

ALTO-PIEMONTE: MORE SPANNA PLEASE

Nebbiolo is King for all the right reasons. We'll go out on a limb and say that if you sat down with two bottles of similar reputation - great producer, great vintage - but one hails from Burgundy, the other from Barolo... the likelihood of sheer enjoyment leans greatly towards the Barolo. Clearly this is a Bergamot-biased opinion, however, the consistency and predictability of Nebbiolo to perform far above its own reputation is nearly guaranteed, whereas "perfect" drinking windows for Burgundy can be notoriously difficult targets. Reaching beyond the Barolo and Barbaresco boundaries are some stunning wines that have garnered a very religious following (yours truly included) and well deserved and for all the right reasons. Here in Alto-Piemonte, Nebbiolo (locally called Spanna) consistently and wildly over-delivers. It provides us with wines that are transparent of terroir and nuanced with delicacy, both attributes that are often underrepresented elsewhere due to the grapes own ability to showcase its strength. Alpine wines are an education in and of themselves, but here, where royalty like Nebbiolo meets the mountains, it opens up a whole new world of ethereal enjoyment.

Kevin Wardell, January 2021

WINE NO. 1
Produttori di Carema Classico
Nebbiolo
Carema, Piedmont, Italy 2016

RE-ORDER: \$27

GRAPE: NEBBIOLO [neh-bee-OH-low]

The entirety of the Carema region is planted to Nebbiolo, albeit with a mix of local clones such as Nebbiolo Spanna and Picutener. The Nebbiolo here is adored for its beautiful bouquet and lighter profile than in the Big Bs: Barolo and Barbaresco. The vines are planted on steep stone terraces that absorb maximum sunshine and maintain the heat of the day during the night. They are firmly tied up on pergola-like cross beams, named "topie" to keep them from being broken by the strong winds.

GROWER: Carema is an absolutely stunning location north of Torino, resting at the mouth of the striking Aosta Valley. Enclosed by mountains, this region certainly has its growing challenges, like striving to maximize sun exposure, and constant battles with wind damage to the vines. Produttori di Carema is not only the most recognized label from this very small appellation, it is also one of the more successful co-ops in Piedmont. Created in 1960 and made up of 71 tiny land owners, together they have essentially been the benchmark of Carema wine since the DOC was created in 1967. This group of growers wrote the book on growing the best quality grapes for the area and have consistently churned out incredible alpine Nebbiolo for the world to both learn from and enjoy. Prior to the last year or two the Produttori wines were much more attainable, but their climbing scores have finally outed them as awesome and thus they are suddenly being gobbled up far too quickly.

GLASS: Dazzling and transparent aromas of dried cherries and rose hips as well as some spice box (but thankfully not oak spice). Pipe tobacco, pink peppercorn, blood orange, and mint. There are some fun similarities to a great coastal Pinot here. Opens up beautifully with some air, but the tannins stay dusty, soft and refined. Although this wine by color and by initial taste may seem very light, it expands with some exposure to oxygen. Not to say it gets bigger, mind you, but it's true character awakens and the wine quickly has far more interesting things to say... kinda like after that second cup of morning coffee.

SIDE NOTES: In Alpine regions like Alto-Adige as well the Valle d'Aosta just north of Carema, co-op wineries are still very common and successful. Mountain landscapes, where land is at a premium, lend great examples of community efforts to showcase a wine reflective of their specific little corner of Italy.

WINE NO. 2
Rovellotti 'Valplazza'
Nebbiolo
Colline Novaresi (Ghemme), Piedmont, Italy 2018

RE-ORDER: \$24

GRAPE: NEBBIOLO [neh-bee-OH-low]

Nebbiolo along the Sesia River in Ghemme has a history which pre-dates the ancient Romans. Ghemme is microscopically small, totaling about 125 acres and is generally a lower elevation than the other regions of the Alto-Piemonte. The Ghemme Spanna shines in the glacial and alluvial soils here which are poor in nutrients but rich in layers upon layers of minerals deposited by river and glacial movement over centuries. Nebbiolo responds with greatness to the stressful, cooler, nutrient poor conditions and creates remarkable wines that are often the first on many connoisseurs minds in this category.

GROWER: Ghemme is definitely Rovellotti territory. Of the less than 200 people in the world who carry the family name Rovellotti, 66 live in and around Ghemme and the rest can be found in other parts of Italy (and a few in France and in Argentina.) The winery lies within the walls of the Ricetto castle in central Ghemme, a brick structure with some walls still dated back to the 10th century that has essentially become the central cantina for the area's legendary wines. Since the 1980s, their family vineyards have been maintained according to a special regimen in coordination with the local University of Milan, with the unique and lofty purpose of achieving zero use of chemicals in order re-establish the natural balance of environmental and ecological elements.

GLASS: Oh so so much love for that Nebbiolo tar. Just the right hint of it, alongside some wet clay, ample black cherries, anise seed, and a very subtle meatiness. This is a pretty wine that dances broadly across the palate and avoids being heavy in any category. Balanced, drinkable pleasure designed for a long lunch outside as the sun begins to dip behind the mountains. Tertiary notes of earthen forest floor and clean mushroom makes this a perfect candidate for pairing with the fresh pastas you'd find in the region - be it some agnolotti del plin, or even better, some cocoa tajarin.

SIDE NOTES: The first Rovellotti wine to become a hands down favorite for Bergamot was their 100% Vespolina. It's a wine that is Exhibit A in the argument for demanding more varietal wines from the grape. Stay tuned...

WINE NO. 3

Colombera & Garella Coste della Sesia

70% Nebbiolo + 15% Croatina + 15% Vespolina

Coste della Sesia (Bramaterra), Piedmont, Italy 2017

RE-ORDER: \$26

GRAPES: NEBBIOLO + CROATINA + VESPOLINA

[neh-bee-OH-low] + [kroh-ah-TEE-nah] + [VEHS-PO-lina]

Here in Bramaterra they refer to Nebbiolo as being 'etched by an extinct volcanic terroir of yellow porphyritic sand.' This is not the fresh volcanic material that Southern Italy is renowned for, but the remaining material left behind by a volcano 300 million years ago. Bramaterra Nebbiolo has probably the strongest reputation in the Alto Piemonte for powerful wines that can age as well as Barolo. In fact, if you ask the locals here their resounding sentiment would be 'far better and longer than Barolo.' To which you respond by holding out a glass and demanding evidence.

GROWER: Colombera & Garella is a project with Cristiano Garella, Alto Piemontese wunderkind and leading consultant for a number of properties, alongside his long-time friends Giacomo and Carlo Colombera, who have been growing grapes in Bramaterra since the early 1990s. They adhere to natural farming, with only copper, sulfur, and natural fertilizer being added to the vines. Cristiano has garnered a heavy hitter reputation for his hand in creating beautiful wines, but it is important to note that at no time is he trying to make something that is massively sensational and unapproachable. Despite their natural age worthiness, he never wants to make a wine that is best untouched for 10 years like in Barolo, as he feels it's not the correct expression for his region.

GLASS: Undeniably recognizable Nebbiolo aromas in there with complimentary grapes playing a big role here too. Some assertive black pepper, and a light roasted coffee note that is so often associated with alpine reds from this area and other northern Italian growing regions. Black tea steeped with some slightly bitter alpine herb nuance. Black raspberries, bright cherry flavors and a sweet leathery earth. This wine presents itself with stiff and brawny shoulders at first, but relaxes after a moment or two, kicks up its feet, and starts telling a riveting tale.

SIDE NOTES: 'Costa della Sesia', similar to Colline Novaresi on the other side of the river, is the equivalent of a 'Langhe' Nebbiolo from the south. Though in these small appellations it is more often made from fruit from the same vineyards and simply declassified and treated with less age.

WINE NO. 4
Castello Conti 'Spanna' Colline Novaresi
Nebbiolo
Colline Novaresi (Boca), Piedmont, Italy 2017

RE-ORDER: \$32

GRAPE: NEBBIOLO [neh-bee-OH-low]

Spanna is the principal grape in Boca but there are also small areas dedicated to Vespolina and Uva Rara. This is one of the smallest of the Alto Piemonte appellations and is the highest altitude in which one can find Nebbiolo in all Piedmont, growing at 1,700 feet above sea level. Despite this height and the cold nights in the shadow of Monte Rosa, the grapes enjoy a wee pocket of warmth in the Boca microclimate and the intensity of the sun helps counterbalance the extreme conditions. The (literal) dozen growers in Boca have nurtured the soils back to health as many properties here sat fallow for decades.

GROWER: Ermanno Conti planted his vineyards in 1971, laying the groundwork for the next generation - his daughters Elena, Anna & Paola. This Conti family has become a bit of an icon for Alto-Piemonte in the wine world. They are especially recognized as it is so rare to enjoy such incredible wines coming from such a small and humble source. They farm organically and ferment with indigenous yeasts with no additives- aside from some sulfur, sometimes. The sisters simply strive to create the most expressive Spanna that reflects nothing more, or less, than the stunningly impressive mountain backdrop from which it comes. This is when a wine elevates to the level of truly special. Drink this mountain.

GLASS: Juicy and vibrant from the moment it is opened. Strawberry rhubarb, juicy black plums and some crunchy pomegranate. Hibiscus tea, goji and a whole arrangement of dried floral magnificence. Beneath all that there is some beautiful cigar box and black licorice as well; the layers here change with every sip and with a seemingly endless finish. This a giggly fun wine to apply your nerd brain to. There is a touch of volatile acidity woven into this wine, but it dissipates in a short amount of time and reminds us of Burgundies we've had in recent years that similarly carry that 'flaw' without it being offensive or off putting.

SIDE NOTES: Boca was once far more planted to grapes, but in the early 1900's the vines were devastated by disease as well as by an epic hail storm from which it never fully recovered.