

A Shy Italian Shines

BY ERIC ASIMOV

What is greatness? When that question is asked about wine, it sometimes is answered too narrowly.

With food, most people recognize that all sorts of meals can satisfy and delight. A magnificent feast at a culinary temple does not cloud the ability to appreciate the pleasure of a perfect hamburger, or a chicken judiciously salted and well roasted...

...Yet with wine, we sometimes overlook a mountain of potential pleasures for the peak experience. I know more than a few people who believe that if a wine is not a benchmark bottle - a top Burgundy, Bordeaux or the equivalent - it's not worth drinking. It's a kind of blindness reserved for those who have never felt moved by the everyday joy that wine can offer, and who consequently measure all wines on a single scale rather than adjust their scales according to context.

The wine panel recently found the perfect case in point: the dolcetto wines of the Langhe region of northwestern Italy. There, a hierarchy is clear. The nebbiolo grape rules. A good, well-aged Barolo or Barbaresco, the major nebbiolo wines, is a transcendent pleasure, one that speaks both to the brain and the soul. But these wines are expensive and getting more so...

...Everyday wines tend to be simpler, though nonetheless satisfying. In the Langhe they are mostly barberas and dolcettos, with a smattering of fringe wines like freisa, ruché, pelaverga and grignolino. Even when a treasured bottle is hauled out, it appears on the table only after subordinate bottles have been drunk, beginning with dolcetto and proceeding through barbera to nebbiolo...

...dolcetto - thankfully, perhaps - has not been favored with similar efforts at improvement. Instead, it is almost always free of the blemishing of new oak flavors. Left to its own devices, dolcetto offers what naturally makes it so winning: an object lesson in the very Italian push-pull of blending bitter and sweet flavors, along with an earthiness and a rounded, lightly tannic texture.

The wine panel recently tasted 20 bottles of dolcetto, all from the 2010 and 2011 vintages, all either the Dolcetto d'Alba, Dolcetto di Dogliani or Langhe appellations. For the tasting, Florence

Fabricant and I were joined by Liz Nicholson, the wine director at Maialino, and Levi Dalton, a sommelier between restaurants who is the host of the excellent "I'll Drink to That" podcasts.

We were thrilled by the high quality we found. As a group, the dolcettos were superb. We liked more wines than we had room for in our top 10...

..."Dolcettos are like the off-cut of meat that the butcher takes home for himself," Levi said, adding that it was his go-to wine at home because of its versatility.

Of the many bottles we liked, none appealed to us more than the 2010 Dolcetto di Dogliani Superiore from Luigi Einaudi, with its superb structure and beautiful balance between sweet, bitter and earthy flavors. Our No. 2 bottle, the 2010 Dolcetto di Dogliani from Anna Maria Abbona, showed a different style, so fresh and lively it seemed to want to leap out of the glass, yet also well balanced.

Balance was also crucial in our No. 3 bottle, the 2011 Langhe from Aldo Conterno, which showed a captivating tension between fruity and bitter. **Likewise for our No. 4, the 2010 Dolcetto d'Alba from Massolino, with its lingering, mouth-filling flavors...**

...During the tasting, it struck us all how well the various wines of the Piedmont dovetail. In a sense, the great nebbiolo wines represent the ultimate achievements, with a complete balance of tannins, acidity and complex flavors. Each of the other wines encompasses a portion of the nebbiolo spectrum. Barbera offers buzz-saw acidity, vibrant fruit and few tannins, while dolcetto is more tannic, less acid, with softly bitter fruit. Each of the other wines, the freisas, grignolinos and so on, show an aspect of nebbiolo as well.

It's a well-ordered universe in which each wine has its place and its role. A great Barolo is a rare and wonderful pleasure. A great dolcetto can be a nightly one.

Luigi Einaudi Dolcetto di Dogliani, \$23, ***
Superiore Vigna Tecc 2010
Excellent combination of fruity, bitter and earthy flavors; great structure and balance. (Empson & Company, Alexandria, Va.)

Anna Maria Abbona Dolcetto di Dogliani, \$17, ***

Sori dij But 2010

Fresh, forthright and lively, with lovely balance of flavors. (Oliver McCrum Wines, American Canyon, Calif.)

Aldo Conterno Langhe, \$22, ***

Dolcetto Masante 2011

Bright and round with an inviting tension between fruity and bitter. (Massano Imports, Washington, D.C.)

Massolino Dolcetto d'Alba 2010, \$21, *
Long, lingering, mouth-filling flavors of fruit, earth and minerals. (Domaine Select Wine Estates, New York)**

BEST VALUE

Francesco Rinaldi Dolcetto d'Alba, \$15, **^{1/2}

Roussot 2011

Classic, well-balanced profile of fruity, bitter and earthy flavors. (Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, N.Y.)

Paitin Dolcetto d'Alba, \$19, **^{1/2}

Sori Paitin 2010

Aromas and flavors of berries, minerals and menthol. (Petit Pois, Moorestown, N.J.)

Roagna Dolcetto d'Alba 2011, \$16, **^{1/2}

Spicy, pure and earthy with flavors of dark fruit. (Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, N.Y.)

Francesco Boschis Dolcetto di Dogliani, \$19, **^{1/2}

Sori San Martino 2010

Lively and vibrant with earthy, bitter fruit flavors. (Marc de Grazia Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

E. Pira Dolcetto d'Alba 2010, \$19, **

Tannic with flavors of earth, dark fruit and menthol. (Indigenous Selections, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.)

Prunotto Dolcetto d'Alba 2011, \$16, **

Lightly bitter with flavors of ripe fruit and firm tannins. (Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, Woodenville, Wash.)