

Monsecco – Alto Piemonte; *Uva Rara, Vespolina & Croatina*

Monsecco is one of the best kept secrets of Neal Rosenthal's very strong portfolio. Neal has been a long-time champion of Piedmont's hinterlands: Ferrando's legendary Carema is a monument to his passion for the area and Neal's new involvement with the family with vineyard purchases. It also underscores his ability to discover great producers in obscure places.



Though it's worth remembering that what's obscure today might not have been obscure in the past; wine writers are quick to point out that in the 19th century Gattinara enjoyed greater renown than Barolo or Barbaresco. In other words: This is very serious terroir for Nebbiolo. Monsecco was an old estate that made great wine in the 1960s and then became defunct. Happily, a new generation descended from Lorenzo Zanetta has revived the estate and now crafts the finest wines in the Colline Novaresi, and Gattinara DOCs using the same traditional methods. This region is defined by Nebbiolo, but the supporting players are what our focus is here.



In "A Trip to Alto Piemonte" - Eric Asimov in [The New York Times](#) recently had a great write-up on Nebbiolo from the "other" parts of Piedmont (meaning not Barolo or Barbaresco), the vast majority of the wines covered by the article are from a region called Alto Piemonte, which is basically higher up in the foothills of the Alps north of Barolo/Barbaresco. It is one of the most interesting wine regions in the world. We are fascinated by it, and have a selection of wines from the region. In Northern Piedmont the Nebbiolo grape is traditionally referred to as Spanna. It can be blended with other native grape varieties, namely Vespolina (for color, fruit, and some floral spiciness; it is also believed to be closely related to Nebbiolo), Croatina (for color, fruit, and tannins) and Uva Rara (for softness, perfumed fruit, and a sometimes bitter finish). Aside from these delicate Nebbiolo, we offer a "deconstructed" Gattinara in the form of the following three varietals, rarely vinified alone offering a unique look at this region.

All of the following three are generally available at independent retailers for \$19.99 or at fine restaurants.

Monsecco Uva Rara "Massotondo" '12 Colline Novaresi

Uva Rara literally means "rare grape" but most likely refers to in low yields. It is locally used to soften Nebbiolo and in the rare cases when bottled alone has an enchanting bouquet and soft texture.

Monsecco Vespolina "Barbatasso" '12 Colline Novaresi

Once widely planted in northern Italy, as of 2000 there were only 108 ha left. The name probably likely comes from the high concentration of sugar in the grapes which attracts wasps (*vespa* in Italian). DNA analysis reveals that Vespolina is a progeny of Nebbiolo, the other parent is unknown. Though rarely bottled alone the wines are spicy, high-toned with a tendency to high tannins.

Monsecco Croatina "Borgoalto" '12 Colline Novaresi

In nearby Lombardia. Croatina is known as Bonarda which is confusing because there are at least six distinct varieties of the name in Italy. And we now know that the Bonarda of Argentina (and Charbono in California) are in fact Douce Noire from the Savoie region of what is now France.

First, the big picture. All the Alto Piemonte DOCs lie in areas where glaciers retreated at the end of the last ice age. The glaciers carved out slopes with iron-rich soils that are high in acidity—in contrast to the alkaline soils of Barolo/Barbaresco. It is these very acidic soils which seem to bring out the most mineral aspects of the wines, making them a little lighter, leaner, and more rustic when compared to their Langhe neighbors', yet just as perfumed and complex as a top Barolo, and some claim, even more age worthy. The sun-facing slopes ensure that the vines get intense heat during summer days; the high altitude and northerly latitude give cool nights that preserve the grapes' freshness and acidity, yes we're talking diurnal swing once again. This is a very special terroir that is quite different from what you find further south. It is no wonder that around 100 years ago this region's red wines were more famous than



Barolo! After all, it was in this tucked away part of the world, at the base of the Alps in Italy's northwestern corner, where Piedmont's largest volume of wine was once produced. By the 19th century, Gattinara, one of the region's (slightly) better known towns, was considered to make the best quality Nebbiolo in the world, surpassing Barolo. Wine from Northern Piedmont was served to nobility across the land.



And then everything collapsed.



It wasn't due to a drop in quality or any kind of realization that this was not a great wine-producing region, but because of practical human problems. Towards the end of the 19th century, industry was booming — but so was the grapevine epidemic of phylloxera. Unfortunately, for this part of the wine world, there was little motivation to replant after the vineyard devastation. Work in factories and on railways paid better than winegrowing. The mass exodus from the country to the nearby cities of Novara and Milan began.

The fate of Northern Piedmont's vineyards was significantly worsened again during World War II when the region experienced another massive loss of inhabitants. By the end of the war, the once 40,000 hectares of flourishing vines diminished to less than 1,500. Whole forests grew over abandoned vineyards. (Today you can find vines still producing grapes in the middle of the

forest.) Many people did not return to these Alpine hills. Unlike Barolo, it was not a place the royal and the wealthy were interested in, and it never received oenology help or investment from the French.

Today, despite a lack of wealth and vineyards, a small number of passionate viticoltori are working tirelessly to make world class wine in this unique, expressive slice of terroir.

Less than an hour drive from Milan-Malpensa airport, Northern Piedmont is one of the most interesting terroirs in Italy. Once you arrive, you will gaze at the Alps, with the stunning view of Monte Rosa ("Pink Mountain", as it appears pink at dawn) held high in local reverence, welcoming you. In Alto Piemonte you can find a completely different world: the beauty and relaxing atmosphere of Lake Maggiore and Lake Orta which help moderate temperatures here, and the micro-climatic effect of the alpine valleys grants Northern Piedmont a very particular climate.



On the sub-alpine hills of Northern Piedmont, viticulture goes back to the ancient Roman empire and it is one of the best wine and food paradises in Italy.

This region is in the foothills of the Alps. It lies on the borderline between the Mediterranean climate, typical of the rest of Italy, and the temperate climate of continental Europe.

Winters are usually cold and dry. Springs are mild and rainy and summers are hot, from the end of May to the end of September. From the middle of August until the harvesting, usually during the first decade of October, the high thermic excursion between night and day is ideal for the ripening of the grapes.

The vineyards in Alto Piemonte lie on the hills formed by ancient sediments transported by large glaciers during the last Ice Age. When the glaciers retreated back to the mountains, they left long and narrow hills (called moraines) stretching from the Alps in the North towards the Po valley in the South, following the courses of the rivers Ticino and Sesia. The soil of the moraines is rich in iron and other micro-elements essential to the growth of the grapevine. The porphyrite rock contained in the moraine causes the acid condition of the soil, which is a peculiarity of this area, as in most wine-growing regions (even in southern Piedmont) the soil is alkaline.

Most wines made to any scale come from the appellations of Gattinara, Ghemme, and, to some extent, Boca. However several more tiny appellations, all with Elvish-sounding names like Lessona, Bramaterra, Sizzano, and Fara, also make up the Northern Piemontese landscape, although these wines can be tricky to find outside their native Piedmont. There are also a few larger regional designations, the Colline Novaresi and the Coste della Sesia. You owe it to yourselves to check out some of the other great wines from Monsecco!

