

ITALY'S KILLER B'S

Italian wines can be downright confusing. To make matters even more confusing, many of them have similar sounding names. Such is the case with the five wines we'll explore in this presentation: Barbera, Brunello di Montalcino, Barbaresco, Barolo, and Brachetto d'Acqui. Three of these wines – Brunello, Barbaresco, and Barolo – have been colloquially referred to by wine writers as the “Killer B's”, owing to the fact that they all begin with the letter “B” and are considered by many to be Italy's finest red wines. For the purposes of this presentation we are also including two other B's: Barbera and Brachetto – wines that don't always get as much respect but which, as you'll see, can be interesting and delicious in their own right.

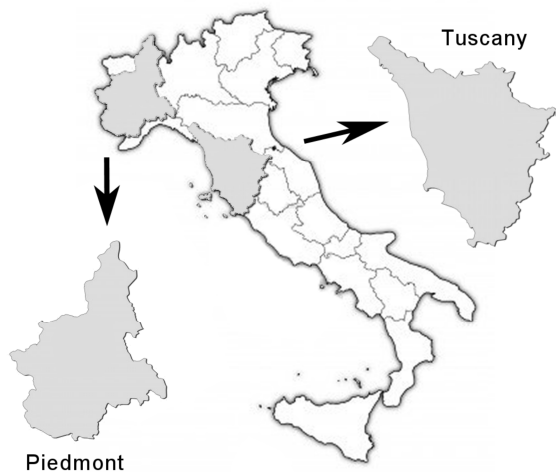


Figure 1. Piedmont and Tuscany are each approximately 9,000 square miles in size, or roughly 1/10 the area of Minnesota.

In addition to sharing an alliterative connection, there are other similarities between these wines. To begin with, they're all made from red grapes. And they all come to us from Northern Italy. Four of the five are produced in the Piedmont (Piemonte) region, while the fifth comes from Tuscany.

The best of examples of these wines also tend to be somewhat acidic, which makes them a natural pairing with food. Just as in France and Spain, In Italy it would be unusual to sit and drink wine by itself. Wine is considered a beverage that is almost always served with a meal. The natural acidity causes salivation, which in turn stimulates the appetite.

A WORD ABOUT ITALIAN WINE LABELS

In Italy, as in other parts of Europe, the name of the wine usually denotes a geographic location, rather than a grape variety. Where there may be confusion, however, either the grape variety or style of wine can be mentioned in addition to the location name. Look for the words “di”, “da”, or “d'”, all which mean “from.”

A few examples:

- Chianti. A place in the Tuscany region.
- Nero d'Avola. Nero, a grape variety, from Avola, a town in Sicily.
- Brunello di Montalcino. Brunello, a grape variety (also called Sangiovese Grosso), from Montalcino, a town in the Tuscany region.
- Vino Nobile di Montepulciano. Literally “noble wine” style from Montepulciano, a town in Tuscany.
- Montepulciano d'Abruzzo. Here's where it gets tricky. Although Montepulciano is a town, it's also the name of a grape variety grown in the Abruzzo region.

Of course, the one rule governing rules is that there are *always* exceptions to the rules.

BARBERA

Barbera (pronounced bar-BARE-ah) is the most widely planted grape in Piedmont, and the third most planted grape in Italy. From its ancestral home in the Piedmont city of Casale Monferrato, Barbera has made its way around the world, and is now grown in the US, Australia, Argentina, and Brazil. But the best examples still come from Italy.

Most Barbera comes from three zones within Piedmont:

- **Barbera del Monferrato.** The largest - and probably least known - of the three zones, the area surrounding the town of Casale Monferrato in the Province of Alessandria has been growing Barbera since the 12th century, and probably much longer. The wine produced here tends to be simple table wine (much of it is slightly sparkling) and is seldom seen outside of Italy.
- **Barbera d'Asti** comes from the provinces of Asti and, to a lesser extent, Alessandria. Most of what is imported into the US is Barbera d'Asti. By DOCG law, Barbera must comprise at least 85% of the blend with the remaining percentage being Freisa, Grignolino, and Dolcetto.
- **Barbera d'Alba** comes from the area surrounding the town of Alba in the province of Cuneo. Although some of the best quality Barbera is produced in Alba, it has to compete for acreage with Nebbiolo (Barolo, Barbaresco), which can command much higher prices. Therefore, comparatively little is produced. By DOCG law, Barbera must comprise at least 85% of the blend, but up to 15% Nebbiolo is allowed. Barbera d'Alba can generally age well.

Barbera is considered to be a superb food wine. Its lively acidity pairs with many dishes, including pasta with tomato sauce, grilled chicken, pizza, and any meal where mushrooms or truffles are the featured ingredient.

2011 Prunotto Barbera d'Asti Fiulot

\$14.99 at Sokolin & Co., Bridgehampton, NY

From Wine Spectator: "This is pure, with blackberry and black cherry flavors that run deep. Coats the palate lightly, with a glycerine feel, offset by bright acidity and a touch of tannins that add a pleasant astringency on the finish. Drink now through 2014. 3,000 cases imported. 90 points."

Piedmont



Figure 2. Most of the wine production in Piedmont is centered around the gently rolling hills in the southern half of the region.

BRUNELLO DI MONTALCINO

Brunello di Montalcino (pronounced brew-NELL-loh dee mont-al-CHEE-noh) is produced in the tiny commune of Montalcino, which lies in the Siena Province of Tuscany. The name “Brunello” refers to the



grape, which is a clone of Sangiovese, and is also known locally as Sangiovese Grosso. The origin of the name “Brunello”, which translates to “brownish,” is unknown. Some believe the name came from the color of the wine, while others believe it to be a family name or derivative.

In order to label a wine “Brunello di Montalcino”, DOCG rules mandate that it be made from 100% Sangiovese, aged in cask for a minimum of two years (although three years is more typical), and bottle aged for another 6 months before release.

Traditionally, the wine goes through a period of extended maceration following fermentation, where the spent grape skins are allowed to remain in contact – sometimes for weeks – with the finished wine.

Due in part to being hyped by a certain American wine publication, Brunello di Montalcino has grown immensely in popularity over the last few decades. In the 1960’s, there were only 11 producers. Today there are over 200.

2005 Tenimenti Ricci Brunello di Montalcino

\$19.99 at Wine Library, Springfield, NJ

From Wine Enthusiast: “This 2005 Brunello opens with a soft and supple nose that is accented by tones of sweet cherry, blackberry and spice. All these elements integrate well and the acidity versus tannin equation is equally balanced. There’s a slightly sour note on the end that recalls almond skin or cassis. 91 points.”

From Wine Spectator: “Ripe plum and berries on the nose lead to a medium-to-full-bodied palate, with medium velvety tannins and an aftertaste of fruit, toasty oak and vanilla bean. Still holding back for the vintage. Best after 2011. 1,250 cases made. 90 points.”

BARBARESCO

Made from 100% Nebbiolo, Barbaresco (bar-bah-RESS-koh) is produced in the Cuneo Province of Piedmont. Nebbiolo is a somewhat thin-skinned grape variety that produces light colored, heavily perfumed wines. The wines can be somewhat of a contradiction, however, since the seeds and skins of the grape also contain an abundance of tannin, which gives these wines a good deal of structure and allow for extended aging. Nebbiolo is a difficult variety to grow outside of its native region. There are small pockets of Nebbiolo grown in the US and Mexico, but the wines never achieve the same greatness as those made in Piedmont.

Barbaresco wines come primarily from three communities:

- Barbaresco
- Neive
- Treiso

The wines of Neive are considered by many to be the best examples of Barbaresco.

DOCG requirements mandate that Barbaresco wines must be aged in cask for a minimum of one year and one year in the bottle before release.

While Barolo is often said to be the King of Italian wines, in surveys, drinkers tend to give the edge to Barbaresco for its earlier approachability.

2007 Castello di Neive "Santo Stefano" Barbaresco

\$34.99 at Sokolin & Co., Bridgehampton, NY

Owned and operated by the Stupino brothers and sisters, Castello di Neive was started by their father, Giacomo, who began producing wine in the small cellar of his home. Over time he purchased a number of vineyards throughout the region, and in 1964 the family purchased the Castello di Neive - a castle with spacious cellars and more land. This allowed the growing winery to greatly expand their reach, and today the company is known as one of Barbaresco's historic producers.

Castello di Neive "Santo Stefano" Barbaresco is an intense, weighty Nebbiolo with generous notes of fresh roses, menthol and leather enveloped in dark fruit. Bright acidity and smooth tannins merge with hints of licorice, sweet spice and smoke on the finish. Enjoy through 2027.

Awarded 95 Points by Wine Advocate, and 94 Points by Wine Enthusiast.

BAROLO

Barolo (pronounced bah-ROH-loh) refers to a wine production area in the Piedmont Province of Cuneo, and lies just southwest of the large Barbera producing areas of Asti and Alba. Over 90% of Barolo wines come from 5 communities:

- Barolo
- Castiglione Falletto
- La Morra Valley
- Monforte d'Alba
- Serralunga d'Alba

Like its cousin, Barbaresco, Barolo is made entirely from the Nebbiolo grape. Although the two areas are only two miles apart, there are a few notable differences between the two wines. First, the Barolo area is slightly higher in altitude and subject to less maritime influence than Barbaresco, and thus has slightly cooler temperatures. Consequently, the grapes in Barolo are usually harvested a few weeks later. While Barbaresco wines are said to be more perfumed and softer, Barolo typically has more structure the ability to age longer.

There are also variations within the area itself. Due to heavy clay soils, the wines produced in the Barolo and La Morra communes tend to be softer, whereas wines from Serralunga, Falletto, and Monforte are

more tannic and will age better (up to 40 years, under good conditions). In fact, you would typically lay these wines down for 10-15 years before opening them.

Producers of Barolo fall into two categories: Modernists and Traditionalists. Modernists use more New World techniques – shorter maceration and fermentation times without stems, commercial yeasts, pumpovers, and aging in smaller French barrels, at least a percentage of which are new. Traditionalists use methods that have been used for centuries. Wine is fermented in concrete cisterns with natural yeast for three weeks or longer, after which it's aged for a number of years in enormous 500-1000 gallon casks, known locally as *botti*.

Barolo food pairings include truffles, cured meats, venison, and beef.

2008 Schiavenza Barolo Serralunga

\$40 at Sokolin & Co., Bridgehampton, NY

Azienda Agricola Schiavenza is located in Serralunga D'Alba in the heart of Piedmont's Langhe district. The estate was founded in 1956 by the brothers Vittorio and Ugo Alessandria. In the local dialect, "schiavenza" means "sharecropper", which should give one a clue as to the style. The Barolos here are ultra-traditional, fermented in cement cisterns using only naturally occurring yeasts, and aged in the old style *botti*. In the vineyard, Schiavenza does not use pesticides or herbicides; harvest is manual and is conducted according to the phases of the moon.

According to Wine Spectator, "This alluring red combines the pure racy cherry and floral fruit of the vintage with a firm, linear structure. The result is electric, with energy pulsing through as this builds to a lingering aftertaste. Shows terrific harmony and finesse. Best from 2015 through 2035. 511 cases made. 95 points."

BRACHETTO D'ACQUI

Brachetto d'Acqui (bra-KEHT-toh DOCK-uh-wee) is a wine produced near the town of Acqui Terme in the Alessandria Province of Piedmont. Made from the red Brachetto grape, it can sometimes be found as a still wine, but is more often made slightly sweet in the *spumante* (sparkling) style.

Brachetto has a long history. Ancient Roman historians wrote of *vinum acquense*, a sweet, aromatic red wine from the region that was a favorite among upper class patricians. It was also said to have been presented by Julius Caesar as a gift to Cleopatra.

Under DOCG restrictions, the wine must be made from 100% Brachetto grapes, harvested at less than three tons per acre.

One notable attribute of Brachetto wine is its affinity for chocolate.

2011 Borgo Maragliano Brachetto d'Acqui

\$19.99 at Sunfish Cellars, Lilydale, MN

From Wine Enthusiast: "Truly enjoyable, this has loads of fizzy bubbles and sweet tones of strawberry and raspberry tart. This sweet, sparkling red wine is made with low atmospheric pressure, giving it a soft, creamy feel. 85 points and Editors' Choice."