

A Beginner's Guide to Nebbiolo, One of Italy's Great Grapes



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There's more to this varietal than barolo and barbaresco

Northern Italy's most renowned red-wine grape is the classic nebbiolo, which produces wines that are full-bodied and wildly age-worthy. Most know this grape from the two famous regions of Barolo and Barbaresco, both hill towns in the Piedmont region. (As with many Old World wines, the place name and not the grape name appears on the label.)

Despite the aging potential and remarkable complexity of barbaresco and barolo, nebbiolo can be a tricky grape to grow. It has comparatively thin skins (making it prone to disease and pests) and is a late-ripening grape (typically harvested in mid-October), so it can be challenging to bring it to full maturity in northerly climes, especially in cooler years. The very name of the grape suggests this: It derives from nebbia, Italian for "fog" — appropriate because fog blankets Piedmont's vineyards much of the year, often extending the ripening time for this finicky grape.

Those thin skins mean that the wines it produces are usually considerably lighter in color than many anticipate. The aromas can also be surprisingly subdued, with bright red berry fruit, florals that lean heavily to crushed rose petals, and sometimes warm cinnamon spice. First impressions can be an illusion. Once you sip good examples of nebbiolo-based wine, though, you are introduced to tannins that never let go, zippy acidity, and bright cherry fruit flavors that are only amplified by notes of leather and earth.

Barbaresco and barolo are phenomenal food wines — provided they're served with the right food. Piedmont's cuisine (like that of most of northern Italy) caters to die-hard carnivores. Think bollito misto (a presentation of boiled meat and fowl), osso buco (braised veal shank), sausage, game, and ultra-rich fare like butter-based risotto topped with cured meat and white truffles. High fat and protein interact with and subdue the wines' high tannin content and play extraordinarily well with the grape's innate acidity.

Barolo is an intense, dry, powerful red wine with considerable acidity, fierce tannins, and high alcohol levels. Producers are required to age barolo for a minimum of 38 months before release (riservas must age 62 months), and traditionally these wines show best when given some significant cellar time, to help tame the tannins, prior to popping the cork.

Barbaresco, which must be aged at least 26 months before release, is often viewed as slightly more approachable than barolo, showing a little less force up front and a little more elegance.

Piedmont literally means “foot of the mountains,” the name being a nod to the nearby Alps. The region is home to the most DOC and DOCG vineyards in Italy, with Barbaresco and Barolo being the most notable nebbiolo-based production zones.

The key sub-zones of Barolo production include the town of Barolo itself along with Castiglione Falletto, La Morra, Monforte d'Alba, and Serralunga d'Alba, with each giving its own signature spin to nebbiolo. Some show bright fruit nuances, others offer up the classic “tar and roses” aromas, but all share a bright ruby color in youth (turning to a deeper orangey garnet with age) with firm tannins, elevated acidity levels, and high alcohol.

Barbaresco is situated north of Alba on the eastern edge of the Tanaro River, Barbaresco's nebbiolo vines dig deep into limestone and marl soils on steep, sunny, south-facing slopes. The Barbaresco region is a touch warmer and drier than nearby Barolo, making it easier for the grapes to ripen earlier. This in turn can translate into slightly lower levels of tannin, which in many instances makes for a wine that can be approachable at an earlier age than many Barolos (though plenty of delicious exceptions abound).

Recommended producers of Barolo and Barbaresco include Bruno Giacosa, Ceretto, Fontanafredda, Gaja, Michele Chiarlo, **Marchesi di Barolo**, Produttori del Barbaresco, Sandrone and Vietti.

While Barbaresco and Barolo are the most famous places for nebbiolo, there are dozens of other well-established zones producing high-quality nebbiolo of their own.

In Piedmont, these include:

Langhe, which is the overall name for the region that encompasses Barbaresco and Barolo, as well as Roero (see below). Wines bearing this larger regional appellation often deliver excellent value.

Roero, directly across the Tanaro from Barbaresco, a region whose sandy soils can produce an earlier-drinking style of nebbiolo, though the wines maintain a strong sense of structure and varietal intensity. (Roero is also noted for its white wines based on the arneis grape

Gattinara and Ghemme are situated in northern Piedmont, where nebbiolo is called "spanna" and the vines grow on iron-rich, gravel-based soils. The wines may be blended with local grapes, but must contain at least 90 percent spanna (nebbiolo). Locally, these wines are celebrated for their extreme aging ability.

There is also a lot of nebbiolo grown in the region of Lombardy, east of Piedmont, and specifically in Valtellina. This is a sub-Alpine growing region whose nebbiolo-based wines (the local name for the grape is "chiavennasca") lean more towards refined elegance than full-throttle power. Often showing aromas of dried flowers, with ripe red fruit on the palate, along with solid acidity and tamer tannins than their Piedmont counterparts, these wines are extremely versatile food wines. In addition to its other reds, the region also produces a rich, concentrated amarone-style wine called Sfursato or Sfursat, which is made from nebbiolo grapes that have been dried for three months prior to vinification. (Valtellina's nebbiolos must contain at least 90 percent of that grape.) The Valtellina valley itself is a hidden gem, with the banks of Lake Como to the west and the dramatic foothills of the Swiss Alps forming its eastern side. Slowly carved through the centuries by the Adda River, the valley stretches for 132 miles on a sun-drenched, east-west axis. Valtellina's main winemaking region, though, spans only 30 miles. Most vineyards here are quite small and are built into steep, heavily-terraced slopes. In some particularly steep vineyards, harvest is done via helicopter, as reaching them by foot requires a serious hike. One of the region's oldest and largest producers, Nino Negri, pioneered this high-tech approach to getting grapes off the ground and into the cellar as quickly as possible. What would normally take 10 men 10 days to harvest, the chopper completes in 90 minutes and at a tremendous cost savings to boot.

Recommended producers of Valtellina wines include: Nino Negri, Conti Sertoli, Rainoldi and Ar.Pe.Pe.

Both Piedmont and Valtellina are stellar producers of nebbiolo-based wines, in a range of styles that reaches from stout powerhouses demanding significant time to settle down to approachable bottles from mountain estates that show an early elegance and refinement. No matter where the grape is grown, though, expect a surprisingly pale ruby to garnet color, elevated acidity, intense tannins, and plenty of alcohol, with red fruit character, floral notes (from fresh to dried), and the ability to age well. Nebbiolo-based wines celebrate their roots and invite you to share in their sense of place.