100% Nebbiolo. Gaja decided that some of his wines were better when blended and in 1996 he pulled the single vineyard Barbarescos and Barolos out of their respective DOCGs. Over in Lombardy (where some say Nebbiolo originates from), the Valtellina zone close to the border with Switzerland is where most of the region's Nebbiolo is grown, although some is also found in Franciacorta. For the generic Valtellina DOC wines, Nebbiolo (at least 70%) can be blended alongside Merlot, Pinot Nero, Pignola, Prugnolo and Rossola. For the quality offerings this must be at least 95%, and certainly in the Valetllina Superiore and Sfursat DOCG Nebbiolo tends to be bottled in its pure form.

THE REGIONS NEBBIOLO

Valtellina

The northernmost region in Italy for growing Nebbiolo is Valtellina, where the grape is known as Chiavennasca. There are three key appellations here: Valtellina; Valtellina Superiore (split into 4 sub-zones) and Sforzato. The region is famous for its very steep slopes and low rainfall.

Gattinara

Historically, Gattinara was the most renowned region for production of Nebbiolo (or Spanna as it is known locally), commanding far higher prices than the wines of Piedmont. It is the best of a collection of DOCs nestled in the hills of Vercelli & Novara, many of which use Bonarda and Vespolina as a blending partner for Nebbiolo.

Barbaresco

North-east of Alba are the hills and calcareous soils around the village of Barbaresco. Until the 1850s, the Nebbiolo of the region was used to make sweet reds and it took a Frenchman to introduce them to the techniques required to ferment a wine to dryness. After this revolution in practice, it took another 130 years before a revolution in quality began that established the reputation that the region enjoys today.

The majority of the top vineyard sites are in the stretch of land between Barbaresco, Tre Stelle and Neive, with many of the top producers owning vines in a number of crus. Barbaresco is not only blessed with a number of extremely talented wine makers, but also a co-operative that has consistently produces wines of excellent quality. As with its neighbour Barolo, the battle between new (with their barriques) and old (with their large oak casks) means a variety of styles. The vineyard area in Barbaresco (680ha) is about half the size of Barolo and the lower altitude lends itself to earlier ripening and softer wines that are approachable earlier in their life.

Barolo

While the top producers of Barbaresco can often produce stunning wines from Nebbiolo, it is in Barolo that the best examples of this variety are to be found. A large number of 'Crus' are scattered around the environs of the region's villages, totalling a vineyard area that is three times the size of neighbouring Barbaresco. In a similar situation to the vineyards of Burgundy, each one is divided amongst a number of owners - the vast majority of which can point to long and illustrious histories of making wine in the area. There is a total of 1700ha of vines in the Barolo zone, some of which rise up to 1200ft and are dominated by two distinct soil types. The vineyards to the west, in and around the village of La Morra, are planted on calcareous marls that produce open and fragrant wines. In the eastern part of the zone around the villages of Castiglione Falletto and Serralunga d'Alba, the soil turns into less fertile sandstone and the resulting wines are tense, dense and reward time the cellar.

Barolo, like all of the finest wine regions, is a melting pot of winemakers with different styles and approaches. The difference between modern and traditional is far more acute here than in many other regions, with the battle between Slovenian casks and French barriques refusing to go away. The traditional approach was to produce muscular wines of incredible density that would spend many years in casks before continuing their development for decades in bottle, while the modernists are making barrique aged wines that are supple and forward enough to enjoy in their relative youth.

Rest of the world

Despite Nebbiolo's travel sickness, there are a few examples of the grape being grown in the New World. The most commonly seen non-Italian Nebbiolos are from Australia, where the cooler climate regions have had limited success with the variety. The same is true of California, where Italian immigrants planted the grape back in the 19th century, but so far nothing of any note has emerged to rival the wines of the mother country. There are isolated plantings in South America, with Chile, Argentina and Uruguay all making examples of Nebbiolo although the struggle to find balance between ripeness and the grape's structure is proving difficult to overcome.

NEBBIOLO THE STYLES

Australia

Stephen Pannell is an Australian that loves the wines of Piedmont. He makes a number of wines from his vineyards in McClaren Vale and the Adelaide hills, focusing on Grenache but including one of the few New World Nebbiolos to have achieved commercial success. 2007 is his favourite vintage yet for the Nebbiolo, a wine that is open top fermented and aged for two years in old oak casks.

Widely praised for his pioneering spirit, Pannell received 90 points from Robert Parker's Wine Advocate for his 2007 Nebbiolo.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
1: 2006 Adelaide Hills Nebbiolo; SC Pannell (Australia) 14% ABV	4	£33.95	£30.56

Valtellina

The Nebbiolo of this northern region of Italy is grown on the insanely steep slopes of the Alpine foothills. The best wines of Valtellina are made in the Superiore DOCG, which includes four designated subzones - Inferno, Sasella, Grumello and Valgella. A fifth, Paradiso, is the source of some of Valtellina's finest fruit, but as yet it has not been promoted to 'cru' status. The vines are planted in sandy soil and are on steep, terraced slopes.

Nino Negri is undoubtedly the top producer in the region and tonight we will taste two of their wines. The first is from their 11ha of 'Inferno', where the slope is so steep that during harvest they have to ferry the fruit back to the winery by helicopter! The vineyard is so-called because it is south facing and gets completely exposed to the sun during summer time. The 100% Nebbiolo wine is aged in French and American oak (75%) and old Slovenian oak casks (25%) for two years.

The most prestigious style of wine in Valtellina is Sfursat (also called Sfuzat or Sfurzato), which translates as 'struggle'. The name derives from the problems encountered when working on the region's best (and therefore steeply terraced) vineyard sites and the style of the wine is a Nebbiolo version of Amarone. Nino Negri's 5* is widely acclaimed as the best wine of the entire region, made from 100% Nebbiolo grapes air dried on straw mats for three months. The wine is matured for two years in 100% new French oak barriques.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
2: 2006 'Inferno' Valtellina Superiore DOCG; Nino Negri (Italy) 13.5% ABV	6	£22.95	£20.66
3: 2006 '5*' Valtellina Sfurzato DOCG; Nino Negri (Italy) 16% ABV	4	£56.95	£51.26

THE STYLES NEBBIOLO

Gattinara

Nebbiolo is known as Spanna in this part of Northern Piedmont and it must form 90% of the final blend. The region used to be very famous for the quality of its wines, although it was virtually unknown outside Northern Italy for much of the 20th century. Since being upgraded to DOCG status in 1990, Gattinara has attracted the attention of many buyers of Italian wine looking for bargains, in a similar fashion to the emergence of Cornas in France's Rhone Valley.

Travaglini are perhaps the most renowned of Gattinara's wineries and we will taste their regular DOCG bottling tonight, which is made from 100% Nebbiolo and aged for two years in old Slovenian oak casks. The bottle is somewhat unique and was adopted by the Travaglini family after they discovered some bottles of the fantastic 1952 vintage that had been designed by a local glassmaker in the now famous warped design. Apparently it self-decants!

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
4: 2004 Gattinara DOCG; Travaglini (Italy) 13.5% ABV	10	£29.95	£26.96

Langhe

The Langhe is the area surrounding Barbaresco and Barolo, where a number of different wine styles can be made. Red or white grapes can be blended to make generic Langhe Rosso or Bianco, but the signature wine of this DOC has become Langhe Nebbiolo and many of the best producers in Barolo & Barbaresco use this designation in the same way that Burgundian vignerons may use Bourgogne Rouge. For the Nebbiolo grown (or bought in) from outside the more prestigious appellations, or sometimes from fruit declassified from within them, Langhe Nebbiolo has become an entry level wine that can offer fantastic value for money. One such example is the wine we will taste tonight - a Langhe Nebbiolo from Produttori del Barbaresco. All of the fruit is from within the Barbaresco DOCG, but it comes from young vines or less auspicious vineyard parcels. In order to avoid the ageing requirements of the DOCG and bottle it before the required 21 months for Barbaresco, the wine is bottled after 9 months in old oak casks and declassified.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
5: 2008 Langhe Nebbiolo DOC; Produttori del Barbaresco (Italy) 14% ABV **We will have more stock of this wine next week	n/a	£18.95	£17.06

NEBBIOLO THE STYLES

Barolo & Barbaresco

More information about the two most prestigious regions for growing Nebbiolo can be found on Page 3.

The wines we will taste from Barbaresco tonight come from two producers - one modern and one traditional - and two excellent vineyards. The first one, Castello Neive's 'Santo Stefano' is from one of the finest sites in the DOCG. The vineyard has been made famous by the exquisite traditionally produced wines of Bruno Giacosa (who buys the fruit from Neive), but in recent years the Castello has stepped up its own production, focusing on the use of French oak barriques to age the wine (for 2 years). The second Barbaresco is from the excellent co-operative Produttori del Barbaresco, which (in its first incarnation) practically invented the appellation. The wine is from the Pajé vineyard and spends 3 years in old oak before being bottled as a Barbaresco Riserva DOCG.

Both the Barolos we will taste tonight come from modernist producers, one in GD Vajra that is famed for their excellent value wines and the other - Roberto Voerzio - that is hailed as one of the stars of Nebbiolo production. The first wine, Vajra's 'Albe' is made from a blend of parcels and is aged in used oak barrels, whereas the single vineyard 'La Serra' is aged in 100% new French oak.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
6: 2005 'Santo Stefano' Barbaresco DOCG; Castello di Neive (Italy) 14% ABV	16	£39.95	£35.96
7: 1999 'Pajé' Barbaresco Riserva DOCG; Produttori del Barbaresco (Italy) 13.5% ABV	8	£45.95	£41.36
8: 2005 'Albe' Barolo DOCG; GD Vajra (Italy) 14.5% ABV	29	£34.95	£31.46
9: 1998 'La Serra' Barolo DOCG; Roberto Voerzio (Italy) 14.5% ABV	1	£135.00	£121.50

Barolo Chinato

This bizarre - not to mention rare - fortified 'wine' is made by steeping the bark of the local Caljssaia cinchona tree (rich in quinine) in Barolo wine, before infusing the liquid with a concoction of up to twenty one other herbs and spices, including rhubarb roots, gentian, orange peels, cloves and cardamon seeds. It has been made in the region since the 19th century, when it was introduced as a cure to the common cold! Nowadays it is consumed as a digestif.

	Available	Retail price	Tasting special bottle price
10: NV Barolo Chinato; Fontanafredda (Italy) *50cl bottle 16.5% ABV	3	£36.95	£33.26