

## Italy, Piedmont: Alto Piemonte

- **Monica Larner**
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Vintage	Wines	RP
2010	<a href="#">Proprietà Sperino 'L Franc</a>	96
2010	<a href="#">Proprietà Sperino Lessona</a>	94
2006	<a href="#">Travaglini Gattinara Riserva</a>	94
2007	<a href="#">Le Piane Boca</a>	94
2006	<a href="#">Travaglini Gattinara Tre Vigne</a>	93+

Alto Piemonte is not a single wine denomination. Instead, the term refers to a collection of ten small appellations that are located within the northern most tip of Piedmont, one of the most powerful and productive wine regions in Italy. The southern half of Piedmont is home to the provinces of Cuneo and Asti where wines Barolo, Barbaresco and Moscato d’Asti (to name just a few) are produced. The northern part of the region is broken into four smaller provinces: Biella, Novara, Vercelli and Verbano Cusio Ossola. The wines made in these four provinces are collectively known as the wines of Alto Piemonte, or “upper Piedmont” in English.



*The tower of the Basilica di San Gaudenzio dominates the Novara skyline. This beautiful city is the perfect starting point for exploring the ten appellations that make up the greater Alto Piemonte wine region. What consumers should see in Alto Piemonte is an opportunity to taste a more accessible side of Nebbiolo (the leading component in Alto Piemonte wines) at a more attractive price point. As land*

prices in southern Piedmont have already exceeded the \$1 million-per-hectare mark in the Langhe where Barolo and Barbaresco are made, Alto Piemonte remains reasonably affordable for those looking to invest in vineyard or winery startups. Those savings are passed forward to the consumer. Alto Piemonte is home to many historic wine estates, but we are now seeing a new generation of young vintners looking to make their mark on the local winescape.



*Barrel tasting at the*

*Le Piane winery outside the town of Boca within the wine appellation of the same name.*

Alto Piemonte is regarded as a land of opportunity for up-and-coming winemakers. The region has the potential to increase annual production to 1.7 million liters of wine. The most important appellation is Colline Novaresi. It represents 45 percent of total production. The Gattinara appellation makes 23 percent of the wine in Alto Piemonte, and 11 percent comes from the Ghemme appellation. The Fara appellation is the smallest at just 2 percent of total production, and it exports a mere 1,000 bottles each year to foreign markets.

Alto Piemonte is highly influenced by the proximity of the Italian Alps that rise suddenly as a steep wall of granite in this beautiful part of the Italian peninsula. “Those mountains represent one of the most dramatic altitude ascent in Italy,” says Luca De Marchi of Proprietà Sperino in the Lessona appellation. “As a result, hail storms are a serious problem because of the violent exchanges between hot and cold air.” Despite those marked diurnal temperature shifts, that imposing wall of looming mountains serves to block cold weather patterns from the Continental climate found in Central Europe and to safeguard the milder Mediterranean climate found in northern Italy. Warm, sunny pockets and special microclimates that are ideal for grape growing are found at the base of Monte Rosa—the second highest mountain in the Alps—located between Switzerland and Italy. Monte Rosa is the main panoramic symbol of this landscape.





*The common link*

*shared by the ten appellations in Alto Piemonte is Nebbiolo. They all rely on this important indigenous grape from Piedmont as the base for their red wines. Other grapes such as Vespolina, Croatina and Uva Rara (Bonarda Novarese) are sometimes blended in smaller percentages. In Alto Piemonte, Nebbiolo is frequently called Spanna or Prüinent. The main white grape is Erbaluce. The geology of Alto Piemonte is highly unique in that it sees a varied mixture of soil types. The Valli Ossolane wine region closest to the mountains is home to compressed granite pulverized by the movement of glaciers. The eastern side of Alto Piemonte is characterized by volcanic soils in the areas of Colline Novaresi and Ghemme. The Boca appellation has sandy soils and Gattinara is rich with limestone deposits. The western part of Alto Piemonte, in the Lessona and Coste della Sesia areas, is home to alluvial soils and marine fossils. The soils in Lessona range in bright colors from rusty red to mustard yellow. Bramaterra often shows heavy gray soils. “The geology in Alto Piemonte is extremely varied,” says Lorella Zoppis, president of the Consorzio Tutela Alto Piemonte, or the local growers’ association. “These range from volcanic soils to soils with acidic and mineral strength.”*

The ten wine denominations of Alto Piemonte share loose historic links if any at all. For example, Ghemme and Gattinara are the oldest with roots spanning back to the ancient Romans when the area was known as Anagnum. The ancients celebrated this area for its quality grape production. In the Middle Ages, wine production also flourished as part of the religious orders and abbeys of the area.

One thing all ten appellations share is that they are all based on the Nebbiolo grape. Some areas prioritize mono-varietal wines (100% Nebbiolo), and others are partial to blends. The main blending partners are Vespolina (for color brightness), Croatina (for its fruity intensity) and Uva Rara (also known as Bonarda Novarese). You may also see Nebbiolo called by its other names such

as “Spanna” in the hills of Novara or “Prünent” in the Valli Ossolane area. White wines are made with the crisp and fragrant Erbaluce grape.

I have discovered two general markers that can help identify the red wines of Alto Piemonte in a blind tasting. First, the bouquet usually reveals more evolved aromas of tar, dark spice and dried rose that give a smoky and distinctive personality. Second, these blended expressions of Nebbiolo offer softer tannins and a more accessible drinking style compared to Nebbiolo-based wines made further south in the Langhe.

Here is a quick breakdown of the ten appellations (in alphabetical order) you will find highlighted in this report.

### **Boca DOC**

Wines from this appellation are 70 to 90 percent Nebbiolo (also called Spanna). Both Vespolina and Uva Rara can represent up to 30 percent of the blend. Single-vineyard designations are used in this appellation. Boca wines see 34 months of aging (of which 18 must be in oak), and Boca Riserva wines are required to age for 46 months (of which 24 must be in oak).



*Christoph Künzli owns Le Piane in the Boca appellation. This fabulous boutique estate is responsible for some of the most exciting wines I discovered in Alto Piemonte.*





*Le Piane produces four red wines: the Colline Novaresi Piane gives you a pure taste of the Croatina grape; the Boca made with 85% Nebbiolo and a smaller part Vespolina is the estate's headline wine; the Mimmo is an age-worthy blend of 70% Nebbiolo, 25% Croatina and 5% Vespolina; and the Maggiorina is a crazy blend of 13 different grapes harvested from 25 separate vineyard sites.*

**Bramaterra DOC**

Bramaterra wines see anywhere from 50 to 80 percent Nebbiolo (also called Spanna in this appellation) that can be blended with Croatina (up to 30 percent), Uva Rara and Vespolina. The wines must age for 22 months total (with 18 months in wood) or 34 months for the Riserva category (with 24 months in oak).

**Colline Novaresi DOC**

This is the largest and most flexible appellation listed here. Colline Novaresi wines are white, rosé and red. There is a Novello, too, that is made with 50 percent Nebbiolo. This appellation allows for mono-varietal labeling including a white wine that is a pure expression of the Erbaluce grape. Otherwise, you can find mono-varietal expressions of Nebbiolo, Barbera, Croatina, Uva Rara and Vespolina (single-variety wines are officially 85 percent of any single grape).

**Coste della Sesia DOC**

This is the western-most appellation in Alto Piemonte. Like Colline Novaresi, this is a blanket denomination that covers a much bigger chunk of territory (up to the Sesia River). Red and rosé wines must be made with at least 50 percent Nebbiolo. The other 50 percent of the blend can be any non-aromatic red grape registered by the region of Piedmont. White wines are 100 percent Erbaluce. This appellation allows for mono-varietal (at least 85 percent) expressions of Nebbiolo

(or Spanna), Vespolina, Croatina and Uva Rara. Vineyards in the Gattinara, Lessona or the Bramaterra appellations can also take part in the Coste della Sesia DOC if desired.

### **Fara DOC**

The tiniest appellation, Fara wines must be made with anywhere from 50 to 70 percent Nebbiolo (also called Spanna). The rest of the blend can see up to 50 percent Vespolina and Uva Rara. Other red grapes from Piedmont can also be used as long as they don't exceed ten percent of the blend. These wines must age for 22 months (of which 12 must be in wood). There is a Riserva category that sees 34 months of aging (with 20 months in oak barrel).

### **Gattinara DOCG**

This is one of the oldest appellations in Alto Piemonte. It is also a single-town appellation with vineyards at the perimeter of the picturesque village of Gattinara. The wines are made with at least 90 percent Nebbiolo (also called Spanna) with no more than ten percent Vespolina and Uva Rara (Bonarda Novarese). The vast majority of these wines are pure expressions of Nebbiolo. Gattinara wines age for 35 months, with 24 months in oak. Gattinara Riserva wines are aged for 47 months total, with 36 months in oak barrel.



*Cinzia Travaglini and her husband Massimo Collauto present new vintages of Travaglini. The family is focused mostly on Nebbiolo planted in various single-vineyard parcels spread over 44 hectares of vines in the Gattinara appellation.*



*Since 1958, the Travaglini family has used a unique bottle design that is registered solely to them. Acting like a decanter, it can catch any sediment formed during the aging process.*

### **Ghemme DOCG**

Ghemme is also one of the most historic appellations in Alto Piemonte. Wines are made with 85 percent Nebbiolo (also called Spanna here) with up to 15 percent Vespolina and Uva Rara. The wine is aged for 34 months (with 18 months in oak) for the classic expression and 46 months (with 24 months in wood) for the Riserva expression.

### **Lessona DOC**

Lessona is close to the city of Turin. Wines in this appellation are 85 percent Nebbiolo (also called Spanna) with up to 15 percent Vespolina and Uva Rara. The wine ages for 22 months (with 12 months in oak). There is a Riserva version that sees 46 months of aging with 30 months in oak.





Left:

*Luca De Marchi manages Proprietà Sperino in the Lessona appellation with his father Paolo (who owns Isole e Olena in Chianti Classico). Right: The Lessona appellation has varied soil types some with brilliant shades of red and yellow. These are the sandy yellow soils that distinguish Proprietà Sperino's vineyards planted to Nebbiolo, Vespolina and Croatina. This estate also makes a stunning Cabernet Franc.*

### **Sizzano DOC**

This is a very small appellation based around the village of Sizzano in the province of Novara some 80 kilometers northeast of Turin. The wines are composed of 50 to 70 percent Nebbiolo (also called Spanna) with 30 to 50 percent other grapes such as Vespolina and Uva Rara. This appellation sees a shorter refining period with 22 months of aging (with 16 months in oak) for the classic wine and 34 months (with 24 in oak) for the Riserva.

### **Valli Ossolane DOC**

This is the northern-most appellation in Alto Piemonte that butts up against the Italian Alps. This is a more complicated appellation that allows for red wines made with at least 60 percent Nebbiolo, or Croatina or Merlot. There is a white wine that is made with at least 60 percent Chardonnay. Valli Ossolane also offers a Nebbiolo Superiore that is 85 percent Nebbiolo (also called Prünent in this part of Italy). The Superiore must have at least 11 percent alcohol, and these wines age for 13 months in wood. Because this appellation is so close to Switzerland, you can expect very fresh and vibrant fruit-forward flavors.





*The territory of Alto Piemonte is rich with indigenous grapes and traditional growing methods. This is the Maggiorina vine training system in which three vines are planted together and trained upwards into a large box frame.*

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## **Valutazione Vini Alto Piemonte da Monica Larner della rivista Robert Parker**

2010 Proprietà Sperino 'L Franc	96
2010 Proprietà Sperino Lessona	94
2007 Le Piane Boca	94
2006 Travaglini Gattinara Riserva	94
2013 Proprietà Sperino Coste della Sesia Uvaggio	93+
2006 Travaglini Gattinara Tre Vigne	93+
2012 Le Piane Boca	93
2009 Le Piane Colline Novaresi Piane	93
2010 Travaglini Metodo Classico Dosaggio Zero Nebolè	92+
2013 Le Piane Mimmo	92
2012 Proprietà Sperino Lessona	92
2011 Travaglini Gattinara Tre Vigne	92
2009 Le Piane Boca	92
2006 Le Piane Boca	92
2011 Nervi Gattinara Vigna Molsino	91+
2010 Pietro Cassina Lessona Tanzo	91+
2012 Antonolo Gattinara San Francesco	91
2011 Travaglini Gattinara Riserva	91
2011 Travaglini Il Sogno	91
2010 La Badina Lessona Riserva	91
2012 Travaglini Gattinara	90
2011 Massimo Clerico Lessona Riserva	90
2005 Travaglini Gattinara Riserva	90
2012 Francesca Castaldi Fara	89
2012 Vignaioli Boniperti Fara Bartön	89
2010 Torracia del Piantavigna Ghemme Vigna Pelizzane	89
2007 Travaglini L'Altro Sogno	89
2015 Le Piane Maggiorina	88+
2011 Il Roccolo di Mezzomerico Coll. Nov. Nebbiolo Valenti	88+
2015 Travaglini Nebbiolo Coste della Sesia	88
2013 Le Pianelle Bramaterra	88
2013 Villa Era Coste della Sesia Nebbiolo	88



2012 Cantine del Castello Conti Boca Il Rosso delle Donne	88
2012 Enrico Crola Colline Novaresi Nebbiolo Giulia	88
2012 Roccia Rossa Bramaterra	88
2011 Castello di Montecavallo Coste della Sesia Nebbiolo	88
2011 Ioppa Ghemme Balsina	88
2011 Zanetta Sergio e Valter Ghemme Lorenzo Zanetta	88
2007 Mirù Ghemme	88
2016 Platinetti Guido Colline Novaresi Vespolina	88
2013 La Prevostura Lessona	87
2012 Antoniotti Bramaterra	87
2012 Barbaglia Boca	87
2012 Cantina del Signore Gattinara Il Putto Vendemmiatore	87
2012 Mauro Franchino Gattinara	87
2012 Paride Iaretti Gattinara Pietro	87
2011 Francesco Brigatti Ghemme Oltre il Bosco	87
2010 Ca' Nova Ghemme	87
2009 Rovellotti Ghemme Chioso dei Pomi	87
2009 Tenute Sella 1671 Lessona Omaggio a Quintino	87
2014 F. Zambolin Coste della Sesia Nebbiolo Gioia d'Autunno	87
2011 Vigneti Valle Roncati Fara Riserva Ciada	87
2002 Nervi Gattinara	87
2014 Pietraforata Colline Novaresi Vespolina Vespolezza	86
2013 Cantine Garrone Valli Ossolane Nebbiolo Sup. Prùnent	86
2013 Colombera & Garella Bramaterra Cascina Cottignano	86
2011 Poderi Garona Boca	86
2008 La Palazzina Bramaterra Riserva	86
2011 Centovigne Coste della Sesia Nebbiolo Castellengo	85
2011 Filadora Colline Novaresi Nebbiolo Nobile	85
2013 Stradina Gattinara Rusèt	84
2012 Davide Carlone Boca	84
2008 Cantina Sociale di Gattinara Gattinara Riserva	84
2013 Tiziano Mazzoni Ghemme dei Mazzoni	83
2012 Paride Chiovini Sizzano	83
2010 Podere ai Valloni Boca Vigna Cristiana	82
2011 Caligaris Luca Gattinara	80