

# Alpine Italy

Where the landscapes of northern Italy rise towards its dramatic mountain borders, the wines come with as many accents and cultural influences as the local communities.

Simon Reilly takes us on a tour of the regions, and recommends 15 fascinating wines

WHEN MOST PEOPLE think of the Alps, wine is not the first thing that springs to mind – après-ski aside. But wine lovers whose Italian cellars stop at the rolling hills of Langhe or Tuscany are missing out on some fascinating wines. There are delicious wines to be found from Valle d'Aosta (Italy's smallest wine-growing region) in the west, travelling through Alto Piemonte and Valtellina, to Alto Adige in the east.

The expanse of Italy's Alpine region, and the merging of cultures created by its mountain borders with France, Switzerland and Austria, results in a great diversity of wine styles. Yet the dramatic landscape they share brings similarities too. Italy's best Alpine wines all offer freshness, minerality, acidity and complexity in abundance.

## Working together

The logistical challenges the Alpine conditions create seem to bring the winemakers together. Across the region, cooperatives feature strongly. Rather than the stereotypical idea of co-ops selling the local mouthwash by the litre, these are producing serious, high-quality wines.

Cantina Produttori Nebbiolo di Carema is one of only two producers in the small Carema DOC on the border of Alto Piemonte and Valle d'Aosta. It produces only two Nebbiolos, a black-label Classico and a white-label Riserva. I'd quite happily drink the Classico with lunch and the Riserva with dinner for the rest of my days. While the Classico is softer and lighter than the darker, more serious Riserva, both have a beautiful balance of cherry sweetness, refreshing acidity and freshness.

In Alto Adige, cooperatives such as Cantina Terlano and Cantina Andrian produce a wide range of quality wines at every price point. Entry-level wines like Cantina Andrian's Vernatsch red and Pinot Bianco are precise and food-friendly, offering great value. At the top end, Cantina Terlano's top crus are world-class, complex wines, aged in oak and then held in bottle for 10 or more years before being released when deemed ready to drink.

In Alto Piemonte, a group of producers from Biella has formed the Associazione Vignaioli Colline Biellesi. The passionate spokesman for this group is Luca De Marchi of Proprietà Sperino (son of owner Paolo, who also owns Isole e Olena in Tuscany). He says: 'If only one person makes good wine, it only benefits one. If we all make good wine, it becomes a good area and that is better for everyone.'

## Nebbiolo's various guises

Nebbiolo is well represented in the Alps, but is chameleon-like, known as Spanna in Alto Piemonte, Chiavennasca in Valtellina and Picotendro in Valle d'Aosta.

Sitting in the shadow of Monte Rosa, the second highest mountain in the Alps, to the west and north of Milan, the Gattinara DOCG in Alto Piemonte is the birthplace of Spanna, an ancient clone of Nebbiolo. Elring and Kathrine Astrup, majority owners of the Nervi estate, are Spanna's official cheerleaders. They bought the estate in 2011 after falling in love with the wines of Gattinara during family ski holidays in the Italian Alps.

Kathrine says: 'Spanna was historically deemed to be better than Nebbiolo as it >



Views over Carema from the vineyards of Cantina Produttori Nebbiolo di Carema



was better suited to the climate. Normal Nebbiolo loses concentration in the acidic soils and heavy rain, but Spanna thrives.' Despite this, Spanna was gradually replaced by higher yielding clones of Nebbiolo such as Lampia. Nervi has been working with the University of Turin to develop Spanna clones from old vines in an effort to increase the proportion of Spanna vines on its estate. Nervi produces an excellent estate Gattinara, as well as two single-vineyard crus, Molsino and Valferana, typified by finesse, elegance and structure, with great acidity and minerality.

**Above:**  
**Isabella Pelizzatti**  
**Perego of Ar.Pe.Pe.**  
**with her brothers Guido**  
**(left) and Emanuele**

**Left: cable cars on the**  
**the steeply sloping**  
**vineyards of Ar.Pe.Pe.**  
**estate in Valtellina**

Moving east, Valtellina lies along the Adda River in north Lombardy and is home to real mountain Nebbiolo, known as Chiavennasca locally. The sloping vineyards at Ar.Pe.Pe. estate (Arturo Pelizzatti Perego) are so steep that cable cars are used to harvest the grapes. The work is manual and hard. Committed to quality, Ar.Pe.Pe. has been a family estate since 1860 – Isabella Pelizzatti Perego and her two brothers took over from her father, Arturo, who decided to make wines in 1984. Isabella says his stubborn belief in producing quality, aged wines, released when ready to drink, existed from day one: 'He didn't sell any wine for six years. It just sat in the cellar, waiting.'

This ethos continues: the current vintage of Ar.Pe.Pe.'s two riservas is 2007. The vineyards are only 2km apart, but the difference in terroir shines through. Sassella is the dark, brooding brother to its soft and seductive sister, Grumello. In all, eight different cuvées are produced but – understandably given the harsh geography – only four of those on average are produced each year. 'Which ones?' says Isabella. 'That depends on mother nature.'

A special Nebbiolo style native to Valtellina is Sforzato. Similar in style to Amarone, it's a passito wine made from partially dried grapes. Although many producers use heated cellars, at Ar.Pe.Pe. the grapes dry on the vines. Being at the mercy of the elements, Isabella only makes Sforzato around three times a decade.

### Native grapes

Italy's Alpine regions are a great source of little-known but interesting native varieties. Beginning with whites, in the DOCG of Caluso near Turin, Erbaluce is used to make dry table wines with taut acidity and great minerality, excellent traditional, Champagne-method sparkling wines, and delicious late-harvest passitos. Caluso producers of fine Erbaluce (in all three formats) to look out for include: Cella Grande, La Masera, Cieck and Orsolani.

In Trentino-Alto Adige, the white grape Nosiola – which is traditionally seen as a blending variety (see 'Unusual grapes', p10) – was almost extinct in the early 1970s, when Giuseppe Fanti decided to start bottling a 100% Nosiola wine in the foothills of the ➤

## Reilly recommends: best of the Italian Alpine region



**Orsolani, Cuvée Tradizione 1968, Spumante, Caluso, Piedmont 2009** 93  
£20.80 **Mille Gusti**  
1968 refers to the year Orsolani's first sparkling Erbaluce was produced. Toasted notes integrate perfectly with pineapple and lime flavours, all combining to create a seamless mouthful of freshness, richness and tension. Delicious. **Drink 2017-2020 Alcohol 13%**

**Cantina Produttori Valle Isarco, Aristos, Sylvaner, Alto Adige 2014** 92  
£21.95 **Slurp**  
A slightly reticent nose of peaches leads to a lovely texture, with salty stone minerality and pithy white grapefruit flavours. Herbal, earthy notes to finish. If, like me, you generally avoid Sylvaner, this is worth a try. **Drink 2017-2022 Alc 14%**

**Abbazia di Novacella, Kerner, Alto Adige 2015** 91  
£17-£18.95 **Astrum, Forest Wines, Lea & Sandeman, Vini Italiani**  
Lovely peach and apricot aromas lead to a tangy orange spiciness on the tongue.

There is great energy on the peppery finish that leaves your palate so refreshed you can't stop yourself smacking your lips. **Drink 2017-2020 Alc 13.5%**

**Pojer e Sandri, Nosiola, Dolomiti, Trentino-Alto Adige 2015** 91  
£17 **FortyFive10°**  
100% Nosiola. A heady concoction of pepper, minerals and limes, underpinned by a subtle smokiness through to a long finish. Unique. **Drink 2017-2018 Alc 12%**



**Cantina Terlano, Terlaner Classico, Alto Adige 2015** 90  
£15.50 **Astrum, Bottle Apostle, Field & Fawcett, Highbury Vintners, Jeroboams, The Solent Cellar, WoodWinters**  
A blend of Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Blanc, with a distinct green tinge. Mineral and grapefruit aromas lead to sweet peach, tart citrus and peppery spice. A long and mineral finish. **Drink 2017-2018 Alc 13.5%**

**Ottin, Petite Arvine, Valle d'Aosta 2015** 90  
£24.50 **Stannary St Wine Co**

From steep, south-facing vineyards at about 600m, this has lovely aromas of peaches, but you can also smell the wet stone minerality. A lovely waxy texture reveals white grapefruit and pepper leading to refreshing saltiness on the finish. Nicely balanced despite relatively high alcohol. **Drink 2017-2019 Alc 14.5%**

**Ar.Pe.Pe., Buon Consiglio, Grumello Riserva, Valtellina Superiore, Lombardy 2007** 98  
£44 **Tutto**

Nebbiolo that's been aged for four years in oak and three years in bottle before release. Cherry sweetness melts into refreshing acidity, creating a stunning wine that is both powerful yet delicate and soft. This wine could be likened to an onion: it has layers of complexity and it makes me want to cry. **Drink 2017-2037 Alc 13.5%**

**Cantina Produttori Nebbiolo di Carema, Carema Classico, Piedmont 2013** 96  
£18.50-£19.50 **Astrum, Highbury Vintners**  
Light as a feather yet bursting with the flavours of red cherries, raspberries and

orange peel spice. After resting for 12 months in large oak casks, fruit flavours combine effortlessly with soft tannins and mouthwatering acidity to create the most drinkable wine imaginable. **Drink 2017-2028 Alc 12.5%**

**Nervi, Gattinara, Piedmont 2011** 95  
£24 **Raeburn**  
Nebbiolo that's blended from all of this estate's vineyards. A lovely, sweet fruit nose of red berries and watermelon with notes of spice. So smooth and elegant on the palate, with acidity and soft tannins on the long finish giving it great balance. **Drink 2017-2026 Alc 13.5%**

**Ignaz Niedrist, Berger Gei, Lagrein Gries Riserva, Alto Adige 2013** 94  
£28 **Astrum, Bacco, Highbury Vintners, Vini Italiani**  
Dark crimson, almost black. Delicious flavours of dark fruits and juniper berries, with well-integrated oak sweetness (this was aged 12 months in barrique), balanced by an aniseed sourness on the finish. Fantastic stuff. **Drink 2017-2023 Alc 13.5%**



**Les Crêtes, Fumin, Valle d'Aosta 2012** 94  
£24.95 **Exel**  
Very dark, almost black in colour. Brooding and spicy, with dark fruits and a touch of polish on the nose. Deliciously tart berry fruit on the palate leads to a very long finish that has a pleasing sourness to it. **Drink 2017-2025 Alc 13.5%**

**Proprietà Sperino, Uvaggio, Coste della Sesia, Piedmont 2012** 94  
£24.99 **Bentley's, Drinkmonger, Harrogate Fine Wine Co, Hedonism, Richard Granger, Scarlet Wines, The Wine Reserve, Whole Foods**  
Blend of 70% Nebbiolo, 20% Vespolina and 10% Croatina. Enticing cherry and red berry aromas. The spice of the Vespolina and a lovely minerality add real freshness to a deliciously smooth and balanced wine. **Drink 2017-2022 Alc 12.5%**

**Ottin, Pinot Noir, Valle d'Aosta, 2014** 93  
£23.50 **Stannary St Wine Co, Uncorked**  
From a vineyard planted in 1989 with original Burgundy clones, this feels more like a German Spätburgunder in style. Savoury notes of leather, mushroom and

spice are followed by tart fruit flavours of damsons and griotte cherries. This is full of energy and is very easy to drink. **Drink 2017-2021 Alc 13.5%**



**Rivetti & Lauro, Dell'Orco, Sforzato di Valtellina, Lombardy 2011** 92  
£30.36 **Vinissimo**  
Made from partially dried Nebbiolo. Floral nose of dried roses. Powerful and intense cherry sweetness is balanced by a dry finish. A wine made for cheese, preferably Italian. **Drink 2017-2025 Alc 14.5%**

**Cantina Andrian, Bocado, Vernatsch, Alto Adige 2014** 91  
£13 **Astrum, Corks of Cotham, No2 Pound Street, Planet of the Grapes**  
With its delicious aromas of cherries and spice, this is full of soft and juicy fruit character, with raspberries, strawberries and almonds all vying for your attention on the palate. The finish is so fresh that it implores you to have another glass. **Drink 2017-2018 Alc 13%**

For full details of UK stockists, see p104

## ALPINE WINES

Dolomites. Neighbouring estate Pojer e Sandri then resuscitated an old Nosiola vineyard and did the same thing. Both continue to make excellent 100% Nosiola wines today.

Indigenous reds to look out for include Vespolina and Croatina grown in Piedmont and Lombardy. Both are used in blends. Vespolina is particularly evident in Nebbiolo-based blends due to its northern Rhône Syrah-style spiciness. Many of these blends are produced under the Coste della Sesia and Colline Novaresi DOCs. Good examples come from Proprietà Sperino, Tenute Sella, Pietro Cassina and Antichi Vigneti di Cantalupo.

Fumin, a variety native to Valle d'Aosta, can be blended but also works as a single varietal, producing a dark, brooding, spicy red. In Alto Adige, interesting indigenous reds include Lagrein and Vernatsch (also called Trollinger). Fans of Gamay from Beaujolais and the Loire should enjoy the light juiciness of Vernatsch. Lagrein is a more powerful and potentially serious proposition, with some well-structured wines on offer, particularly at the riserva level.

### International scope

The existence of several international borders around the Alpine region lends itself to the

*'Italy's best Alpine wines offer freshness, minerality, acidity and complexity in abundance'*



adoption of international grapes. Pinot Noir (or Pinot Nero) is grown across the region and is the most successful international red grape in the Alps, capable of producing wines with great minerality and tension. A particularly skilled exponent of Alpine Pinot Noir is Elio Ottin, one of the rising stars in Valle d'Aosta.

With the exception of Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc – which can both be found right across the region, often in blends – the most typical international varieties planted are those which are already popular in neighbouring wine regions. The Swiss variety Petite Arvine is particularly popular in Valle d'Aosta, where again Ottin produces one of the region's best examples. In Alto Adige, German varieties such as Sylvaner, Gewürztraminer, Kerner and Müller-Thurgau are grown extensively, often with great success.

So the Alps may still be better known for its ski resorts than its vineyards, but as the latest generation of winemakers continue to work together to raise the quality and profile of the wines produced, holidaymakers and wine enthusiasts alike will soon be talking about the wines as well. 

**Above: Tenute Sella, which uses indigenous red variety Vespolina in its Nebbiolo blends**

**Below: Elio Ottin is one of the producers to watch in Valle d'Aosta**

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