



# Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

For some time I have been wanting to feature an all Piedmont selection and I am delighted that this quarter it finally came together. This is one of my favorite wine regions in the world and one with a rich history of innovation that is the model for many other evolving areas.

The name Piedmont means the “land below the mountains” in the local dialect, recognizing the position between the Alps and the Mediterranean Sea. As the western most of the Italian provinces the producers in this region have long had close relationships with French wineries, especially Burgundy. This is in part because both regions were under the control of the Duchy of Savoy for almost 400 years, making the spread of information between wine areas quite easy. Coincidentally, both regions also share a reliance on mono-variety wines based on late ripening, thin skinned varieties.

For the features this quarter I chose only wines based on the Nebbiolo grape, a very old variety that has dominated the region since at least the 1200s. The name Nebbiolo is typically attributed to the foggy colored bloom, *nebbia*, that appears on the grapes as they ripen. You will also hear sometimes that the name refers to when it is time to pick the grapes in the fall when the fog lays across the vineyards. While a great story the classical way of naming grapes usually points to growing habits, not the climate of an area.

Nebbiolo is a fickle variety that buds early, making it susceptible to spring frost, and ripens really late, putting the crop in danger of fall rains and, yes, late season frost. The skins of the grape are thin, making mildew during wet growing seasons a problem. It needs plenty of heat to ripen so it can only be planted on the best east, south and west facing slopes. Finally, this trouble maker only performs well when grown in well drained soils, typically of sand or marl. However, when all of the conditions are right there are only a couple of grapes in the world that can match Nebbiolo for perfume, power and expression of terroir. The selections this quarter are going to demonstrate this perfectly.

## **2018 Castello di Perno Barolo - \$65**

I only recently discovered this winery, which is imported by Nick Jackson, a Master of Wine who recently opened an import and distribution company in Florida. The castle was built in the middle ages by the Falletti family who converted it to a residence in the 1800s. In the 1970s it was purchased by Giulio Einaudi, a publishing magnet from nearby Turin, who used the castle to host writers as a quiet place of inspiration for their work. Then in 2012 it was purchased by Gregorio Gitti, a lawyer from Milan, with the intention of creating a wine making estate based on the old vines of the property.

The castle is located in the hamlet of Perno, which lies in the commune of Monforte d'Alba, a border land between the two classic soil types of the Barolo region; limestone marls and sandstone. The vineyard owned by the winery, appropriately called Castelletto, stretches around the castle, dropping several hundred feet below and extending to the ridge above. It is an MGA, or *Menzione Geografica Aggiuntiva*, which is a defined area of a vineyard with distinctive attributes, not unlike the system of the vineyards of Burgundy. The location of the Castelletto vineyard is unique, as the lower portion of the vineyard lies on the limestone marl soils of the western Barolo region, while the portion of the vineyard above the winery lies on the sandstone soils of the East. For this reason the parcels are farmed and harvested separately, with this bottling produced using the grapes from the limestone portion.

Winemaking in Barolo has evolved a lot over the past fifty years, and this is an excellent example of the current trends which marry classic techniques with modern advances. Going back to the 1970s, when the wines were not very fashionable and sold for very little, farmers harvested all of the grapes from the vineyard, ripe or not. They would then ferment the wine for up to 60 days in order to extract as much color as possible from the light colored Nebbiolo. Then the wines would rest for 2 years in large, old foudre, often contributing to many flaws including *brettanomyces* and volatile acidity. Today, farming emphasizes harvesting a smaller crop of perfectly ripe grapes, which in this case are destemmed and sorted before fermentation in stainless steel tanks. They use wild yeast for the fermentation and maceration, which lasts for 30 days, then the wine is racked to 250HL Austrian Stockinger casks for 24 months. The wine is then aged in concrete for a few more months before bottling without filtration.

Decant this beauty for an hour before serving, and the nose displays the classic notes of Barolo; tobacco, sandalwood, star anise, orange peel, ripe but tart cherries and hibiscus tea. On the palate this wine displays medium concentration, with a richer sense of fruit than the color implies, but also fairly abrupt tannins that encapsulate the finish. This wine shows great potential so drink 2025-2034

### **2019 Cantina Rizzi Barbaresco “Rizzi” - \$57**

You will often read that Barbaresco is the feminine complement to the more masculine Barolo, which in my opinion is not only sexist but blatantly wrong. One only has to taste the wines from La Spinetta, Angelo Gaja or Bruno Giacosa to see the folly in that statement, as they are every bit as big, or bigger, than any Barolo. However, rather than perpetuate an arms race of whose wine is bigger, this selection shows the same level of power and finesse as the Barolo above.

I discovered the Rizzi wines in 2019 during a tasting with Enrico Dellapiana, the winemaker and son of the owner Ernesto. They are fourth generation owners of the estate, but it was not until 1974 that they began to focus on winemaking. The original estate is located in the village of Treiso, but over the past 40 years they have purchased several top quality vineyards so today the estate is nearly 100 acres.

This is the flagship wine of this estate, taken from an eponymous cru site that sits above the winery and directly below the village of Treiso. The soils are limestone marls mixed with sand, and the vines are between 20 and 50 years old. All of the grapes are hand harvested and fermentation and maceration is done in stainless steel for 25-30 days. The wine is then racked to large oak casks for a year, then an additional 6 months in concrete tank before bottling.

You will want to decant this wine for at least a half hour before serving, but up to an hour is fine. The nose is a stunning combination of gardenias, dried strawberries and tart cherries, fresh crushed cranberries, fennel seed and claro cigar wrapper. On the palate this wine displays a moderate concentration of fruit as forward, dusty tannins and moderate tension frame this wine into the finish. Drink 2024-2029.

### **2016 Ioppa Ghemme - \$45**

The first two selections come from the classic Langhe Valley, located in the hills near the towns of Asti and Alba. Ghemme is a commune located farther north, in the foothills of the Alps in a region known as Romagnano Sesia, a part of the Alto Piemonte. This area is west of the city of Milan and the vineyards sit at higher elevation than those of the Langhe on very steep slopes. While the wines from this area were famous before the wars, many abandoned their vineyards during Italy's industrial revolution of the 1950s for less strenuous work in the factories. Even as late as the early 1990s wines from Ghemme were hard to find, but thanks to the passion of many young winemakers this region is enjoying a renaissance.

The Ioppa family have been farmers in the Ghemme region for centuries, but the winery was formally created in 1852 when Michelangelo Ioppa made the first documented purchase of vineyard land. Today the sixth generation of the Ioppa family are at the helm, and the seventh is in the wings. They are incredibly important in Ghemme, instrumental in the region gaining DOCG status in 2006. In 2022 they christened a new winemaking facility that is a gorgeous, modern structure with views of Monte Rosa, the second highest peak in Europe.

Due to the higher latitude and altitude, the vineyards in this region ripen at a slower pace than those of the Langhe Valley to the South. Also, the soils are much older, mostly degraded granite, which provides a warm growing environment that allows the Nebbiolo to achieve full ripeness. An interesting stat on the technical sheet is they have 1680 vines per acre, compared with nearly 3000 per acre in Barolo. The growing conditions in Ghemme are too extreme to support as many vines and yields are already very low.

Unlike the first two wines which are 100% Nebbiolo, in the Alto Piemonte the grape is frequently blended with other varieties. Here 15% of the blend is made of Vespolina, an offspring of Nebbiolo that is known for early ripening, high sugar accumulation but low yields. It is used in this area to bolster the alcohol of the Nebbiolo, which before climate change would struggle to achieve 12% potential ABV. Decant this wine for up to an hour before serving and the nose mimics the other features, but with a more savory quality. The nose is a mix of pipe tobacco, orange peel, dried red cherries, red licorice and sun dried tomato. On the palate it is restrained and a bit more rustic than Langhe examples, with obvious tannins that wrap up the moderate fruit. Despite being the oldest wine in this offering it also has the longest potential, drink 2024-2035.