



PRESERVING THE FAMILY SILVER

THE WINERY is situated in a beautiful village surrounded by vineyards in the heart of the Barolo.

(Photos: Courtesy Vietti Winery)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

Piedmont is along with Tuscany, the most famous wine region in Italy. Yet, whereas Tuscany is grand, worldly and stately, rather like Bordeaux; Piedmont is more like Burgundy – rural, agricultural and provincial – a farming community that grows wine.

The main grape varieties grown in Piedmont are Nebbiolo, Barbera and Dolcetto for reds, and Arneis, Cortese and Moscato for whites. There are two main regions, the Langhe region surrounding the town of Alba and the Monferrato region around Asti. These are to the south of Turin in rolling hills, which are really the foothills to the Alps. That is why the word Piedmont means “the foot of the mountain.” Alba is famous for its wine, its truffles and hazelnuts, but most of all for being the birthplace and home of Nutella, the hazelnut cocoa spread. However, for the wine intelligentsia, this is Barolo and Barbaresco country.

Barolo is situated south west of Alba. The wine of the same name is big, but without great depth of color. It is often brick red with an orange tinge. Yet it has a beautiful, haunting aroma of tar, roses, wild fruit, violets and plums. It is more a scent than an aroma. It is a wine to inhale as much as to drink. Barolo is very tannic with harsh acidity. When I was younger, we regarded Barolo with awe. It was known as the wine of kings and the king of wines. We were told it was one of the great red wines of the world. However, because of its exaggerated tannin, it needed years of bottle age to become tamed. Unfortunately, despite aging for one or even two decades, some bottles never softened or became approachable.

With a new generation came new technology and new ideas. They made wine in small barrels, used lashings of new oak and – to the horror of the traditionalists – made wine in an easier style (relatively speaking of course, Barolo is never easy drinking). Now wineries have chosen a middle path, between modernity and the traditions passed down over a century. Barolo is made

from Nebbiolo, which is difficult to grow. The name Nebbiolo refers to the fog, which often coats the vineyards. It is a variety barely grown in Israel and Lotem Winery makes a surprising varietal Nebbiolo. However, it is not a variety that travels well.

Barbera is the largest planted variety in Piedmont. It is enormously versatile. It is more approachable than Nebbiolo, with aromas of black cherry, plums, a high acidity and very little tannin. It can be quite plush, with good complexity, almost like a Merlot, but with a touch of spice and a refreshing acidity. Barbera d’Alba wines are considered a little more robust than Barbera d’Asti. Which is better? Six of one, half-dozen of the other. Which is better depends on the producer, but from wherever, it remains a great food wine.

Dolcetto is the third on the pecking order, after Nebbiolo and Barbera. The word, which sounds like a brand of ice cream, means “little sweet one.” The wine is deep purple, light, with a juicy-fruity aroma, crunchy fruit, is easy drinking and refreshing. It is the perfect lunchtime wine. It is similar to a Beaujolais maybe, but has more of a mid-palate presence than a regular Beaujolais.

Arneis is a variety producing slightly floral, mineral-toned, refreshing white wines.

I WAS RECENTLY invited to taste the wines of Vietti, one of the stalwarts of the region. The Vietti family has been around a long time. Their name can be found in church registers dating back to the 17th century. They own all their own 55 hectares of vineyards which they farm organically. They produce nearly 500,000 bottles of wine, specializing mainly in Barolo and Barbera, but also produce Dolcetto and Arneis, as well as Barbaresco and Moscato d’Asti.

The winery has been part of the family for four generations, since the 19th century. It is based in Castiglione Falletto, a village in the heart of Barolo. At that time, farmers herded cattle, grew corn and practiced mixed farming. Carlo Vietti founded the winery in the late 19th century. The growing of grapes and the making of wine was part of the mix, but held no more importance

than anything else; wine was still made, though – in those days – it was often sweet. The oldest bottle they have found with a label, dates back to 1873! There were not many bottles with labels back then.

The change began with a split between two brothers. One, Giovanni took over the farm, and the other, Mario, took the opportunity to choose a new life in America. However, when Giovanni passed away before his time, Mario was called back to run the family business in 1919.

He was known in the village as ‘the crazy American,’ because he immediately made changes, which was frowned upon in a conservative place where change and progress were not highly regarded. He followed his instincts and honed a vision as the returning outsider who sees everything with clarity.

Firstly, he took the radical decision to focus on wine and the winery. Way ahead of his time, he began a program of leasing vineyards in the best sites in different areas. Why and how, I don’t know, but it showed astonishing foresight. Certainly, it was well before the traditionalist locals followed suit. It was revolutionary and Vietti has benefited from this wisdom until today.

The next pioneer in the story of Vietti was Alfredo Currado, who had married Mario’s daughter Luciana Vietti in the late 1950s. He was a winemaker and he also became a trailblazer. He was the first to bring stainless steel tanks to the region. He had visited Burgundy, which had affected him deeply. In 1961, he made the first single vineyard wines, before that became fashionable. In 1964, he became the first producer of Barolo to make Barbaresco.

ORIGINALLY MORE out of curiosity than conviction, Currado got behind the Piedmont white wine varietal Arneis. The variety had previously been used as a very minor part in a field blend planted with Nebbiolo to soften the red variety’s angular, harsh edges. So much so, it was sometimes known as “white nebbiolo.” Folklore tells us that Currado was challenged to give Arneis a chance, after a discussion with his priest at church one day. He decided to plant Arneis in the Roero region and launched it as a single vineyard wine in 1967. He became regarded as the father of the variety.

Another lasting innovation was using artist’s labels since 1974. Since the 1982 vintage, the artist label has been dedicated to the Barolo Villero.

The baton was passed onto Luca Currado Vietti (the son of Alfredo and Luciana) and his wife Elena. He brought along winemaking experience from Simi Winery in California, Opus One and Chateau Mouton Rothschild in Bordeaux. He continued the family penchant for quality, with a flair for the unexpected and an innate curiosity for experimenting. Luca is a restless tinkerer, constantly trying new things, but the quality and loyalty to the purity of terroir has been sacrosanct.

Nonetheless, the region was rocked to its core when the winery was purchased by food retailer Krause Holdings, Inc. in 2016. Eyes rolled and heads fell into hands as locals absorbed the shock. The Krause family are Barolo lovers and owners of convenience stores in the US. Luca and Elena made the case that they are involved just as much as before, but that the transaction provided Vietti Winery with the financial security to preserve vineyard sites, as land prices continued to soar to ridiculous heights. Luca sees this as way of safeguarding the future and certainly not as selling out. Maybe the family is just ahead of the curve – smelling the coffee first – as was done throughout their history?

I tasted the wines, each of which are standard bearers of their type:

- **Vietti Roero Arneis 2018** (NIS 99) was very pale, almost water colored. It had an oh-so-slight floral aroma with a hint of citrus, a very mineral palate, and clean acidity on the finish.

- **Vietti Dolcetto d’Alba Tre Vigne 2016** (NIS 115). The ‘Tre Vigne’ in the name, refers to the fact that the wine is sourced from three vineyards. Purple with juicy, wild blackberry fruit. The thread of drying tannin on the finish made it refreshing. A good, quaffable wine.

- **Vietti Barbera d’Alba Tre Vigne 2017** (NIS 145). This has aromas of red cherry, ripe plum against a backdrop of vanilla. The acidity ensures a refreshing finish. It was certainly very good, but I actually preferred their Barbera d’Asti Tre Vigne 2017 which was a little more fruit forward and fresher in the mouth.

- **Vietti Nebbiolo Perbacco 2017** (NIS 160). This is a great value introduction to Barolo, a ‘mini-me’ Barolo if you like. Good quality and it provides a real glimpse into the magic that is Nebbiolo.

- **Vietti Barolo Castiglione 2015** (NIS 330). A truly fine Barolo. Refined red cherry berry fruit and a hint of violets, backed by an earthy, rasping character. Savory, it is elegant yet intense and persistent, with good length. A wine to return to, again and again, over a long meal.

Vietti Winery continues to be one of the best quality wineries of the region. The family has been constant pioneers – often the first to innovate – but are also aware of the responsibility to maintain traditions. The steps they have taken to preserve the family silver and ensure their legacy for the future will be judged over time. In the meantime, the wines continue to be excellent expressions of the local varieties, their individual vineyard sites and the unique terroir. ■

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VIETTI VINTAGES are some of the finest from Piedmont.



THE BARREL cellar of Vietti Winery.

THE VIETTI family is still managing the winery.

LUCA CURRADO VIETTI is the current winemaker.

