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To Boca with Love

The quest to revive a near-lost Nebbiolo terroir in northern Piedmont

Posted: Mar 9, 2015 10:00am ET

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When Christoph Künzli discovered northern Piedmont's Boca appellation at the end of the 1980s, it was, in a word, "dead."

"It was the end," says Künzli. "Everybody was gone. Most of the wines were undrinkable."

At the time, Künzli was a Swiss importer, guided by his friend Paolo de Marchi—the northern Piedmont native who created Tuscany's legendary [Isole e Olena](#).

De Marchi introduced him to a Boca exception—retired farmer Antonio Cerri, who bottled elegant Nebbiolo-based reds from an acre he had worked for 40 years.

"Cerri made these incredible wines from another time," explains Künzli, now 54 and a gray-bearded bear of a man. "That is why I am here. I lost my heart here."

Before World War II in Italy, the hills around Boca and four other towns were covered with more than 10,000 vineyard acres. After the war, waves of locals left vinegrowing to work in local textile and plumbing industries. By the mid-1990s, only 25 acres remained under vine.

"I said to myself, 'It cannot die.'" Künzli shakes his head. He made several offers to buy out Cerri, but the old winemaker refused.

Following Cerri's death in 1997 at 84 the family sold to Künzli and a group of wine-loving investors. That year's vintage was ruined by a hailstorm, but Künzli persisted, making 1,000 bottles of the 1998 vintage (released in 2002), buying up more small parcels and clearing and replanting 15 abandoned acres.

Today, Künzli's Le Piane estate, with its cellars in Cerri's old farmhouse and its offices in Boca's old town hall, is Boca's locomotive, comprising about 15 of the Boca DOCG's nearly 50 acres of vines, along with nearly five outside the appellation.

To find the Boca vineyards, you must hike or drive up through dense forests that have replaced lower vineyards. Today, Boca has some of Piedmont's highest-altitude vineyards—up to 1,700 feet—all facing south-southwest on steep, bermed slopes. Soils are acidic, mineral-rich, volcanic porphyry like those in the nearby Gattinara appellation, but with a finer, sandier consistency.

Künzli farms his vineyards in a labor-intensive, chemical-free way, planting cabbage to aerate soils and clover as green fertilizer.

"If you have good grapes, you only have to not destroy the wine in the cellar," says Künzli, who learned winemaking by doing and tasting—at first with the help of another friend, Barolo winemaker Aldo Vajra.

Whereas Barolo and some northern Piedmont wines are pure Nebbiolo, Boca DOC wines must be a blend of 70 to 90 percent Nebbiolo with two other Italian varieties, Vespolina and Uva Rara.

After a meticulous selection of grapes in the vineyard, Künzli coferments his 85 percent Nebbiolo with 15 percent Vespolina in outdoor stainless-steel vats using native yeasts.

"Alone I don't like Vespolina—it's not elegant enough," says Künzli of the darker, spicy, Nebbiolo relative. "But with Nebbiolo, it's perfect."

To comply with the appellation's Uva Rara requirement, he says, "I throw in one grape. I don't like it; it's not a grape that ages well."

After pressing with an old-fashioned pneumatic basket press, he ages the wines like some traditional Barolos—in large oak casks for at least three years, then for another year in bottle before release.

Compared with Barolo, Künzli's Boca is a softer, almost ephemeral style, yet has a long aging potential supported by good acidity.

Le Piane also makes three other red table wines, including a pure, juicy Croatina (another native variety), a simpler Nebbiolo-Vespolina-Croatina blend and an easy-drinking, low-alcohol wine called Maggiorina, made from a field blend of a dozen varieties in century-old vineyards. (The name comes from the old *maggiorina* vineyard system in which two to four vines were planted together to form one tree-like goblet.)

After 17 years working in Cerri's old cellar, Künzli has yet to turn a profit. Still, he has become ever more reluctant to change anything.

"I ask myself, 'What would Cerri do,'" Künzli says. "Cerri had only cold water in the winery. I added hot water. But I don't use it."



Christoph Künzli has preserved 15 acres of the Nebbiolo terroir in Piedmont's Boca appellation.

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