

AT THE BAR vintners of nebbiolo

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CRAFTING THE FAMOUS  
RED WINES OF PIEDMONT.

BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN



In the words of Paolo Cordero di Montezemolo, a patriarch of Barolo producers in Piedmont, Italy, making great wine is like an “agrarian opera.” There are many players, many complexities, and no one knows the outcome until the final act—or uncorking—of the bottle.

Cordero di Montezemolo’s successors at his eponymous winery, Giovanni and Alberto, agree that nebbiolo, the grape in Barolo and Barbaresco, needs special expertise. It’s a difficult grape to grow, requiring appropriate soils and sun exposure to mitigate the wine becoming overly tannic and tight. These same characteristics enable well-made nebbiolo to age and delight for decades.

Typical of the many multigenerational wineries in Roero and the Langhe hills of Barolo and Barbaresco where the controlled appellations of DOCG (*denominazione di origine controllata e garantita*) nebbiolo wines are made, Isabella Boffa Oddero also emphasizes the careful vineyard management and winemaking skills her grandfather modeled at Oddero Poderi e Cantine. “The point of wine is to express different vineyards and different moments in time,” says Oddero.

A new generation of Piedmont producers has improved quality in the vineyard and cellar. An overview of several vintners manifests their intense focus on familial heritage while establishing creative innovative approaches to nebbiolo winemaking.

For the past several years Alberto Cordero has served as president of Albeisa, the Union of Alba Wine Producers, a nonprofit association. The Albeisa mission is to promote wines from the Alba area, protect trademarks, maintain production statistics and monitor quality standards. A special Albeisa wine bottle marks the authenticity of these wines.

Albeisa sponsors Nebbiolo Prima, a program for international journalists to taste 600 of the newly released DOCG nebbiolo wines in Alba. In May, 94 writers blind-sampled the latest wines and then visited wineries to explore the vineyards and discuss the wines with producers.

“We want the participants to touch the vines—this creates a connection with the wine and winery,” says Chiara Boschis, owner/winemaker of E. Pira e Figli (Pira) in the La Morra commune (village) of the Barolo district.

## CORDERO DI MONTEZEMOLO

At the May event, Alberto Cordero set out a rare vertical tasting of Cordero di Montezemolo by decade, beginning in

1957. “The best way to describe classic older Barolos is fresh leather, tobacco and softer tannins than the new releases—but they are still alive,” he says.

Cordero represents the 19th generation of producers on the property, which has belonged to the Falletti family in the La Morra commune since 1340. From the top of the Gettera hill crowned by a majestic 150-year-old cedar of Lebanon, the vista from Cordero’s winery covers much of the Barolo area.

Cordero’s family developed a special winemaking style that resulted in less-tannic wines. Rather than the usual practice of aging wine longer than required in barrel, Alberto’s father Giovanni moved his wine to concrete or stainless-steel tanks after the minimal time in barrel—followed by bottle aging for up to two years.

“In wines such as our Barolo Monfalletto, we look for balance. Only some of our parcels need new oak barrels—we don’t want to overpower the wine with oak,” says Cordero.

## E. PIRA E FIGLI

In 1981, when Boschis took over E. Pira e Figli winery in the Cannubi commune of Barolo, people considered her “exotic fruit.” “After college, I asked my father why men passed on their wineries only to their sons,” she says. “I was pleased when he purchased the winery for me.”

Boschis worked hard, and within a few vintages was accepted by the group known as the “Barolo Boys,” men who inherited wineries from their parents and innovated in the vineyard and cellar. The impact of the group is portrayed in the documentary of the same name, released in April 2016, in which Boschis is featured. A new book by Suzanne Hoffman, *Labor of Love: Wine Family Women of Piemonte* (Under Discovered Publishing LLC, 2016), features Boschis, including a photo of her hands on the cover.

The Barolo Cannubi that Boschis crafts has power and complexity yet retains elegance. She has influenced many women vintners in the Langhe, including Bruna Grimaldi of her eponymous winery who crafts a softer style Barolo from the cru (vineyard) Badarina.

Boschis’ focus on sustainable growing practices has also impacted the region. After converting her vineyards to organic standard, she has convinced most of the other 26 growers in Cannubi to do the same.

## PODERI E CANTINA ODDERO

The first bottle under the Poderi e Cantina Oddero label was made in 1878. But owner/winemaker Cristina Oddero has discovered records that show her family sold wine in the 1700s. Oddero follows what she calls “tradunt” (to hand down and teach). “I use mostly neutral oak barrels to respect the terroir, and only sell when ready,” she says.

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**OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** 1) A view of Castiglione Falletto from the Paolo Manzone winery. 2) Giorgio Pelissero at the Pelissero winery. 3) Cordero di Montezemolo Barolo 1957 and 1967. 4) Cristina and Pietro Oddero at Poderi e Cantine Oddero. 5) Pio Cesare wine tasting.

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Her niece, Isabella Oddero, adds, “Our single vineyard La Morra Brunato Barolo is not just about muscle, but is also elegant and well-defined to the nose.”

The newly released 2005 Riserva Vigna Rionda is balanced and rich, and named for the top-quality vineyard in the shape of a round amphitheater.

### PIO CESARE

Pio Cesare winery is 136 years old—and the only one remaining in the historic center of Alba. Fifth-generation vintner Cesare Benvenuto is the great-great-grandson of founder Cesare Pio. In the late 1880s, Cesare Pio saw the potential for Barolo, despite the small number of Langhe wineries.

History runs deep at the winery. Excavations in the old cellar have uncovered parts of the 50 B.C. Roman wall. A stable was built on top of the wall, followed by the winery, still in use. During World War II, Italians and Germans fought outside while the historic cellar served as a citizens’ bunker. Benvenuto’s grandmother told him that the wine kept the group “very happy,” despite the chaos.

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### NEBBIOLO IN U.S. RESTAURANTS

At Commander’s Palace in New Orleans, wine director Dan Davis believes nebbiolo is simple to sell. “The same people who buy cabernet sauvignon buy nebbiolo, because they are similar, with big, bold profiles and huge tannins.” But, he adds, there is a difference. “Nebbiolo also has flavors of pinot noir—the cherry, red and black plums and raspberry notes.”

Mark Warren, former wine program director and sommelier at Beau Rivage, an MGM resort in Biloxi, Mississippi, is now with MGM National Harbor, Oxon Hill, Maryland. With the obsession with small vineyards, nebbiolo reminds him of Burgundy’s focus on small named vineyards. Beau Rivage has 10 restaurants, and BR Prime was where Warren sold Vietti Barolo and Produtorri del Barbaresco with dry-aged meats.

At Italian-focused A16 in San Francisco and Berkeley, California, wine director Shelley Lindgren sells hand-selected nebbiolo wines. She pairs linguine with cherry tomato, garlic and pecorino with a younger, easy-drinking Barolo from Poderi e Cantine Oddero with high acid and fairly firm tannins that also shows cherry fruit. Yet, says Lindgren, “A younger Barolo also pairs well with an osso buco, a hearty, rich dish, brightened and uplifted by the bright fruits and zippy texture of the younger wine.” For older nebbiolos, Lindgren would pair Cordero di Montezemolo Barolo with bucatini accompanied by cauliflower, anchovy, garlic, parsley and

breadcrumbs. The A16 hanger steak with its rich flavor pairs well with an older Barolo from Pelissero known for its deep, dark fruits.

How does a seafood house sell nebbiolo? At Farallon in San Francisco, wine director Luke Kenning emphasizes the similar characteristics that the wines have to Burgundian pinot noirs. He often chooses the more elegant Barolo wines from La Morra in Barolo or Neive in Barbaresco. He may pair an Bovio Barolo and sturgeon with sauce grabiche. With an eye on price and style, Kenning is fond of Pira. “Some of Chiara Boschis’ wines are dark and bold,” he says. “Many of our guests are coming from the steakhouse universe and veer toward our meat or poultry dishes. We serve wines that do not travel—meaning those that are not sold nationally and are usually small production. Boschis’ wines fit the bill—and satisfy our diners wanting a bigger red.”

It’s easier for John Rittmaster to sell Boschis’ wines at Prima Ristorante in Walnut Creek, California. Co-owner Rittmaster and partner/chef Peter Chastain specialize in Northern Italian wines and cuisine. At a recent winemaker dinner with Boschis, Chastain prepared grilled fillet of Piedmontese-style muscular, lean Nebraska beef served with cipollini onions agrodolce (sweet and sour), romano beans and roasted tomato. Rittmaster paired the course with Pira Barolo Mosconi.



Pio Cesare produces single vineyard DOCG wines such as Barolo Ornato and Il Bricco Barbaresco. Benvenuto is also proud of his entry-level Barolo Classico wines. “A great chef can make a great risotto for six people. But can he cook for 100 people? Our goal is consistency. Please, do not call this wine our ‘regular’ Barolo.”

### PODERI COLLA

Tino Colla epitomizes the diverse winegrowing of the region. The vintner plants and sells riesling at Poderi Colla, but he also produces a full range of nebbiolo wines, such as DOCG Barbaresco Roncaglie and Barolo Bussia Dardi le Rose. His grandfather Pietro was a leader of the Piedmontese vintners who made spumante sparkling wine in the *méthode champenoise* in the early 1900s. The Poderi Colla Blanc de Noirs Extra Brut is made from nebbiolo and pinot noir.

Beyond sparkling wine, the Colla family bought the famed Prunotto Colla in the Bussia area of the Monforte d’Alba commune in 1956. Colla’s brother Beppe helped build the reputation of nebbiolo at a time when the wines of Piedmont were relatively unknown. In 1994, the Colla brothers sold the winery to the famed Tuscan winemaking company Antinori and launched Poderi Colla. “If you don’t know our history, you don’t know our wine,” says Tino Colla.

### PRUNOTTO

Prunotto’s history is intertwined with the city of Alba where it served as a “social canteen,” a communal winemaking facility to produce its wine and that of others. The winery is now located in Bussia Soprana in Monforte d’Alba at the top of the highly regarded vineyard. Prunotto Bussia is aged in unusual oval barrels. As wine educator Tiziano Torto explains, the shape saves space in the cellar and allows sediment to more readily drop to the bottom.

Barolo Bussia was the first winery to produce single vineyard-designated Barolo in 1961. It’s now known for its classic-style wines sourced from the Langhe and Roero. The 2012 Bric Turot

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ABOVE: Pelissero winery vineyards

Barbaresco DOCG is exceptionally smooth, while the 2009 Vigna Colonnello Riserva Bussia is well-balanced with intense classic nebbiolo aromas. The entry-level Barolo Classico DOCG range is known for its approachability in price and flavor profile.

## PELISSERO

Giorgio Pelissero is the third-generation winegrower of the Pelissero Winery. His grandfather Giovanni started growing grapes in the early 1900s, and his father first bottled wine in 1960. By 1990, enologist Giorgio took over the winery and expanded the production in Treiso, the heart of the Barbaresco region, exporting to more than 50 countries. “It is easier to buy grapes when vintners want to follow a trend,” says Pelissero. “But I make decisions on what to grow based on the land.”

With four vineyards, including the estate property, to choose from, Pelissero produces a wide selection of wines. His personal favorites are classic, age-worthy Barbaresco DOCG Vanotu and Vanotu Riserva, named in the Piemontese dialect for his grandfather Giovanni.

## PAOLO MANZONE

Like the hillside vineyards of Burgundy, wine from the Serralunga d’Alba commune manifests unique flavor characteristic—rounded tannins and rich fruit. An admirer of pinot noir, Paolo Manzone employs several Burgundian production techniques at his eponymous winery. In addition to the large wooden barrels, called “botte” in the Langhe, Manzone purchases traditional Burgundy barrels with a lighter toast.

Manzone calls his top-end Barolo Meriame “round with good body, a kind and strong, sweet and full-bodied wine.” He also makes Langhe Rosso, a growing category of red wines from the region. As part of the growing agrotourism movement, Manzone operates a bed-and-breakfast at the winery.

Boschis of Pira winery sees many changes in the area. “Fifty years ago, no one knew what nebbiolo was,” she says. “We explained what the wine can be and how to enjoy it. People are writing books about us, and organic winegrowing is advancing. This is our future.” ■

DEBORAH GROSSMAN IS A SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA JOURNALIST WHO WRITES ABOUT PEOPLE, PLACES AND PRODUCTS THAT IMPACT THE FOOD-AND-WINE WORLD.



PHOTO CREDIT Deborah Grossman

## NEBBIOLO IN PIEDMONT, ITALY, RESTAURANTS

Across the Tanaro River from Alba, Castello di Guarene perches atop the hill overlooking the Roero commune with vistas of Barbaresco. Built as a residence in 1727, the Castello is now a Relais & Châteaux five-star hotel and restaurant. With a younger, lean nebbiolo from E. Pira e Figli (Pira) with accentuated tannins, chef Davide Odero would pair traditional dishes such as boiled sausage with polenta or a plate of mixed Piemontese boiled meats. An older Nebbiolo with fuller structure and more-rounded tannins better supports dishes with more-pronounced flavors, he says. “A Poderi Colla Barolo would work well with game, while a traditional Barbaresco from Pio Cesare could be paired with a braised meat.”

The wine cellar at La Ciau del Tornavento in Treiso is well-known for its prized collection of Italian wines. La Ciau del Tornavento is considered a top restaurant in the Barbaresco area. Wine director Luca Ronchail pairs Piedmontese Fassone with raw meat lightly seasoned with lemon, salt and olive oil. “The delicate flavor of the raw meat works well with a light, younger nebbiolo with floral bouquet,” he says. “I do not want strong aromas or heavy fruit to cover the light dish.”

Another dish that Ronchail serves with a younger nebbiolo is tajarin. “This egg-based pasta, a thin, local version of tagliatelle, tossed with butter and sage, needs a light nebbiolo with more acidity to reset the palate,” he says.

For an older Barolo, Ronchail recommends veal braised in Barolo and seasoned with balsamic vinegar and herbs. “With such a rich sauce to accompany the meat, we need a powerful Barolo, for example, from a 2006 vintage, with enough tannins and acidity to stand up to the meat with the strong flavors in the sauce.”

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: 1) A 1916 bottle of Pio Cesare. 2) Poderi e Cantine Oddero cellar. 3) Cordero di Montezemolo Barolo label and old ledger.