

Napa Valley **Register**



The View from Italy by Chiara Giorleo

My beloved Barolo

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This time, we are in Piemonte, northwest of Italy, the region of the elegant city of Torino.

In this region, there are about 127,000 acres of vineyards and 30,000 wine companies. They are famous for the “important” and structured reds, which account for 68 percent of total wine production. Perfumed whites also have their place on the list. This is thanks to the range of terroir, which allows production of several different wines even when made from the same grape variety.

More specifically, let’s address Langhe, where the renowned Barolo and Barbaresco wines are produced.

A famous Italian writer, Mario Soldati, some years ago wrote: “It’s not the inhabitants of the area who monopolize their product (the wine), it is their product that monopolizes them.” After the crisis of the beginning of the 20th century and the consequent industrialization, which brought people to cities, from the 1970s on wine production is one of the most prestigious activities.

Many people know Barolo wine and also Barbaresco, but only a few know that the production area is quite small; its terroir makes these wines special. Langhe is located at the right side of Tanaro river with a dry climate that contributes to high sugar concentration and a great quality.

The most popular grape of the area is the red nebbiolo, which is the grape that is used for production of both the treasured Barolo and Barbaresco wines, generally produced from selected and/or single vineyards.

You might ask: What’s the difference between Barolo and Barbaresco?

Barolo is defined as “male” for his strong character and tannins. It ages in big barrels generally but there are also producers who prefer the “modern” barriques; anyway, it needs years to become gentle. It ages 38 months (of which at least 18 in wood); the Riserva version ages 62 months (at least 18 in wood).

Barbaresco is defined as “female” because it’s more elegant somehow; it’s still a very complex wine as it’s made from nebbiolo but there are distinct differences. It ages in wood as well — 26 months (of which at least 9 in wood) and 50 months for Riserva version (at least 9 in wood again). Both can last for decades.

Two different wines even if made from the same grape produced in towns close to each other — this is the power of Italy.

In fact, the local wine culture is based on the “cru” concept. It’s easy to find on the labels the name of the specific vineyard where the grape has been cultivated. Over time, various “names” have come up; among some others, Cannubi is considered one of the best regions for nebbiolo vines, costing up to 1 million euros per hectare (2.47 acres).

I am selecting just some of the wineries in Langhe, but I promise to go again to try some more wines considered among the best in Italy.

I like to start with a big name, Fontanafredda, with such a romantic story: The king, who had fallen in love with Rosa, the daughter of a drum major at his majesty’s service, gave the entire parcel of land to her, and he made her Countess of Mirafiori and Fontanafredda a year later. Generations later, this company is now one of the biggest ones in the area and it plays a crucial role in the communication and promotion of the territory.

Another renowned producer of the area is Angelo Gaja; his wines can cost even more than 300 euros (based on the vintage). It is not easy to get even an appointment. The tour at Gaja feels religious, I kept my voice down as a sign of respect for the place. Among others, I got the chance to try his wonderful Langhe Nebbiolo DOC 1999 (named “Sperss”) with mature aromas but still young somehow.

How could I forget Renato Ratti, whose fascinating winery has such a wonderful view of the surrounding area? It is a reference point for Barolo production, thanks also to the innovation of production techniques.

Worthy to be mentioned is Oddero, a historical winery, which shows a great passion and attention to detail for each single bottle. They also produce a special Barolo, which ages for 10 years in their winery before being put on the market.

Ceretto winery is greatly interesting, too. They collaborated with important architects, resulting in a building that is like a big bubble with a magnificent view. They are among the producers who also promote the good whites from the area, like the highly appreciated Blangè.

Another pioneer of the area is Pio Cesare. Wines have been produced here from the end of the 19th century, and they still have their fascinating winery in the middle of the town. It’s the same for Marchesi di Barolo, with such a great history you can “smell” it in their ancient cellar. They are located right in Barolo town and impressed me with their modern California-style hospitality — tasting room available every day, nice events and wine shop.

Another well-known producer of Barolo is Giacomo Brezza, with a traditional production style. They prefer big barrels for their reds that I really love.

Another special experience is the tour at Beppe Rinaldi's winery. He is a wise man who does not like to talk about wine. Conterno Fantino is another winery that impressed me — for the wines, for the hospitality, for the building and the “green” initiatives. This is why some of their wines are expensive; there is so much behind them.

Some smaller producers are reaching a great success as well. Bruno Rocca (as the name of winery itself) is well supported by his energetic daughter, Silvia. They mostly produce Barbaresco. I also loved the Barbaresco produced by Produttori di Barbaresco from the grapes of 50 growers.

One of my favorite ones is Barbaresco Sori Paitin by “Paitin winery, a family-owned business devoted to high quality.

If the communication is not always a priority, “Damilano” winery represents an exception, well done.

What I love in Italy is the possibility to find numerous wonderful small producers, family owned wineries which bring you on another dimension, the true one. At “Carlo Giacosa” I had the impression to be at their home. I lived the same sensation at “Eraldo Viberti” winery, I am writing a lot of him and his wines I enjoy so much, also because I have had the chance to try his Barolo from one of best vintages: 1999, what's more?

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