

The BEST *WINE*

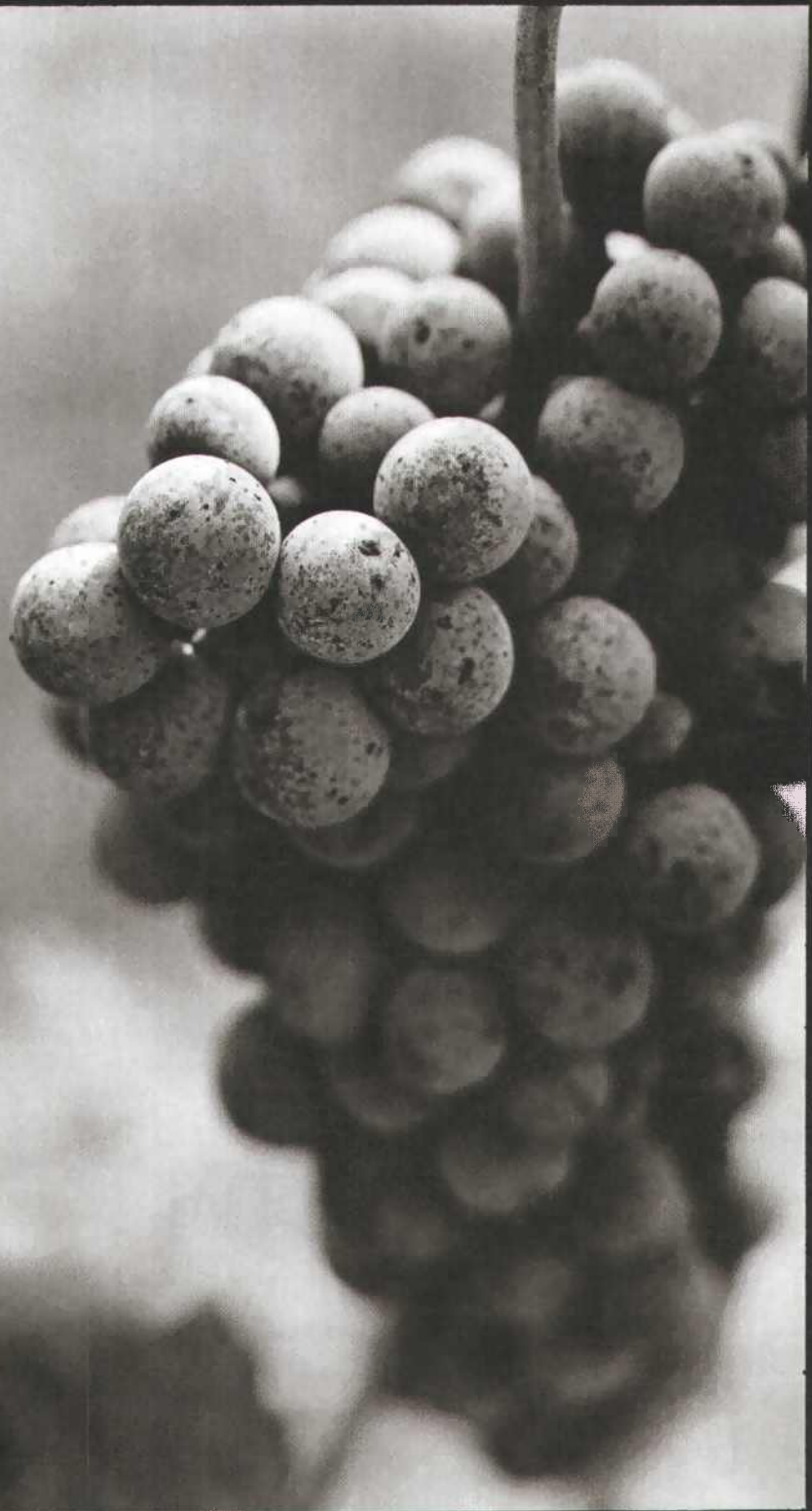
The hilltop vines of Italy's *LANGHE* region, in the heart of Piedmont, produce some of the most spectacular wines anywhere. BRUCE SCHOENFELD meets two winemakers with radically different styles who are harvesting the very finest.
Photographed by DAVID CICCONI



SAMPLE

in the WORLD?

Ripe nebbiolo grapes at the Staderi vineyard, in Barbaresco. Opposite: A panoramic view of the hilltop town of Monforte d'Aiba, from the Hotel Villa Beccaris.



T

HE MORNING FOG, or *nebbia*, of Italy's Piedmont region had long since cleared when I found my host, the winemaker Giorgio Rivetti, straddling the steep slope of the Gallina vineyard, inspecting nebbiolo grapes, which get their name and much of their distinctive character from that encompassing shroud. Shortly before, Rivetti and I had finished a lunch the length of a Bertolucci epic. It had involved course after course of local specialties—snails with leeks and apples, pasta stuffed with rabbit—tweaked for modernity and accompanied by multiple bottles of Rivetti's La Spinetta wines. Inspired, I had struck off alone to visit the grapes.

From the top of the vineyard, I had a panoramic view of the area's hilltop towns. Capped by medieval churches and fronted by vine-covered hillsides, each stood in the foreground of the next until the soft purples and muted greens faded together at the horizon. It was a timeless scene. But I'd been listening to Rivetti describe the recent evolution—no, call it revolution—of wine making in Piedmont. I'd tasted the extraordinary wines produced in the neighboring communes of Barolo and Barbaresco since the mid-1990's. I understood that much of what was happening on those hillsides bore scant resemblance to what had gone before.

Short and dark-haired, Rivetti looks something like the actor John Cusack. He'd changed from his lunchtime clothes into a tattersall shirt worn untucked over camouflage pants. Now he looked up from his refractometer, a device he uses to measure the sweetness of the grapes, and greeted me without surprise. Where else but a vineyard would someone go after having sampled such wines?

"The best winemakers are farmers," he said, a notion that hardly sounds revolutionary. But until recently, most *piemontese* winemakers considered the region's vineyards little more than a source of raw material, mere office-supply stores for grapes. The wine making began at the winery door. Rivetti, along with perhaps a dozen other inspired and industrious viticulturists, helped change that mind-set. They snipped nascent grapes from the vines in June to give those that remained a better chance to develop character and power. They used modern

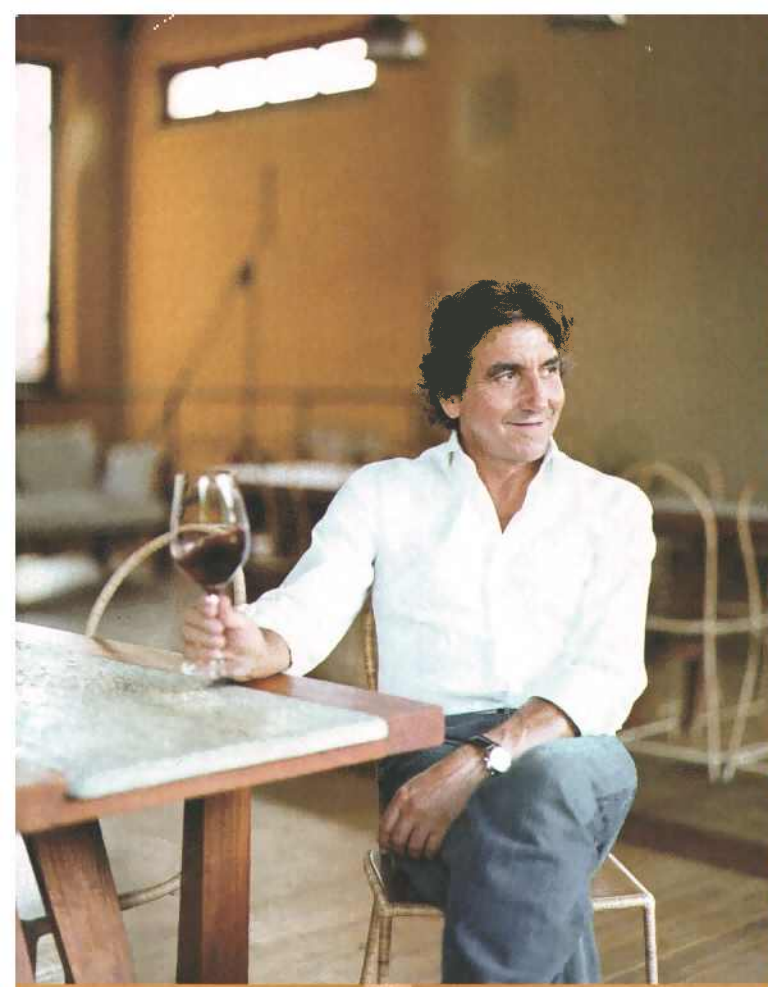
technology to understand why some vines yielded better fruit than others. They harvested days after everyone else, waiting to ensure that their grapes were truly ripe.

These were common techniques in Bordeaux, not to mention the thoroughly modern Napa Valley. But in this corner of northwestern Italy, a static, insular, landlocked place where fresh ideas are about as common as fresh fish, they seemed heretical. The wines that resulted were both smoother and more potent than the old Barolos and Barbarescos. They were full of personality but without harsh-



Italian Classics

Left: A *plin de seirass-agnolotti* pasta traditionally served on a bed of dried grasses—at La Ciau del Tornavento in Treiso. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Winemaker Giorgio Rivetti, with a glass of 2001 Barolo Campé; La Spinetta aging in oak barrels; view of surrounding vineyards and countryside, as seen from atop a hill in Neive; the tasting room at La Spinetta, in Piedmont.





Hail, Cesare Left: Inside the cellar at Pio Cesare, in Alba. Above: A bottle of 2005 Arneis. Below: Pio Cesare's L'Ornato vineyard.

Acclaim for the new *Barolos* and *Barbarescos* is attracting wine

ness, so they didn't need a decade or more of cellar time before they could be enjoyed. They appealed to a wide range of wine drinkers throughout the world, not just to locals who'd acclimated their palates to nebbiolo, and to a tiny coterie of Barolo and Barbaresco fanatics elsewhere.

Before long, these wines had altered the economics of the region. For most of the 20th century, young adults in this part of Piedmont, which is called the Langhe, would finish school and migrate from the picturesque but economically stagnant hilltop towns to nearby Turin for work in the Fiat factory. On weekends, they would return to tend their small vineyard plots—as their parents and grandparents had tended them—but with little knowledge or passion. Rivetti and his peers must have seemed like dangerous radicals, but by creating such coveted wines, they ultimately helped transform hobbies into businesses. “Everything changed,” says Domenico Clerico, another of these iconoclasts-turned-icons. “Our entire way of life is different now.”

These days, acclaim for the new Barolos and Barbarescos is attracting wine pilgrims to what has always been an inaccessible area, hidden behind an arc of mountains and a suspicion bordering on antipathy toward the outside world. Centuries-old villas have been converted into hotels that belong to one or another of the luxury associations. The culinary scene is thriving. Even nature has relented. After several decades of mostly uncooperative weather, a string of remarkable vintages—from 1996 to 2001—has made the wines of the Langhe as consistently great as any in the world.





Piedmont's Old Guard Left: Fourth-generation vintner Pio Boffa, in the Pio Cesare tasting room. Above: The bounty at his Gustava vineyard.

pilgrims to the *LANGHE*, and the culinary scene is thriving

Rivetti might still describe himself as a farmer, but the nebbiolo from the rarefied vineyards of Barolo and Barbaresco has become a spectacularly lucrative cash crop. His finest wines—three Barbarescos and a Barolo—sell for more than \$100 a bottle on release. He dresses like a rock star, in designer shirts and leather jackets. He drives a Mercedes. And nearly every night when he isn't traveling, he eats at one of the growing number of Michelin-starred or similarly accomplished restaurants in the area—such as Cervere's Antica Corona Reale da Renzo, where we'd had lunch—that use the finest ingredients, employ imaginative chefs of the highest order, serve the wine-making community and well-heeled tourists, and never could have existed here before now.

But as often happens when something is gained, something else has been lost. Pio Boffa is Rivetti's antithesis: a fourth-generation proprietor of a winery called Pio Cesare that does its best to resist the call to modernity. Boffa is just four years older than Rivetti, yet he dresses like a European of another time, with supple loafers buffed to a shine and sweater vests worn over striped shirts. "How you dress is important," he says. "You see kids today looking like...if I saw them in the middle of the night, I'd be scared."

Once upon a time, Boffa himself was regarded as a revolutionary. A 1982 clipping from *Wine Spectator* anointing (Continued on page 220; turn page for Guide)





The dining room at Guido, in Pollenzo.

WHEN TO GO

Fog blots out mornings for nine months of the year, but afternoons can be gorgeous all year, and the soft, understated landscape wears its seasonality well. June is particularly lovely, with highs of 70 degrees and the first evidence of grapes on the vines.

GETTING THERE

Alitalia and Delta fly direct from U.S. gateways to Milan's Malpensa Airport, which is a two-hour drive east of the Langhe.

WHERE TO STAY

Villa Tiboldi
Atop a steep hill of vineyards outside Canale in the Roero appellation, this prototypical Italian villa—part of a working winery—was underrated until

Paul Allen rented out all nine rooms for last year's Winter Olympics. 127 *Case Sparse Tiboldi*; 39-0173/970-388; www.villatiboldi.it; doubles from \$172.

Hotel Villa Beccaris

A beautiful (if somewhat soulless) 18th-century compound perched above Monforte. But beware: the bell in the adjacent cathedral sounds on the hour all night long. 1 *Via Bava Beccaris, Monforte d'Alba*; 39-0173/78158; www.villabeccaris.it; doubles from \$258, including breakfast.

L'Antico Asilo

GREAT VALUE Spotlessly clean and family-run, this four-room inn on a Serralunga back street has a courtyard overlooking the hillside vineyards. Utterly charming,



Sommelier Guillermo Field at La Ciau del Tornavento.

friendly, reasonably priced. 13 *Via Mazzini, Serralunga d'Alba*; 39-0173/613-016; www.anticoasilo.com; doubles from \$126.

WHERE TO EAT

Antica Corona Reale da Renzo

Home cooking—Piedmontese-style—at the Michelin-starred level, including perhaps the finest rendition of tripe anywhere in the world. Wine options are extensive and underpriced. 13 *Via Fossano, Cervere*; 39-0172/474-132; dinner for two \$159.

Combal.Zero

Castello di Rivoli, Piazza Mafalda di Savoia, Rivoli; 39-011/956-5225; dinner for two \$263.

La Ciau del Tornavento

No restaurant in the area is more ambitious, nor consistently rewarding. Interiors border on kitschy, but the view over a valley is stunning, the atmosphere elegant, and the wine list a work of art. 7 *Piazza Baracco, Treiso*; 39-0173/638-333; www.laciadeltornavento.it; dinner for two \$210.

Guido Ristorante Pollenzo

Not the warm, traditional trattoria of your Italian fantasy, but a modern culinary temple with deferential service and imaginative food on the grounds of Slow Food's University of Gastronomic Sciences. 19 *Via Fossano, Pollenzo*; 39-0172/458-422; www.guidoristorante.it; dinner for two \$198.

WHERE TO SIP

Visiting wineries in the Langhe is like visiting a working farm in the United States. It can be done, and someone there will have plenty to show you, but he's likely to have done nothing to make the place look nice on your behalf—and you need to set up the visit before you arrive. That said, Barolos and Barbarescos (or, if you really want to sound Italian, *baroli* and *barbareschi*) rank among the world's finest wines, and the Piedmontese are fantastically generous. Try some wines before you go, pick a few favorites, call ahead with a polite request, and have an unforgettable time, usually with the owner.



Pollenzo's town square.

Pio Cesare Azienda Agricola

The only producer remaining in Alba, Pio Boffa's family winery brings more than a century of tradition (and a surprisingly open mind) to bear on some of the best vineyard sites in Barolo and Barbaresco. 6 *Via Cesare Balbo, Alba*; 39-0173/440-386; www.piocesare.it.

La Spinetta

Giorgio Rivetti's wines are decidedly new wave, but so full of flavor and nuance that traditionalists can't help loving them, too. 1 *Via Carzello, Grinzane Cavour*; 39-0141/877-396; www.la-spinetta.com.

Azienda Agricola Vigna Rionda (Massolino)

A small winery on a hillside in Serralunga, it looks the way wineries have looked in Barolo for half a century, but the limp wines are on the cutting edge. 8 *Piazza Cappellano, Serralunga d'Alba*; 39-0173/613-138; www.massolino.it.

WHAT TO READ

Edward Steinberg's *The Vines of San Lorenzo* tells the story of Barbaresco pioneer Angelo Gaja through his Sori San Lorenzo vineyard.

Matt Kramer's *A Passion for Piedmont* interweaves the history of the region with recipes and insight into Piedmontese wines.

Vino Italiano, David Lynch and Joe Bastianich's compendium of producers and their wines, is a valuable resource.

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(Italy)

(Continued from page 193) him as such adorns a wall in the Pio Cesare winery, where both Boffa and his mother were born. Boffa was among the first in the area to ferment his wine in stainless steel; among the first to moderate the time it spent in contact with the skins, thereby limiting the amount of tannin that would be transmitted; and among the first to obsess about cleanliness in his winery—and, by extension, in his wines. He spent time in Napa with Robert Mondavi, living at his house for several months.

But now Boffa stands as a guardian of a dying tradition. He believes the wines that Rivetti and the others are making taste too much like wines from all over the world. This doesn't make them bad so much as improper for a region that has something singular to offer. "There are so many areas that make wine that is approachable, easy to drink," he says. "I don't want to be one of those."

Boffa bemoans much of the modernization he sees around him. "We have made progress," he says, "but I think in many ways we've lost our integrity. We have made lots of mistakes, in terms of following too closely the modern trend." He's talking about wine, but also about culture. "I understand that this is the perspective of somebody with an older mentality," Boffa says, "and from a family that has been here forever. But why do I have to go to restaurants around here and see ostrich meat?"

The Langhe is small, and Boffa and Rivetti inevitably pass each other on the sidewalks of Alba or when driving one of the hairpin turns on the road to Serralunga or La Morra. Both love to eat well, so they periodically find themselves manning adjacent tables at one of the region's better restaurants. When that happens, Rivetti will order a bottle of Pio Cesare and Boffa will order a bottle of La Spinetta as a sign of mutual respect. Each will enjoy the other's wine over their *vitello tonnato* or *carne cruda*, but with a nagging feeling that an opportunity has been squandered. Such talent, such formidable intelligence, such elite vineyards should be used in the service of making truly great wine, each will be thinking about the other. How unfortunate that someone who could be making some of the best wines around, should be so utterly, transparently, and irrevocably wrong.

On a map, Piedmont appears perfectly positioned at the center of Mediterranean Europe. The abundance of Liguria lies directly to the south, with France due west. Milan and the riches of Lombardy lie to the east, while the snowcapped peaks of Switzerland are almost visible to the north.

The truth is, for centuries the Langhe existed as a place out of time. Nobody came, almost nobody left, and the culture was turned inward for so long that it became almost impenetrable. The Piedmontese spoke their own dialect, which was only rudimentarily linked to Italian. Trade with the outside world was minimal, as was travel. "You ask a 70-year-old farmer here about the sea and he's never seen it," Rivetti says. "It's an hour away by car, but he's never seen it."

"Piedmont is in the middle of nowhere," Boffa volunteers. "There are no direct trains here. But the thing is, we like that. We're a very closed people. We like to stay by ourselves."

The Rivettis were different. In the mid-1800's, the family left for Argentina. Around 1920 Giorgio's grandfather, Giovanni, wandered to Brooklyn, where he seems to have found work in wine distribution, though alcohol sales were illegal in the United States at the time. Eventually, Giovanni's son abandoned New York for his ancestral home. Giuseppe Rivetti bought land in Neive, in the heart of Barbaresco, and started making wine. Unlike almost everyone else in the Langhe's wine industry, he hadn't grown up in the region. He wasn't doing things a certain way because his ancestors had. And when his youngest son, Giorgio, asked to spend two years working with the Bordeaux producer Château Margaux, Giuseppe was worldly enough to appreciate the opportunity.

Rivetti had already taken an undergraduate degree in Alba, and he would later study enology in Turin, but his real education came at Margaux. He was exposed to the viticultural and enological techniques used to make the world's most renowned wines, and he was able to taste those wines day after day. He came home in 1985 with a head full of ideas and a car full of bottles: French wines, from Bordeaux and farther afield. Soon after, he called friends and colleagues and invited them to a restaurant

called Guido, in Costigliole d'Asti. He wanted them to sample the wines he'd brought back, alongside a selection of wines from the Langhe. "I wanted them to realize, 'Why would anyone buy *piemontese* wine when it tastes like this?'" Rivetti says now. "Old, dirty, oxidized. And the French wine was so approachable, so drinkable."

Many of the attendees of that tasting—Elio Altare, Luciano Sandrone, Roberto Voerzio, Enrico Scavino, and Domenico Clerico—now rank among the region's greatest winemakers. "We tried the wines to understand what is good, what is wrong, what is best," says Roberto Damonte, an enologist who studied with Rivetti and whose Malvirà wines are made just outside the Barolo appellation, in Roero. "We realized that Piedmont has too much tradition. Our wines weren't clear. They smelled wrong. After that, vintage by vintage, producer by producer, the wines changed."

The 1989 and 1990 vintages marked the first successes for some of the new and revitalized producers. Simultaneously, the Slow Food movement, founded as a reaction to the encroachment of McDonald's hamburger stands around the world and headquartered in the Piedmontese town of Bra, emerged to provide a context. These wines were made in limited volume from nebbiolo, which is native to Piedmont and known for expressing the attributes of the *terroir* where it is grown. The grapes have a transparency of place that the Slow Food mentality cherished. Nobody could mistake a Barolo or Barbaresco for anything else.

Soon curious wine drinkers from Switzerland and Germany started to visit, driving down to taste for themselves the changes that were unfolding. Many had spent time in Bordeaux, Burgundy, and beyond, and when they began calling on the Piedmontese farmers and sampling wines in rudimentary tasting rooms, a curious thing happened. "They'd actually teach some of the producers," Rivetti says. "They'd say, 'These wines are good, but try doing this and they might be even better.' And the producers learned!"

By the time the first of the extraordinary run of vintages arrived, in 1996, both vines and mind-sets were ready.

And as the wines began to sell, affluence crept into the region. That same year, Damonte and his wife, Patrizia, bought a hillside vineyard in Canale, near Alba. With the property came a dilapidated 18th-century villa that a Genoese lawyer had kept as a summerhouse. At the time, there was little commercial use for such a structure, but by 2003 they'd transformed it into Villa Tiboldi, a stunning hotel with a commanding view of the Roero. They marketed it first to clients who bought their wine, then pitched the property to their importers around Europe.

Now Villa Tiboldi sells itself. It is booked much of the year by Germans, Swiss, French, English, other Italians, and a smattering of Americans. With each morning's fog, Patrizia arrives bearing freshly laid eggs, and one by one guests throw open their shutters to the day. By lunchtime exquisite dishes such as roasted squab with grainy mustard and a marmalade of green tomato are served on the terrace.

Rivetti came to Villa Tiboldi one day to see Damonte and walked away with a girlfriend: a quick-witted, fair-haired German named Anja who now runs La Spinetta's business side. One evening I meet them in Pollenzo at a restaurant called Guido on the campus of Slow Food's University of Gastronomic Sciences: an institution of higher learning that, by dint of its name alone, could exist only in Italy. This Guido is a direct descendant of the old Guido, where the 1985 tasting was held. The original Guido is gone but his sons now run the restaurant.

Rivetti is wearing a white dress shirt unbuttoned at the cuffs, his third shirt of the day. ("We go through a lot of shirts," Anja says.) He eats at Guido often, yet each time he encounters the high wooden ceiling, with its arc of futuristic lights, or the row of wine glasses behind a translucent wall, visible only in silhouette, he can't help but marvel. "I remember being here back in 1998," he says. "It was an absolute mess."

The first Guido was one of the few places that employed sommeliers who were inquisitive about wine. The second has taken that to extremes, with two phone book-size lists for red wine alone. "Now winemakers come and »

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drink wine from all over," Rivetti says. And this Guido is a departure from the old Piedmont in another way: the restaurant serves so much fresh fish that one of the two chefs specializes in it.

At Guido we eat beef tongue stuffed with cabbage and *bottarga*—preserved tuna roe. We eat *agnolotti* pasta filled with three meats, then rabbit with rectangles of puréed vegetables. Each of us at the table has chosen a wine to be served blind, and we end up with two Barolos, two Barbarescos, and a Burgundy.

We agree unanimously on which is best. Lush and supple, it has a nose of cherries but the driving force of a Charlie Watts beat. It is more modern than traditional but exudes that sense of place that marks the world's finest wines. The bottle is revealed as the La Spinetta 1998 from Barbaresco's Staderi vineyard.

Rivetti, who had no idea that a wine of his was on the table, is overjoyed by our reaction, but even more by his own. "I never recognize my wine," he says. "But I always love it."

The memory of the Staderi still lingers when Pio Boffa collects me the next morning in Monforte d'Alba, where I'm staying. We wind past groves of pencil-thin trees toward Alba and his winery. The towns we pass through seem similar—each is built atop a hill and dominated by a church, with streets paved in square stones and red-shuttered houses topped by barrel-tile roofs, yet each has singularities. Monforte uses white-marble inlay instead of paint to mark its crosswalks, for example. We pass a man in a long coat shuffling along the street beside a dog; both look as they might have a century ago. "Truffle hunters," Boffa says.

Pio Cesare was founded in 1881 by Boffa's great-grandfather. The winery itself, which has a tiled courtyard, brick-domed ceilings, and other features of traditional Piedmontese architecture, dates back to the 1600's. Boffa takes me to see a Roman wall from 50 B.C. that cuts through the cellar, separating his fermentation tanks from his barrels. "If you have something like that in your winery, you must respect it," he says.

Accordingly, he uses large wooden casks, which impart more oak flavor, to age his wine. Unlike La Spinetta's labels, which feature Albrecht Dürer

woodcuts of wild animals, Pio Cesare's look as if they've been handed down directly from the 19th century. And when Boffa spent about \$10 million to renovate the winery's inner workings several years ago, he commanded the contractor to keep the place looking the same. "So if my late grandfather walked in, he'd not notice a difference," Boffa says. "I told them, 'I don't care about the cost. I don't care if it's not practical. Exactly the same.'"

The wines themselves have the same sense of being crafted to feel like heirlooms. "A glass of real Barolo, the first time you have it, it's hard to understand," he explains. "It's rude, it's rough, it's controversial. But sip by sip, it conquers you. It requires time to understand it, but when you do, you can't live without it. That's the kind of Barolo I try to make."

Earlier in the week, we'd eaten a traditional *piemontese* dinner cooked by Boffa's wife, Nicoletta, at their summerhouse in Treiso, a few miles away. Now, with lunchtime approaching, he takes me upstairs to a terrace off the living quarters, where his mother still resides. A red-and-white-checked tablecloth is spread over a table. We open bottles of Pio Cesare and eat preserved tuna, homemade bread, spaghetti with tomatoes from the garden, and peaches soaked in Barolo—all made by his mother, who is in her eighties. We gaze out over the buildings of Alba.

"I have been eating lunch and dinner here with my grandfather and my father for 51 years," he says. "The same view. The same table. The same food." His manner is brusque, but I see that his eyes are moist. He gestures toward the hills, which glint in the sunshine. "You can see why we like to keep things the same."

I spend the next night with Rivetti

at La Ciau del Tornavento, in Treiso. Perhaps the best restaurant in the area, it can't be more than a half-mile from Boffa's summerhouse. As I revel in chef Maurilio Garola's wry take on Piedmontese cuisine, I can't help thinking about the home-cooked meal Boffa is doubtless eating at the same moment.

Nicoletta Boffa's dishes aren't updated versions of anything, just traditional recipes served with the utmost sincerity. They aren't as exciting as what Garola creates at Tornavento, just as her

husband's Barolos and Barbarescos don't thrill my palate quite as much as Rivetti's versions of those wines, yet I understand that it is vitally important that Nicoletta's food, like the Pio Cesare wines, continues to exist in its current form. If Rivetti and his cadre were necessary to help pull Piedmont into the present day, Boffa is there to ensure that it doesn't get pulled too far. After a week spent between one winemaker and the other, I have come to perceive them as the twin halves of today's Piedmontese culture. One looks ahead, the other behind.

Except that this isn't exactly true. For my last dinner in the area, I meet Boffa in Rivoli, outside Turin. He has invited me to Combal.Zero, an avant-garde restaurant within a museum of contemporary art, where our meal is easily as surreal as any of the paintings hanging in the galleries. Spanish ham and frozen melon are presented in a hollowed-out book. A fish course arrives in a faux fossil, and we're asked to hammer away at the clay around it. Foie gras is sucked out of a hole in a balloon.

Boffa loves every course. It is like taking Gore Vidal to see the Three Stooges and watching him double over in hysterics. Flabbergasted, I ask Boffa how he can reconcile his fervor for the traditional, for that which exists without irony, with the most studiously ironic meal I have ever eaten. "This is provocative," he replies. "You go to traditional restaurants in La Morra, you have traditional dishes. You come here, you start talking."

At that moment, a bottle of his Dolcetto arrives at the table. It is a lighter, simpler wine than Barolo or Barbaresco, made from a different grape—an everyday beverage for the Piedmontese that, if anything, symbolizes the region even more than those expensive, exalted wines do. He tastes it and sighs with contentment. I tell Boffa that it is absolutely the last wine I would have ever imagined ordering at a place like this, and he looks at me with an expression—a mixture of defiance and pity—that seems to embody the whole of *piemontese* culture.

"I'm from Piemonte, what can I tell you?" he says, turning his palms toward the sky. "I love what I love." ✚

Bruce Schoenfeld is a Travel + Leisure contributing editor.