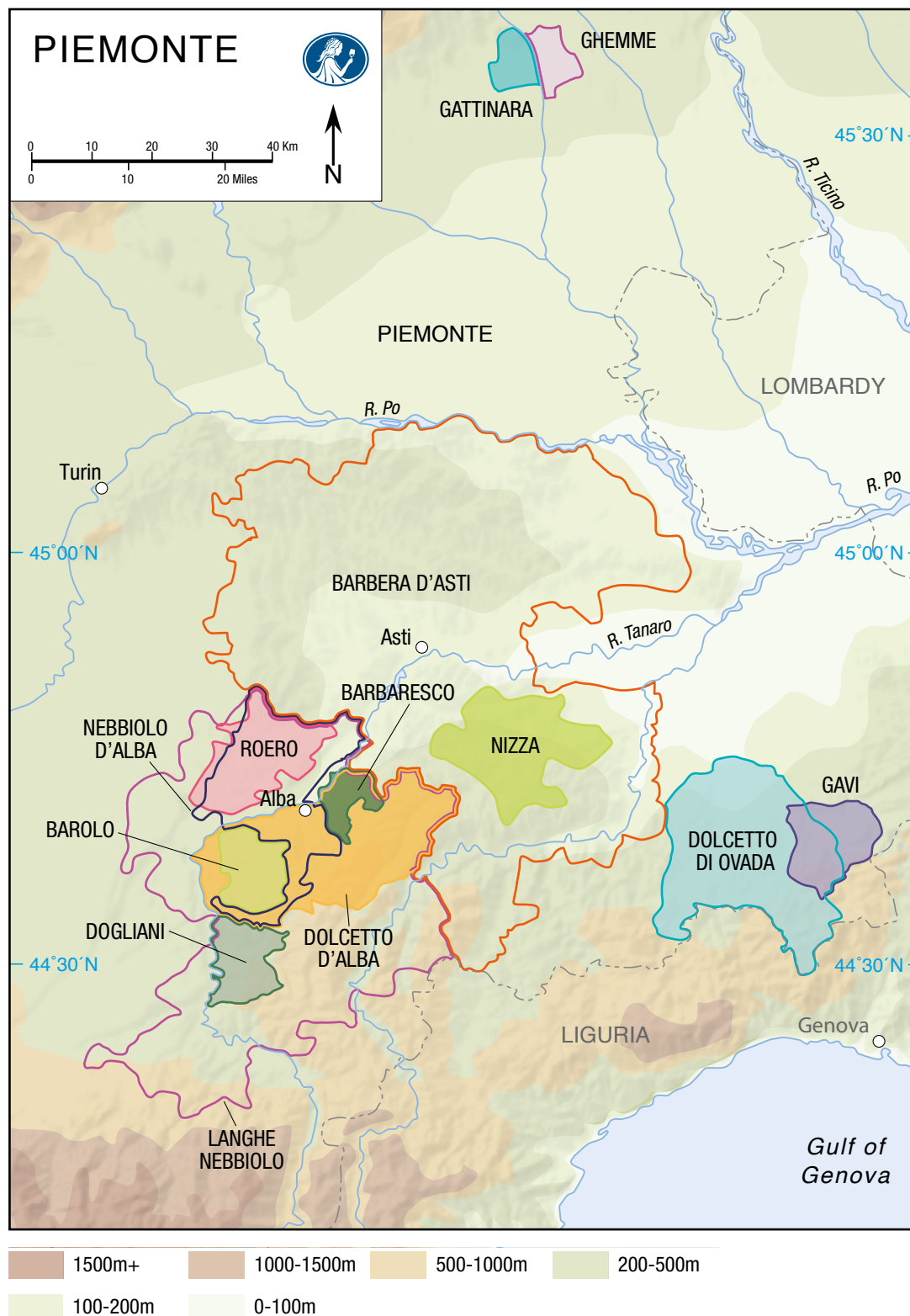
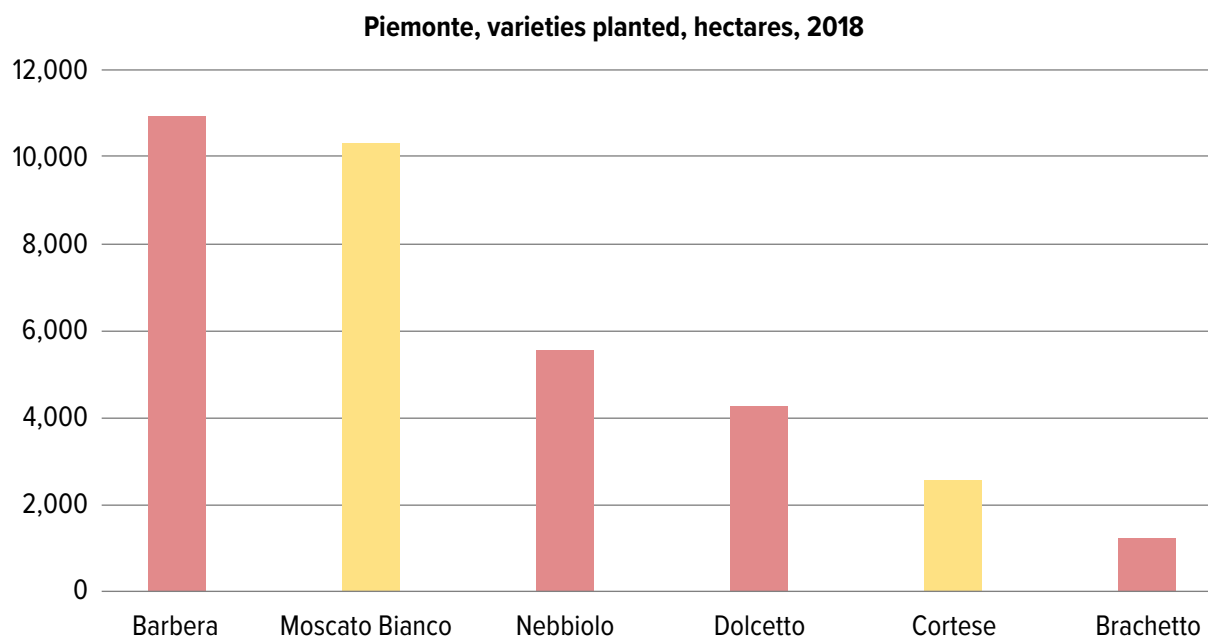


# 17. North-West Italy

## 17.1. Piemonte



The Piemonte region, also known as Piedmont in English, is home to the Nebbiolo variety, producing some of Italy's most prized, aromatically intense and long-lived wines, especially but not exclusively in the Langhe, part of the Cuneo province. The region also grows Barbera (the most grown variety), Dolcetto and the white varieties Cortese and Arneis. Moscato is dealt with in the unit on Sparkling Wine, while Brachetto produces a rosé sparkling wine similar to Moscato d'Asti.



Source: Vignaioli Piemontesi<sup>1</sup>

## THE GROWING ENVIRONMENT AND GRAPE GROWING

### Climate

The grape growing regions of Piemonte have a moderate continental climate with cold winters and hot summers. The region is protected from cold northern winds and excessive rainfall by the Alps to the north and from weather systems coming from the Mediterranean by the Apennines. The region can be subject to thunderstorms, hail and fog. Late frosts can also be a threat. However, low rainfall in June to September allows grapes to ripen and reduces the threat of fungal disease. Rainfall increases in late September and October, posing a threat to late ripening varieties such as Nebbiolo.

## GRAPE VARIETIES, DENOMINATIONS AND WINEMAKING

### Nebbiolo

This black variety was until recently only grown in Piemonte and neighbouring regions. It is an early budding (and hence at danger from spring frosts) and vigorous variety that ripens very late (see above on climate). It is mainly grown in the Cuneo province, especially in the Langhe, but also in the northern provinces of Piemonte. Wines made from Nebbiolo are typically pale ruby in colour, turning to pale garnet within 3–5 years, with pronounced intensity aromas and flavours (violet, rose, red cherry, red plum), a full body, high tannins, high acidity and can be high alcohol.



**High-trained Nebbiolo**

It is said to produce its finest, most perfumed wines on calcareous marls. Because of its value in the market, it tends to be given the best south- and southwest-facing sites in the Langhe that enable it to ripen fully. The vines have to be pruned high as the first few buds are infertile and therefore it needs to be pruned with more buds so that those further up the shoot will bear fruit. Single Guyot is the most common form of training as it facilitates mechanical trimming of the canopy. Excessive exposure of grapes to the sun can be a problem.

Nebbiolo vines are vigorous and need regular canopy management (necessary to avoid unripe fruit due to shading) and, for the best quality, time-consuming cluster thinning.

Clonal research into Nebbiolo has mainly been aimed at producing wines of deeper colour as traditional wines were pale in intensity and quickly turned to pale garnet, even in young wines. However, some believe that the new clones have lost some of the variety's high aromatic intensity. Many growers, including significant producer Gaja, prefer mass selection to propagate new vines, seeking vines with low vigour (for wines of increased concentration), open bunches (to reduce fungal disease) and small berries (good depth of colour).

Nebbiolo is grown in a number of denominations.

**Barolo DOCG** – This appellation takes its name after the village of the same name and incorporates a number of villages to the south west of the city of Alba. Barolo as a dry, tannic wine made from 100 per cent Nebbiolo, goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century and came to fame through its association with the local royal House of Savoy. This led to the name 'the wine of kings, the king of wines'.

The vineyards are planted on south- and south-west facing slopes, typically 200–400 metres above sea level, combining good sunlight interception with cooling influences. This





**La Morra, Barolo**

allows grapes to ripen fully but over a long growing season, producing wines of pronounced aromatic intensity and high acidity.

The DOCG restricts yields to 56 hL/ha (marginally lower for single vineyard wines, see below). Plantings of Nebbiolo for Barolo have increased by 90 per cent to over 2,200 hectares in the period 1990–2020,<sup>2</sup> reflecting the great success of the wine in recent decades.

Barolo DOCG has to be aged for three years and two months from 1 November of the year of harvest, including 18 months in wood. Barolo Riserva DOCG has to be aged for five years and two months with a minimum of 18 months in wood. These long maturation times add to the costs of production. The wines are very good to outstanding in quality and premium and super-premium priced.

The soil types in Barolo DOCG are complex. However, a contrast is often made between:

- the villages with blue-grey marl in the north and west of the denomination (for example La Morra) that produce lighter more aromatic wines that become drinkable after a few years in bottle
- the villages in the south and east of the denomination with less fertile, predominantly yellow-grey compacted sand and clay (for example, Serralunga d'Alba) producing wines that are closed and tannic in youth and should be cellared for 10–15 years.

Historically, most top producers prided themselves on blending wines from the grapes of a number of vineyards, searching for more complexity, as continues to be done by some (most notably, Bartolo Mascarello). However, certain single vineyards (latter termed subzones) have long had a very high reputation for quality (examples include Cannubi or Vignarionda). Significant producers who were the early champions of single vineyard wines in Barolo and Barbaresco include Angelo Gaja and Bruno Giacosa.

In 2010 an official system of subzones was introduced, called *Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive* (MGA or MeGA, official additional geographical indications) within the rules of the Barolo DOCG. In Barolo the subzones are:



- entire villages (e.g. Barolo del comune di La Morra)
- specified subzones (examples include Bussia or Cannubi).

In addition, the word *Vigna* plus registered vineyard name can now only appear as a labelling term if the name of the MGA is also stated.

A very small amount of Barolo Chinato is made, which is Barolo wine, sweetened and infused with herbs and spices.

**Barbaresco DOCG** – The DOCG for wines made from 100 per cent Nebbiolo takes its name from the village of the same name and incorporates a number of villages to the east of the city of Alba. It is only about one third of the size of Barolo DOCG. The area shares many of the characteristics of Barolo, though most vineyards are at slightly lower altitude and the climate is slightly warmer. Harvest is typically a week earlier. The subtly riper style is reflected in shorter minimum ageing requirements: two years and two months from 1 November of the year of harvest for Barbaresco DOCG and four years and two months for the Riserva. Both require a minimum of 9 months in wood. These maturation times add to the cost of production, but less so than in Barolo. Maximum yield is 56 hL/ha, as with Barolo. In 2007, slightly earlier than Barolo as the DOCG area is much smaller, an official system of *Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive* was introduced within the rules of the DOCG. The wines are very good to outstanding in quality and premium and super-premium in price.

Traditional winemaking for Nebbiolo used to involve very long maceration on the skins (three to four months), followed by five to eight years of ageing in large old wooden vessels to soften the tannins. In the late 1970s and early 1980s a group of young producers (including Elio Altare in Barolo and Angelo Gaja in Barbaresco) sought wines with deeper colour, softer tannins and less need to be aged, and with new oak flavours.



**Vineyard in Barbaresco**

However, while these innovations in the region raised quality and prices, current practice has moderated the extremes. Most producers seek to pick only grapes with ripe skins and seeds (to eliminate aggressive tannins), macerate on the skins for 3–4 weeks for top wines and age the wines in either large format oak (French or Slavonian) or a combination of large and smaller format oak (barriques and up to 500 L), only a small proportion being new. Most, but not all, now agree that overt vanilla and sweet spice notes from new French oak mask the delicate aromas of the Nebbiolo variety.

Nebbiolo is also grown in **Roero DOCG**, north of the Tanaro River and in scattered, often-historic denominations in the north of Piemonte, closer to the major city Milan. These include **Gattinara DOCG** and **Ghemme DOCG** that have a continental climate with greater diurnal variation than Barolo, resulting of wines of higher acidity. South-facing sites at around 300 m above sea level enables fruit to ripen and the wines are light bodied but intensely perfumed. (Similar wines are also made at much higher altitudes, up to 750m, in Valtellina in the neighbouring region of Lombardy.) In these denominations, Nebbiolo is often blended with small proportions of other local varieties.

Wines from Nebbiolo for early drinking are made within the regional denominations, such as **Langhe DOC Nebbiolo** or **Nebbiolo d'Alba DOC**. These wines are typically made from young vines or less favoured sites. During winemaking, maceration lasts for seven to ten days only and the wines are aged for up to a year in neutral containers. Some top producers use Nebbiolo DOC Langhe to bottle parcels from Barolo or Barbaresco that do not meet the quality they require in their top wines and to offer some wines at more accessible prices.



**Barriques in Barolo**





**Large casks in Barolo**

These wines are cheaper to produce (shorter maturation times) and are typically mid-priced to premium priced.

### **Barbera**

As noted, this black variety is the most grown variety in Piemonte as a whole, with three times as much vineyard area as Nebbiolo. While it is widely grown in the region and in Italy in general, it is concentrated around the towns of Asti and Alba and the area known as the Monferrato. The best quality wines come from Asti and its subzones, including Nizza, which has now been promoted to a DOCG of its own. Barbera is also grown around Alba, but here the best sites are reserved for Nebbiolo. Nonetheless, Barbera grown in the Langhe can be of high quality as it is less sensitive to site than Nebbiolo.

Barbera is a relatively early budding variety and therefore prone to spring frosts. It is a very vigorous and disease-resistant variety, though it is susceptible to fan leaf virus. It will grow on a range of sites and aspects. It can produce very high yields and therefore the grower can choose to allow high yields for wines of acceptable to good quality or prune hard for highly concentrated wines. It ripens relatively late, but before Nebbiolo.

Barbera is generally high in acidity and relatively low in tannin. It is made in a range of styles including the traditional lightly sparkling style. Most wine now is made as still wine for early drinking with medium to deep ruby colour, medium intensity red plum and red cherry fruit sometimes with black pepper aromas, high acidity, medium tannins and medium alcohol. These lighter wines show the high acidity of the variety.

Most wines are good to very good in quality and are inexpensive to mid-priced. As noted, some very good to outstanding wines are made that command premium prices.





**Barbera close to harvest**

However, highly concentrated Barbera wines are also made. The fruit is grown at lower yields, often from old vines, and the wines are aged in French oak barriques, as pioneered by Giacomo Bologna. Oak tannins from barrels adds to the body of these wines and gives them further capacity to age. Where Barbera is aged in barriques, this adds to production costs, especially where new oak is used.

**Barbera d'Asti DOCG** has a maximum yield of 63 hL/ha and the wine has to be aged for a minimum of four months only. The Superiore category must be aged for a minimum of 14 months of which 6 must be in wood. The yield of **Nizza DOCG** is limited to 49 hL/ha and it must be aged for 18 months, six of which must be in wood. Barbera is also made within **Piemonte DOC** allowing up to 84 hL/ha, which can result in wines of low concentration.

### **Dolcetto**

In comparison to Nebbiolo and Barbera, the black variety Dolcetto ripens early and can be grown on cooler sites. It is susceptible to fungal diseases, is fragile (the buds are easily broken), has low vigour and ripening can be blocked by prolonged spells of cold weather. These issues have contributed to a reduction in vineyard area planted. This reduction has also been due to the much higher prices that can be obtained for Nebbiolo grapes.

The variety is reductive in the winery, requiring frequent pump overs or rack-and-return to introduce oxygen and avoid off-flavours. To retain the variety's fresh primary fruit requires mid-range fermentation temperatures, short times on the skins (5–10 days) and soft extraction methods to avoid extracting its naturally high tannins. Wines are typically aged in stainless steel tanks or cement vats to preserve primary fruit. Most wines are good to very good in

quality and are inexpensive to mid-priced. Some very good to outstanding wines are made that command premium prices.

The best areas for Dolcetto are Alba (**Dolcetto d'Alba DOC**, maximum yield 63 hL/ha), Dogliani (**Dogliani DOCG**) and Ovada (**Dolcetto di Ovada DOC and Dolcetto di Ovada Superiore DOCG**), the last two with lower maximum yields. The wines are typically deep ruby in colour, with medium (+) intensity red cherry fruit with floral notes, medium (–) acidity and medium (+) tannins. Significant producers include Marcarini (Alba) and Marziano Abbona (Dogliani). Dolcetto can also be made at higher yields as **Piemonte DOC** (77 hL/ha).

### Other Local Black Varieties

With growing interest in indigenous varieties and rising prices for Nebbiolo, renewed attention is being paid to the wines made from other local varieties such as Freisa (related to and highly aromatic like Nebbiolo) and Grignolino.

### Cortese

Cortese is a high yielding white variety typically producing wines with light intensity aromas of lemon, apple/pear and white flowers with high acidity and medium body. It is thin-skinned and susceptible to grey rot in rainy conditions. After pressing, the must is fermented at mid-range temperatures. (Top quality wines may undergo a few hours of pre-fermentation maceration to increase aromatic intensity.) Wines are typically aged in stainless steel containers to preserve the primary fruit. Most wines are made for early drinking, though some top wines can be aged in the bottle for tertiary notes. The wines are typically good quality with some very good examples and inexpensive to mid-priced, with some premium examples.

Wines made as **Gavi** (or **Cortese di Gavi DOCG**) must be made entirely from Cortese grapes with a maximum yield of 67 hL/ha. (**Gavi del commune di Gavi DOCG** is wine made from grapes grown within the municipality of Gavi itself.) Riserva wines are limited to 45 hL/ha and must be aged for one year in any vessel before release. Significant producers include Castellari Bergaglio and La Scolca.

### Arneis

Most Arneis is grown in the Roero area. The wines have light intensity but complex aromas of white flowers, chamomile, white peach and lemon. They have medium (–) acidity. The wines are typically good quality with some very good examples and are inexpensive to mid-priced, with some premium examples.

Grapes must be picked as soon as the desired ripeness is reached as the acidity drops very rapidly. Care must be taken in the winery to minimise oxygen contact as it oxidises easily.

**Roero Arneis DOCG** must be made from a minimum of 95 per cent Arneis. Yields up to 70 hL/ha are permitted. The wine became popular from the 1980s on, despite the difficulties of growing it successfully. Significant producers include early champions of the variety, Vietti and Bruno Giacosa.

## WINE LAW AND REGULATIONS

Yield levels and ageing times for individual PDOs have been covered in the preceding section. Piemonte does not have any PGI (IGT) wines. Wines produced either are within the simple 'wine' category or are accommodated within the DOCs/DOCGs. Piemonte DOC has provision for a wide range of local and international varieties.





Samples for analysis

### WINE BUSINESS

For historical reasons, the Langhe and Piemonte more generally has remained a region with small family-owned farms and vineyards. By comparison with other leading Italian regions, especially Tuscany, there has been little consolidation of vineyard holdings. In the past, small growers sold their grapes to larger producers, for example, Fontanafredda, or merchants. Today, with much higher prices for Nebbiolo wines, many small estates bottle and market their own wines.



Farmhouse winery, Barbaresco



A very high proportion of Barolo and Barbaresco is exported (80 and 60 per cent respectively in 2022) with the top markets being USA, UK, Scandinavia and Germany.<sup>3</sup>

With prices for top quality Bordeaux and Burgundy rising rapidly since 2010, fine wine merchants, collectors and buyers have been looking for alternative wines that can be aged in bottle and collected. Nebbiolo has attracted increased interest due to its capacity to develop tertiary flavours in bottle. The new focus on named subzones within Barolo and Barbaresco is becoming to have traction in the market, at least for the better known subzones. A comparison can be made with vineyard names in Burgundy. In turn, as the prices of Barolo and Barbaresco have risen, attention has also turned to less expensive Nebbiolo wines from the other denominations, for example, Langhe DOC Nebbiolo.

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