

FOOD

Your Next Lesson: Dolcetto

Wine School

By ERIC ASIMOV NOV. 28, 2016

In past months, we've sampled nebbiolos and barberas from the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy. Next, we'll turn to the last of the three leading Piedmont red grapes, dolcetto.

If you ever visit the rolling hills around Alba in the Piedmont, you can learn a lot by looking at the vineyards. Nebbiolo is the most difficult of the grapes to ripen, and so it will have the warmest, sunniest places in the vineyard. Barbera doesn't need quite as much heat or light, while dolcetto will ripen quite happily just about anywhere.

That's true in the Alba region, where many leading Barolo producers also make excellent barberas and dolcettos. But in Dogliani, to the south of Alba, dolcetto takes pride of place. It only produces dolcetto, so dolcetto gets all the best places in the vineyard. For that reason, Dolcetto di Dogliani is often thought to be bigger and riper than Dolcetto d'Alba.

That's the theory, anyway. In practice, even from Dogliani, dolcetto is a juicy, earthy, sometimes tannic wine that makes for superb early drinking.

In many ways, dolcetto is an excellent counterpoint to barbera. It has ample tannins but low acidity, while barbera has buzz saw acidity but is not tannic. They are both accessible early and can be enjoyed while waiting for the nebbiolo to mature. It's the jigsaw puzzle of Piemontese wine life. Here are the three wines I recommend:

Luigi Einaudi Dolcetto di Dogliani 2014 (Empson USA, Alexandria, Va.) \$17

Bartolo Mascarello Dolcetto d'Alba 2015 (Rare Wine Company, Brisbane, Calif.) \$33

Roagna Dolcetto d'Alba 2014 (Polaner Selections, Mount Kisco, N.Y.) \$18

Each of these producers makes excellent Barolo (or Barbaresco). That can often be a guide to finding good dolcetto, though not always, as some producers who specialize in Dolcetto di Dogliani, like Anna Maria Abbona, may not make a nebbiolo wine.

Other names to look for include Aldo Conterno, Massolino, Pira, Prunotto, Francesco Rinaldi, Brovia, Cappellano, Bruno Giacosa, De Forville, Chionetti, Schiavenza and many others. Look for recent vintages, and if you can compare dolcettos from Alba and Dogliani, that would be great.

Dolcetto will pair well with many foods, and its light tannins make it especially congenial with salumi, sausages, pastas with mushrooms or meat sauces and pizzas. You can also try it with burgers, ribs and roast chicken.

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