

SPECIAL ITALY ISSUE

Wine Spectator

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The Jewels of PIEDMONT

DISCOVER BAROLO, BARBARESCO AND BEYOND

Piedmont • Barolo Truffle • Cannone • Pastinac



**WHITE TRUFFLE COUNTRY:
A TRAVELER'S GUIDE**

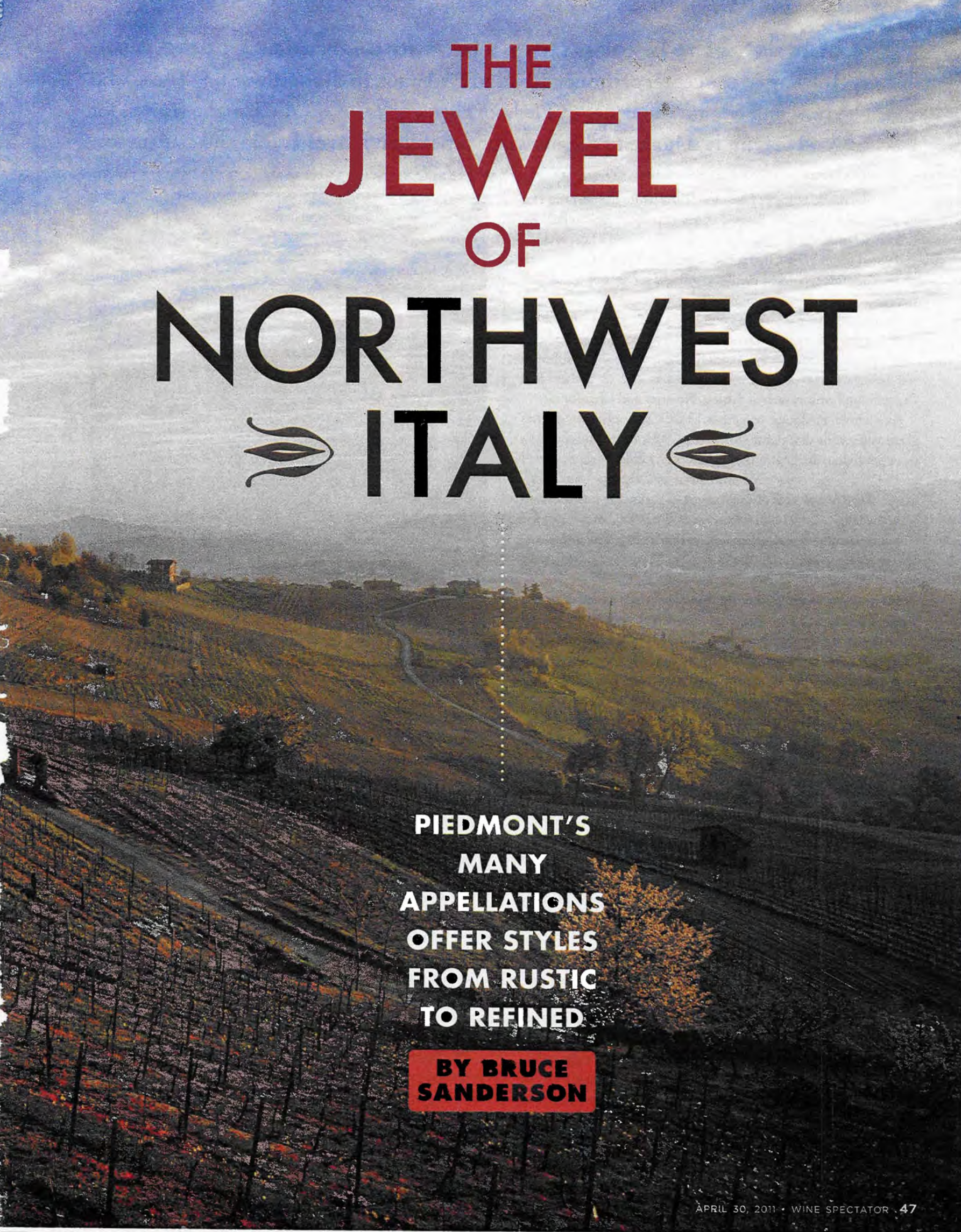
GERMANY'S MAGNIFICENT 2009s

PORTUGAL'S RISING REDS

APRIL 30, 2011
\$5.95 US

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Wine Spectator
April 30 2011



THE
JEWEL
OF
NORTHWEST
ITALLY

PIEDMONT'S
MANY
APPELLATIONS
OFFER STYLES
FROM RUSTIC
TO REFINED

BY BRUCE
SANDERSON



Vineyards near the storied hilltop town of La Morra, in the heart of the Barolo district.

For most wine lovers, Italy's best known wines come from Tuscany, in the center of the country, and Piedmont, in the northwest. † Those who know and admire the wines of Piedmont tend to focus on the Langhe region, for good reason: It is home to the muscular yet elegant reds of Barolo and Barbaresco.

It also offers some of Italy's finest foods: the white truffle, prized for its perfume and delicate flavors, *tajarin* (the local tagliatelle), agnolotti del plin, vitello tonnato, rice, hazelnuts and a host of dried and cured meats. The Langhe also features stunning scenery, with steep vineyards topped by medieval villages set against the majestic, snowcapped Alps.

Yet Barolo and Barbaresco combined cover only a little more than 6,000 acres, a small percentage of the approximately 130,000 acres of vines planted in Piedmont. In the Langhe alone, substantial acreage is also devoted to red varieties such as Barbera and Dolcetto and whites such as Arneis, Favorita and Chardonnay.

As a whole, Piedmont comprises 13 DOCG winegrowing zones (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita, the country's most prestigious designation), the most of any Italian region, as well as 45 DOC wine zones (Denominazione di Origine Controllata). Some of the wines, such as sparkling Asti Spumante and Moscato from the neighboring hills of Asti, are well-known. Many more are tiny and obscure—appellations such as Bramaterra, Gabilano, Loazolo and Valsusa, all within the greater Piedmont region, are hardly household names.

Since taking responsibility for *Wine Spectator's* coverage of the wines of Piedmont, I have been exploring widely, both on the ground and through the wines. There are so many places, people and tastes to discover that it will be a lifelong pursuit, but I can already say with confidence that no matter how important Barolo and Barbaresco may be, Piedmont offers far more to the lover of Italy.

This cover story attempts to sketch the broader contours of Piedmont. I hope that it will encourage you to explore this diverse region and its unique wines.

PIEDMONT literally means “at the foot of the mountains.” It is surrounded to the north and west by the Alps and separated from Liguria to the south by the Ligurian Apennines.

When the Alps and Apennines were formed, the existing Po Valley basin, occupying what is now central Piedmont, collapsed. Erosion from the mountains deposited sedimentary materials at its edges. Over time, tributaries of the Po cut through these deposits, creating hillsides ideal for vineyards.

The climate is continental, with cold winters, warm summers and adequate rainfall, though the rain sometimes comes at harvest-time, when it is least desired.

Much of the region's history is tied to neighboring France. For several periods, beginning in the 11th century and until Italy unified in 1861, Piedmont was part of the Savoy dynasty, which originated in France and modern-day Switzerland. The nobility's demand for the region's wines shaped the land, and the Savoy influence can still be heard in the local dialect.

Nebbiolo was first mentioned in official records in 1431. It was originally a sweet wine, but underwent a transformation in style in



Barolo rests in Slavonian oak casks in the cellars of Aldo Conterno, in Monforte d'Alba.

the mid-1800s, when Count Camillo Benso Cavour hired French enologist Louis Oudart to improve the local wines; it was Oudart who mastered the fermentation of the Nebbiolo grape, creating a dry-style Barolo that became the modern prototype.

At around the same time, Carlo Gancia perfected the method of making sparkling wines from Moscato grapes, based on his knowledge of Champagne production. His legacy lives on today in the form of Asti Spumante and Moscato d'Asti. These slightly sweet, low-alcohol sparkling wines typically offer spice, grapefruit and grape flavors. They are ideal as aperitifs, or with fresh fruits such as strawberries or melons.

Piedmont's most densely planted area is to the southeast, the Langhe hills south of Alba and the Monferrato hills in the Asti and Alessandria provinces to the east. Both extend into the Apennine range to the south. The major grapes are Nebbiolo, Barbera and Dolcetto, but Grignolino, Moscato, Arneis and Chardonnay are also grown.

The Barolo and Barbaresco DOCGs are named after communes in the respective regions. Driving around the area, it's difficult not to be impressed by the steep hillsides clad in vines, their rows of geometric lines forming an orderly pattern on the landscape. The medieval villages command imposing positions on the hilltops, many marked by their fortifications, a reminder of their defensive

roles in less stable periods throughout history.

The other major DOCs—Barbera d’Alba, Dolcetto d’Alba and Nebbiolo d’Alba—take the name of their dominant grape variety. Dolcetto di Diano d’Alba and Dolcetto di Dogliani DOCGs are small zones specializing in Dolcetto. One can also find some international varieties in the Langhe, such as Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot.

THE TANARO RIVER divides the Langhe from Roero, a drier region with sandy soils. This is home to Arneis and also grows Nebbiolo, with a few other supporting grape varieties. Roero is a wilder version of the Langhe, with more forests and undeveloped land. It lacks the reputation of its more famous neighbor because historically there has not been a big name producer to promote the region, according to Roberto Damonte, owner and winemaker of Malvirà, a Roero winery founded in 1974. Traditionally, many Roero growers sold grapes to houses in Barolo.

North and east of Alba are the Monferrato hills, which encompass the Asti area and Gavi. Gavi is a DOCG, known for its dry whites made from the Cortese grape. Asti is home to the Barbera d’Asti DOCG, Barbera del Monferrato DOCG and the Asti and Moscato d’Asti DOCGs, the latter two pertaining to the sweet sparkling wine made from the Moscato grape. Dolcetto is also prominent around the town of Ovada (Dolcetto di Ovada DOCG).

North of the Po Valley in the foothills of the Alps are the outlying wine-producing areas of Carema DOC, where Nebbiolo reigns, and Erbaluce di Caluso, specializing in dry, sparkling and sweet wines from the Erbaluce grape.

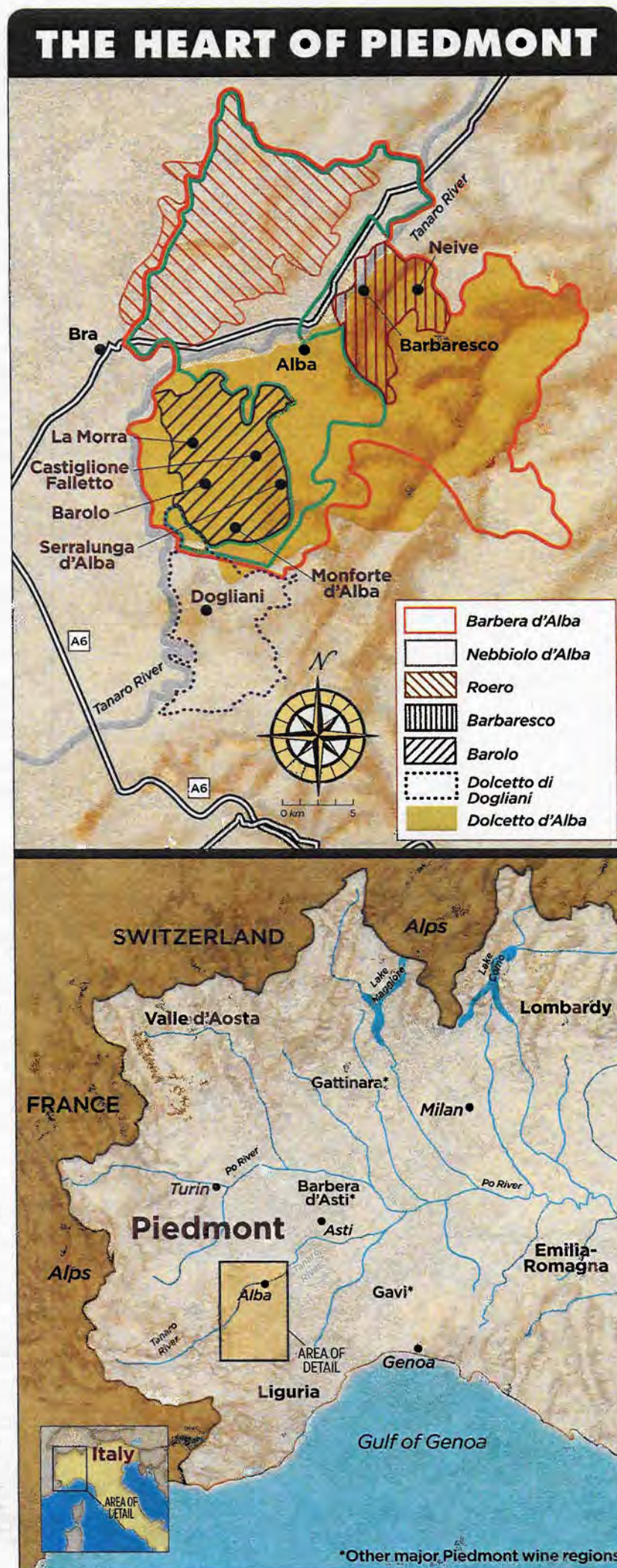
In the provinces of Novara and Vercelli, rice thrives on the flat plain, but the hills are planted to vines. A handful of zones focus on Nebbiolo, known locally as Spanna. The most notable of these are the two DOCGs, Gattinara and Ghemme.

Piedmont is also home to Fiat, the Ferrero chocolate factory in Alba, Martini & Rossi vermouth and Cinzano. For many years, the automotive giant and Ferrero offered attractive alternatives to the sons and daughters of small wine estates. But today, the vineyards are persuasive, and the younger generation is making its impact on the wines, though not always following in the footsteps of their ancestors.

“We have to look to the past, to our tradition, but also to the future,” says Isabella Oddero, 26, who represents the seventh generation to join the family estate. “It’s difficult to find the balance between that tradition [of structured, long-lived wines] and easy drinkability.”

The following pages explore some of the more prominent among Piedmont’s wine zones, including profiles of influential producers in each. The tasting report segment of our package takes in the more than 400 wines reviewed since I began covering the region in August 2010. And because Piedmont’s culture has always linked wine and food, the region attracts inquisitive visitors from abroad each year. If you go, let our travel story beginning on page 65 help you plan your trip.

We hope you enjoy this introduction to Piedmont and find it useful as a guide as you explore the region, on the ground or in the glass.



Dogliani's Pecchenino brothers uplift an everyday red



Orlando Pecchenino (left) and brother Attilio

Dolcetto is the everyday wine of the Langhe region in Piedmont. It is consumed in osterias and trattorias with pasta, pizza and salume, a straightforward, fruity and inexpensive red.

Much of the Dolcetto plantings in the Langhe are near the towns of Alba and Dogliani, with a little in the tiny Dolcetto di Diano d'Alba DOCG. Farther east, in the Monferrato hills, Dolcetto can be found around the town of Ovada. Overall, there are about 16,000 acres of Dolcetto planted.

In most of the Langhe, the best south- and southwest-facing sites, especially those at the top of the hills, are reserved for Nebbiolo. Like Barbera, Dolcetto plays second, or even third, fiddle (behind both Nebbiolo and Barbera). Dolcetto's role is that of an early-release, easy-drinking red that will provide income to vintners while their other reds, particularly Nebbiolo destined to become Barolo and Barbaresco, age in the cellars.

Many top vintners produce fine Dolcetto, including Marziano Abbona, Luigi Einaudi, M. Marengo, Massolino and Oddero. The wines, which retail for about \$15 to \$25 in the United States, deliver black cherry and blueberry flavors, with undertones of chocolate and moderate tannins.

South of the Barolo DOCG lies the Dogliani zone, named after its central town. There, in contrast, the best, south-facing sites are planted to Dolcetto. The soils contain more clay and less sand than Alba's and the grapes ripen more fully. The countryside is relatively open, resulting in better flow of air in the vineyards.

All these factors add up to more complexity and power in the Dolcettos from Dogliani compared to their counterparts from Alba. In fact,

Dogliani is one of three Dolcetto appellations to carry the highest quality designation, DOCG (the others are Dolcetto di Diano and Dolcetto di Ovada).

Several top quality estates are found in Dogliani and specialize in Dolcetto. They include Marziano Abbona, Luigi Einaudi and Bruno Porro. One of the best there is Pecchenino. Brothers Attilio and Orlando Pecchenino farm 62 acres, mostly Dolcetto, with some Barbera and Nebbiolo.

Pecchenino doesn't harvest particularly late, but they keep yields low, which, coupled with the south-facing exposures, brings ripeness early. In 2010, for example, the Dolcetto grapes were harvested in mid-September. The fermentation lasts about a month.

There are three different Dolcettos: San Luigi, fermented and aged in tank; Siri d'Jermu, aged in large oak casks for a year; and Bricco Botti, which is aged in wood for two years, one each in *barrique* and cask.

The San Luigi is the first to be bottled, to showcase its fresh, jammy fruit. The Siri d'Jermu is a more faceted wine, with violet and black fruit notes. The Bricco Botti offers the most muscle and structure of the three, with an undercurrent of mineral.

Current research on the Dolcetto grape reveals that it needs more oxygen during fermentation and aging than was originally thought, to help polymerize the tannins. This gives the final wines more supple textures and allows them to age longer.

Dolcettos are mostly delicious on release. And though many don't consider Dolcetto a wine for aging, Pecchenino poured me a Bricco Botti 1999 that was very fresh, barely showing signs of age, displaying vibrant fruit, tobacco and leather flavors.

SPOTLIGHT ON DOLCETTO

Pecchenino Dogliani Bricco Botti 2007	92	\$NA
Pecchenino Dolcetto di Dogliani San Luigi 2009	89	\$NA
Pecchenino Dogliani Siri d'Jermu 2008	89	\$27
Marziano Abbona Dolcetto di Dogliani San Luigi 2008	88	\$18
Giacomo Ascheri Dolcetto d'Alba Nirane 2009	90	\$17
Bruno Giacosa Dolcetto d'Alba 2009	90	\$22
Luigi Einaudi Dolcetto di Dogliani 2009	90	\$20
Bruno Porro Dolcetto di Dogliani Ribote 2008	87	\$24