

Barolo Breakthrough

Skiing isn't the only reason to visit the Italian Alps this winter

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BY ERICA DUECY

ON A HAZY LATE-AUTUMN DAY, I'M tasting wines at Ettore Germano Winery in Serralunga d'Alba, in the northwestern Italian province of Piedmont. Elena Germano apologizes profusely — her husband, winemaker Sergio, is working, but will try to join us later. Visitors always want to come in fall around the harvest, but that's the busiest time of the year, she laments. It's a common problem here, but I've found a simple solution: Visit in the slower winter season, when winemakers have time to talk. And since you're in the Italian Alps, why not combine life's



two great indulgences and make it a wine-and-skiing vacation?

Wine tasting and snow sports may sound like an odd pairing — when pursued simultaneously, anyway — but it’s one that makes perfect sense in Piedmont, home to both the country’s best skiing — the region boasts 53 resorts and 800 miles of runs — and to barolo, its most prestigious wine.

Alba, the heart of barolo country, is just two hours south of resorts like Bardonecchia and Sestriere,* making it easy to arrange a day or overnight trip. Its connection to world-class wines and haute cuisine — white truffles are famously foraged nearby — lends a cosmopolitan flavor enhanced by Michelin-starred restaurants, luxe lodgings, and upscale shopping. The picturesque landscape boasts rolling, vine-covered hills, untamed forests, and medieval villages.

Even if you never venture beyond the resort villages, most après spots serve up a fine selection of local wines, notably reds: Piedmont is known for its barbarescos, barberas, and dolcettos. But barolo is the undisputed king, commanding premium prices and pride of place at the wineries certified to make it. With a full body, grippy tannins, and savory flavors, it is a great cold-weather wine. “The flavors are wild, they remind you of autumn and winter,” says Roberta Ceretto of Ceretto wineries. “You notice mushrooms, leather, spices, chocolate, licorice, and as the wines evolve, they become more elegant.” Barolos are the ideal mate for hearty dishes like beef short-ribs or braised wild boar over polenta.

Fans of the wine tend to exude passionate zeal. “Barolo is one of my favorites of all the wines in the world,” says Paolo Canclini, owner of Telluride’s Rustico Ristorante. “Every sip is a different emotion. It evolves slowly over the course of a meal as you drink it.” Canclini offers more than 240 barolos on his Italian-only list of 1,000-plus selections, which range from \$75 to more than \$1,000.

Such premium pricing is driven by the wine’s limited production. The entire certified growing area (DOCG) is a mere 3,000 acres, comparable in size to Saint-Estèphe, one of Bordeaux’s 60 appellations.



“Barolo is unique and very rare,” Ceretto says. “There is a mystery and fascination with it.”

While it’s hard to find a bad bottle, the wine is challenging to produce. Barolo is made exclusively from nebbiolo, a varietal similar to pinot noir in the dramatically different expressions it shows from site to site. In the 11 villages comprising the DOCG, variations in soil and elevation noticeably impact the character of the wine.* For example, grapes from Ettore Germano’s sites in Serralunga d’Alba produce wines with big tannins and long aging potential, while those made around La Morra are rounder and smoother.

In comparison to international grape varieties, barolos also drink more like pinot noirs than cabernet sauvignons or merlots. “If you love pinot noir from Burgundy, then you will be intrigued by barolo,” says Anja Cramer, marketing director at La Spinetta. “It has the body and fruit of a burgundy, but with more length and power.”

Barolo’s structure of robust tannins and bright acidity contributes to its aging potential of 50 years or more, making it an excellent cellar addition. But the wine can be lovely at just five years old. The current release of 2005 barolos are excellent for drinking or cellaring, with retail prices starting around \$50.

Beyond the prospect of sampling such outstanding wines, it’s the personal touch that makes visiting area wineries so special. When Sergio Germano finally joined us, he enthused about his wines for more than an hour — the kind of one-on-one interaction with the winemaker that’s rare in most other

regions, where tasting rooms are manned by retail-sales staff. But it also means that tours and tastings are harder to come by. Three seasons of the year, producers are hard at work and can’t spare much time to meet with visitors. But in winter, “we taste the wines with you and have a longer conversation,” says La Spinetta’s Cramer.

For those in pursuit of *la dolce vita* in the Alps this winter, a wine-tasting side trip may prove to be the clincher.* Even if you’re not headed to Italy, a 2005 barolo* provides a taste of the good life. ●

Italy’s Piedmont region is home to its best skiing — and its most prestigious wine.