

SNOW ON WINE

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Gimme Ghemme!!

...for affordable Nebbiolo wine!



“Nebbiolo is Italy’s greatest native grape,”¹ and “Barolo” and “Barbaresco” are the two best-known wines made from Nebbiolo...internationally famous monovarietal wines”¹ which are extremely ageworthy. “But Nebbiolo is also at the core of other fantastic Italian wines such as...**Ghemme**... where it is usually blended with small percentages of local varieties...”¹ But almost no one has heard of Ghemme, or the handful of other DOCG3 level Nebbiolo based wine villages nearby it! This is both a good and a bad thing, and has been for me a great lesson in how climate and geopolitical events can dramatically change the success, availability, quality and price of a given wine appellation or village.

Nebbiolo is found primarily in Piedmont, Lombardy and Valle d’Aosta, and is one of the oldest grapes of Italy. Yet it represents only about 8% of Piedmont’s plantings². Why you may ask since it’s wines command high prices. Well, like Pinot Noir, it is a difficult grape to grow although for different reasons. Nebbiolo needs a lot of heat and sun and is late to ripen and thus has been traditionally planted on South, Southeast and Southwest facing slopes or the crown of a hill, to maximize sun exposure. It is also fussy about soil, preferring Calcareous marl. Nebbia is Latin for fog, and so Nebbiolo means “it of fog,” referring, some say, to the heavy fogs rising from the Tarano River which typically blanket Barolo and Barbaresco (often called the Lange) during harvest. Although deceptively light in color, often going to orange early on, the grape is high in acid and tannins thus needing years of aging. But its “haunting array”² of aromas and depth and length of flavors will hook you for life.



Ghemme is a small relatively isolated village found in Northeast Piedmont with plantings on fairly steep hills which are higher and cooler than the Lange. Prior to World War II, Ghemme and several other nearby villages (Gattinara, Boca, Lessona, and Fara) had all been successfully producing and marketing high quality Nebbiolo wines for centuries. However, after the war, and with the aid of our Marshall Plan, the Italian industrial revolution began, most of it just downstream in the Po River Valley. Workers abandoned agricultural jobs for better pay and city life. Only the toniest wineries, like internationally famous Barolo and Barbaresco (let’s call them the B2 wines), could afford to pay enough to keep their vineyards and wineries staffed. So in Ghemme vineyards languished and generations old wine families closed-up shop, soon to be forgotten. Eventually however rising worldwide interest in wine generated demand, especially for high quality grapes such as Nebbiolo. These vineyards were gradually resurrected and production of high quality DOCG3 wine returned. *A few adventuresome wine lovers took notice and began adding them to our cellars.* But the former fame of Ghemme and her neighbors had been lost. Bad for them, is good for us. Lacking the wide renown of the B2 wines, they needed to settle for lower prices – 30% to 50% less expensive than the B2 wines.

Oh, and do not forget climate change. Whatever it’s cause, it has had two effects which have pushed me to Ghemme. The cooler villages in the Northeast of Piedmont, like Ghemme, are now able to reliably ripen Nebbiolo every year. This means we can expect wines offering “... more perfume ...with amazingly intense and penetrating aroma of red roses and

sour red cherries complicated by light sweet spices.... and creamy fruit without excessive austerity..."¹. And while many B2 wines are superb as usual, their high demand and commensurate price has prompted some on the Lange take advantage. A few producers (not naming any) are now planting Nebbiolo in less ideal soil and on North slopes producing lower quality grapes, which they blend in with the rest of their premium Nebbiolo harvest. Their vaunted reputation and worldwide demand allow them to continue the same high prices. But after waiting 20 years for a Barolo to mature there are going to be some disappointments resulting from wines with those lesser grapes in the mix. So I say enjoy the benefits of climate change -- cellar those affordably priced wines like Ghemme and avoid paying a king's ransom for a B2 wine which may not fully live-up to its vaunted reputation.

Nebbiolo has been slow to move outside of Northern Italy. But because Nebbiolo, after Pinot Noir, is the grape which most reflects each terroir with unique flavor profiles; it is worth pursuing elsewhere. So expect and relish the surprising range of flavors other locations deliver. And why not start here at home. The Washington Wine Commission reported that 110,000 tons of Red Grapes were harvested in 2021, including a mere 2000 tons listed as "other red varieties" among which was Nebbiolo. Small amounts are produced in California, Oregon, Idaho, New Mexico, Virginia, Tennessee and Pennsylvania. Chili is producing some as are South Africa and Australia. But in Mexico, Julie and I have discovered what we think is the best outside of Italy. In northern Baja's Guadeloupe Valley L. A. Cetto, an Italian immigrant, planted it, and the eponymous winery makes it into "...a particularly full bodied Nebbiolo."² In France we found uniquely delicious Nebbiolo as we boated along the Canal du Midi thru Languedoc's Minervous region. So in my opinion it can be well worth the work of hunting out the rare Nebbiolo plantings outside Italy.

If you have become enticed by the complex layers of aroma and taste in world class Lange wines such as Barolo and Barbaresco, but put off by the high prices they command, consider seeking out Nebbiolo from other appellations. Remember that Nebbiolo, wherever grown, has high acid and tannin which must be tamed with aging. As I said, the Nebbiolo grape is lighter in color and fades quickly to orange but don't be fooled. These changes do not reflect the progression of aging, as they do in most red wine. Nebbiolo require patience, but my 50+ year experience suggest that vigneron are learning to make Nebbiolo with earlier maturation, without sacrificing quality. And the way Nebbiolo so clearly reflects each terroir with characteristic and unique flavor profiles will reward one who seeks it out in a variety of locations. I have also observed that both Ghemme, and the Nebbiolo from L. A. Cetto in Mexico do seem to mature to ideal drinkability quicker than the B2 wines. So many reasons to reach for Nebbiolo and with it's geopolitical history and benefits of climate change, to say **Gimme Ghemme!**

Notes and references:

- 1) Ian D'Agata, Native Wine Grapes of Italy, 2014, University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angelos, CA, pp 353-363.
- 2) Jancis Robinson, J. Harding, J. Vouillamoz, Wine Grapes, a complete guide to 1,368 vine varieties, 2012, ECCO HarperCollins publishers, New York, pp 701-707.
- 3) Italian wine quality designations, starting with the highest quality level DOCG (Donominazione di Origine Controllata e Garanti) followed in descending order by DOC, DO, IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica) and VdT (Vino da Tavolo) or table wine.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WINE?



LEARNING THE BASICS IN A FUN NEW WAY

Looking forward to meeting with our SES members who have registered for our first WINE 101 learning session on Oct. 4th at 6 p.m. at Vino! A Wine Shop.

Future learning session dates, location, pricing and curriculum will be determined by feedback from our students based on their post-course survey responses, and by our wine educators based on what they think students need to know but don't know enough yet to ask. 😊

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