

WINE TIM WHITE

Nebbiolo — not for the fainthearted

Love it or loathe it, the secrets of this ferocious grape variety are unlocked by food.

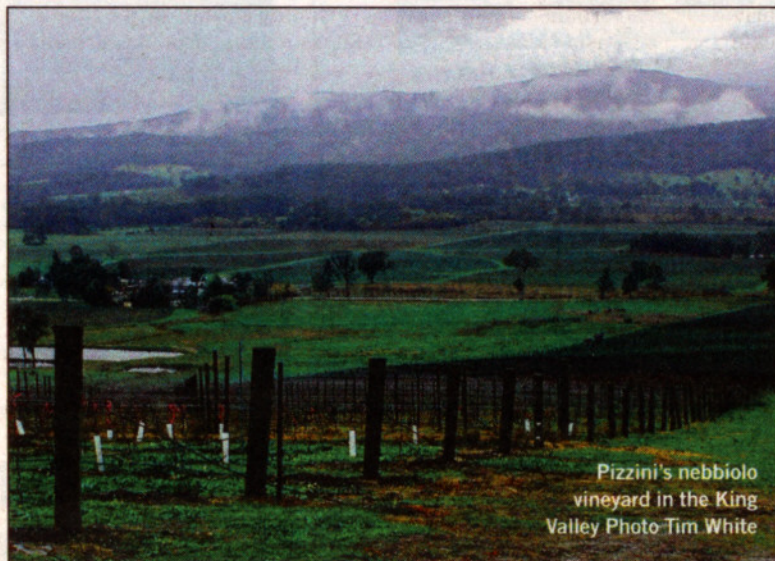
Some people don't get nebb — that's nebbiolo, a so-called black grape variety from north-west Italy. It's ferociously tannic and acidic, but it's also perfumed and powerfully flavoured with tastes of loganberry, caraway, raspberry, tar and peat.

At least it can be. Nebb looks old — rusty coloured — when young, so it's different to what we expect of other intense black grapes such as cabernet sauvignon and shiraz. But it lasts long in the bottle and changes merely in shades.

I don't remember exactly when I "got" nebbiolo, but it would have been some time before I got to drink one of the greatest wines that I've tasted in my life, Gaja Barbaresco 1961. My captivation by this tricky grape was certainly complete when I encountered Pizzini's '98 nebbiolo from the King Valley, and immediately understood that we could grow noble nebbiolo locally.

With nebbiolo, it's either like or dislike, there's nothing in between. The secrets of this grape are unlocked by food. And Alfio Cavallotto certainly gets nebbiolo.

His family farms one of the great vineyards of the barolo zone in the



Pizzini's nebbiolo vineyard in the King Valley Photo-Tim White

Bricco Boschis — in the hilltop village of Castiglione Falletto. He visited Australia a few years ago and we met at La Luna on Rathdowne Street in Carlton North. I poured him a glass from a bottle disguised in a brown paper bag. He smelled the wine, tasted, and said, "This is nebbiolo. This is Australian nebbiolo?" He looked respectfully into the glass, nodding in approval. The wine was an S.C. Pannell '06 nebbiolo from the Adelaide Hills.

Winemakers and wine lovers have questioned me of late regarding the validity, the success, of nebbiolo in Australia and I have been unequivocally positive in my response. Not everyone appears to be as well disposed.

As James Halliday observes in

Aussie-style nebbiolos are a less masochistic introduction to the cultivar.

the tome, *The Australian Wine Encyclopedia* (Hardie Grant, 2009): "Nebbiolo has been grown in the King Valley, McLaren Vale, Adelaide Hills, Mornington Peninsula, Heathcote, Mudgee and Murray-Darling.

"In none of these regions has it yet produced wines of unambiguous class.

"It may be that the combination of better clonal selection and greater vine age will produce worthwhile results in 10 or

20 years' time, but it will take a brave and financially secure vigneron to prove the point."

Which is fairly damning. I'd suggest, especially for the likes of Sally McGill and Peter Godden of Arrivo, Steve Pannell of S.C. Pannell and the Pizzini family, who have made stellar examples of this variety: wines I would happily stick under the nose of the sternest international winemakers and critics — and have done so.

One of the reasons this grape variety has succeeded is that many clones planted in Australia are actually extant in the Langhe — e.g. CN 36, CN 111 (a so-called rosé clone), and CN 230 — and much admired and widely grown. These clones have been available locally since the early 1990s.

Perhaps what is most exciting about nebbiolo at present, though, is the diversity of wine styles available: as well as the serious versions made by the above producers there are several producing more approachable, fleshier, more Aussie-style nebbiolos, which serve as a less masochistic introduction to the cultivar.

In addition to those reviewed, Thorn Clarke in the Barossa Valley is knocking out some seriously moreish nebbiolo under its Morello label. And it can be found for well under \$20.

So if you ask this observer as to how nebbiolo is going in Australia, I'd say I'm drinking it right now to accompany roast barramundi with a puttanesca rub (yes with fish). I'd say, "nebbiolo è arrivato".

WHAT TO DRINK

Casa Freschi Ragazzi Nebbiolo 2010 [Langhorne Creek, SA]

Smells young and fleshy pippy, with a touch of dried oregano. A lick of rose also. Has flesh and easiness in the mouth, and a kind of fudgy thing about it. The tannins are firm but yield, and are backed by gentle raspberry pippy flavours. This has some character and creeps up on you. One for earthy fish if you feel inclined. 90/100, \$25.

Mt Surmon Wines Nebbiolo 2009 [Clare Valley, SA]

This is fragrant, pure, intense; raspberry essence. A touch of mint and rose and wet dirt floors. Attacks deep and plump with mouth-watering flesh and grip. Tannins are big but melt to tongue-coating smoothness: the palate is absolutely right, absolutely nebbiolo. Braise a rabbit in one bottle and share a couple more. 93/100, \$25.

Cavallotto Langhe Nebbiolo 2008 [Piedmont, Italy]

Classic brick-dusty stuff. Hot bricks and fennel; primal. Opens up and up with air. This has great flesh, juice and pips stacked on super-dry tannins. There's so much more loganberry pippy fruit than suggested by the nose. This is as good as some entry level barolos. Decant and leave for an hour or two. 95/100, \$66.