

The Wines of Italy: Part 3

Written by Terry Connor
Tuesday, 24 May 2011 14:42

Franco and I are on our way to Piedmont (sometimes seen as "Piemonte.") The dinner that he cooked the other night was nothing less than sensational. I can only hope that he has more friends to cook for as we progress on our journey.

The Piedmont area is a good example of wines produced for quality and not quantity. As you travel in Italy, you discover that there are areas that produce for quantity, e.g. Soave. Other areas produce for quality, such as Piedmont and Tuscany. In Piedmont, the effort to produce quality wines is reflected in the fact that 45 regions have achieved the DOC status, and 12 have achieved the DOCG status. Adding these numbers together gives us a total of 57 regions, and that means 86% of the wine produced in Piedmont is DOC/G.

The wines most notable from Piedmont are Barolo, Barbaresco, and Asti. Barolo and Barbaresco are produced in the "Lange" terroir, located southwest of the town of Alba. The Lange is a series of steep hills that accommodate the climate, soil, and Nebbiolo grape that in turn produces very complex, tannic and acidic wine. Patience is the key here as Barolo can age sometimes in excess of ten years before the tannins dissipate and the wine becomes drinkable. If you are patient, and you live long enough, you will be rewarded with a unique wine drinking experience. Good Barolos are very special, and in my opinion, belong in your wine cabinet, forgotten about, and taken out for special occasions only.

Annual production of Barolo is approximately 500,000 cases. This is truly an amazing number when you consider that the entire region is only seven miles long and five miles wide. However, it is enough to satisfy worldwide consumption as Barolo is pricey and, normally is not an everyday wine.

We move now to Barbaresco wine, which is also produced from the Nebbiolo grape. The Nebbiolo grapes for Barbaresco are grown only 10 miles apart from Barolo. Although this causes similarities to exist with Barolo, there is a slight maritime influence from the Tanaro River. The resulting wine is less tannic and more elegant thus enabling consumption earlier than Barolo. The Barbaresco DOCG regulation stipulates wines with a minimum alcohol content of 12.5%, and 2 years aging, in the winery for standard labels and 4 years minimum aging for RESERVAS wines. Being an even smaller zone than Barolo, annual production is approximately 200,000 cases.

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A note about the soil in Barbaresco: The soil is more uniform across the region of Barbaresco, which tends to produce a more consistent character to the wine than Barolo. Barolo is produced in a compact area that tends to be rugged and hilly. Keeping in mind how near these two wines are to each other, we can see the effect of a microclimate.

Sparkling wine from Italy is nothing short of enormous. I previously mentioned Prosecco, however I would be remiss if I did not discuss Asti Spumante and Moscato d'Asti. Asti Spumante is a DOCG wine made from the Moscato grape. It is a full sparkling, and semi-sweet to sweet wine with only 7 to 9% alcohol. The production process is very interesting and could only be the result of years of recorded experience. The process is called "Modified Charmat." In this process, the grape juice is filtered and brought to near freezing temperature thus STOPPING fermentation. (The wine is made in batches.) When demand for the wine occurs, the juice is allowed to warm and is inoculated with yeast so that fermentation can BEGIN. Once the desired alcohol and residual sugar levels are achieved, the wine is rapidly chilled to STOP fermentation. The wine is then filtered again, bottled and corked, and made ready for shipment.

Moscato d' Asti is generally made in even smaller batches. It is produced from the same grape; however I should point out what makes this wine so different. The final product is not a full sparkling wine. It is FRIZZANTE (fizzy), and as a result, it is packaged using only a conventional cork and not a champagne-style cork and wire. The alcohol level is limited to 5.5% by law. At the present time, Moscato d' Asti is one of the hottest products on the retail market. I can only assume that this is so because the wine is so light in alcohol.

Room for one more Spumante. Red Spumante is usually made from the Barbera or Nebbiolo grapes. However, one made from the Brachetto grape, and called Brachetto Spumante, is available in the Lowcountry. It is sweet and meant to be served with dessert.

Winespeak:

If you go to Piedmont (and/or Tuscany) do it justice by visiting a quality wine producer and enjoying a meal at one of the best restaurants. I say this because it will result in a lasting memory. The wineries are all on the internet and making an appointment (required) is very

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easy. All of the good restaurants are near the town of Alba. Try Boccondivino or Guido. Are the restaurants expensive? Yes.

One last item. Set aside some time to investigate The White Truffles. I will say no more to keep the mystery alive.

Next stop: Tuscany.

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