

WHERE TRADITION MEETS INNOVATION

Piedmont is one of the world's most storied wine regions. And yet for all its aristocratic reputation, it's a place where revolutions in winemaking are continually taking place. Michèle Shah reports.

At first sight, Piedmont looks like a very peaceful place. A UNESCO world-heritage site, its 46,000 ha of manicured vineyards at the foothills of the Alps that divide Italy and France are home to some of Italy's most sought-after wines, such as Barolo and Barbaresco, as well as larger quantities of Barbera, Dolcetto and Moscato. It is at its most picturesque in autumn when the golden and copper-coloured leaves are often hidden behind the seasonal fog, 'nebbia', which is said to give its name to 'Nebbiolo', the region's most famous and highly appreciated varietal.

Within the often small cellars of the region, however, some dramatic changes are taking place.

The first revolution

The process began in the 1960s and 1970s when a young man called Angelo Gaja, son of the largest vineyard owner in Barbaresco, introduced techniques he had learned while studying in Montpellier. These included the introduction of malolactic fermentation, temperature control, single vineyard wines and small new oak barrels alongside the large, old Slovenian oak oval casks in which the wine was traditionally matured.

Before Gaja, most Nebbiolo wines were almost always tannic blends from across their denominations that required a decade or more to soften sufficiently to be drinkable. Even then, they were proudly described as 'intellectual'. In the 1980s, Gaja's example

was followed in Barolo by modernists such as Elio Altare, Ceretto, Paolo Scavino and Luciano Sandrone, while conservatives or 'classicists' such as Borgogno and Giacosa maintained that early-drinking examples of Nebbiolo with evident new oak bore no relationship to the traditions of the region. What few of the classicists cared to acknowledge was that 'their' style of wine was in fact supposedly created by a Frenchman called Louis Oudart, commissioned by the Marchesa di Barolo in the mid 19th century to improve the quality of what was then rustic and possibly sweet red wine.

The fight between the so-called traditionalists and modernists was fierce enough for a documentary called Barolo Boys – The Story of a Revolution, to have been released in 2014. Today the two sides are less divided, but there are still some major philosophical differences. A number of notable producers such as Pio Cesare, Prunotto and Bruno Giacosa still focus mainly on making Barolo from vineyards across the region. "Blended Barolo offers an expression of balance and harmony," says Pio Boffa, CEO of Pio Cesare, a 135-year-old winery in the heart of Alba. "Each blend is studied according to the expression we wish to give it and assembled at the time of fermentation. Like our forefathers said, a great wine needs to be a terroir expression. In order to express greatness, it needs different characteristics, something you don't find in a single-vineyard expression."

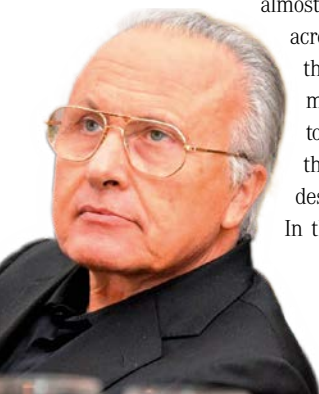
On the other hand, 'zonation' – or the subdividing of single-cru vineyards – which was accomplished officially in 2010, has, according to Sergio Molino, one of Piedmont's most distinguished consultant winemakers, been a key factor in highlighting the outstanding quality of Barolo and Barbaresco and its diverse expressions. "No other region in Italy has accomplished such detail in which

the sub-regions can name on the label each single vineyard or 'cru', capable of expressing individual character. One needs a subtle palate to appreciate this individuality," says Molino.

Blends of different vineyards are today labelled generically as 'Barolo', or with the name of the commune in which the vineyards are located such as 'Barolo del Comune di La Morra' or 'Barolo del Comune di Serralunga d'Alba'. This trend towards treating blended Barolo as a 'lesser' wine – as 'regular Barolo' – has annoyed Boffa enough for him to add "PLEASE DON'T CALL IT REGULAR" to his labels, adding that 'regular' is an insult to the prestige of Barolo.

In both vineyards and wineries, there is a growing trend towards combining aspects of both the traditionalism and modernism. "What's new is a definite return to the past," says Molino. "In the vineyard we have abandoned modern clones and returned to massal selections, to 'organic needs'. In the cellar we have returned to the use of larger barrels, like those used 30 years ago; barriques are on their way out. Fermentation is spontaneous, maceration up to 100 days, tannins are rounded off and we are back to elegance, with a capital E."

However, some aspects of the past have been deliberately abandoned. Giuseppino Anfossi of the Ghiomo winery in Guarene near Alba, says that "Our biggest advantage is to be flexible, to be more attentive, more knowledgeable, to vinify each vineyard parcel individually and to harvest twice – something that my grandfather would have reproached me for. Wine was then part of one's daily diet and not a production generating the value and wealth it does today." In the winery, he continues, "The difference between us and our grandparents is that we eliminate the stalks and only select the best skins, discarding some of the seeds, punching down the cap and pumping over manually, using less technology and returning to tradition, to a less aggressive



Angelo Gaja revolutionised the way Nebbiolo was handled.

approach in order to seek more delicate tannins which allow for good ageing.”

These techniques, along with skilful canopy management, have contributed to making Piedmont's best wines a lot more approachable in their youth but, as Molino acknowledges, as elsewhere, the region has also benefitted from climate change and warmer temperatures that allow the late-ripening Nebbiolo to reach full maturity.

Caring for the future

Another development has been a growth in environmental awareness. Anfossi, like many small farmers who today produce and bottle their own wines, defines himself as a farmer, ‘contadino’ – hardworking and dedicated to tending to his vineyards. “We farmers don't wish to define ourselves as organic or biodynamic, but we are all passionate and care about how we work and the quality of our grapes.”

Sustainability, environment, organic, biodiversity and respect, are all key words that roll off the tongues of today's producers, whether it is the big brand owner or the small farmer, thousands of whom work vineyards in the Langhe and Monferrato hills around Alba, Asti, and Alessandria that are often no little larger than a hectare.

One example of the way both of these groups are thinking is Fontanafredda, one of the oldest and largest estates in Langhe, with 120 ha of estate vineyards plus 300 small growers who supply its grapes. According to the company's CEO Roberto Bruno, Fontanafredda introduced an agriculture focused on sustainable biodiversity as long as 20 years ago. In 2011 they launched their certified project *Vino Libero*, upholding transparency and sustainability and eliminating the use of chemicals in the vineyards, making sure all their farmers follow the same procedures. “Ours is a more holistic approach where we look out for our farmers and for the final consumer, yet still with the aim of economic benefit,” says Bruno. “Some say that ours was a marketing shortcut to attract the attention of the media. It has been, but that was not the real purpose of the project.”

According to Bruno, many consumers are not aware of what the issues of biodiversity, sustainability and other such have to do with quality wine, which is why in their *Vino Libero* project they have a sticker on the bottle explaining the ethics.



Fontanafredda winery, in Langhe in the heart of Piedmont

Similarly, Angelo Gaja, Piedmont's most forward-thinking producer says that over the past 10 years he has been continuously experimenting with the help of seven consultant ‘artisans’, which is how he likes to define himself and his workers. Their aim is to eliminate all chemically induced practices and allow the vineyard to fend for itself, making it more resilient against disease, while assisting it with things like canopy management, so as to improve the quality of viticulture and the environment which, according to Gaja, is their most valuable asset and one to be upheld with great respect.

Gaja tends to agree that the new awareness, particularly in Barolo and Barbaresco, has had a rollercoaster effect, spreading over the region where farmers, big brands, vigneron and cooperatives agree that it is not enough to merely produce quality wines, but that they also need to invest in marketing. “Piedmont has every reason to be seen as a market leader, thanks to its unique territorial products such as Barolo and Barbaresco, Barbera, its cheeses, truffles and tourism,” says Gaja.

Innovation and tradition

Piedmont's ‘unique territorial products’ used to include two sparkling wines: the sweet white Asti Spumante, an export success, especially in Asia, and pink Brachetto. Today, however, these have been joined by a new creation in the shape of ‘Nebbione’, a ‘methode classique’ Nebbiolo.

Created in 2004 by Molino, these wines were inspired by the fact that Nebbiolo sparkling was something already enjoyed in the seventeenth century. ‘Nebbione’ is made from 100% Nebbiolo grapes that come from the green-harvesting of top Barolo vineyards at the end of August, and the wine enjoys 40 months on the lees, far longer than most Champagne. According

to Molino, the high acidity and low sugar in these grapes make it ideal for classic sparkling wines, which estates like Travaglini, Conterno, Boglietti, Ballarin, Reverdito and Rivetto export successfully for between €12.00 (\$13.50) and €18.00 a bottle.

Gianluca Viberti of the estate 460° Casina Bric in Barolo is also making a rosé sparkling Nebbiolo, but using the Charmat method. Viberti is looking to make his mark by promoting and branding the wine's identity with the cutting-edge packaging and branding for which Viberti has proudly won awards. His Barolo bottle is a minimalist design based on a Barolo bottle used in 1750. “My philosophy is to produce quality wine, but to differentiate myself by promoting and branding my identity, not my family name. There are far too many same surnames here in Piedmont – it can be confusing,” he says.

Among other styles, producers are proving that the juicy lively local Barbera which covers around a third of the region's vines can offer more versatile, approachable reds that work well both in wood and stainless steel, while greater ambition is being applied to Dolcetto, once only thought of as Piedmont's everyday drinking wine. Other red varieties that are gaining greater attention include Grignolino and Freisa.

Piedmont is also home to a range of increasingly interesting local white wines. Cortese is the grape of Gavi; Roero which is famous for its Nebbiolo also makes increasingly popular fruity Arneis; and Erbaluce makes small quantities of mainly late-harvest white wine. More recently there has been a growing revival of the lesser-known white indigenous Nascetta. All of these, and a great deal more, are to be found by anyone ready to penetrate the fogs of Piedmont. ■