The Jewels of PIEDMONT

DISCOVER BAROLO, BARBARESCO AND BEYOND

WHITE TRUFFLE COUNTRY:
A TRAVELER'S GUIDE

GERMANY’S MAGNIFICENT 2009s

PORTUGAL’S RISING REDS
THE JEWEL OF NORTHWEST ITALY

PIEDMONT’S MANY APPELLATIONS OFFER STYLES FROM RUSTIC TO REFINED

BY BRUCE SANDERSON
For most wine lovers, Italy’s best known wines come from Tuscany, in the center of the country, and Piedmont, in the northwest. Those who know and admire the wines of Piedmont tend to focus on the Langhe region, for good reason: It is home to the muscular yet elegant reds of Barolo and Barbaresco.

It also offers some of Italy’s finest foods: the white truffle, prized for its perfume and delicate flavors, tajarin (the local tagliatelle), agnolotti del plin, vitello tonnato, rice, hazelnuts and a host of dried and cured meats. The Langhe also features stunning scenery, with steep vineyards topped by medieval villages set against the majestic, snow-capped Alps.

Yet Barolo and Barbaresco combined cover only a little more than 10,000 acres, a small percentage of the approximately 130,000 acres of vines planted in Piedmont. In the Langhe alone, substantial acreage is also devoted to red varieties such as Barbera and Dolcetto and whites such as Arneis, Favorita and Chardonnay.

As a whole, Piedmont comprises 13 DOCG winegrowing zones (Denominazione diOrigine Controllata e Garantita, the country’s most prestigious designation), the most of any Italian region, as well as 45 DOC wine zones (Denominazione diOrigine Controllata). Some of the wines, such as sparkling Asti Spumante and Moscato from the neighboring hills of Asti, are well-known. Many more are tiny and obscure —appellations such as Bramaterra, Gabiano, Lavatolo and Valsusa, all within the greater Piedmont region, are hardly household names.

Since taking responsibility for Wine Spectator’s coverage of the wines of Piedmont, I have been exploring widely, both on the ground and through the wines. There are so many places, people and tastes to discover that it will be a lifelong pursuit, but I can already say with confidence that no matter how important Barolo and Barbarese may be, Piedmont offers far more to the lover of Italy.

This cover story attempts to sketch the broader contours of Piedmont. I hope that it will encourage you to explore this diverse region and its unique wines.

PIEDMONT literally means “at the foot of the mountains.” It is surrounded to the north and west by the Alps and separated from Liguria to the south by the Ligurian Apennines.

When the Alps and Apennines were formed, the existing Po Valley basin, occupying what is now central Piedmont, collapsed. Erosion from the mountains deposited sedimentary materials at its edges. Over time, tributaries of the Po cut through these deposits, creating hillsides ideal for vineyards.

The climate is continental, with cold winters, warm summers and adequate rainfall, though the rain sometimes comes at harvest-time, when it is least desired.

Much of the region’s history is tied to neighboring France. For several periods, beginning in the 11th century and until Italy unified in 1861, Piedmont was part of the Savoy dynasty, which originated in France and modern-day Switzerland. The nobility’s demand for the region’s wines shaped the land, and the Savoy influence can still be heard in the local dialect.

Nebbiolo was first mentioned in official records in 1431. It was originally a sweet wine, but underwent a transformation in style in the mid-1800s, when Count Camillo Benso Cavour hired French enologist Louis Oudart to improve the local wines; it was Oudart who mastered the fermentation of the Nebbiolo grape, creating a dry-style Barolo that became the modern prototype.

At around the same time, Carlo Gancia perfected the method of making sparkling wines from Moscato grapes, based on his knowledge of Champagne production. His legacy lives on today in the form of Asti Spumante and Moscato d’Asti. These slightly sweet, low-alcohol sparkling wines typically offer spice, grapefruit and grape flavors. They are ideal as aperitifs, or with fresh fruits such as strawberries or melons.

Piedmont’s most densely planted area is to the southeast, the Langhe hills south of Alba and the Monferrato hills in the Asti and Alessandria provinces to the east. Both extend into the Apennine range to the south. The major grapes are Nebbiolo, Barbera and Dolcetto, but Grignolino, Moscato, Arneis and Chardonnay are also grown.

The Barolo and Barbaresco DOCGs are named after communes in the respective regions. Driving around the area, it’s difficult not to be impressed by the steep hillside clad in vines, their rows of geometric lines forming an orderly pattern on the landscape. The medieval villages command imposing positions on the hilltops, many marked by their fortifications, a reminder of their defensive
roles in less stable periods throughout history.

The other major DOCs—Barbera d’Alba, Dolcetto d’Alba and Nebbiolo d’Alba—take the name of their dominant grape variety. Dolcetto di Diano d’Alba and Dolcetto di Dogliani DOCGs are small zones specializing in Dolcetto. One can also find some international varieties in the Langhe, such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot.

**THE TANARO RIVER** divides the Langhe from Roero, a drier region with sandy soils. This is home to Arneis and also grows Nebbiolo, with a few other supporting grape varieties. Roero is a wilder version of the Langhe, with more forests and undeveloped land. It lacks the reputation of its more famous neighbor because historically there has not been a big name producer to promote the region, according to Roberto Damonte, owner and winemaker of Malvirà, a Roero winery founded in 1974. Traditionally, many Roero growers sold grapes to houses in Barolo.

North and east of Alba are the Monferrato hills, which encompass the Asti area and Gavi. Gavi is a DOCG, known for its dry whites made from the Cortese grape. Asti is home to the Barbera d’Asti DOCG, Barbera del Monferrato DOCG and the Asti and Moscato d’Asti DOCGs, the latter pertaining to the sweet sparkling wine made from the Moscato grape. Dolcetto is also prominent around the town of Ovada (Dolcetto di Ovada DOCG).

North of the Po Valley in the foothills of the Alps are the outlying wine-producing areas of Carema DOC, where Nebbiolo reigns, and Erbaluce di Caluso, specializing in dry, sparkling and sweet wines from the Erbaluce grape.

In the provinces of Novara and Vercelli, rice thrives on the flat plain, but the hills are planted to vines. A handful of zones focus on Nebbiolo, known locally as Spanna. The most notable of these are the two DOCGs,Gattinara and Ghemme.

Piedmont is also home to Fiat, the Ferrero chocolate factory in Alba, Martini & Rossi vermouth and Cinzano. For many years, the automotive giant and Ferrero offered attractive alternatives to the sons and daughters of small wine estates. But today, the vineyards are persuasive, and the younger generation is making its impact on the wines, though not always following in the footsteps of their ancestors.

"We have to look to the past, to our tradition, but also to the future," says Isabella Oddero, 26, who represents the seventh generation to join the family estate. "It's difficult to find the balance between that tradition [of structured, long-lived wines] and easy drinkability."

The following pages explore some of the more prominent among Piedmont's wine zones, including profiles of influential producers in each. The tasting report segment of our package takes in the more than 400 wines reviewed since I began covering the region in August 2010. And because Piedmont's culture has always linked wine and food, the region attracts inquisitive visitors from abroad each year. If you go, let our travel story beginning on page 65 help you plan your trip.

We hope you enjoy this introduction to Piedmont and find it useful as a guide as you explore the region, on the ground or in the glass.
A native white takes center stage at Malvirà

Though Piedmont is best known for red wines, whites are gaining in popularity and improving in quality. Arneis is the region's biggest success story in this category. Most of the Arneis vines are planted in the Roero, an area west of the Tanaro River, where they thrive in the sandy soils.

Though prices for Arneis once rivaled those for Nebbiolo, Arneis declined throughout the 20th century; 25 years ago, there were fewer than 60 acres planted. More recently, however, it has become popular again. With 1,820 acres in production as of 2009, according to the Consorzio di Tutela Barolo Barbaresco Alba, Langhe e Roero, Arneis is the most widely planted white grape in Roero.

Arneis makes medium-bodied whites, with citrus, apple and peach flavors and a characteristic touch of bitterness on the finish that reminds me of grapefruit peel. Depending on the site, Arneis can tend toward tropical fruit or, on stony sites, a greater expression of mineral.

The producer Ceretto was an early proponent of Arneis; its Blangè bottling from the Langhe is made in ample quantities. Pio Cesare, Damilano and Paitin are other well-established Langhe producers who make fine Arneis. The best versions, however, come from the Roero. Top producers there include Bruno Giacosa, Cascina Chicco and Beni di Batasiolo.

One of Arneis' staunchest proponents is Malvirà. The name translates as "badly turned," referring, in the Piedmontese dialect, to the original winery, which faced north instead of south, southward being the tradition at the time. The company was founded in 1974 by brothers Massimo and Roberto Damonte, but their father, Giuseppe, had been making wine and selling it in bulk since the 1950s.

Malvirà makes a number of wines from its 104 acres of vines, both red and white, but its specialty is Arneis. They devote 42 acres to the grape; in addition to its classico label, there are three vineyard-designated Arneis bottlings: Renesio, Saglietto and Trinità.

"For 25 years, we have vinified and bottled the wine from our three Roero crus [separately]," says Roberto Damonte, who is responsible for making the wines (Massimo is in charge of viticulture). "We do this to highlight the various influences of the soils and exposures that characterize our area."

Malvirà's Renesio vineyard is reputed to be the original home of Arneis. Records from the 15th century refer to the grape as arnese, meaning "nuisance" in the Piedmontese dialect. The Renesio estate belonged to an aristocratic family who sold a portion of it in 1528. Documents from the sale mention a grape called Renexì, while other documentation from the area in 1572 refers to Arneis as Reneyesium.

Unless it is farmed and vinified carefully, Arneis makes a bland, neutral white. For Damonte, the key to quality Arneis is old vines (Malvirà's vines average 35 to 40 years old). In fact, of the 42 acres of Arneis planted at Malvirà, 10 are not yet in production because Damonte considers them too young.

Damonte also vinifies each cuvée of Arneis differently. The classico label, a blend of multiple vineyards, is fermented and aged in stainless steel for four to five months. The Renesio is also made in stainless steel, but spends a little longer in tank before bottling. Both are elegant wines, with peach, melon and citrus flavors, but the Renesio shows added depth and length.

Ten percent of the Trinità is aged in older, 450-liter oak barrels, the rest in stainless steel tanks, for six months. This gives it roundness and texture, with a hint of pastry in the flavors. The Arneis from Malvirà's Saglietto vineyard is the most powerful and thus sees 50 percent older oak barrels and 50 percent stainless steel. Though the most reserved of the four bottlings, it has the greatest complexity and structure. "The crus are better after a year in bottle, they need time," explains Roberto Damonte. "The classic Arneis is less interesting in the second year."

For its expressive and distinctive Arneis from individual sites, Malvirà is a leader in quality, if not volume.

**Spotlight on Arneis**

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