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Without rival

Italy's nebbiolo grape reaches its zenith in Barolo and Barbaresco

By Bill St. John, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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Little fog.

The Italians have a knack for naming wine grapes. They ought to; they raise more than 1,000 varieties — more than any other country on the planet.

The Tuscan mainstay of sangiovese, for example, comes from the Latin words sanguis jovis, "the blood of Jove (Zeus)." Not at all a bad name for a red grape.

The great red of northern Italy's Piedmont region, nebbiolo, derives from the Italian word nebbia or "fog." In the Langhe, a hilly area in Piedmont where nebbiolo grows most profitably, milk-white mists settle into the valleys during harvest time. Hence the name, made even more endearing because the diminutive suffix "-olo" makes "nebbiolo" mean "little fog."

Even though Piedmont is nebbiolo's most felicitous home, it nonetheless takes up a mere 6 percent of vineyard plantings there. One reason is that the little fog is very fickle about where it grows, which also explains why it has yet to prove itself a great grape outside Piedmont.

Nebbiolo reaches its zenith in two wines, Barolo and Barbaresco, made in and around the two Piedmontese towns of the same names. Other nebbiolo-based wines such as spanna, Carema, Gattinara or Langhe, to name a few, can be delicious, but none rival the two big B's for perfume, longevity and structure.

Neither Barolo nor Barbaresco comes cheaply, but they remain two of the most profound red wines produced anywhere and bear their prices honorably.

However, they do raise issues for consumers of them.

So, here is a rundown of what to keep in mind as you go about buying, drinking and aging both wines.

Nebbiolo sports two things in great abundance: tannin and acidity. Together, these contribute to what makes Barolo and Barbaresco so comely, their ability to age into wines of amazing depth and nuance, and their beauty at table.

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But it also means they're a pain to make into wine. Taking into account nebbiolo's one deficit — pale skins — winemakers must attempt the difficult balancing act of extracting color from those pale skins without, at the same time, steeping their wines with too much tannin.

Two schools have emerged in both Barolo and Barbaresco, making your choice of either wine a matter of knowing the practices of these two schools.

Traditionalists (Vietti, Bruno Giacosa, Vajra, Produttori di Barbaresco, for only a few names) macerate the grapes at length and ferment the juice for upwards of a month. Then, to soften nebbiolo's tannins, they barrel age for a long time (usually in very large barrels, to avoid too much wood tannin extraction).

In short, the idea is to obtain good color and concentration, but allow for long aging in both barrel at the winery and bottle in your cellar.

Modernists (Scavino, Sandrone or Altare, for example) aim to preserve and push forward nebbiolo's fruit, extract less tannin and to produce Barolo or Barbaresco that is more supple and easier to consume, especially in the short run.

Therefore, they use shorter maceration and fermentation, but with techniques that nonetheless extract good color; age in smaller barrels (in order to oxidize and soften tannin gently and to add a note of vanilla); and perform a secondary fermentation called malolactic to achieve less belligerent acidity.

Of course, as with many things Italian, there is an "on the one hand, on the other" school in both Barolo and Barbaresco that occupies the middle ground between the traditionalists and the modernists. Some names here are Aldo Conterno, Marchesi di Gresy, Ceretto and the great Angelo Gaja.

Taking in nebbiolo

Aging used to be de rigueur with much Piedmont nebbiolo, especially Barolo. Today's commonly more accessible versions, of course, are designed for earlier enjoyment. Nonetheless, good Barolo and Barbaresco remain famously long-lived; Carema can last eight-plus years, Gattinara even more. Roero and Langhe nebbiolos, so named, are delicious for a mere few years, by and large.

Nebbiolo's seductive scents and tastes of tar and roses, cherries, plums, leather, dried and fresh herbs all mature as its wines do. Nebbiolo's stiff tannins generally mollify over time. But its native acidity remains forever — its best gift to the table.

Recommended

2006 Marchesi di Gresy Barbaresco Martinenga: Unusual, as a powerful red, for its freshness, with moderate tannin and an inviting rose-scented aroma. \$30-\$40

2007 Vietti Nebbiolo Langhe Perbacco: Essentially a declassified Barolo, from several vineyards in that region, bottled two years earlier than the Barolo requirement. Terrific balance, perfume and buckets of flavor. A steal at \$25

2006 Vietti Barolo Castiglione: Vietti's entry-level Barolo, a combo of many vineyard plots and made in an accessible style. Thick with fruit, depth and fatness on the palate. \$45-\$50

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and price.