

# The New York Times

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## [Dining & Wine](#)

### *WINES OF THE TIMES*

#### **A Shy Italian, Made for Everyday**



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

WHAT is greatness? When that question is asked about wine, it sometimes is answered too narrowly.

With food, most people recognize that all sorts of meals can satisfy and delight. A magnificent feast at a culinary temple does not cloud the ability to appreciate the pleasure of a perfect hamburger, or a chicken judiciously salted and well roasted.

A great novel does not diminish the enjoyment of a well-turned historical romance. Nor does a cinematic triumph demean a good thriller. While acknowledging a hierarchy of genres, excellence is excellence.

Yet with wine, we sometimes overlook a mountain of potential pleasures for the peak experience. I know more than a few people who believe that if a wine is not a benchmark bottle — a top Burgundy, Bordeaux or the equivalent — it's not worth drinking. It's a kind of blindness reserved for those who have never felt moved by the everyday joy that wine can offer, and who consequently measure all wines on a single scale rather than adjust their scales according to context.

The wine panel recently found the perfect case in point: the dolcetto wines of the Langhe region of northwestern Italy. There, a hierarchy is clear. The nebbiolo grape rules. A good, well-aged Barolo or

Barbaresco, the major nebbiolo wines, is a transcendent pleasure, one that speaks both to the brain and the soul. But these wines are expensive and getting more so.

Naturally, it would not occur to most people in the Langhe to drink nebbiolo daily. It's not affordable, for one thing. But more important, great bottles speak in a complex way that demands more attention, more focus and more time than is appropriate at most nightly family meals. These wines are rightly reserved for occasions that warrant them.

Everyday wines tend to be simpler, though nonetheless satisfying. In the Langhe they are mostly barberas and dolcettos, with a smattering of fringe wines like freisa, ruché, pelaverga and grignolino. Even when a treasured bottle is hauled out, it appears on the table only after subordinate bottles have been drunk, beginning with dolcetto and proceeding through barbera to nebbiolo.

Of barbera and dolcetto, it's always seemed to me that dolcetto was the less appreciated. For better or worse, barbera producers have taken their stabs at transformation, trying to make age-worthy wines reared in oak

### Tasting Report

The panel tasted dolcettos, a blend of bitter and sweet, all under \$25.

#### [1. Luigi Einaudi Dolcetto di Dogliani](#)

[Superiore Vigna Tecc 2010 \\*\\*\\*](#)

\$23

Excellent combination of fruity, bitter and earthy flavors; great structure and balance.



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Importer: Empson & Company, Alexandria, Va.

- [E-Mail This Wine](#)
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#### [2. Anna Maria Abbona Dolcetto di Dogliani](#)

#### [3. Aldo Conterno Langhe](#)

#### [4. Massolino](#)

#### [5. Francesco Rinaldi Dolcetto d'Alba](#)

#### [6. Paitin Dolcetto d'Alba](#)

#### [7. Roagna](#)

#### [8. Francesco Boschis Dolcetto di Dogliani](#)

#### [9. E. Pira](#)

#### [10. Prunotto Dolcetto d'Alba 2011](#)

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Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

Best Value

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barrels, and charging prices that reflect their ambitions. Some have succeeded admirably, though I generally prefer the simpler versions for their vivacity and clarity.

But dolcetto — thankfully, perhaps — has not been favored with similar efforts at improvement. Instead, it is almost always free of the blemishing of new oak flavors. Left to its own devices, dolcetto offers what naturally makes it so winning: an object lesson in the very Italian push-pull of blending bitter and sweet flavors, along with an earthiness and a rounded, lightly tannic texture.

The wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles of dolcetto, all from the 2010 and 2011 vintages, all either the Dolcetto d'Alba, Dolcetto di Dogliani or Langhe appellations. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Liz Nicholson, the wine director at Maialino, and Levi Dalton, a sommelier between restaurants who is the host of the excellent ["I'll Drink to That"](#) podcasts.

We were thrilled by the high quality we found. As a group, the dolcettos were superb. We liked more wines than we had room for in our top 10.

Though many dolcettos are widely available, they nonetheless seem to lead an insiders' existence. Despite the pleasures they offer and their easygoing price tags — 17 were \$25 and under — Levi and Liz both said they were tough to sell in restaurants.

We wondered whether the slight bitterness that is characteristic of the dolcetto flavor profile was an obstacle in achieving greater popularity. A platitude often invoked in stereotyping American wine drinkers is that they like only sweet flavors. While this is no doubt partly true, Americans also drink plenty of beer, most of which is at least mildly bitter. Go figure.

"Dolcettos are like the off-cut of meat that the butcher takes home for himself," Levi said, adding that it was his go-to wine at home because of its versatility.

Of the many bottles we liked, none appealed to us more than the 2010 Dolcetto di Dogliani Superiore from Luigi Einaudi, with its superb structure and beautiful balance between sweet, bitter and earthy flavors. Our No. 2 bottle, the 2010 Dolcetto di Dogliani from Anna Maria Abbona, showed a different style, so fresh and lively it seemed to want to leap out of the glass, yet also well balanced.

Balance was also crucial in our No. 3 bottle, the 2011 Langhe from Aldo Conterno, which showed a captivating tension between fruity and bitter. Likewise for our No. 4, the 2010 Dolcetto d'Alba from Massolino, with its lingering, mouth-filling flavors.

Of all the dolcettos available, most come from the Alba region. Fourteen of our 20 bottles were Dolcettos d'Alba. Yet they also are the most inconsistent; only 6 of the 14 made our top 10. Perhaps this is because in Alba, the dolcetto grape often plays third fiddle behind nebbiolo and barbera, and does not always receive top vineyard sites or the loving care it warrants. On the other hand, dolcetto is the pride of Dogliani, which may be why many experts believe the best dolcettos are from Dogliani. That may indeed be the case. Dolcettos di Dogliani are harder to find, yet of the four in our tasting three made our top 10, including Nos. 1 and 2.

Dogliani and Alba are only two of the seven dolcetto appellations, yet they are the most important along with a third, Dolcetto di Diano d'Alba, which I see only occasionally. The other four are Dolcetto d'Acqui, Dolcetto d'Asti, Dolcetto delle Langhe Monregalesi and Dolcetto di Ovada. Why so many? It is living testimony to how extensively dolcetto was grown in the region in the ages before the phylloxera bug ravaged European vineyards in the late 19th century. It is still the daily wine, but barbera has gained considerable ground in recent decades.

During the tasting, it struck us all how well the various wines of the Piedmont dovetail. In a sense, the great nebbiolo wines represent the ultimate achievements, with a complete balance of tannins, acidity and complex flavors. Each of the other wines encompasses a portion of the nebbiolo spectrum. Barbera offers buzz-saw acidity, vibrant fruit and few tannins, while dolcetto is more tannic, less acid, with softly bitter fruit. Each of the other wines, the freisas, grignolinos and so on, show an aspect of nebbiolo as well.

It's a well-ordered universe in which each wine has its place and its role. A great Barolo is a rare and wonderful pleasure. A great dolcetto can be a nightly one.

Luigi Einaudi Dolcetto di Dogliani, \$23, \*\*\*

Superiore Vigna Tecc 2010

Excellent combination of fruity, bitter and earthy flavors; great structure and balance. (Empson & Company, Alexandria, Va.)

Anna Maria Abbona Dolcetto di Dogliani, \$17, \*\*\*

Sorì dij But 2010

Fresh, forthright and lively, with lovely balance of flavors. (Oliver McCrum Wines, American Canyon, Calif.)

Aldo Conterno Langhe, \$22, \*\*\*

Dolcetto Masante 2011

Bright and round with an inviting tension between fruity and bitter. (Massanois Imports, Washington, D.C.)

Massolino Dolcetto d'Alba 2010, \$21, \*\*\*

Long, lingering, mouth-filling flavors of fruit, earth and minerals. (Domaine Select Wine Estates, New York)

#### BEST VALUE

Francesco Rinaldi Dolcetto d'Alba, \$15, \*\* ½

Roussot 2011

Classic, well-balanced profile of fruity, bitter and earthy flavors. (Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, N.Y.)

Paitin Dolcetto d'Alba, \$19, \*\* ½

Sorì Paitin 2010

Aromas and flavors of berries, minerals and menthol. (Petit Pois, Moorestown, N.J.)

Roagna Dolcetto d'Alba 2011, \$16, \*\* ½

Spicy, pure and earthy with flavors of dark fruit. (Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, N.Y.)

Francesco Boschis Dolcetto di Dogliani, \$19, \*\* ½

Sorì San Martino 2010

Lively and vibrant with earthy, bitter fruit flavors. (Marc de Grazia Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

E. Pira Dolcetto d'Alba 2010, \$19, \*\*

Tannic with flavors of earth, dark fruit and menthol. (Indigenous Selections, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.)

Prunotto Dolcetto d'Alba 2011, \$16, \*\*

Lightly bitter with flavors of ripe fruit and firm tannins. (Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, Woodenville, Wash.)