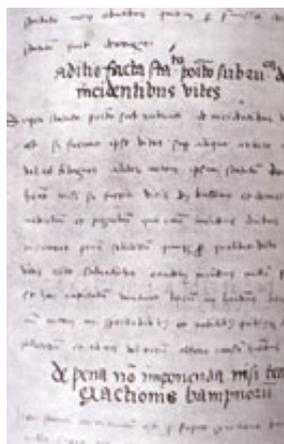


"Nebbiolo the Territorial Vine" by Pietro Ratti (2004)

The last fifteen years have borne witness to a near obsessive discussion about different styles of vinification: international journalists, opinion leaders, the selfsame producers have often found themselves divided into two schools that by now can be summarily dubbed "Traditionalist" and "Modernist".

However as soon as one is called to transform a great year Nebbiolo, it becomes almost self-evident how such a binary approach is both reductive and passé, inasmuch as the most important factor is the work that has already been done, that is to say, the type of cultivation and the origin, the "placement" of the vineyard. Barolo's greatest blessing through the ages, in fact, has been its strong vineyard work tradition, a craft passed down from generation to generation and to this day, still the patrimony of all the many Barolo producers.



Shared expertise in the techniques of pruning and grape development has fostered the best possible cultivation of such a sensitive and difficult vine as Nebbiolo resulting in wines beyond compare. The present reality is the outcome of a long period of evolution. For example, already in 1511, the statutes of La Morra make mention of the Nebbiolo variety (at that time called "Nebiolium") as a precious vine to be protected with particular care. In 1600, G.B. Croce defines Nebbiolo as "the queen of black grapes."

In 1879, Lorenzo Fantini in his "Monograph of Vine Growing and Enology in the Province of Cuneo," offers an accurate description of the zone and defines Nebbiolo as "the prince of vines." From the township of La Morra came curious rules and edicts from the Middle Ages that called for lashings and banishment and even death by hanging for those guilty of cutting more than fifteen vines, or otherwise bringing serious harm to the feudal master's vineyards! Or for example there were decrees that would set the date for the beginning of the harvest period, public announcements rigorously after following High Mass, that the civil or feudal authorities would accompany with drums and fanfares along the public squares.

Also in the old municipal statutes are prohibitions to truffle diggers and game hunters to walk through the vineyards during the harvesting period. From the start considered a vine difficult to cultivate, due to its need for particular care and attention, as well as for being demanding in terms of soil and micro-climates, Nebbiolo's area of cultivation waned considerably. With the scourge of the so-called "American diseases" in the course of the penultimate century, Oidium in the mid 1800's, Peronospora at the end of the 1800's, Phylloxera at the beginning of the 1900's, coupled with the two successive World Wars, the planters of Piedmont substituted a large part of their Nebbiolo vines with Barbera, which was considerably more productive and resistant. As a result, Nebbiolo remained only in those zones that were capable of yielding truly great wines, corresponding to the extant denominations of Roero, Barbaresco and Barolo.

Again, Fantini in his "Monograph" of 1879 wrote: "if the vine has within itself excellent qualities it is also undoubtedly true that the elaboration of its heavenly juice requires favorable land and soil. Not all soils provide equal savor, so if we must doff our caps to this princely vine, we must revere with equal respect that earth which hosts and maintains it..."
"...the vine growth along the Langhe slopes, so rich and luxuriant, dominates all other cultivations. To the amenities and asperities of those hills, the hand of man and investment have cultivated the most splendid of vines which in turn have entirely altered the aspect of those localities. If from the high plateau of La Morra you cast a look at the vast surface of grape vines stretching out before you, upon beholding those magnificent vineyards, so wondrously cultivated and immensely productive, it would be nigh unto impossible to hold back an expression of wonder."



For the most part, the hills of Barolo are of marine alluvial origin (excavations invariably bring fossil shells to the light) formed about 10 million years ago. Geologically speaking, two main types of earth can be found which in turn characterize two distinct areas: the Tortonian and Elveziano. The first, which starting from Verduno and then passing through La Morra and Barolo extends to Novello, is characterized by gray-blue marl. The second, all along the Serralunga - Castiglione Falletto - Monforte axis, instead bears witness to grey-yellowish compact sand deposits.



Already back in 1927, Professor Ferdinando Vignolo-Lutati hailing from Castiglione Falletto, drew a map that underscored the presence of these two macro-zones, and in his "Annual of the Royal Academy of Agriculture of Turin" entered: "...the varying geological and lithological constitution, with its resultant diversity in mineralogical composition of the soil, determines a setting which can be quite inconstant even within a limited region, a mutability reflected in the products of the land, namely grape and wine, coming even from the same varietal vine."
"Man has found along these low, gentle slopes and cupola-shaped hills a land particularly suited to the vine, and so in time he has covered it with numerous series of concentric vine rows which immediately capture the gaze of any first time visitor to the Talloria Valley, along the roadway from Alba to Barolo."

Tradition has it that the Barolo coming from the Tortonian soils is elegant, moderately alcoholic in content and of intense bouquet, whereas the Elveziano soils give forth a generally stronger, more austere Barolo. Ground analysis shows that the valley under the Serralunga heading is richer in iron content, whereas the valley under the Barolo heading shows a markedly greater degree of magnesium oxide and manganese. Regardless, both are "poor" soils that have been eroded by rivers across the span of millions of years. They are therefore ideally suited to the cultivation of Nebbiolo. Land considerations aside, the centuries long adaptation of Nebbiolo was also influenced by the micro-climate. The vertical movement of the Langhe basin and successive land erosions have also been a contributing factor in shaping the hills, greatly altering their height (200-450 meters) and exposure (south, southeast, southwest).



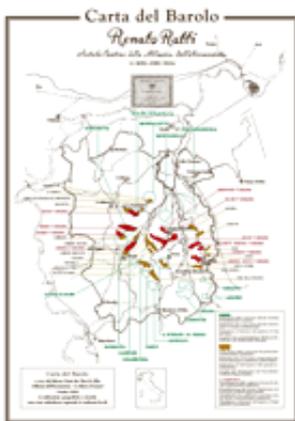


All these characteristics had a determining effect upon the microclimates. Even in this case, centuries of work have allowed successive producers to transmit the secrets of every single vineyard. It is known, for example that some zones are more susceptible to hail, just as others might be more prone to snow, ice, wind, etc.. A classic example of microclimate is a small vineyard in La Morra called "Conca dell'Abbazia dell'Annunziata." Every year at springtime, a small red flower blossoms, called "Anemone Coronaria," a one-of-a-kind rarity in the entire Langhe and Roero region. It is interesting to note that the concept of microclimates was already common knowledge to the Benedictine monks who cultivated Nebbiolo in that vineyard back in the 13th Century. By the last century, awareness of the different soils and microclimates, naturally brought forth the need to identify the sub-zones with greater accuracy. In his "Monograph of Vine growing and Enology in the Province of Cuneo," of 1895, Lorenzo Fantini provided a detailed list of the vineyards in the Barolo area, with gradings such as: "Good Position... Choice Position... Optimal Position."

Even if the "chemical" and "geological" data are often not that dissimilar, the prestige and therefore the value of the vineyards can vary a great deal. And so too, by consequence, can many important "organoleptic" shadings and traces. For example, at La Morra there three historical vineyards (great "crus"), quite close to one another, but with different characteristics: Cerequio presents trace elements of truffle and mint, Brunate bears a greater

range of spices and Rocche dell'Annunziata is reminiscent of tobacco leaf, truffle and rose. If until the Sixties the expertise of connoisseurs regarding the taste and bouquet shadings of the various vineyards was used to assemble a mix of wines to reach an agreeable balance and avoid the overly marked characteristics of certain sub-zones, producers later changed their policy and began to bottle single cru Barolos precisely for the purpose of highlighting and extolling the unique values of their determined sub-zones. The oldest example of "cru" appreciation in the Barolo area is a rare bottle bearing the label: "Cannubi 1756."

In the Seventies, my father Renato Ratti, undertook a painstaking research effort regarding the historical vineyards of Barolo, the outcome of which was his "Map of Barolo," in which he set forth and even classified the best positions. Then, in the early Nineties, the Arcigola-Slow Food organization published their "Atlas of the Barolo Vineyards," a complete and detailed research project on the history and present-day realities of the great Barolo vineyards.



And now, as of the last few years, the Barolo Tutelage Consortium, based on the University of Turin's work upon the "Characterization of the single Production Territories," has been working on a "mapping" of all the vineyards of the Barolo area, allowing us to have an official and universally accepted plan for the protection and promotion of the historical names of our territory.

If thousands of years have allowed us to indicate the best positions, as well as the best techniques of cultivation, the totally random and uncontrollable factor which since time immemorial has played a key role upon the end product has been the climate. The variability of each year's climate is such that every single vintage is unique and unrepeatable. A rainfall survey has shown that for Nebbiolo grapes destined to become Barolo, the determining factor is the amount of precipitation in the period closely preceding the harvest.

It is in fact the period between the 10th of September and the 10th of October that decides the final quality of the grapes, more than the rainfall, sunshine and temperature of the rest of the year. If the rainfall exceeds 100 mm, the quality of the grapes is compromised regardless of the seasonal course of the previous months. By way of example, two vintages are emblematic:

1994 and 2002.

The first was characterized by a magnificent summer that held the promise of a great year, but the rains came early on that September and were so insistent as to compromise the final quality of the grapes. In 2002 instead, a disastrous summer seemed to haringer an equally disastrous year, but favorable weather conditions from the second week of September onwards allowed for a discreetly good vintage, certainly not a great one, but much better than foreseen. Undoubtedly, the attention lavished on the vineyards with continuous controls and thinnings helped a great deal to achieve the final result.

I am therefore convinced that our focus must still and always be held on the vine and its origin, before the grapes even reach the cellar, for, while methods and technologies are transferable throughout the whole world, the "terroir" is the unique patrimony of a special area, the Langhe, whose principal vine will always be King Nebbiolo.

RENATO RATTI