





Alto Piemonte

A Renaissance in Progress

by Stephanie Johnson

High on a hilltop about 100 miles north of Barolo, the remains of a medieval tower stand guard above the red-tiled rooftops of Gattinara. The ground continues rising northward toward the purple line of the Alps and the snowcapped Monte Rosa, Europe's second-highest peak. The Sesia River descends past Gattinara and leads south, where the hills gradually flatten into vast rice paddies, opening up a sweeping view that reaches Milan's skyscrapers 50 miles to the east and, on a clear day, the iconic spire of Turin's Mole Antonelliana to the west.

Tighten your focus to a distance of ten miles in any direction to view a series of neighboring townships collectively known as Alto Piemonte (high Piedmont): Gattinara, whose vineyards surround the tower; Boca, nestled on slopes to the north; Ghemme, Sizzano and Fara, lined up on a low plateau to the southeast; and the hills of Bramaterra, heading west toward the sandy slopes of Lessona. Swaths of forest darken the hillsides; a 19th-century visitor standing on this spot would have seen nothing but vineyards.

In the mid-1800s, at a time when the wines of Barolo and Barbaresco were in their nascent stages, Alto Piemonte's wines were prized by nobles in Turin, Milan and beyond. That began to change with a series of misfortunes that hit the region; phylloxera reached Alto

Piemonte's vineyards in the latter part of the century, followed by a devastating hailstorm that wiped out most of the harvest in 1904 and 1905. Two world wars deepened the region's economic woes, leading many farmers to abandon their vineyards in search of more reliable income from the textile and auto industries. Forests overtook the abandoned vineyards, and plantings that had covered over 100,000 acres a century ago dropped to just 2,000.

MANEUVERING A BATTERED Land Rover up a steep, rock-strewn dirt road in Bramaterra, Cristiano Garella stops to point out some twisted wires and slanted stakes barely visible through the dense mass of ferns and acacia trees. It's a remnant of one of those old



Cristiano Garella

vineyards, long since reclaimed by the forest, and a sight Garella encounters daily on his forays throughout the region.

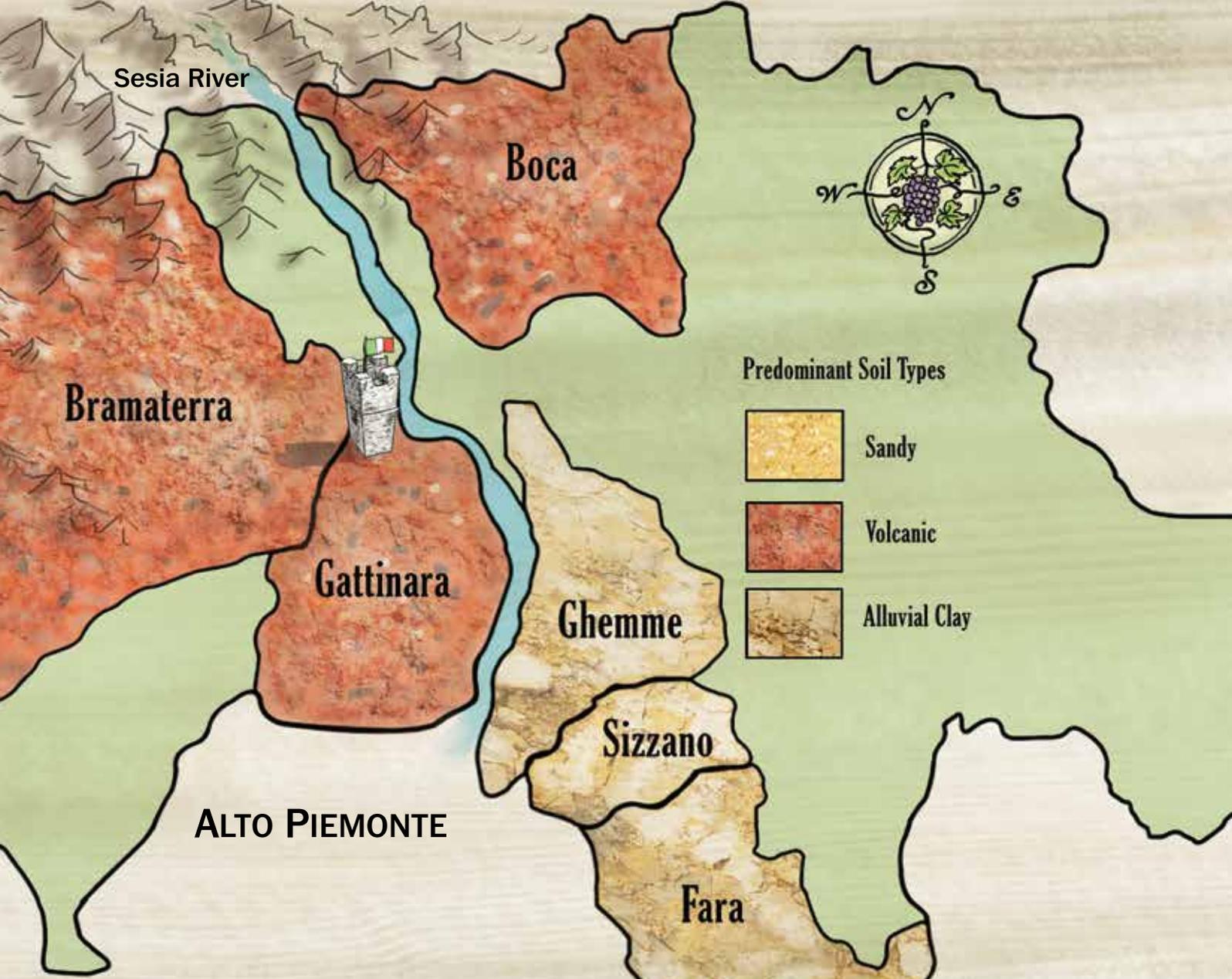
A native of Alto Piemonte, Garella is thin and wiry, with a shock of dark hair above intense brown eyes. He grew up in a family without any connection to the wine industry, and his career started just as the region was beginning to emerge from a century of setbacks. Nineteen harvests later, eight of them at the helm of Tenute Sella, Garella has moved on to become a partner in two local wineries and a consultant for more than a dozen others. His scope of work and passion for Alto Piemonte's wines have made him something of an unofficial ambassador for the region, with an emphasis on unofficial, since you won't find the term "Alto Piemonte" on any wine labels, or even on wine maps of the region. Locals and wine professionals use the term to link together the group of northern Piedmont townships that all produce wines from nebbiolo.

PERHAPS IT'S FITTING TO TALK ABOUT EACH of Alto Piemonte's townships individually, because diversity is one of the things that makes the region special. The nebbiolo vines of each township grow in widely different soil types that give varying expressions of the variety. Garella likes to hand visitors a geological map of Alto Piemonte that looks a bit like a children's puzzle, each colored block representing a different soil type. He also keeps copies of a slim paperback on hand for those die-hard rockheads who love to talk dirt. The book, breathlessly titled *The*

Incredible History of the Sesia Supervolcano, is an account of

the events that created Alto Piemonte's terroir, written by Silvano Sinigoi, a geology professor at the University of Trieste. According to Sinigoi, about 280 million years ago an enormous volcano exploded, sending hundreds of cubic tons of rock and ash into the air before collapsing on itself. A few million years later, the African and European continents collided to form the Alps, lifting and rotating the earth's crust to expose the exploded volcano's bowels. Later, as glaciers carved a path through the valley, they transported pieces of volcanic debris, leaving a chaotic mix of soils that make this area a mecca for geologists as well as oenophiles.

Garella sounds almost like an evangelist when he talks about the area's diverse soils and how each soil type leaves a different mark on the region's nebbiolo-based wines. The light, sandy soils of Lessona translate into some of the region's most floral and elegant wines, with soft tannins and fresh berry flavors tinged with notes of iodine. Boca, Gattinara and



parts of Bramaterra have reddish, volcanic soils that are rich in iron; these wines often have a bloody character that complements sturdy tannins and dark fruit flavors. Wines from grapes grown in the alluvial clay soils of Ghemme, Sizzano and Fara can be even darker and more firmly structured.

GARELLA'S CONSULTING ROLE TAKES HIM to most of Alto Piemonte's townships, including Ghemme, where he works with the Ioppa family. Ghemme sits at the northern end of a plateau that runs roughly parallel to the Sesia River's east bank. The plateau continues southward into the vineyards of Sizzano and beyond that into Fara; the wines of these three townships share similar soil types, elevations and flavor profiles.

I pull into the driveway of the spacious, modern winery and am met by Andrea Ioppa, a young man who bears an uncanny resemblance to a pre-*Matrix* Keanu Reeves. Ioppa is part of the seventh generation at this family-run business, one that has been bottling wine in the region since 1929. As we drive a short distance to the family's Santa Fé vineyard, Ioppa explains that in the early days, vineyards were planted

here at the top of the plateau, where level ground made it easy to work the vines. We walk among vines planted in 1969 and rooted in heavy clay soils, an influence that translates into rugged tannins and earthy flavors in Ioppa's Ghemme Santa Fé. Moving downslope into Balsina, another estate vineyard, the soils become more friable and sandy, studded with chunks of granite and black volcanic stones. Those sandy soils impart floral scents and softer tannins to Ioppa's Ghemme Balsina bottling.

Rosé production has become a staple in Alto Piemonte, where cool winds from the Alps keep acidities high and give fresh strawberry-scented wines like Ioppa's 2016 Rusin, a nebbiolo rosé vinified in stainless-steel tanks. Rosé's short production cycle also provides quick cash flow, especially for newer producers looking to establish their name while their nebbiolo reds age in casks. Ioppa now makes 120,000 bottles of rosé, nearly two-thirds of their annual production, almost all of it exported to Norway.



Andrea Ioppa



Giacomo Colombera

CROSSING THE SESIA AND CONTINUING WEST for about ten miles, I arrive in Masserano, one of seven towns that comprise the Bramaterra DOC. I'm met by Giacomo Colombera, Garella's partner in a winery that's aptly named Colombera & Garella. Tall and sturdily built, Colombera sports a sandy beard that makes him look just slightly older than his 24 years. During Alto Piemonte's dark days, young men like Colombera would have left family farms in search of better opportunities. Instead, he elected to stay, and met Garella when they both were working at Tenute Sella. They joined forces to work the Colombera family's vineyards in Lessona and Bramaterra, and now produce 20,000 bottles a year in a cramped cellar next to the Colombera family home. "My dream is to produce 50,000 bottles eventually," says Colombera, and he's already drawn up plans to double the size of the cellar when they can afford to begin construction.

That may not be long from now, given Colombera & Garella's initial success. After just four vintages, the wines have already become something of a sensation in New York's wine community, getting snapped off the shelves of retailers like Flatiron Wines & Spirits and Crush Wine Co., and listed at hotspots like *Marta*. Their separate bottlings from vineyards in Lessona and Bramaterra, just a short distance from one another, exhibit some of those soil differences that Garella loves to emphasize. The Lessona Pizaguerra, from sandy soils, shows delicate floral aromas and a fine, lacy structure; it feels almost feather-light in a cool vintage like 2014. Iron-rich soils surrounding the cellar yield the grapes for Bramaterra Cascina Cottignano, a firm, mineral-driven wine laden with flavors of cherry and dark spice.

Colombera & Garella also makes an introductory wine under the Coste delle Sesia designation, which can include grapes from any of Alto Piemonte's vineyards west of the Sesia River. The 2015 is light, fresh and fruity, and an excellent bargain at around \$20 on retail shelves.

BRAMATERRA IS ALSO HOME TO LE PIANELLE, Garella's other partnership. The winery is housed in an old three-story structure with a couple of wooden casks and stainless-steel tanks downstairs and a small tasting room on the top floor. Le Pianelle make two wines: Al Posto dei Fiori Rosato, a delicious rosé that's as fresh and floral as its name suggests, and Bramaterra, a complex mélange of black cherry flavors and orange peel and spice scents tucked in a crisp, lean frame.

Garella's partners in Le Pianelle are from Germany and Alto Adige, and are part of a new wave of external

investment in the region. Their experiences illustrate some of the challenges that stand in the way of Alto Piemonte's growth. When the partners began buying land in 2003, many of the vineyards had been either abandoned or subdivided by inheritance. Assembling Le Pianelle's first hectare (the equivalent of two and a half acres) required contracts with 42 different owners. The partners replanted as soon as they could, bottled their first wines from the 2010 vintage and began selling in 2013, but ten years is a long time to wait for a return on investment. And their project continues to face challenges. Proximity to the Alps brings spring temperatures that can lead to untimely spring frosts, while hailstorms can hit at any time during the growing season. Both hazards afflicted one of Le Pianelle's vineyards this year, and Garella estimates they'll salvage only about five percent of the grapes.

Garella hadn't blended Le Pianelle's 2015 Bramaterra yet, and a tasting of its component parts from tank offered a fascinating glimpse of some of the other native varieties that often complement nebbiolo in the region's wines. Vespolina is darkly colored and firmly tannic; it adds distinctive notes of white pepper and green tea leaves to the blend and is good enough to bottle as a single variety, which an increasing number of producers have begun to do. Croatina is fruity and lower in acidity, with somewhat rustic tannins and flavors that express a salty, almost bloody character. Each of these two varieties typically constitutes ten percent of Le Pianelle's wine, although Bramaterra DOC rules allow as much as 30 percent of Croatina and 20 percent of Vespolina.

GATTINARA IS ONE OF THE FEW ALTO PIEMONTE townships in which Garella does not yet consult. Perhaps that's because Gattinara has more established producers, having experienced wider fame and greater continuity, even through the lean years. Travaglini was founded in the 1920s and became Gattinara's largest landholder, with more than 100 acres planted to vines; it's now run by Cinzia Travaglini, the founder's great-granddaughter. Nervi, established in 1906, has accumulated some of the choicest parcels in Gattinara's Molsina and Valferana vineyards. A group of Norwegian investors purchased the winery in 2011; they kept on Enrico Fileppo, Nervi's oenologist since 1982, and viticulturist Ettore Bornate, who has worked Nervi's vineyards since 1973.

Antonolo is another historic Gattinara producer, established by Mario Antonolo in 1948. If Cristiano Garella and some of his young compatriots are the new face of Alto Piemonte, you might consider Antonolo part of the establishment—except for the fam-

ily's history of upending the establishment. Mario's daughter Rosanna began managing the business at a time when few women were running wineries. With the encouragement of her friend Luigi Veronelli, one of Italy's most influential wine and food critics, Antonio became one of the region's earliest producers of single-cru wines. She was also one of the first in the region to release a nebbiolo rosé, in 1984, paving the way for all those pallets of Ioppa rosé now making their way to Scandinavia.

The 78-year-old Rosanna has since handed over winemaking responsibilities to her son, Alberto, and management of the business to her daughter, Lorella Zoppis Antonio, who drove me up to the Gattinara tower for a look at some of the family's vineyards. Antonio's wind-blown blond hair and tanned features project the look of someone who's spent plenty of hours among the vines. She tells me that when her grandfather began buying land in the 1940s, vines covered more than 1,700 acres of the Gattinara hill-sides; just 260 acres remain today.

Antonio owns 34 acres on some of Gattinara's highest hills, including the San Francesco and Le Castelle vineyards, directly behind the tower, and Osso San Grato, on a steep, scrabbly slope facing south toward the town below. They bottle the three crus separately, each of the 2012s showing different nuances of Gattinara's volcanic terroir. Osso

San Grato is the most austere, aged for three years in large casks and built for long-term cellaring. San Francesco, aged about half as long in a mix of small and medium-sized barrels, is floral and fruity, fleshy enough to enjoy now but with the structure to improve over the next few years. Le Castelle is the most approachable of the crus, with velvety tannins rounded by two years in used barriques.

ANTONIOLO IS AN INTENT LISTENER and projects a calm authority that probably serves her well in her role as president of the local consorzio. Like Garella, she's an advocate for the region as a whole.

Both Garella and Antonio see a silver lining in Alto Piemonte's dark years. Since the wines weren't popular in global markets during the 1980s and '90s, the producers weren't affected by stylistic changes that moved the wines of some Italian regions to a rounder, sweeter, more heavily oaked style. "We have always looked for wines that are typical of this region," Antonio says, and that means wines that are fresh and structured, maybe even a bit lean and sharp for some palates, but never domineering at the dinner table. It's a style that's coming back into fashion as a new generation looks for balanced, affordable wines offering authentic regional expression, and that's good news for an old region seeking a fresh start. ■

Alto Piemonte's Place at the Table



Katie Morton fell hard for nebbiolo when she joined the wine team at NYC's *Maialino*, where the list includes deep verticals of some of Barolo and Barbaresco's most prestigious names. *Maialino's* clientele skews toward a younger demographic with less ready cash and more adventurous tastes, and Morton found she had to look elsewhere for affordable bottles of nebbiolo. Now, as the wine director at *Marta*, Morton's list includes selections from Antonio and Colombera & Garella, as well as a mini-vertical of old Travaglini Gattinaras and even a single-variety vespolina. "They're light, aromatic wines with a little grip, delicious with the pizza and grilled meats on our menu," she says. "And with a price tag of around sixty-five dollars, people are willing to give them a try."



Susannah Smith, a buyer at NYC's Flatiron Wines & Spirits, appreciates the high-acid, ethereal quality of Alto Piemonte wines, describing them in musical terms: "Sometimes I'll listen to a wall-of-sound band, but other times I like Fugazi, because you can hear each musician separately and pick out all of the notes. Alto Piemonte wines have that sense of interior space; they aren't so jam-packed." Smith pitches them to customers looking for wines that are delicious, expressive of their place and affordable. "I don't think of them as Barolo lite," she says. "These wines are special on their own."