

Jewels of the Alto-Piemonte

An hour northwest of Milan Italy is the rugged, glacier-sculpted Alto-Piemonte. Imagine yourself against the stunning backdrop of Monte Rosa in the Swiss-Italian Alps with Lake Orta and Lake Maggiore reflecting the morning sky. Breathe it in. OK, back to reality...Sub-alpine viticulture in this remote Northwestern Italian region dates back to the Roman Empire. The lakes mitigate climate extremes and diverse moraine and volcanic soils yield unique wines. Nebbiolo-based wines from the Alto region were actually held in higher regard than Barolo or Barbaresco into the 19th century. But remember the saying that bad things come in threes? Just as Phylloxera hammered the Alto Piemontese vineyards, the Industrial Revolution led youth to cities. The fabric of the vineyards unraveled, fading into forests of the early 20th century. World War II was the last thread, as 40,000 flourishing hectares of vines were reduced to 1,500 and many local inhabitants perished. By the mid -20th century the Alto-Piemonte wine region had shrunk into near obscurity.

What has developed since has been done by the sheer will and determination of a few. This month's selections focus on two wines from the Collines Novaresi, crafted from distinctive sites and cultivars and made in fairly miniscule quantities. It's actually amazing we have access to these wines. Grouped around the Sesia River, Collines Novaresi DOC was only established recently. It encompasses the smaller, longer established DOC's known for the "other" Nebbiolo based wines from Gattinara, Ghemme, and to a lesser extent, Boca.

The white wines come from Erbaluce, which produces a luscious yet vibrant white. Francesca Castaldi fashions a single white wine *Lucia*. Her minimalist label is understated and modern, perhaps a slight contrast to the liquid inside. Typically Erbaluce has floral aromas, sweet fruit, bright acidity and a vibrancy that is prototypically Italian. Yet, the 2012 *Lucia* is anything but. It is eager, grassy, waxy and has a lovely cotton candy feel on the palate. Francesca grew up in a winemaking family, but it wasn't until the late 1990's when she took the bull by the horns and purchased her own vineyards. Her small-production wines are crafted from only 5 hectares fine-tuned with conscientious farming and vinification based on intuition, attention to details and learning by doing. It certainly doesn't hurt that her family has wine roots stretching to the 1700s.

The reds of the Collines Novaresi are crafted from Vespolina, Bonarda Novaresi (aka Uva Rara), Nebbiolo and it's wild-child cousin, Croatina. Many of the oldest vineyards are planted with a mix of these cultivars, though Nebbiolo has always been credited with the highest pedigree. Croatina was generally planted in lesser quantity than the others, providing the "pepper" quality for the Nebbiolo-based blends. In the case of this month's *Le Piane* Croatina makes up the majority of the cuvee. These vines are trained in the style of Italian Architekt Antonelli, called La Maggiorina. Appearing to be quartered, two vines are simply planted next to each other, pruned and trellised in opposition to form a four-armed "chair" or "cup". Careful pruning encourages leaf growth and cluster development inside of the "cup", both increasing leaf cover to encourage slow ripening and protecting the fruit from strong winds on steep slopes. All the work is done by hand and the pedigree shows. Swiss winemaker Christoph Kunzli took over the Cerri Estate in the late 1990's and is working to rediscover the forgotten landscape of Boca as well as the intrigue of the local Croatina grape. He farms only 6.5 hectares so the attention to detail is high. For *Le Piane*, the fruit is plucked from 100 year old vineyards and is fermented in stainless steel and wood casks, before ageing in 20% new 500L barrels and old, large Slovenian wooden barrels for an additional two years. There is refinement here amongst beautiful rusticity; the dark cherry, dusty rose-wood tannins, mineral and savory feel are like nothing else, but at the same time, what else would you expect from Nebbiolo's unruly Northern cousin?

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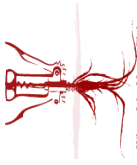
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Until next month,

Joe, Tom, & Andria

(over for recipe of the month)

“fighting for the soul of wine..”



This Month's Biodynamic® / Organic Selections

Francesca Castaldi Lucia

100% Erbaluce
Region: Colline
Novaresi, DOC, Italy
Vintage: 2012

Rarely found outside of its home in the Alto Piemonte, this 100% Erbaluce is dry, bright, and yet also serious enough to age well. Vivacious, steely, waxy and redolent with aromatics of green melon, and wet minerals. The palate is chalky, grassy and almost creamy with a wonderful presence. This wine is vinified in miniscule quantities, and after delighting us in its youth, is sure to develop beautifully.

Le Piane

Croatina
Region: Colline
Novaresi, DOC, Italy
Vintage: 2008

100+ year old vine Croatina is 90% of this distinctive red from Christoph Kunzli. Brooding, powerful and rustic, it opens with a dark, stony mineral edge and has aromatics of dried currants, pit fruit, rosemary and cedar. The palate is rich and textural with good acidity and a dusty, dry tannin structure that frames the flavors of plum, and cocoa. The finish is spicy, nervy and long with chewy tannins and iron minerality. *Le Piane* is as Alto-Piemonte as they come. Decanting is recommended in its youth. A relic of time past, this bottling will be lovely to behold in 10-30 years. Like *Lucia*, this wine highlights a varietal and its steward, speaking truly of the rugged, northern feel of the Italian-Swiss Alps.

Hey, why did my wine come in a used box?

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