

WINETRAVELLER

# SAVOURING PIEDMONT

## A Wine Enthusiast's Paradise

Located in the northwestern part of Italy, Piedmont is one of Italy's premier wine regions, celebrated for the Nebbiolo grape and its exceptional wines, writes *Michèle Shah*



Piedmont vineyards are set against breathtaking landscapes at the foot of the western Alps

If you are a connoisseur of red wine and a true food aficionado, you're going to find yourself in paradise when you visit Piedmont or Piemonte (pee-ay-MON-tay in Italian) – one of the highest quality wine-producing regions in Italy. Famous, top-class wines such as Barolo and Barbaresco are produced here from 100% Nebbiolo – the noble grape of the area. The wines are known for their complexity, aging potential, and the influence of the unique microclimates in which the grapes are grown.

Piedmont's unique geographical location in the northwestern part of Italy at the foot of the western Alps results in two key features that influence the region's climate: the cool Alps and the balmy breezes from the Mediterranean Sea which contribute wide day-night temperature variation, known as diurnal range. Cold nights, foggy mornings and sunlit days make for good wine.

Piedmont and its winemaking history reaches far back to ancient Roman times. Historically characterized by feudalism, its noble families owned vast expanses of land, including vineyards. They often played a significant role in promoting winemaking and enhancing the reputation of Piedmontese wines.

The elegant capital town of Turin, also known as Torino, plays an important role in the winemaking history of the region, particularly following the unification of Italy in 1861. King Victor Emmanuel II of the House of Savoy was enthroned as the King of Italy during this period. His affection for the Langhe region, coupled with his passion for hunting and fine wine, frequently led him to the royal lodge in Serralunga, now recognized as the Fontanafredda estate. It was here that King Victor, already married, met Rosa Vercellana, known as "La Bela Rosin" (beautiful Rose). Their secret love affair blossomed and when King Victor's wife died from illness, he legitimized the affair by marrying Rosa and naming her Countess of Mirafiore and



Royal hunting lodge at the Fontanafredda estate in Serralunga

Fontanafredda, giving her the estate, acquired in 1858 in the village of Serralunga d'Alba. To this day, it stands as one of the most historically significant founding estates, contributing to the serious wine production of Barolo. It is a great starting place to discover the region.

The region's vineyards are set against breathtaking landscapes. The combination of world-class wines, truffles, and culinary experiences, mingled with the region's rich history, create a unique and memorable wine tourism experience. There is something reminiscent of Burgundy in the Langhe hills near Alba, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2014, where **Barolo** and **Barbaresco** are produced. The region is known for manicured vineyards fragmented into single-owner plots on every south-facing slope, trim villages where the lusty odour of fermenting grapes perfumes the autumn air and the self-assured way in

which the *vignaiolo* or wine grower hands you a glass of his best.

Viticulture is most intense in the Langhe and Monferrato hills around Alba, Asti, and Alessandria, where thousands of growers work vineyards that are often little larger than a hectare. While in the past, grapes were sold to negotiants and larger cooperative wineries, today there is an explosion of small vigneroni, new estates and exciting new labels emerging.

Classic Piedmontese wines are so distinctive that, often, they are not comprehended at a first encounter. Most of the region's classified wines derive from native grapes and single varietals predominate, though not all carry varietal names. **Nebbiolo**, source of Barolo and Barbaresco, takes its name from 'nebbia', the Italian word for mist or fog. Being a late-ripening grape, it is often harvested during early autumn fogs.

**B**arolo DOCG and Barbaresco DOCG have undergone changes in style that have divided winemakers between the progressive set who have opted for short, hot macerations and brief spells in small new oak, and the traditionalists who macerate for weeks and then allow the wine to slumber for years in inert Slavonian barrels. The best modern

View over Barbaresco vineyards in the Langhe



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interpretations of Barolo and Barbaresco maintain their ample dimensions, but are better balanced and more approachable than before. But even the traditionally-styled Barolo and Barbaresco have responded to modern know-how and are even more impressive now.

The Piedmontese drink more red wine than white, and about half of the red is from the **Barbera** grape. The wine has plentiful fruit and acidity but lacks supporting tannin, a combination that gives wonderful vibrancy and lift when made from good quality grapes. Yet many producers seek to give additional balance and complexity to the wine through ageing in small, new oak casks, which can give a classy but indistinct style.

Top appellations include Barbera del Monferrato DOC, Barbera d'Asti DOCG, Barbera d'Alba DOCG and the more recent (2014) designated Barbera DOCG known as Nizza DOCG, which recognises the quality of specific 'prized' plots within the overall Barbera d'Asti DOCG region.

Barbera from Alba is rounder, producing wines of great structure with higher levels of alcohol. It adapts well to oak, which integrates and enhances its aromas. Barbera from Asti is better known for its higher acidity, also showing ageing potential, while the wine from



A corner of the award-winning cellar of Michelin-starred restaurant, La Ciau del Tornavento in Langhe

the Monferrato area is characterised by a greater minerality and structure. The lively, fruity and uncomplicated but not simplistic nature of **Dolcetto** (the grape and the DOCG appellation), is a perfect accompaniment to a wide range of dishes and remains as popular as ever.

The wines from **Grignolino**, **Freisa** and **Pelaverga** are so unusual that they remain little more than local curiosities, but deserve greater attention. Pelaverga is a medium-bodied high acidity wine with floral and red fruit, spiced up with notes of white pepper, while Grignolino is a light, transparent rub-tinted wine, characterized by its high acidity and notes of rose hips, geraniums and sour cherries with a twist of spice. It can be very elegant.

**S**pumante sparkling wine is a global trend that is currently flying high and getting well-deserved attention. The sparkling wines from Piedmont offer a diverse range of styles, from sweet and aromatic to dry and complex. Among these, the low alcohol, slightly sweet, tank-fermented Asti Spumante DOCG tops all production in volume. Made from the Moscato Bianco grape, it is the world's most popular sweet

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sparkling wine, yet it is often, unjustifiably, looked down upon by connoisseurs who prefer the gently bubbly, Moscato d'Asti DOCG.

A dryer sparkling style, the *metodo classico* Alta Langa DOCG stretches along the provinces of Cuneo, Asti and Alessandria. The **Alta Langa Spumante** is made from Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes which can be found in percentages varying between 90% and 100%. The remaining 10% may be made up of non-aromatic grapes from vines whose cultivation is authorized in Piedmont. It can be white, rosé, brut or *pas dosé* (0% sugar), the latter has become quite a popular trend, with ageing on the lees for at least 30 months.

Another derivation of sparkling wine can be found in the **Nebbione** *metodo classico* sparkling made from 100% Nebbiolo which is left on the lees for no less than 40 months. This is quite a niche product also because Nebbione is made with the cuttings of Barolo bunches, in particular the tips of the bunches.

**T**he main production of still white wine in Piedmont is divided between **Arneis** from the Roero hills near Alba, and **Cortese**, at its best in Gavi, making increasingly stylish dry whites. Recent attention on reviving the very small indigenous production of white **Nascetta**, which had become almost forgotten and extinct, has been met with enthusiasm. And the varietal known as **Timorasso** from Tortona in southeast Piedmont is enjoying a new lease of life with international acclaim. The Timorasso variety was brought back by iconic producer Walter Massa who has given new fame to this grape and the area it grows in. Rosé wines and blends are also on the rise, responding to an increase in Piedmont's growing summer wine tourism, blending into the autumn with Alba's famous truffle market. Finally, in response to market request, or global warming, we are seeing an increase in the production of simpler, fresher styles of reds, be these young Nebbiolo wines or lighter styles of Barbera, or the lively, fruity uncomplicated nature of Dolcetto.

## IF YOU GO...

### Michèle's Top Nine Wineries

Call in advance to book your visit

#### Serralunga – Enrico Rivetto

This is one of my favorites. A beautiful, small family-certified Demeter biodynamic winery in Serralunga, producing wines that have an authentic, unique feel and expression. Great visit, be sure also to visit the donkeys!  
[www.rivetto.it](http://www.rivetto.it)

#### Paolo Scavino Barolo Winery

This is a historical family-owned winery in the Barolo region with excellent different crus of Barolo. Wines of great depth and elegance.  
[www.paoloscavino.com](http://www.paoloscavino.com)

#### G.D. Vajra Winery

One of Piedmont's top family estates, with wines of great precision made by passionate winemakers. A family that has dedicated its soul to the excellence of authentic, elegant Piedmont wines.  
[www.gdvajra.it/en/homepage](http://www.gdvajra.it/en/homepage)



Wine bottles lined up for a tasting at G.D. Vajra winery

#### Castello di Neive Estate

Castello di Neive has centuries of history closely bound to the town of Neive and its wines. It's a historical producer of Barbaresco DOCG with many different crus.  
[www.castellodineive.it/barbaresco?lang=en](http://www.castellodineive.it/barbaresco?lang=en)

#### Tenute Cisa Asinari dei Marchesi di Grésy

This is a landmark of Piedmontese winemaking, with roots tracing back to the 18th century. Martinenga, their top cru, is a breathtaking natural amphitheatre in the heart of the Barbaresco DOCG, exclusively owned by Marchesi di Grésy since 1797. It also has good accommodation.  
[www.marchesidigrésy.com](http://www.marchesidigrésy.com)

#### Malvirà Winery & Villa Tiboldi

One of Roero's top producers. If you are interested in exploring Roero wines this is the place to focus on. Excellent age-worthy Nebbiolo Roero DOCG and elegant age-worthy white Roero DOCG. Both the restaurant at Villa Tiboldi situated above the winery, and the accommodation are highly recommended.  
[www.malvira.com](http://www.malvira.com) [www.villatiboldi.com/en/](http://www.villatiboldi.com/en/)

#### Cantine Rizzi

One of my favorite Barbaresco estates, owned by brother-and-sister team, Enrico and Jole Dellapiana

– two delightful people who make the experience of visiting this estate, which focuses on single-vineyard Barbaresco, a passionate experience.  
[www.cantinarizzi.com/en/home](http://www.cantinarizzi.com/en/home)

#### Cerretto Monsordo Bernardina Estate

This is one of the historic producers who have achieved a large production of wines but retained impeccable precision and depth with their top labels, as well as producing some very good more accessible labels. Great winery to visit with very cutting-edge tasting rooms overlooking the vineyards.  
[www.cerretto.com/en](http://www.cerretto.com/en)

#### The 'Villaggio Narrante'

The Storytelling Village of Fontanafredda offering excellent accommodation and Michelin starred dining. One of the most historic estates, now the property of Oscar Farinetti, owner of Eataly, a global food and wine emporium promoting the best and most authentic Italian foods and wines. The estate offers a unique storytelling of Barolo. It hosts Ugo Alciati's Michelin-starred Ristorante Guido in the Royal Villa and the more casual Disguido Osteria in the main complex, as well as two hotels, Foresteria nelle Vigne and Hotel Vigna Magica.  
[www.villaggionarrante.it](http://www.villaggionarrante.it)



Chef Maurizio shaving white truffles at Osteria dell'Arco

#### Six Top Places to Eat

**Trattoria la Coccinella** "Qualità Italiana" award-winning traditional trattoria which has maintained its quaint, cosy dining area, offering an excellent assortment of traditional dishes, with prime ingredients adapted to a slight modern twist, yet not veering too far away from authentic Piedmont cuisine. Excellent wine list and friendly, professional service.  
[www.trattoriacoccinella.it/index\\_en.php](http://www.trattoriacoccinella.it/index_en.php)

**Osteria Wine Bar More & Macine in La Morra (Barolo)** A favourite with the locals, casual dining with good al fresco terrace. Plenty of fresh tempting appetizers, salads, cheeses and cured meats, pasta dishes, main courses and desserts – excellent value for money with a good selection of

wines by the glass  
[www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063477974911](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063477974911)

#### Osteria dell'Arco

A must! In the centre of Alba and a favourite osteria since 1986, famed for its 'slow food' cuisine and philosophy, with a great selection of wines. You can never go wrong booking here.  
[www.osteriadellarco.it/osteria/ita/osteria.asp](http://www.osteriadellarco.it/osteria/ita/osteria.asp)

#### Antica Torre in Barbaresco

Bang in the middle of Barbaresco, offering traditional cuisine, with a well-stocked cellar. Don't miss their homemade awesome tagliolini. Very good wine list.

**Michelin starred La Ciau del del Tornavento** One of Langhe's top Michelin-starred restaurants which houses one of Italy's top wine cellars. Maurilio Garola, owner and chef, prepares traditional dishes with seasonal fresh ingredients. Be sure to visit their cellar. Great terrace and view over the Langhe.  
[www.laciaudeltornavento.it/en/](http://www.laciaudeltornavento.it/en/)

**Michelin starred Massimo Camia** Highly respected family-run restaurant with Massimo Camia and his daughter artfully creating in the kitchen, his wife acting as Maitre d' and his son offering an excellently curated, well-priced wine list – or should I say book!  
[www.massimocamia.it/en/home](http://www.massimocamia.it/en/home)

### Tours & Activities

#### Truffle Hunting

Don't miss the annual truffle festival in October and November, adding an additional gastronomic delight to your wine tour held in Alba.

#### Azienda Agricola Alois Luca

Personalised truffle hunting and truffle experiences.  
[www.andarpertartufi.com](http://www.andarpertartufi.com)

#### Trekking Tours and Walks in Langhe

Personalised treks and walks. Contact Elio Sabena [e.sabena@libero.it](mailto:e.sabena@libero.it)  
[www.trekkinginlanga.com](http://www.trekkinginlanga.com)

#### Langhe Experience Tours & Events

Very dependable and efficient tourist office creating personalized experiences  
<https://www.langhe-experience.it>



Truffle hunting is popular in the autumn