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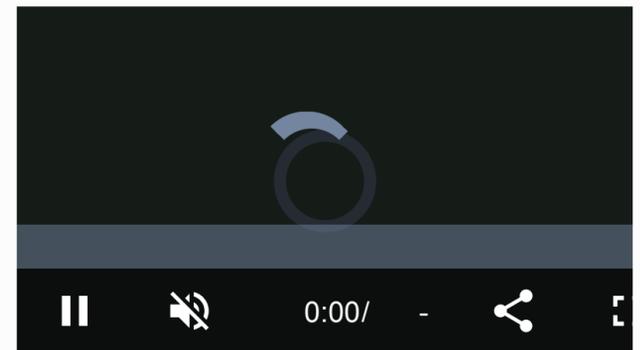
Le Piane - Christoph Künzli Leading A Wine Renaissance In Alto Piemonte



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Food & Drink

I write about wine (and sometimes food) from around the world.



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Christoph Künzli, winemaker/proprietor, Le Piane, Boca PHOTO ©TOM HYLAND

The region of Piemonte is most famous for two red wines, Barolo and Barbaresco, both produced exclusively from the Nebbiolo variety. The territories that are the source of these wines are located in the province of Cuneo in the southern reaches of the region.

But there are other notable versions of Nebbiolo-based wines made in Piemonte, especially in Alto (“upper”) Piemonte; examples here include Gattinara, Ghemme and a lovely wine known as Boca. There are only about a dozen producers of Boca, which is made primarily with Nebbiolo, along with Vespolina, a local red variety. Today the leading producer of Boca is Christoph Künzli, proprietor and winemaker at a small estate known as Le Piane.

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Künzli’s story is a fascinating one, an example of how one’s life can take a surprising, and in this case, a highly successful turn. A Swiss native, Künzli imported fine wines for years and in that capacity, had the opportunity to often visit Italy, and during his visits he tasted the wines of Antonio Cerri at his estate, Campo delle Piane in the tiny hamlet of Boca, not far from the city of Novara. When Cerri became too old to manage the everyday work necessary, Künzli soon after was able to purchase the property in the mid 1990s.

A few words about Boca and Alto Piemonte. This was a thriving wine territory some 70-80 years ago; Künzli notes that in Alto Piemonte, “Nebbiolo was always there and was already famous” in the early 20th century. In the 1930s, Künzli points out that there were almost 75,000 acres of vineyards planted there, meaning there were more plantings than in all of Tuscany at that time.

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Over the years, due to the cost of production, many producers in Alto Piemonte either moved south to the Langhe to make Barolo or Barbaresco, or else changed to a business that was less costly. “I always say that for these people it was easier to go to the factory than the vineyards, and it took less time,” Künzli remarks. “When I came there were very few plantings left; there were only 25 acres left, with the rest being forest.” Today then, there are only a few dozen and not a few hundred wine estates in the area.



Vineyards at Le Piane estate, Boca PHOTO COURTESY OF LE PIANE

Thankfully, Künzli has decided to remain, despite some locals wondering why he would opt to produce Boca rather than Barolo. His signature Boca, a blend of 70% Nebbiolo and 30% Vespolina, is truly one of not only Piemonte greatest red wines (it is arguably the best Piemontese red that is not Barolo or Barbaresco), it is also one of the finest of all Italian reds. Künzli emulates the style of previous owner Cerri, crafting the wine in a traditional manner, maturing it in large Slavonian oak casks (in fact, he still vinifies in the same cellars of Cerri.)

As Boca is much farther north in Piemonte as opposed to Barolo or Barbaresco, temperatures here are cooler, meaning that generally there is a higher level of acidity in these wines, ensuring excellent aging potential. Künzli's first production of Boca was from 1999 (an excellent vintage) and the wine is in wonderful drinking condition.

Künzli is rightfully proud of his work, and notes that several Italian wine publications are grateful to him for “saving” Boca. They also note that it took someone from Switzerland to do this, rather than an Italian. He tells the story of a local grower he has been collaborating with for 20 years now, who told Künzli after ten years, “I can't believe you're Swiss.” What's wrong with the Swiss?,” is a question he is immediately asked his friend.

Künzli understands why Italians think this way, yet reasons that the fact an outsider is succeeding is something that occurs all the time, in many corners of the world. “It's important sometimes that somebody comes from somewhere, and sees something that people around there may not see anymore because it's so normal.

For me, it's not normal. I opened the window and let fresh air in.”

If you are a true lover of Piemontese red wine, you must find a bottle of Le Piane Boca (any vintage - 2016 is the current release) and experience its structure, class and styling, as well as varietal purity. When you do, you will be most grateful that Künzli decided to make Boca relevant again.

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I am a Chicago-based wine writer, educator and photographer, with 39 years of experience in the wine industry. For the past 20 years, I have been a freelancer, writing... **Read More**

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