

Italy's Barolo:

The Wine of Kings, and the King of Wines

The cooler temperatures of late winter and early spring beg for a hearty red wine, so let's take a trip to my favorite wine region, Piemonte. It's an Italian region that includes Torino (the site of the February 2006 Olympic games) and is the home of Barolo, a robust red often described as the "wine of kings and the king of wines."

Having spent more than a year over the past decade in Piemonte, I developed a passion for this region's food, wine, and people. Through close friendships with some of Italy's most famous winery owners, including Altare, Conterno, Vietti, Marcarini, Marchesi di Barolo, and Gaja, I feel fortunate to have had my greatest wine experiences in Piemonte.

Barolo is generally considered Italy's highest quality wine, according to local growers. It is also heralded as the world's second most robust wine. Barolo wine is named from the Italian word "nebbia," which means fog. The Nebbiolo grape bears a unique gray hue resembling a fog that blankets its red skin.

This wine demands food. At minimum, an aged Parmigiana is required to counter the wine's high acidity. Alternatively, my favorite meal is aged Barolo with risotto or pasta with shaved white truffles. These combinations can be found in Piemonte from September to December, accompanied by a fat wallet. Unfortunately, such experiences can rarely be found in the best U.S. Italian restaurants.

If you're unable to make it to Italy, my favorite meal with a great Barolo is fettuccini Alfredo and veal scaloppini Marsala. Other great combinations with Barolo range from grilled steak or rack of lamb to beef braised in Barolo. My sole contribution to great cuisine involves the substitution of Barolo (or Spanna, Gattinara, Ghemme — all made from the Nebbiolo grape) in the recipe for Beef Bourguignon, accompanied by a great Barolo with the meal. This idea stemmed from the fact that the Nebbiolo grape is genetically linked to Pinot Noir, which I believe lacks the body to best complement such a robust meal, even though it's generally used in the recipe and served as the wine of choice.

The great controversy over the past two decades involves whether Barolo made in the tra-



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ditional style (e.g., Giacomo Conterno or Bartolo Mascarello) or in the modern style (e.g., Elio Altare or Angelo Gaja) is the better wine. The modern school produces riper and fruitier wines due to shorter maceration and the vanilla flavors imparted by the French barrels used for aging the wine. The traditionalist school uses longer maceration times with aging in large older oak casks (typically Slovenian), which do not impart the vanilla flavors of new French oak. In general, most of the modern style wines also come from the northwestern part of the Barolo zone—an area of gentle to steep hills with soils rich in magnesium and manganese. The traditionalist wines more often come from the southeastern portion of the zone, with soils rich in iron. Modern-style Barolos often have aromas of soil, truffles, mint, and rose petals, along with vanilla. The traditionalist school involves more tones of tobacco, tar, smoke, and minerals. Certainly, if the wine is to be consumed early, the modern style is easier to enjoy. This debate has subsided recently, in part because the two schools, led by Mascarello and Altare, essentially declared that while differences abound when

these wines are young, once they have aged about 10 to 15 years, there are more similarities than differences. Both went on record to express their fondness for well-made wines of each style.

As is the case for all great wines, Barolo is much enhanced if it is stored well and drunk from proper stemware. The glass should be thin with large bowls to invite the wine's aroma. Large bowls also allow the wine to aerate; one hour poured in a decanter or wine glass equals one year in the bottle. This way you can buy time; this is true whether the style is traditional or modern. And this wine requires time to best express itself. U

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