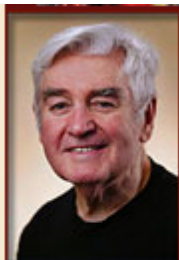


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Dolcetto, Piedmont's Affordable Red

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Many of my favorite red wines come from Italy's Piedmont region. They include, of course, Barolo and Barbaresco. But frankly, these two great wines are too big and powerful—and too expensive—to drink on a regular basis. Instead, I find myself drinking a lot more Barbera and

Dolcetto, Piedmont's affordable reds, both at home and in Italian restaurants.

I love Barbera, my favorite wine with pizza. But I've noticed that, with its new-found popularity, Barbera is starting to get a bit pricey. More and more Piedmontese Barberas are now retailing for over \$20, and a few of the best are over \$40. For me, an affordable red wine should retail in the \$12 to \$20 range. Fortunately, many fine Dolcettos can still be found in this price range.

I've got a soft spot in my heart for Dolcetto, the one Piedmont wine most overlooked in the U.S. I even named my little Siamese cat "Dolcetto." She's about to turn 19, and is aging better than her namesake wine does.

Traditionally, Dolcetto and Barbera are the two red wines that Piedmontese drink the most; they save Barolo, Barbaresco, or any of the other important Nebbiolo-based wines for special dinners. Because Dolcetto and Barbera are very different wines, they are typically served separately, depending on the cuisine of the day.

Barbera, with its fruitiness, high acidity and very low tannin, goes best with all tomato-based dishes, such as pastas, meat, and even fish.

Dolcetto—which means "little sweet one" in Italian—is actually a very dry, medium-bodied wine, made from the Dolcetto grape variety, and it is not blended with any other variety. It has good acidity (but not as acidic as Barbera), medium tannins, and a rich texture, with aromas and flavors of black pepper and ripe berry fruit. It is an ideal accompaniment to Italian antipasti—especially hard salami—and to simpler pasta dishes such as spaghetti al pomodoro.

Dolcetto has been compared to Beaujolais, but this is an erroneous comparison, because it is too dry a wine to drink without food, unlike the softer, fruitier Beaujolais. When Dolcetto and Barbera are served together at the same dinner, Dolcetto is invariably served first, as it is dryer and slightly lighter-bodied than Barbera.

Dolcetto ages differently than Barbera. Both wines are best when they're young, in my opinion. But Barbera can age for ten or twelve years. It just doesn't really improve that much with age—unlike its big brothers, Barolo and Barbaresco. Dolcetto tastes best in the first two years, and at three years of age it's still fine. Beyond three years of age, only the best Dolcettos will still improve; most become less interesting or compelling once they lose their freshness.

Dolcetto comes from eight different DOC zones in Piedmont, and so there are eight different Dolcetto wines, but we see mainly three in the U.S. market—the three most highly regarded Dolcetto wines:

Dolcetto d'Alba (by far the most commonly exported Dolcetto)
Dolcetto di Dogliani (from the town of Dogliani, south of Alba, and renowned for its Dolcettos; biggest, longest-lived Dolcettos)
Dolcetto di Diano d'Alba (the village of Diano d'Alba is high up in the hills above Alba; these Dolcettos are elegant, with good acidity).

The other five Dolcetto wines are the following:

Dolcetto d'Asti (light-bodied, with good acidity; not as well-known as Barbera d'Asti)
Dolcetto di Ovada (southernmost Dolcetto zone; full-bodied and tannic)
Dolcetto d'Acqui (in Alessandria; light and floral)
Dolcetto delle Langhe Monregalesi (lighter-bodied)
Langhe Dolcetto (general DOC Dolcetto; wines from no specific zone, other than the large Langhe area around the town of Alba)

Three Dolcetto wines are entitled to use the more prestigious DOCG appellation rather than the more commonly used DOC, provided that the wines follow stricter production requirements. Dolcetto di Dogliani was the first Dolcetto wine to be granted DOCG status, in 2005. In August, 2010, Dolcetto di Diano d'Alba and Dolcetto di Ovada were also granted DOCG appellations. Dogliani and Ovada, large Dolcetto zones, can use DOC or DOCG, based on production standards used for the wines. The small Diano d'Alba zone now is entitled to use only DOCG for all of its Dolcettos.

This past spring I made my annual trek to Piedmont. One of my specific goals on this trip was to find some of the best Dolcettos. I concentrated on the Alba and Dogliani wine zones, and tasted Dolcettos on every wine visit.

(...)

Fortunately for those of us who enjoy Dolcetto and would hate to see it disappear—in the manner that two other of my favorite Piedmontese wines, Freisa and Grignolino, have almost vanished—two good reasons exist that insure the continuation of Dolcetto:

- The terroir of some Piedmontese zones—such as Dogliani, Diano d'Alba, and Ovada—is perfect for the early maturing Dolcetto variety, but definitely unsuitable for the late-maturing Nebbiolo or even Barbera. For example, Dolcetto can thrive at much higher altitudes than Nebbiolo.
- Some Piedmontese producers love Dolcetto so much that they wouldn't dream of discontinuing it, even if it's not a big moneymaker.

(...)

I list here in no particular order other good Dolcetto wines available in the U.S. that I have tasted during the past year. Unless otherwise noted, the current vintages of these Dolcettos retail in the \$15 to \$20 range:

- Vietti Dolcetto d'Alba "Tre Vigne" 2008
- Renato Ratti Dolcetto d'Alba "Columbe" 2009 (good value, \$13-\$15)
- Roberto Voerzio Dolcetto d'Alba "Priavino" 2007 (\$19 to \$25; '08 very good)
- Luciano Sandrone Dolcetto d'Alba 2008
- Marchesi di Gresy Dolcetto d'Alba "Monte Aribaldo" 2008 (one of my very favorite Dolcettos; very elegant, like the Marchese)
- Gigi Rosso Dolcetto Diano d'Alba 2008, 2009
- Claudio Alario Dolcetto Diano d'Alba "Montagrillo" 2007, 2008
- Marziano Abbona Dolcetto di Dogliani "San Luigi" 2008
- Marziano Abbona Dogliani DOCG "Papa Celso" '07, '08 (\$23-26)
- Poderi Aldo Conterno Langhe Dolcetto "Masante" 2008 (\$23-\$28)
- Poderi Colla Dolcetto d'Alba "Pian Balbo" 2007
- Marchesi di Barolo Dolcetto d'Alba "Madonna di Como" 2008
- Giuseppe Mascarello Dolcetto d'Alba "Bricco" 2007 (\$20-\$23)
- Bartolo Mascarello Dolcetto d'Alba "Vigne Monrobiolo" 2008 (\$25-\$30)
- Francesco Rinaldi Dolcetto d'Alba "Roussot" 2008, 2009
- De Forville Dolcetto d'Alba 2008
- Elvio Corno Dolcetto d'Alba "Vigna del Mandorlo" 2008
- Brovia Dolcetto d'Alba "Vignavillej" 2008
- Cantina del Pino Dolcetto d'Alba 2007, 2008
- Cavallotto Dolcetto d'Alba "Vigna Scot" or "Bricco Boschis" 2008
- Anna Maria Abbona Dolcetto di Dogliani "Sori dij But" 2008
- Boroli Dolcetto d'Alba "Madonna di Como" 2007
- Francesco Boschis Dolcetto di Dogliani "Pianezzo" 2008 (\$14-\$16)
- Bruno Giacosa Dolcetto d'Alba "Falletto" 2008, 2009 ('09 especially fine)
- Vigne Regali (Banfi) Dolcetto d'Acqui 2007, 2008 (\$11-\$12; great value)