

VALLE D'AOSTA : SUMMITTING THE PEAKS OF ITALY

In the dizziest heights of the Northwest of Italy lies the skinny, steep glacial valley called the Valle d'Aosta. The Valley produces just a few thousand acres of vines, on the very highest vineyards on the European continent. It is a region straight out of the novels of Tolkein, a fantasy world walled off by jagged snowy peaks on all sides, with Mt. Blanc to the West, the Matterhorn to the Northeast, and Italy's highest mount, the Gran Paradiso to the South. The local folk speak their native Valdôtain dialect as well as French and Italian, personifying the remote mountain assortment of accents, cultures, and ways of spelling Valle d'Aosta, Vallée d'Aoste, Val de Aosta... choose your own Val d'Adventure.

The extremes of soaring altitude and steep exposition define the valley's viticulture and DOCs, rather than soil type, which is a homogenous mix of glacial moraine hewn from the Alps- a mineral driven terroir. Grape farming here is hands-on and organic by default, no tractors with sprayers could stick to these hillsides; the vineyards are breathtakingly steep and require ladders, rails, and trellis access on *top* of the vines. Native grapes are specialized to elevation-specific areas and their super narrow growing seasons; with limited sunlight, cool nights and mellow warm days, and early autumn frosts, each grape has been honed to its hillside over centuries. The storybook Valle d'Aosta is a wonderment of white wines as energetic as glacial milk and reds as crunchy and light-bodied as snow.

WINE NO.1

Piero Brunet / Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle

Prié Blanc

Morgex, Valle d'Aosta, Italy 2017

GRAPE: PRIÉ BLANC [pree-yay blahn]

Prié blanc gets a double gold star for being the oldest native grape in Valle d'Aosta and the very highest planted in Europe. It makes a beautiful sparkling wine as well (third gold star) - it's simply that there is not enough of it to go around. Historical records are very thorough in this area and point to one very important fact: Prié Blanc is the only vine that was able to survive the extreme cold temperatures in this far reaching corner of the Aosta Valley. It is as delicate as meadow flowers and crisp as freshly melted snow dew, with piercing acidity and full bodied elegance. Ian d'Agata calls it "Italy's best light-bodied white" - a warranted hyperbole for this brave blanc!

GROWER: Piero Brunet took over his family's vineyards in 1985, and at the same time he acquired some of the oldest plantings of Prié Blanc. Piero, his wife, and their two daughters organically farm just under a hectare (2.5 acres) at supremely high altitude (3900 ft.) on superlatively steep terraces. The growing season is so short and the summer so temperate that the vines are pergola-trained very close to the ground to absorb just a hint of heat from sunlight reflected off the stone. These own-rooted vines yield just over 300 cases of the Blanc de Morgex, the family's only wine. What an honor to drink the legacy of this alpine grape, sprung from the highest mountain vineyards, thanks to the folks who cling to their slopes.

GLASS: Sooooooper herbal wine to the point of being almost perplexing. Rosemary and tarragon are the first things that come to mind, but there is also that wonderful descriptor that makes most Americans smirk with nostalgia: fresh cut grass. Underripe apricots and blushing quince are the fruit characteristics that shine through on the palate, even though clearly this wine is not remotely one that can be described as 'fruit forward.' The minerality screams "crunchy waterfalls"... as abstract as it gets, yes, but not if you think about the terrain of Aosta. Picture icy falls made from melted glaciers, frozen in time and cascading from the extreme cliffs of this picturesque alpine valley. See? Crunchy.

SIDE NOTES: Morgex and la Salle are neighboring villages at the base of Mont Blanc in the highest part of the Valley, making them the very highest vineyards in Europe at about 4,300 feet. Dizzyingly delicious.

WINE NO.2

GrosJean / Torrette

Petit Rouge 80% + Fumin + Mayolet + Vien de Nus + Doucet

Ollignan, Valle d'Aosta, Italy 2018

GRAPE: PETIT ROUGE [pah-tee wrooj]

Petit Rouge is likely the most prolific red grape native to Aosta as it tends to produce strong yields, albeit with a lot of variation within those yields, which is the focus for this grape through recent clonal selection work- eg, selecting and encouraging vines with less variation in their clusters. The grape is aptly named, diminutive and soft, like an alpine example of Grenache. Where Grenache is so often blended with its compatriots Syrah and Mourvedre, who lend a bit more structure and color, Petit Rouge is helped out by native cousins, such as Fumin and Mayolet. Fumin is produced as a single varietal wine more commonly here, but the intense tannins make it a very different animal in comparison. Mayolet is also made on its own with delicious results, but it is much more difficult to grow. Like the Beatles needed the Stones to truly rock and roll, Torrette combines these forces to make a beautifully bottled balad.

GROWER: GrosJean is one of those producer names that defines the region- they are well-regarded pioneers championing some of the best of the Northwest, farming organically and sustainably since 1975. Their roots are deeply entrenched in the mountains, just like their grapevines. Their vineyard sites are all at an altitude of 1,800 - 2,200 feet, perched on steep slopes with a 15% to 40% incline. These near-vertical cliffs are planted on the "Guyot system" which allows the vines to drape down the terraced hillside, exposing them to a touch more of that alpine sunshine. There are precious few Aostan wines that make it off the mountains and across the pond for us to enjoy in the US, and GrosJean is a very welcome gem amongst them.

GLASS: Don't be fooled by this light-bodied beauty, it packs a wallop and would love to pair with rich meals like seared fatty pork chops, or even better, the local *bresaola* or the creamy local *fontina*. Blood oranges, blackberries, and a Beaujolais spice kick, earthy mountain trailhead, graphite dynamite, and fruity coffee. Of all those terms, coffee note stands out to me because I not only get that on all of the Grosjean reds, but just about every red wine from these high mountain soils. This is a benchmark wine for this incredible region that I look forward to cracking open in every new vintage. Wines like this seem to spotlight the sense of place, and influence of vintage, in a manner unlike any others.

SIDE NOTES: As one of the architects of modern Aostan viticulture, the Grosjean vineyards are considered some of the best 'Cru' sites in the area. Their old vine Pinot Noir from the 'Tzeriat' vineyard is a world class treasure to behold.

WINE NO.3

Caves de Donnas "Barmet"

Nebbiolo

Donnas, Valle d'Aosta, Italy 2018

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

Nebbiolo is as famous a grape name as one can find in Italy, but in this northern neck of the woods it is locally known as Picotendro. Seriously. It is most notably from Barolo and Barbaresco in Piemonte, where it expresses its brown and brooding depth. But in the mountains it unfolds its floral and elegant side. The success of this grape in both places is due to both the completely different climate influences and soils, but also, the different biotypes of the grape. This particular clone of the grape (Picotendro) can ripen more quickly and has a softer tannin profile that requires less concentration of fruit for balance. Similar to Aosta, the Nebbiolos of the Alto Piedmont appellations (Ghemme, Gattinara, Boca, Lessona and Carema) are all very much worth a try.

GROWER: Donnas was the first established DOC in Aosta and is the gateway that leads from the Dora Baltea River up through the valley. Much of this southern part of the valley is more culturally linked to Piedmont than the rest of the more French influenced corner of the region, which is why Nebbiolo is the sole grape cultivated by the Organic growers of the Donnas Co-op. Cooperatives in regions like this are commonplace for the simple reason that there truly is not a lot of land for one estate to own outright. (And a bit of a model example of cooperation, when you consider how hard each member has to work to get the desired result.) The classic bottling from this winery is a far more serious wine, but this 'Barmet' label is something of a revelation. The lighter, alpine styles of the Nebbiolo grape make for a more approachable wine experience overall, and this bright everyday drinker takes it to the next level.

GLASS: If one were able to take a core sample of the base elements of Nebbiolo (one of the most complex grape varieties there is) this would be it. This is a transparent example of crunchy and dusty dried cranberries, Goji, and wild plums. Adding in cocoa powder, espresso grinds, and fennel seeds and everything starts to come into picture. Dry, but with sweet natural tannins and boundless laser beam acidity, which lends a surprising amount of texture to this wine. And none of this stands in the way of it being undeniably chuggable. But, again, it is merely a simplified version of the grape that we all know and love. That's the beauty of it: A porch pounder Nebbiolo! Be still, my heart.

SIDE NOTES: Donnas is where the Aosta Valley really begins to narrow and the trellised vineyards resemble a game of *Chutes and Ladders as they utilize an alpine rail system to harvest the grapes.

*credit to the importer PortoVino for the analogy

BOTTLE TAG: A porch pounder Nebbiolo - yes, this is very rare. Crunchy, dusty, dried cranberries, Goji, wild plums, cocoa powder, espresso grinds, and fennel seeds. Dry, but with sweet natural tannins and boundless laser beam acidity. There's a surprising amount of texture to this wine.

WINE NO.4

Institut Agricole Regional

Cornalin

Aosta, Valle d'Aosta, Italy 2018

GRAPES: CORNALIN [COR-nah-lynn]

There is so very little information about this native, obscure variety. What we do know is that Cornalin is as hearty as the mountains it hails from, and that it is the red grape with the best capacity for ageability, complexity, and overall awesomeness from the Aosta. According to Ms. Jancis Robinson, the variety is nearly extinct, with only 2.5 acres planted in Valle d'Aosta, and a precious few more found in Swiss vineyards. But why it did not flourish above it's neighboring and closely related short list of other native grapes is a mystery. It certainly

seems to be a hearty variety in terms of growth and disease resistance. But, as in many cases throughout Italy, there is not a clear set of reasons as to why some grape varieties were favored over another, over time. What IS clear is that with more scientific data, and more deliciously drinkable data, there should most definitely be more Cornalin.

GROWER: This is not an estate or a co-op, but a well-regarded local Agriculture school and focal point for young winemakers from all over Northern Italy. The Institut Agricole Régional was founded in 1952 specifically as an agriculture school focused mostly on regional agriculture challenges. But in 1982 it broadened its curriculum to include winemaking, under the very Italian motto "*practice science without losing your soul, and do everything with great passion.*" We kinda wish that was carved into a building at UC Davis. For this tiny region the school also acts as a cultural center of sorts, a place to experience the valley's unique wine, food, and personality. Using selection massale and striving to preserve the best of the local varieties, they expose the potential for the legacy that this small but mighty valley can make on the modern viticulture world.

GLASS: We have so few examples of Cornalin in the world that we can't really reference aged examples, but this is surely a candidate for lying down for a bit to see what sort of butterfly emerges. Dried flowers and sweet tobacco on the nose, concentrated red currant and pomegranate juice on the tongue. What's not to love here? It is juicy and vibrant from the start, but changes dynamically as it breathes in some oxygen. It also displays a ripeness that is, of course, not necessarily a given norm for Aosta- credit to the IAR for meticulously tending to the healthiest of vines possible. The layers of spices, like clove and nutmeg, are really what shine through and push this red wine into a slightly more exotic direction as they linger on your tongue long after the glass is empty. Hopefully there is still a bit more in the bottle.

SIDE NOTES: Aostan language, like the people themselves, is very unique. A dialect mostly derived from French, influenced by Italian and with smatterings of regional Swiss'isms.

BOTTLE TAG: Take your time with this one- it changes dynamically as it breathes in some oxygen. Dried flowers and sweet tobacco nose, concentrated red currant and pomegranate juice in the mouth. Juicy and vibrant from the start, with exotic layers of spices, clove and nutmeg, lingering on the tongue.