



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

## ITALIAN ENIGMA MAKING INROADS

NEBBIOLO is often as appealing as an abstract painting. Probably the majority of wine drinkers don't get it. It's definitely not a mainstream grape variety. In a glass it can look oxidised and decidedly pale. The fruit aromas can have gone AWOL and it may be more about earth and flavours that conjure up your local road works rather than a fruit basket. The tannins can be substantial but the body is light. In short it's an enigma.

However, we have over 100 producers in Australia and most hatted restaurants will have a Barolo or two on their list. The origin of commercial vine plantings in Australia is shrouded in a bit of mystery. Some claim it was Carlo Corino who brought cuttings back from Italy in 1976 and planted them at Montrose Estate in Mudgee. Around the same time, Dr Edgar Riek at Lake George in the Canberra District planted cuttings from an imported University of California Davis clone. But whoever it was, they were not commercially successful and the resulting fruit was often blended away. It's taken us over a

### *The consensus of opinion is that decanting is always necessary.*

quarter of a century to work out nebbiolo, but we are finally making some serious wines.

The ancestral home of nebbiolo is the Barolo region of Piedmont, in north western Italy. The vines are planted in the Langhe Hills around the town of Alba. They hug the hillsides that have a south-westerly aspect to expose the vines to as much sunlight as possible. There are a number of sub-regions. La Morra and Barolo are on crumbly limestone and clay Tortonian marls, and produce softer, aromatic and quicker ageing wines. Whereas Serralunga d'Alba and Monforte d'Alba are on Helvetian marl with a higher proportion of compressed sandstone and iron which displays more power, structure, tannins and longevity. Castiglione sits between these two regions and exhibits more harmony. But it's a bit over simplistic to say the soil results in the different styles. Leading Italian importer Michael Trembath knows a bit about Barolo. "Poorer Helvetian soils hold less water and may

predicate earlier harvesting which gives different fruit characters; earlier harvest also results in higher acidity and then different winemaking processes. And the reverse may apply in Barolo. It comes down to the winemaking as well. The Serralunga winemaker endeavouring to make a long-living structured wine; the Barolo producer may be attempting to produce a Barolo designed for younger consumption. It's not as simple as just saying it's the soil."

Back home you find pockets of nebbiolo dispersed around Australia with the King Valley and Adelaide Hills two notable regions. But you also find winemakers celebrating their Italian heritage by planting it such as Joe Grilli at Primo Estate in McLaren Vale. Daniel Zuzolo is Grilli's winemaker and comments on the challenges of growing nebbiolo. "It's extremely site specific. If the site is too cold and lacks airflow it will not be able to ripen sufficiently and late winter/early spring frosts can cause severe damage to new shoots. Too warm a climate and the resulting wine loses its delicacy and tannin profile that makes

nebbiolo so recognisable." Due to its habit to overcrop, thinning shoots or fruit is necessary. Picking has to be done by hand.

In the vineyard, it requires a long growing season with moderate temperatures and is one of the first to bud but last to ripen. Nebbiolo is possibly a biennial cropping variety, in other words, it crops heavy one year and light the other. With such a fickle variety the choice of clones is important. Clones 230 and 111 seem the most sought after. Clone 230 was originally from Barbaresco, while 111 originates from La Morra. "230 is darker coloured and has more classic rosehip, savoury characters with assertive tannins. 111, called the 'rose clone' is lighter but quite fragrant, savoury with assertive tannins," comments Eden Valley winemaker Stephen Henschke. A "blend of both characteristics works well" for his Henschke The Rose Grower Nebbiolo.

Winemaking follows the usual guidelines with maturation in Italy either using traditional large

oak barrels called "botti" sometimes made out of chestnut, or modern small French oak barriques. Italy went through the "Barolo Wars" where the barrique-driven modernists clashed with "botti" traditionalists. Those days are now in the past. "What I see happening now is a 'coming into the middle' by both camps." comments Trembath. "The traditionalists are using more tech knowhow, but selectively, making better, cleaner wine, our Marcarini Barolo would be a good example of this. The modernists are incorporating some of the older concepts as well, with Conterno Fantino now using medium and larger sized botti, for example." Back in Australia, Henschke reckons "getting the flavour maturity, tannin and acid balance right is an issue when making the wine. We only use older French oak hogsheads for 12 to 18 months to allow the fruit to dominate and oak to play a micro-oxygenation role. Skin contact is extended over 21-plus days."

Drinking nebbiolo can be a challenge. Compared to say cabernet sauvignon it has only half the deeply coloured anthocyanin malvidin, but is loaded up with the more orange spectrum peonidin, which explains the light and sometimes off-putting orange/garnet colour. It displays somewhat lightness in body but with noticeable tannins and acidity. Classic aromas are floral, violet, rose and sometimes the more traditionalist earthy "tar". "The contrast between its rose petal/floral aromas and its tarry/chewy/tannic mouthfeel is why nebbiolo is such a magical variety," comments Zuzolo. Tannin levels vary considerably on Australian wines. For example, Brian Freeman's Altura Vineyard Nebbiolo is more supple and softer compared with the nebbiolo from Primo Estate. One of the most Barolo-like Australian nebbiolo is Protero, made in the Adelaide Hills, and it displays classic rose petal with a silk palate but a dry, tannic finish.

One final note. The consensus of opinion is that decanting is always necessary. Protero owners Rosemary and Frank Baldasso recommend three or so hours of breathing time before drinking. Double decanting wouldn't go amiss. This applies to the wines of Piedmont as well as our Australian drops. 