



The secret Piedmont

Look beyond the big names – Barolo, Barbera and Barbaresco – and you'll find a treasure trove of undiscovered DOCs and grape varieties. Stephen Brook pinpoints the pick of them

SAY 'PIEDMONT' AND two gastro-images spring to mind: Barolo and white truffles. For good measure one could add: Barbaresco, Barbera, Dolcetto and *carne cruda*. But this leaves wine estates from other parts of this large region understandably put out that their products, often with a long and distinguished history, seem virtually unknown outside Piedmont.

I recently encountered this 'other Piedmont' on a whirlwind tour, visiting zones noted on maps and cited in wine guides yet rarely encountered: the Nebbiolo wines of Roero, Ghemme and Boca; the Moscatos of Strevi; the Grignolinos and Barberas from just about anywhere in vine-strewn Piedmont; the obscure Ruché grape; exquisite pink Brachetto; and the remarkable whites of the Colli Tortonesi.

It's impossible in a limited space to give a detailed account of these lesser-known wines;

moreover, some remain less well known for good reason. Instead I will dwell on the wines that made a firm impression and are worth seeking out.

The Nebbiolo gang

In northern Piedmont, in the hills above Novara, are a number of small DOCs and one DOCG dominated by the Nebbiolo grape, although other varieties such as Vespolina, Bonarda and Croatina (not related to the Croatina of Valpolicella) are often blended in. The climate here is cooler than in Barolo or Barbaresco, acidity tends to be higher, and the vines can struggle to ripen in difficult vintages. These are austere wines, and difficult to enjoy young, but with bottle age they develop intensity and complexity, even though wines from some producers in some vintages never shed their rusticity.

Photograph: imagebroker/Alamy

■ **Boca** One of a number of Nebbiolo-based wines produced in a hilly zone just northwest of Novara. In the 19th century there were at least 100ha under vine. Some 20 survive or have been replanted. Vespolina and Bonarda complete the blend, aged in large casks rather than barriques. The best can be outstanding and long-lived, with power, elegance and grandeur.

TWO TO TRY

Le Piane 2005 ★★★★★ 18.5/20

£28.95 **Lea & Sandeman**

Burly cherry nose, bold and powerful. Rich, full bodied and assertive, robust and powerful. **Drink:** 2011–2020

Antico Borgo dei Cavalli 2006 ★★★★ 17.5

N/A UK www.vinabarbaglia.it

Spicy, stylish red-fruits nose. Juicy and full bodied but

Above: Roero is the largest of the lesser-known Nebbiolo DOCs, with almost 200ha under vine

'These austere wines develop complexity and intensity with bottle age' ➤

has firm tannins and considerable minerality, extract and length. **Drink:** 2011-2018.

Vallana 2001 ★★★ 16.5
£16 **Richards Walford**

Mineral raspberry and redcurrant nose. Fresh, spicy and elegant, with fine acidity. Long. **Drink:** 2011-2014.

■ **Bramaterra** Southwest of Boca, this is an equally tiny DOC with about 30ha in production on volcanic soils. The wine tends to be two thirds Nebbiolo, with Croatina and Vespolina in supporting roles. Good to excellent wines are made by Antoniotti, Cottignano, and Sella (from 77-year-old vines), with some limited barrique-ageing.

Sella, I Porfidi 2005 ★★★★★ 18
N/A UK +39 0159 9455

Reserved raspberry nose with a hint of oak. Sleek and stylish, concentrated but has freshness and lift, and beguiling acidity and length. **Drink:** 2011-2016.

Antoniotti 2006 ★★★ 16.5
N/A UK +39 0163 860 309

Lively red-fruits nose, has finesse. Good attack, medium bodied, fresh and balanced by sufficient tannins. Long. **Drink:** 2011-2015.

■ **Fara, Ghemme, Sizzano** These are three conjoined northern Piedmont mini-DOCs, all Nebbiolo-dominated. Fara lies closest to Novara, Ghemme the furthest away, with Sizzano in between. It would take a gifted taster to distinguish between them in a blind tasting. I have yet to taste an outstanding Fara or Sizzano, but the 50ha Ghemme seems to have real potential. The wine has at least 75% Nebbiolo, and is usually aged for two to three years in large casks. There are a number of good producers, including Cantalupo, Ca' de' Santi, Dessilani, Ioppa, Mirú, and Torracchia del Piantavigna.

Ioppa, Sante Fe, Ghemme 2004 ★★★★★ 17.5
N/A UK www.vinioppa.it

Rich, spicy cherry nose. Broad and fleshy, with firm but integrated tannins. Has excellent fruit and concentration, with power, density and length. **Drink:** 2011-2016.

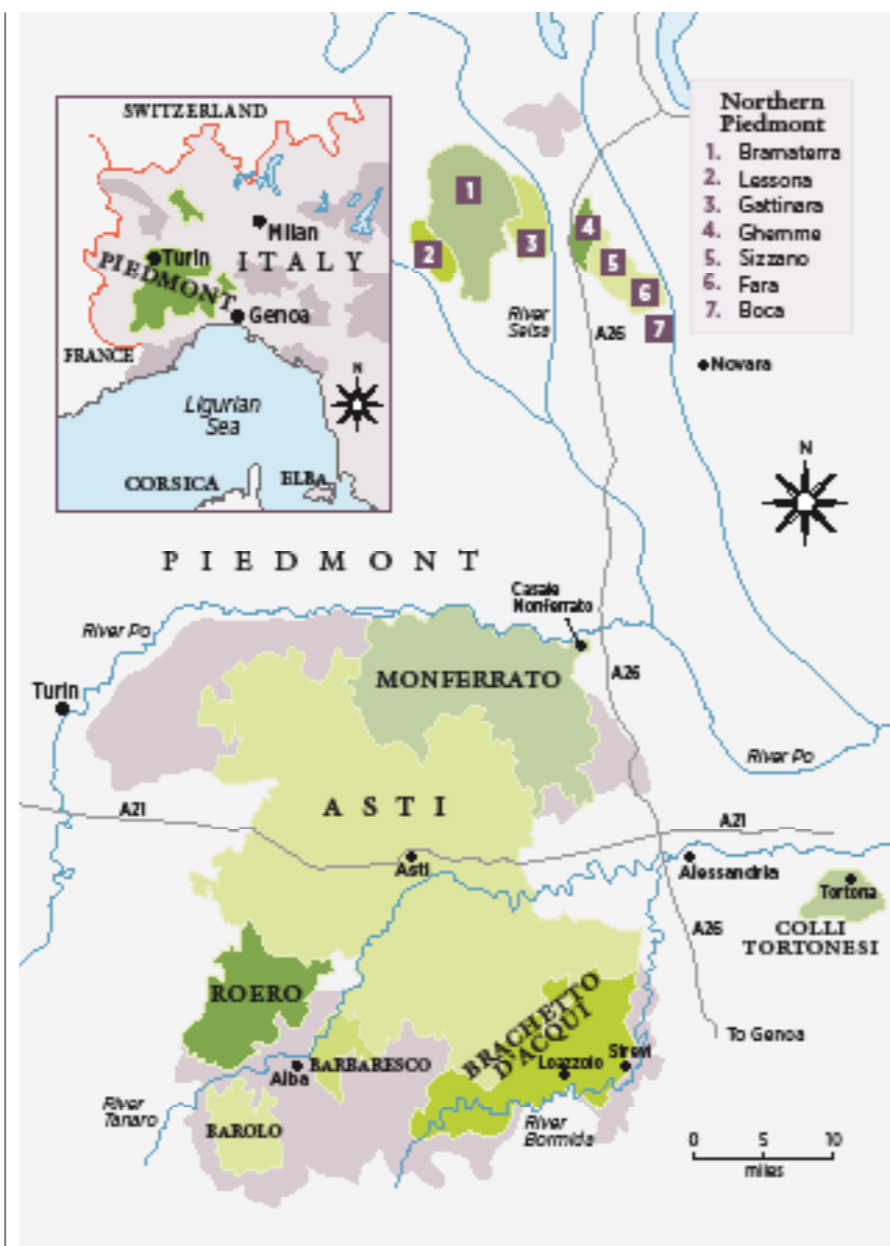
Antichi Vigneti di Cantalupo, Signore di Bayard 2004 ★★★ 16.5
N/A UK www.cantalupo.net

Pungent raspberry and redcurrant nose, quite oaky. Rich, suave and concentrated, with firm but ripe tannins and some elegance. **Drink:** 2011-2015.

■ **Gattinara** Gattinara, a DOCG since 1990, is the largest of the northern Nebbiolo zones, with about 120ha under vine. Travaglini is the producer that has given Gattinara international renown, but Antoniolo and Nervi make wines of comparable quality.

Giancarlo Travaglini, Riserva 2004 ★★★★★ 18
£29.99 **Astrum**

Lean, perfumed raspberry and bacon nose. Sleek and understated, very concentrated and tight with suave tannins. **Drink:** 2011-2020.



'With only a few hectares under vine, Loazzolo is Italy's smallest DOC'

Antoniolo, San Francesco 2005 ★★★★★ 17
£27.65-34.49 **Caves de Pyrène, Slurp**

Intense, elegant nose, perfumed with red fruits and mint. Tight and concentrated, with fine acidity, freshness and vigour. **Drink:** 2011-2016.

■ **Lessona** With a mere 10ha, this Nebbiolo-dominated DOC scarcely exists. But Paolo de Marchi, the renowned owner/winemaker of Isole e Olena in Chianti Classico, has returned to his family roots by purchasing a property called Sperino, and has installed his son Luca as winemaker. His Lessona is superb, if very expensive.

Sperino 2006 ★★★★★ 18
£46.50-51.99 **Harrods, Luvianes, Noel Young**
Sweet, intense cherry nose, elegant and perfumed. Concentrated, dense and tannic, with lively acidity as well as depth and weight. Long. **Drink:** 2011-2018.



Above: Gattinara has been a DOCG since 1990.

Left: Ghemme is one of three mini-DOCs in the north, together with Fara and Sizzano

Sella, Omaggio a Quintino Sella 2004 ★★★ 16.5
N/A UK +39 0159 9455

Spicy red-fruits nose, with freshness and lift. Fairly rich and suave, quite concentrated; solid tannins and lively acidity on the finish. **Drink:** 2011-2015.

■ **Roero** The largest of the lesser-known Nebbiolo zones, with almost 200ha under vine, has mainly sandy soils. The wines are undeniably lighter than Barolo, but also fresher; and although they rarely have comparable ageing ability, they are more accessible and enjoyable in the short to medium term. Prices are also lower than those commanded by their illustrious neighbours, and in good vintages

they can be bargains. A handful of producers, such as Correggia, produce structured and profound Roero that is hard to distinguish from Barolo.

Roero has never enjoyed the renown it deserves, perhaps because in the past there was much clumsy winemaking, but over the past decade standards have improved dramatically. The region is also the source of almost 4 million bottles of Arneis and other white wines, which have won recognition for their youthful appeal and easy drinkability.



Correggia, Ròche d'Ampsjè 2006 ★★★★★ 17
£30.02 (in bond) **Justerini & Brooks**

Powerful, smoky, oaky nose, smoky cherries and red fruits on the palate. Broad, rounded, and quite opulent, but has underlying tannins and good acidity. Long, with a fairly hot finish. **Drink:** 2011-2016.

Beyond Nebbiolo Alternative DOCs

■ **Loazzolo** With only a few hectares under vine high in southern Piedmont, this is Italy's smallest DOC, and derives its reputation from a handful of growers, of whom the best known is Gianni Scaglione of Forteto della Luja. Loazzolo is a Moscato, but unlike most versions of that variety, is produced under the most stringent regulations: vineyards can only be on steep slopes, yields must not exceed 27hl/ha (compared with Moscato d'Asti's generous 75!), and the vines must be at least eight years old. Production, inevitably, was highly localised until Forteto della Luja reinvented the wine in the mid-1980s by leaving the bunches to shrivel on the vine until they succumbed to botrytis. Then part of the crop is air-dried, and after pressing in December the wine ferments and ages in barriques for two years. Only about 250 cases of this exquisite and costly sweet wine are produced, although the estate also makes other wines.

Forteto della Luja 2005 ★★★★★ 18.5
£38.50 (half bottle) **Harrods**

Very delicate nose, grapes and white peach. Lean, silky and intense, with an excellent balance of sweetness and fresh acidity. Very long. **Drink:** 2011-2012.

■ **Moscato di Strevi** Like most Moscato zones in Asti, the Strevi vineyards can produce a range of different wines, usually Asti Spumante and Moscato d'Asti. Strevi DOC is an appellation dedicated to passito wines, first brought to prominence by Banfi. The Strevi hills are always well ventilated, which brings freshness to the wines. Production is limited.

Bragagnolo, Moscato Passito 2006 ★★★★★ 17.5
N/A UK +39 0144 363 411

Lush, honeyed nose, elegant too. Creamy, honeyed, voluptuous and almost syrupy, but with acidity and spiciness on the long finish. **Drink:** 2011-2012.

Other grape varieties

■ **Timorasso** This white grape is native to the hills around Tortona in eastern Piedmont. By the 1980s it had almost disappeared, although one grower called >



Walter Massa kept it alive. It attracted the attention of British importer Michael Palij, who helped ensure the variety's survival. Today Timorasso has been enthusiastically taken up by Massa's neighbours, and is enjoying a well-deserved revival. It doesn't benefit from oak ageing, as its purity, freshness and power emerge perfectly without it. Apricots, peaches, lime, and – with age – a touch of honey and a whisper of nuttiness, all contribute to its aromatic profile, while its natural acidity and extract allow it to be drunk young or cellared for up to a decade.

Massa, Sterpi 2007 ★★★★★ 17.5

£17.49 **Secret Cellar**

Vibrant peachy nose. Rich and juicy but not flabby, creamy and voluptuous, with moderate acidity and good length. **Drink:** 2011–2015.

La Colombera, Derthona 2008 ★★★ 16.5

£15.95 **Berry Bros & Rudd**

Elegant spicy, appley nose, vigorous and fresh. Fairly rich but sprightly and mineral, with a long perky finish; quite good length. **Drink:** 2011–2014.

■ **Brachetto d'Acqui** Brachetto is as versatile and perfumed as Moscato. It gives its best around Strevi, although it is grown elsewhere in eastern Piedmont. Its most common manifestation is as a light, gently sweet, low-alcohol, frizzante red with raspberry and strawberry aromas, similar to Moscato d'Asti. Made as a passito wine, it can be exquisite. Good frizzante versions come from Contero, Convento Cappuccini, Braida and Banfi. Forteto della Luja (see also Loazzolo) and Marengo make thrilling passito.

Forteto della Luja, Pian dei Sogni 2006 ★★★★★ 17

£32.50 (half bottle) **Harrods**

Delicate sour cherry nose. Frail yet intense, floral. Charm, persistence and a dry, persistent finish. **Drink:** 2011–2012.

Marengo, Pineto Passito NV ★★★ 16.5

N/A UK www.marencovini.com

Pretty red fruit nose. Silky, fresh and elegant, though lacks some intensity. **Drink:** 2011–2012.

Contero 2009 ★★★ 15.5

£15 **Cooden, Hangingditch, Harvey Nichols, Highbury Vintners, Nicholls & Perks, Whole Foods**

Floral cherry nose. Creamy flavours yet has welcome sharp acidity, and a long, lively finish. **Drink:** 2011.



Photograph: Dario Fusaro/Cephas

Above: Forteto della Luja produces Brachetto d'Acqui, in a frizzante style

■ **Freisa** A variety that is less well known than it deserves, because it cannot decide on its true identity. In the past it was made as a frizzante wine of some charm, although Brachetto performs the same trick better. Freisa, as a dry red at its best, has force and nobility, although there is often a slight rusticity that, in my view, gives it edge and personality. Vajra, Gilli, La Casaccia, Valpane and Burlotto make some of the best versions.



GD Vajra, Kyè 2004 ★★★★★ 18.5

£24.95 **Harrods**

Lush cherry nose. Suave, concentrated, but has firm tannins and vibrant acidity. Has drive and length. **Drink:** 2011–2015.

Valpane, Canone Inverso Monferrato, 2005 ★★★★★ 17.5

N/A UK www.cantinevalpane.com

Very spicy nose, plums and cloves. Very rich, concentrated, with impressive extract and power. Long. **Drink:** 2011–2018.

■ **Grignolino** This variety enjoys a mixed reputation. Light in colour but high in tannins, it's an acquired taste with a limited following. Grignolino is planted mostly in the Asti and Monferrato regions of southeastern Piedmont, but needs a good site to ripen properly, and most growers would rather use such spots for Barbera. A good one is perfumed and fresh, with enough acidity to balance the pronounced tannins. That said, it remains a minority taste, as tart red wines are scarcely in fashion. Good producers include Accornero, Marco Canato, La Mondianese, Carlo Quarello and Castello di Uviglie.

La Mondianese, Grignolino d'Asti 2008 ★★★ 15.5

No UK www.lamondianese.com

Fresh strawberry nose. Fairly slight, pleasant and bright, with good acidity and tannins on the finish. **Drink:** 2011.

■ **Ruché** This well-established red variety is only grown in a few villages of Monferrato, and no more than 40ha are planted. With its floral aromas and marked acidity and tannin, it is reminiscent of Nebbiolo or even Pinot Noir. The grape is thought to be of non-Italian origin, although its provenance has yet to be established. A curiosity rather than a great wine in its own right, it is worth seeking out in Piedmont, and there is also an even scarcer passito version. Bersano, Bava, Marco Crivelli and La Mondianese produce good bottlings.

Bava 2008 ★★★ 16

£19.21 (2005) **T&W Wines**

Lush, heady, floral nose. Creamy texture, ripe and juicy, with a winegum finish. **Drink:** 2011–2014.

Marco Crivelli 2008 ★★★ 16

N/A UK www.ruchecrivelli.it

Very floral rose-petal nose. Quite fleshy and juicy, with good acidity and a long delicate aftertaste. **Drink:** 2011. **D**

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