

## Wines

## Two days in Piedmont

Michael Tabone

In wine terms, Piedmont, where I spent two days recently, was and possibly still is the most advanced area in the whole of Italy.

This sub-Alpine region, which formed part of the Kingdom of Savoy, has historically and geographically been protected from the history of the rest of Italy and the influence of the Hapsburgs, Bourbon and Papal domination, which from 1550 right up to Italy's unification in the 1870s marked the peninsula's economic and cultural development.

Its proximity to France has also given Piedmont a Francophone culture which made its people and hence its viticulture much more susceptible to the openness and enlightenment of French/European culture after the revolution of the late 18th century.

Viticulturally, Piedmont was also way ahead of the rest of Italy. Just after the ravages of *Philoxera*, the Piedmontese embarked on a programme of experimentation in soil analysis, varietal cloning, viticultural practices and eventually into fermentation temperatures, maceration periods and the use of small oak barriques as opposed to the traditional *botte* of Slovenian oak – ideas that had to wait till the 1970s and 1980s to influence the rest of Italy.

When the Italian wine laws came into effect in the 1960s, Piedmont was the most advanced and organised region, which resulted in the quick adaptation of DOCG zones. By 1998 there were around 50 classified zones, of which six were DOCG.

Today, these represent around 75 per cent of the total output, by far the biggest in the country. The region is situated in northwestern Italy, at the foot of the Alps (Piedmont means the feet of the mountain). In the north it is bordered by Val d'Aosta; by Liguria and Emilia Romagna to

the south, by Lombardy to the east and by France to the west. Its capital, Turin, is situated on the river Po.

The continental climate is obviously influenced by the Alps and Dolomites. The foothills and slopes of the mountains provide ideal conditions for viticulture although weather vintage variations are considerable, so knowing the vintages is important.

Soil types vary in texture and composition. In the Langhe, which are the hills to the north and south of the city of Alba in southern Piedmont, the soils are predominantly clay/marls with some limestone (Tortonian) in particular areas, such as around the Barolo and La Morra. This is a rather compact fertile soil.

Serralunga and parts of Alba have a high proportion of sandstone (Helvetian soils) which is less compact and less fertile. The first produces softer, early maturing wines, while from the latter more structured and long-lived wines are produced.

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North of Alba in the region of Barbaresco, the soils are lighter and the terrain is slightly flatter. It is also influenced by the Tanaro river, so the micro climate is somewhat warmer. A number of grape varieties are grown but the best, most serious wines are made with Nebbiolo. It is this that makes Barolo and Barbaresco.

The focus of our trip was the wines of the Langhe but in particular Barolo and Barbaresco, where we visited a few of the most reputed and admired producers.

Luciano Sandrone has much to be proud of. He started the family estate



Michael Tabone (left) and Angelo Gaja.

around 15 years ago after a lifetime working for top estates and in a short time has managed to establish his wines among the best and most value-for-money bottlings in the Langhe. Sandrone's Nebbiolo D'Alba – Valmaggiore 2006 is approachable and makes for nice drinking. At a more serious level they have a number of Barolos but from their holding in the Cannubi vineyard they make their top wine, Boschis.

Poderi Aldo Conterno's estate in Bussia (Monforte d'Alba) is impressive both in size and architecture. The philosophy here is dominated by quality and tradition. As elsewhere, wherever great wine is grown, their understanding of soil and a sense of place is uplifting. They grow a number of different Barolos all with their own vineyard expression. Among the wines we tasted was Colonello 2005, Cigala

2005 and Romarisco 2005. Of course they are all extremely young to drink but will reward cellaring. Here in Malta I tasted the Colonello 2004, which is probably my favourite. They also produce Grand Bussia Riserva, a blend of the aforementioned vineyards.

Angelo Gaja needs no introduction to anyone in touch with Italian wines. He is a living legend whose contribution to Italian wines and in particular his home town of Barbaresco is immense. Among the wines we tasted here were two impressive whites made with Chardonnay: the smooth but very fresh Gaia and Rey 1999 and even more impressive 1985 in magnum.

Among the reds were the fine and elegant Barbaresco 1999 and two Sperss – 1999 and 1989. The latter two come from Gaja's Barolo holdings but because of local politics and a dash of self-importance and

Barbera added in the blend, the wine now uses the Langhe DOC. The 1999 has great minerality with a fresh clean and very long finish. The 1989 is naturally more mature. Great complexity but very smooth and homogeneous – a fantastic glass of wine.

We also tasted and visited Spinetta in Barbaresco and Elio Altare in Barolo. Spinetta's wines are modern in outlook and hence very popular in the restaurant trade. My favourites here were the Barbaresco Staderi and Campe, from their estate and winery in Barolo.

Everyone in the Langhe loves Elio Altare. He is a passionate wine man with a vast experience of world wines.

His top offering is Alborina, which we tasted in a number of vintages. The 1998 is drinking nicely now and went down very well with some freshly gathered porcini.

## Corinthia Sommelier launched

CHI Hotels and Resorts, operators of the Corinthia Hotels brand worldwide and of the Wyndham and Ramada Plaza brands in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, has teamed up with one of the world's grande marques de champagne, Taittinger, to launch the Corinthia Sommelier signature programme.

Led by CHI's director of products and services Shawn Pisani, the Corinthia Sommelier programme aims to enhance a hotel guest's dining experience. A combination of quality products and services, the programme also provides motivational and educational tools to all CHI Hotels and Resorts' beverage handling staff.

Mr Pisani said: "Corinthia Sommelier focuses on ensuring our food and beverage teams have the right tools and knowledge, enabling them to develop through personal ambition, thus ensuring that our customers

receive the best service and advice at all times.

"A clear endorsement of this is our close collaboration with Taittinger, who are one of the world's top champagne producers and who have committed their vast resources and expertise to the success of our concept. Indeed, we are honoured to have them on board".

A combination of training modules, incentives and competitions have been devised to offer CHI food and beverage teams unsurpassed opportunities for development.

These include tuition from the very basic to the most advanced certifications achievable in the beverage industry, participation in international trade competitions, including the annual Corinthia Sommelier Competition, which will see top sommeliers from around the globe vie for the prestigious title of 'Sommelier of the Year', and travel to



Shawn Pisani (right) being welcomed at the Taittinger vineyards in Reims, France, by company director Claude Taittinger.

renowned wine regions for first hand experience of wine-making processes.

Clovis Taittinger said: "Champagne Taittinger is very pleased and proud to share its knowledge

and experience of fine wines with the Corinthia Sommelier programme. We are more than convinced that this programme will be a success for many years to come."

## Beaujolais Nouveau 2009

The Alliance Française de Malte Méditerranée will be launching the Beaujolais Nouveau 2009 on Thursday. This wine tasting activity, accompanied by light party dishes, will be held at Cafe Jubilee, Gzira.

For tickets (Alliance members €15, non members €20) call Alliance Française on 2122 0701/2123 8456.

Beaujolais Nouveau is a red wine produced in the Beaujolais region, north of Lyon. It is made from *Gamay noir à jus blanc* grapes through a process called carbonic maceration, a technique which preserves the fresh, fruity quality of the wine, leaving very little tannin.

Beaujolais Nouveau is meant to be drunk young and slightly chilled.