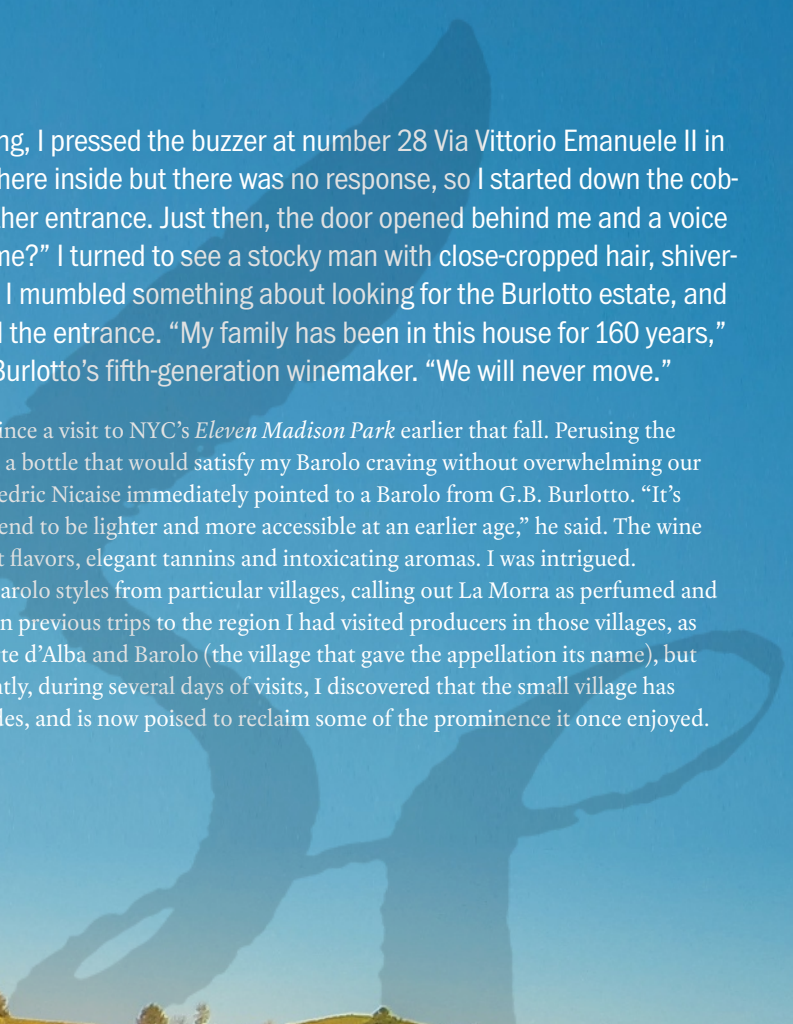


Verduno on the Rise

Barolo's Forgotten Commune is Back in Style

by Stephanie Johnson

The Monvigliero vineyard in Verduno



On a chilly November morning, I pressed the buzzer at number 28 Via Vittorio Emanuele II in Verduno. A bell rang somewhere inside but there was no response, so I started down the cobble street in search of another entrance. Just then, the door opened behind me and a voice asked, “Are you looking for me?” I turned to see a stocky man with close-cropped hair, shivering in his navy puffer jacket. I mumbled something about looking for the Burlotto estate, and wondered if they had moved the entrance. “My family has been in this house for 160 years,” grinned Fabio Alessandria, Burlotto’s fifth-generation winemaker. “We will never move.”

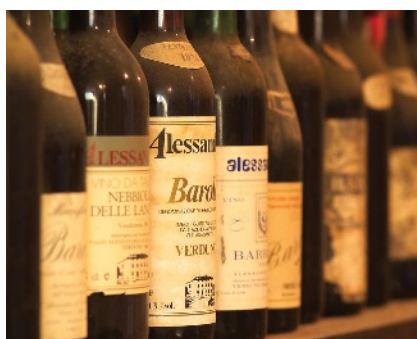
Verduno had been on my mind since a visit to NYC’s *Eleven Madison Park* earlier that fall. Perusing the extensive wine list, I searched for a bottle that would satisfy my Barolo craving without overwhelming our afternoon meal. Wine director Cedric Nicaise immediately pointed to a Barolo from G.B. Burlotto. “It’s from Verduno, where the wines tend to be lighter and more accessible at an earlier age,” he said. The wine was delicious, with lively red fruit flavors, elegant tannins and intoxicating aromas. I was intrigued.

Sommeliers often categorize Barolo styles from particular villages, calling out La Morra as perfumed and Serralunga d’Alba as powerful. On previous trips to the region I had visited producers in those villages, as well Castiglione Falletto, Monforte d’Alba and Barolo (the village that gave the appellation its name), but I’d never been to Verduno. Recently, during several days of visits, I discovered that the small village has languished in obscurity for decades, and is now poised to reclaim some of the prominence it once enjoyed.





Vittore, Alessandro and
Gian Battista Alessandria



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—Vittore
Alessandria, of
Fratelli Alessandria

FADED GLORY

The sleepy village of Verduno sits on the very edge of the Barolo zone. It’s one of eleven villages allowed to bottle wines labeled Barolo, but it’s a small one, accounting for just five percent of Barolo’s vineyard acres. Yet back in the early 19th century, Verduno played a prominent role during Barolo’s nascent stages as a wine. Historians and locals credit General Paolo Francesco Staglieno, a winemaker at Castello di Verduno, with helping to shift Barolo from a sweet wine to the dry style we know today. By the middle of the 19th century, Verduno’s Giovan Battista (G.B.) Burlotto became one of the earliest producers to sell his Barolo in bottle rather than in cask or demijohn and garnered a slew of medals in international wine competitions.

Burlotto expanded his holdings, buying Castello di Verduno from Piedmont’s ruling House of Savoy in 1909. The Alessandria family came onto the scene around this same period, taking charge in 1870 of a winery that had been run by the Dabene family; they eventually renamed it Fratelli Alessandria.

Fabio Alessandria is a descendent of that family as well as the Burlotto family on his mother’s side. As he leads me through Burlotto’s cellars, he explains some of the history of the village. “Verduno had a bigger reputation than other parts of Barolo up until World War II,” he says, adding that it was slower to recover after two world wars, and economic downturns ravaged the area. Verduno’s residents watched as neighboring villages began attracting international recognition for their Barolos. Meanwhile, Verduno’s wines struggled to regain their former prominence.

Verduno’s small size and peripheral position in the Barolo zone may account for its lack of

presence in the market, but today’s producers point to stylistic reasons as well. They note that Barolo from villages like Monforte d’Alba and Serralunga d’Alba typically show more body and power, qualities that American buyers were looking for when Barolo started to take off in the 1980s. Some producers from other villages began aging wines in new French barriques, further amplifying the style of their Barolos, but most of Verduno’s producers avoided that trend.

PELAVERGA PRIDE

Fratelli Alessandria’s charmingly restored 18th-century farmhouse lies on the far end of town from Burlotto’s cellar, yet it’s only a five-minute walk along the tiny town’s narrow streets. Gian Battista Alessandria is the current proprietor, along with his brother Alessandro, who guides us through his compact and tidy cellar, its walls lined with large Slavonian oak casks. Gian Battista’s 40-year-old son Vittore, whose sandy-brown beard gives him a professorial air, speaks English with ease and has become the winery’s standard-bearer to international markets. He echoes the notion that Verduno Barolo’s understated style may have inhibited its appeal. “Our style is not extreme,” he says, “so maybe it didn’t stand out, but that kind of style would not be a mirror of our land.” He notes that the effort to revive Verduno’s fortunes started not with nebbiolo, but with pelaverga, a grape that provides an even more delicate take on the region’s terroir.

The Langhe is famous for its nebbiolo-based wines, and varieties like barbera, dolcetto and arneis also grow throughout the region. Pelaverga grows only around Verduno, giving wines that are light bodied and brisk, with red-berry flavors brightened by distinctive peppery notes. The variety has existed in Verduno for centuries, considered by some a table grape and by others a blending variety, but in the early 1970s, some growers began to see pelaverga as a way to distinguish Verduno from other villages of Barolo, a means of drawing attention to their long-overlooked wines.

The growers banded together in an association called *Verduno e Uno* (“Verduno is One”) to save the vine from near-extinction, and increased plantings from less than ten acres in 1987 to around 40 today. They launched *Festa del Verduno Pelaverga*, a celebration that brings townspeople and producers together each September to promote Verduno’s sin-

gular wine. That kind of cooperation is rare among Piedmontese growers, Vittore Alessandria says, but adds: “There was this will to become something, to be recognized. Maybe we benefited from the fact that Verduno had become an outsider village, not so important as the others. We had more incentive to work together.” Verduno Pelaverga became an official DOC in 1995, and the wine’s popularity has grown in Italy and abroad despite the small quantities available. And somewhere along the way, the variety developed a racy reputation that producers happily perpetuate.

Leaving Fratelli Alessandria’s farmhouse, I made the three-minute walk to Verduno’s main piazza, where the Church of San Michele sits opposite the gates of the imposing Castello di Verduno. G.B. Burlotto’s grandson Giovanni Batista (also, confusingly, called G.B.) converted the property into a hotel and restaurant in the 1950s. His three daughters manage the estate today, with Gabriella (Burlotto) Bianco overseeing the winery along with her husband, Franco Bianco. Their daughters, Marcella and Giovanna, are gradually taking on more responsibility for the winery’s operations.

As Marcella poured wines and recounted the family’s history, Gabriella sat in a corner, observing silently until the conversation turned to Pope Francis (she’s a fan). Her husband’s family is from Barbaresco, and in 1989 they combined the two properties under the Castello di Verduno label. Vinification takes place at the Barbaresco property, and bottles are stored in Castello di Verduno’s spacious cellars. The family makes three pelavergas, all named after flowers: Basadone, a lively and spicy red; Bellis Perennis, a rare white version of pelaverga that’s made by removing the skins immediately from the juice; and S-ciopét, a sparkling pelaverga. “The locals talk about pelaverga as an aphrodisiac,” says Marcella, referring to the variety’s racy reputation. She mentions a connection to wedding rings and certain parts of the male anatomy as possible bases for the claim, and though not vouching for its validity, seems almost gleeful at the aura it lends to pelaverga wines.

VERDUNO BAROLO’S COMEBACK

The names Burlotto and Alessandria weave through every discussion of Verduno wine. Those families have controlled Verduno’s three leading estates for more than a century, and now the current generation of 30- and 40-year-olds is looking to elevate the status of Verduno Barolo in the way their parents

did for pelaverga.

Marcella Bianco at Castello di Verduno is a direct Burlotto descendant through her mother, Gabriella (Burlotto) Bianco. Fabio Alessandria, the winemaker at Burlotto, is also a descendant of G.B. Burlotto through his mother, Mariana (Burlotto) Alessandria. Fabio’s parents linked the Burlotto and Alessandria clans when they married in 1971; his father, Giuseppe, is the brother of Gian Battista and Alessandro Alessandria, proprietors of Fratelli Alessandria. If this all sounds like a tangled web of G.B.’s, Burlottos and Alessandrias, it was for me, too, and I eventually had to ask Fabio to draw me a family tree. To put it as simply as possible, Verduno’s three leading estates are currently led by cousins whose family connections reach back to the 19th century, and who all seem determined to restore Verduno’s Barolo to its former status.

Fabio Alessandria’s parents put him in charge of the Burlotto cellar in 1999, just a few years after his graduation from enology school. As he joked when we first met, the family has lived in the same house for 160 years—and parts of it do resemble an antique shop—but he clearly feels a strong connection to his family’s winemaking traditions and a determination to remain true to the style of Verduno Barolo. “The quality of wine has increased,” he says, perhaps referring to methods he has introduced that bring a gentler extraction, but then he adds: “We always follow the philosophy of complexity without heaviness, structure with finesse. That’s the style of Verduno; it’s what Verduno’s vineyards give.” His nuanced Barolos are reflections of both

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—Fabio Alessandria, of G.B. Burlotto



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—Fabio Alessandria

the land and the family’s deep roots in this place.

The words “elegance” and “finesse” consistently find their way into conversations about Verduno Barolo. While some producers point to a lower level of calcium in Verduno’s soils, which brings a softer, more elegant expression to the tannins, others note that the clay, silt and limestone in Verduno is similar to that of other communes in Barolo’s northwestern sector.

Fabio Alessandria at Burlotto believes it’s climate that sets Verduno apart, describing the effects of the commune’s proximity to the Tanaro River. It warms up the vineyards earlier in the spring than other parts of Barolo, and brings cool evening air currents that help the ripening fruit retain acidity and delicate aromas through the hot summer. “The characteristic of Verduno is this difference in temperature from day to night,” Fabio says, pointing to an unusually dramatic diurnal shift. “That’s less true in other parts of Barolo, where the vineyards are not influenced as much by the river. It creates elegance, finesse and aromatic complexity.”

With one exception, all of Verduno’s vineyards line the slopes of a single valley that runs below the village’s eastern edge. This gives more uniformity to Verduno’s style compared to the more pronounced stylistic differences that can occur in larger villages. Leaving the town and driving on SP 358, the road that leads to Alba, six of the village’s eleven named crus stretch above and below the road, facing primarily east and southeast. As the road curves to the right, the vineyards become more south facing. One vineyard looms above the others in position and in fame—Monvigliero.

VERDUNO’S GRAND CRU

No vineyard elicits greater pride among Verduno growers than Monvigliero. Thirteen producers bottle single-cru Barolos carrying the name of this vineyard, far more than any other cru in Verduno.

Monvigliero sits at the top of a south-facing amphitheater with a commanding view of Verduno’s other vineyards. Looking north from the 1,000-foot crest of the hill, you can see the Tanaro River valley (Barolo’s northern border) lying just beyond the foot of the slope, and in the distance, the Alps. Monvigliero’s elevation, steep slope and southerly aspect all contribute to the quality of wines from the vineyard. Soils in this upper part of the slope are more eroded than those in the vineyards below, which puts stress on Monvigliero’s vines, bringing higher levels of concentration to the berries and a firmer structure to the wine. The vine-

yard’s proximity to the river brings the full benefit of Verduno’s day-night temperature shift, especially during nebbiolo’s last ripening phases.

The village’s leading estates each own plots on Monvigliero’s slope, and their single-cru bottlings showcase the vineyard’s attributes with subtle and not-so-subtle variations. Castello di Verduno’s 2009 Monvigliero Riserva feels round and accessible, with surprisingly fresh acidity from that warm vintage, showcasing the benefit of those cooling river breezes. Fratelli Alessandria’s 2012 Monvigliero shows more earthy and herbal notes, with a raw silk texture that cinches the fruit and spice flavors together. Both estates age the wines in large Slavonian casks, preserving Monvigliero’s signature black spice notes, red fruit flavors and floral scents that offer immediate appeal.

Burlotto’s Monvigliero takes the vineyard’s signature traits and turns them up a notch by keeping the stems in contact with the juice and skins during fermentation. The practice lends structure, spice and freshness to red wines in regions like Burgundy, but is rarely seen in Barolo. The Burlotto family has followed this method in their Monvigliero wines for decades: “You need a very high quality of tannins—silky, not green—but it exalts the elegance and delicacy of Monvigliero,” says Fabio Alessandria. It’s hard to argue with that after tasting Burlotto’s fresh and intensely spicy 2012 Monvigliero (recommended on page 85).

Verduno producers long held a monopoly on Monvigliero’s distinctive Barolos, but outsiders have begun to gain a foothold. Enrico Scavino, proprietor of the Paolo Scavino estate in Castiglione Falletto, started renting a 2.1-acre Monvigliero plot in 2000 and blending the wine into his Barolo classico. During blind tastings to determine which plots would make it into the classico, his daughter Elisa recalls that some vineyards varied in quality depending on vintage conditions, but Monvigliero always performed consistently well, exhibiting freshness even in warm vintages.

Scavino finally had a chance to buy the plot, and bottled his first single-cru Barolo Monvigliero in the 2007 vintage. Today, they are one of seven producers from outside the village to own land in Monvigliero. Meanwhile, the locals, rather than seeing the newcomers as a threat, find the outside interest an affirmation of the quality of their vineyards. They may not be central, but they can still hold a place in Barolo’s top echelon.

Echoing the local sentiment about Monvigliero, Elisa Scavino says, “We really think of it as a grand cru vineyard.” ■