

FOOD

The Profound Modesty of Good Dolcetto

Wine School

By ERIC ASIMOV DEC. 22, 2016

Few would dispute the contention that dolcetto is a modest wine. But the meaning of “modest” is open to interpretation.

It’s a word that may be said with a sneer concerning a wine’s potential. Or it may be said approvingly of its lack of pretension.

Yet it’s my contention that most of the greatest wines of the world are modest wines. Conversely, some of the most disappointing wines of the world lack modesty and come off as pompous and vainglorious.

At Wine School, modesty is a prime virtue, in both wines and wine drinkers.

We appreciate wines of every caliber that are not made with a sense of inflated importance, and that allow terroirs to speak for themselves with a minimum of artifice. And we recognize our limits as wine drinkers: Expertise is neither innate nor a measure of worth. It's simply experience accumulated pleurably, tempered with a recognition that complexities and wisdom differ from insistent opinions.

How does this pertain to *dolcetto*, which we have focused on for the last month? It's precisely because these wines are thought to be modest that we have paradoxically had the opportunity to enjoy their greatness.

As always at Wine School, I select a genre to examine and recommend three bottles to drink over the course of the next month, in a natural setting with food and friends or family. I invite you to share your thoughts about the wines in the comments below.

In an effort to keep costs from getting out of hand, I usually suggest wines that will be on the introductory end of the price scale. In the case of wines that can age for decades, I select easygoing examples that can be enjoyed immediately because it's difficult, if not impossible, to find a wide array of affordable, already aged bottles.

For example, we drank red Burgundies from the village of Marsannay, much lower in status and price than, say, Vosne-Romanée or Chambolle-Musigny, to say nothing of premier crus and grand crus. And we explored the relatively accessible Langhe nebbiolo rather than the more expensive, magnificent and forbidding Barolo and Barbaresco.

Yet for modest *dolcetto*, "a pretty simple wine, as it's meant to be," a reader, Mark of Boston, pointed out, the price range is far more limited. Rather than settle for humble entry-level bottles, we were able to drink wines that were among the greatest examples of *dolcetto* available, for \$17 to \$35.

Of course, we could be picky and point to a single-vineyard *dolcetto*, or to another producer or a different vintage, and insist that it would have been even better. But the *dolcettos* we drank — Luigi Einaudi *Dolcetto di Dogliani* 2014, Bartolo Mascarello *Dolcetto d'Alba* 2015 and Roagna *Dolcetto d'Alba* 2014 — are among the best expressions of this grape from these places.

As is often the case with wine, this raises existential questions. Is it better to drink the greatest examples of modest wines or the most modest examples of great wines? Or, to think of it another way: Is it more fulfilling to hear a good, little-known band from a front-row seat in a local club, or to strain to catch a glimpse of a world-renowned group from the upper reaches of a stadium?

Why settle for one or the other? Each has its moments. The wisdom of experience tells you when those moments have arrived.

In the case of wine, the accumulated wisdom of the people of the Piedmont region in northwestern Italy, home to the dolcetto, barbera and nebbiolo grapes, dictated that friendly, easygoing dolcetto would be the everyday wine, supplemented by barbera. Nebbiolo would be an occasional visitor, treasured for special occasions.

It's easy to see why in these three dolcettos. They are almost born delicious, easy to drink young, and they go with many different foods. I loved them with spaghetti and meatballs. Among readers, Ferguson found dolcetto delicious with mushroom pizza; Dan Barron found excellent pairings in both eggplant Parmesan and pasta with sausage and dandelion greens. But even less intuitive matches worked well, like VSB's carne asada and black-bean burritos, Joseph's ravioli with chanterelles and sage butter, and George Erdle's pork chop with carrots and peanuts.

Yet the wines raised a few questions for me. Can they improve with age? Can they really be summed up as simple?

The 2015 Bartolo Mascarello, a year younger than the other two bottles, showed its youth. Its aromas were insistent and sharply contoured, profoundly fruity yet deliciously pure.

On the palate, the sweetness of the fruit was tempered by a welcome bitterness, a push-pull that gave this wine energy and a sense of liveliness. It was gently earthy, and the tannins exerted a mild but noticeable grip. It was exceptional, but I thought it could have used another year or so to soften a bit.

The Roagna benefited from the extra year of aging, which seemed to have smoothed out any rough edges it might have had. It had bright, vibrant tart berry

flavors, and, like the Mascarello, it was alive in the glass. Though the fruitiness was indeed pleasing, it, however, lacked an added earthy element. It could be called simple, yet delightfully so.

By contrast, the Einaudi seemed to exist in an entirely different dimension from the other two. It was deeper, longer, denser and more complex. While it shared the bright, vivacious fruity aromas and flavors, as well as the lovely tension between sweet and bitter, it offered a more pronounced and lasting earthiness than the Mascarello, a mineral quality that I've rarely seen in a dolcetto.

Significantly, the first two wines were from the Alba region, where dolcetto coexists with nebbiolo and barbera. It is beloved but not the area's top priority. In the Dogliani region, however, where the Einaudi is from, pride of place is given to dolcetto. Though a lot of dolcetto comes from Alba, and much of it from excellent producers, Dogliani is generally considered the best territory for dolcetto (along with a third appellation, Dolcetto di Diano d'Alba, which I don't often see in the United States).

Does our sampling indicate that Dogliani is the best region for dolcetto? Well, I would be cautious about extrapolating too much from a single comparison. For me, though, more than a few bottles of Dogliani over the years have confirmed this conclusion.

Returning to our original questions: Were these modest wines? Great wines? Or great modest wines? Where do they fit in the pecking order? Or, may we ask: Should there even be a hierarchy for wine?

If Wine School has demonstrated anything over its three years, it's that the occasion dictates the wine.

Perhaps this is the wisdom of grandparents, who lived in areas where wine was consumed daily but the selection was meager and decreed by custom. Now, though, we have the luxury of choosing from among hundreds of different wines. The occasion determines not the precise bottle we choose but the level of wine, which can range from easy, pleasurable and inexpensive to profound, contemplative and financially challenging, with many steps in between.

Modest wines may be suitable for far more occasions than profound wines. They are the bottles of daily drinking, so they accumulate great importance for wine lovers over time. Yet profound bottles allow us to make sense of wine by stretching our understanding of beauty and meaning.

Like yin and yang, you cannot have one without the other.

EMAIL asimov@nytimes.com. And follow Eric Asimov on Twitter: [@EricAsimov](https://twitter.com/EricAsimov).