The 2012 Barolos from Piedmont’s Langhe hills are the leading lights among the new releases from the region, despite nature’s challenges during the growing season. The best are elegant, balanced and expressive, offering a mix of fruit and savory elements, with the structure to develop over the medium term.

The current crop of Barbaresco also excel. They hail from 2013, a cool year whose late harvest resulted in complex aromas and finesse. Purity and harmony are common descriptors for these wines, which are generally age-acceptable.

Among the top-scoring 2012 Barolos are Massolino’s Margheria (96 points, $97), a vibrant red dominated by notes of cherry, mint and earth, and Giacomo Conterno’s Cerretta (96, $225), whose complex flavors are allied to a structure with tension and excellent length.

In addition, there are several 2012 Barolos at 95 points: the Luigi Baudana Cerretta ($84), Giuseppe Mascarello & Figlio Monprivato ($165), Bartolo Mascarello ($135), Massolino Farafada ($97), Luciano Sandrone Le Vigne ($155) and Giacomo Zibechi Collezi ($65).
Barbera, a grape variety that likes heat, struggled in the cooler years of 2013 and 2014. It comes as no surprise, then, that the best Barberas are from 2012 and 2015, two warmer, dry vintages. The highest-rated Barbera in this report is the Vietti Barbera d'Alba Vigna Scarrone 2012 (92, $43), a rich, supple red boasting blackberry, black cherry, leather and spice flavors.

Despite the challenges, there are excellent examples from both 2013 and 2014. A pair of 2013's reveal what can be done in a cooler year. The Podere Colla Barbera d'Alba Costa Bruna 2013 (91, $25) and Aldo Conterno Barbera d'Alba Conca Tre Pile 2013 (91, $35) top the list of 10 outstanding 2013 Barberas out of 30 reviewed.

The 2014s don't fare as well, with only four of 35 managing to rate outstanding. Plus, the best tend to be pricey. Of the year's 90-plus Barberas, only the Paitin Barbera d'Alba Serra 2014 (90, $22) stands out as a great value. The other three are the Elvio Cognino Barbera d'Alba Pre-Phylloxera 2014 (90, $67), Falletto di Bruno Giacosa Barbera d'Alba 2014 (90, $60) and Luciano Sandrone Barbera d'Alba 2014 (90, $43).

The 2015s, now arriving, show great promise. Nearly half of these young Barberas are outstanding in my tastings this year, led by the Giacomo Ortinardi Barbera d'Alba Pistasina 2015 (91, $18).

Dolcetto is the first red variety harvested in Piedmont's Langhe hills, and this characteristically fruity red also likes heat. Fortunately, most of the current Dolcettos are from the hot, dry 2015 harvest. Many Dolcettos carry the Alba DOC, yet in the nearby Dogliani appellation, Dolcetto is the star grape and bears the DOCG title.

In the 2015 vintage, the Falletto di Bruno Giacosa Dolcetto d'Alba (92, $25) and Quinto Chieretti & Figlio Doglioni Dolcetto Colleolo (92, $26) head the list. Both exhibit black cherry, blackberry and violet flavors, yet while the former is elegant, the latter shows the plumpness that Dolcetto achieves in Dogliani. Giacomo Conterno's Dolcetto d'Alba (91, $16) delivers excellent value, while Bartolo Mascarello Dolcetto d'Alba (91, $30) and Paitin Dolcetto d'Alba Soris Paitin (91, $20) are also worth the search.

Though Piedmont is better known for its reds, the region's whites represent 10 percent of the wines I tasted during the past year. They consist of several indigenous grape varieties, including Co (grown primarily in the Gavi DOCG) and Arneis, plus the obscure Erbaluce, Favorita, Nascetta and Timorasso. Chardonnay Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc are also grown.

Several whites earned outstanding ratings. Gaja's Langhe Vigna Gaia & Rey 2014 (92, $230), made from Chardonnay, stuns for its rich texture, spice notes and hefty price tag. The peach citrus-flavored Luigi Baudana Langhe White Dragon 2014 ($20) is a blend of Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Nascetta and Riesling. The Elvio Cogno Nascetta Langhe Anas-cetta 2015 ($35) and Broglia Gavi La Meirana 2015 (90, $25), from 100 percent Cortese, represent fine examples of local grape varieties. Vajra's Riesling Langhe 2015 (90, $40) is one of the best values of that grape in Piedmont.

The early-release 2015s show the promise of a vintage in all the red grape varieties of the region excelled. The next Barolos to be released comes from the fine 2013 vintage, a ye Giacomo Conterno, of his family's Aldo Conterno estate, describes as a "very classic vintage, like 2010 but less tannic and mju matic." But until these wines become available later this year, plenty of Piedmont reds and whites to satisfy fans of the from affordable everyday values to high-end collectibles.

Valter Fassone's Elvio Cognino winery in Novello offers a range of outstanding wines in this report, including a Barbera, a Dolcetto and an indigenous white.

Senior editor Bruce Sanderson is Wine Spectator's lead taster on wines of Piedmont.