

regions



Lady in waiting

While Nebbiolo is still king in northwest Italy, an old courtesan, Barbera, has been ennobled. Neil Beckett reports on the latest t



'Su-Su' isn't the name of a geisha, poodle or soup, but of a good single-vineyard Barbera from Carlo Volpi. It's also an appropriate description of the northwest of Italy as a whole – a hilly region with a high reputation, still very much on the 'up and up'. For Nicolas Belfrage MW, the northwest 'is the most exciting wine region in the world' (*Barolo to Valpolicella: The Wines of Northern Italy*). Many agree and for the same reasons: 'a certain dynamism in the approach of producers, a hunger for improvement, plus the old favourite, terroir, using the word in the broadest possible sense.'

Of the four regions which together make up the northwest – Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Lombardy and Piedmont – the first two are less relevant, not because they don't produce any good wine, but because of limited availability.

Lombardy

Of the other two, Lombardy has at least two sub-regions worthy of note – Franciacorta and Valtellina. Franciacorta boasts not only Italy's finest sparkling wine (the DOCG is reserved for it), but also a growing number of good still wines. Among famous producers of both styles are Bellavista and Ca' del Bosco. To distinguish the still wines, 26 of the leading producers will market them as Curtefranca (rather than DOC Terre di Franciacorta Bianco or Rosso) from the 2001 vintage for whites, the 2000 vintage for reds.

Valtellina has two sub-regions, Superiore, both based on Pinot Nero (Chiavennasca). The wines are made from Sforzato or Sforzato full-bodied red wine. Superiore wines, e

Grumello, Inferno, Sassella and Valgella are 'the best Nebbiolos in the world outside Alba', according to Belfrage.

Piedmont

But it is in Piedmont, literally 'at the foot of the mountains', that the greatest thrills are still to be found. Barolo and Barbaresco (both DOCGs) continue to have a reputation out of proportion to their size. As Michael Garner, co-author of *Barolo: Tar and Roses*, reminds us, annual production of the larger DOCG has averaged less than 750,000 bottles over the last five years – less than AC Pauillac and only about a third of the Côte d'Or.

The frequently drawn parallel with Burgundy – fickle red varieties, fragmented production, rich tapestries of terroirs and, at best, *ne plus ultra* wines – is becoming increasingly apt, as the focus on zones, sub-zones and single vineyards sharpens. Until the 1970s, Barolo was often a blend. Now, the best wines are from single zones (such as Barolo, Castiglione Falletto, La Morra, Monforte d'Alba, Serralunga d'Alba and Verduno) or from sub-zones (such as Barolo's Brunate and Cannubi), which are still being identified.

This, needless to say, is a highly sensitive task, which has been accomplished in Barbaresco but may not be completed in Barolo for many years

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amous herring rosso. 'I get caught the goddamn time,' he sighs. 'The In't exist. It's got blown up out of 1.' He even questions the terms in bate has been conducted. 'It's not "innovation" versus "tradition". t even know what "tradition" is. tradition and bad tradition. As the