

THE SOURCE
FLETCHER
LANGHE NEBBIOLO DUO & 2023 BARBARESCO



After representing Dave Fletcher in California and a couple other markets since the 2016 vintage, now we're proud to represent him throughout the entire United States market. Though the wines have been available in New York for several years, our representation there begins this month.

Who would've thought that an Aussie who hadn't married into an Italian family would move to Piemonte and make such compelling and authentically Italian Nebbiolos? In researching how many non-European-born foreigners not only make extraordinary wines in Europe but also grow the grape, few surfaced. Many Europeans who've flocked to various foreign countries, bought some grapes, juice, or wine, and might have done something with it. But very few have taken the position of vigneron, or in Italian, vignaiolo, like Dave and his Aussie wife, Eleanor. And this is no small feat in, of all places, Piemonte, where outsiders rarely become insiders.

Dave is also one of the European growers I know who regularly visits other growers throughout Europe—as we importers do. Curiosity drives all of us in the wine business, especially those of us looking into winegrowing culture from the outside. It's all so close to the growers that it seems strange more don't capitalize on the riches only an hour or more away by plane, let alone those only a couple hours or less by car—says the guy who lived in Arizona for four years and never went to the Grand Canyon. Indeed, some do, but it's not common. Few practice this kind of cross-pollination of culture and craft like Dave, and his wines are unquestionably Italian while also somehow touching other regional European styles that he loves.

Dave and I met at one of my former grower's houses outside of Alba. You can imagine my first reaction: Aussie Barbaresco grower? Do I really need to jump on that one? But the first wines I tasted were his 2016 vintage. Anyone with a reasonable mind and experienced hand could've made a good wine in 2016, where almost all did—even the bad ones. My interest was piqued with his 2016 wines; he had seven seasons under his belt with Ceretto, first as an intern and by that time as their head red winemaker. I wasn't completely convinced because of the shoo-in vintage we tasted at our mutual friend's place or his position at Ceretto, whom he pushed into organic and then biodynamic viticulture, but when I drank the wines alone, I could see there was more there than just a lucky vintage.



There were a few more challenging vintages, and Dave still made good wines. Then in 2019, he reached another level when he stepped away from day-to-day operations at Ceretto and into a consultant position, with far fewer hours; the promise I saw in those 2016s began to take full form.

We're on the 2023 Barbaresco vintage now. After a string of easy wins from 2019-2021 akin to 2016 in overall quality for most of the region, and a showstopping set of 2022s, we've seen the greater realization of Dave and Elenora's vision that began the first time Dave had a Nebbiolo in his Australian wine school that started their journey, the journey of their firstborn Aussie native daughter, and the Italian-born daughter they had after the move. And then there's the lonely, long-time abandoned Barbaresco train station they now call home that also guards much of their wines still in process.

There's something strangely fitting about the train station. Piemonte is a place where outsiders rarely become insiders, and Dave and Elenora didn't wait around to find out if they'd be the exception. They made their home in a building nobody else wanted (at least until just before they signed): an old, abandoned train station that's now renovated and now guards much of their wine while it's still

growing into itself, not unlike its new owners. No one handed them the keys to Piemonte, and they knew they had to get it after it. Curiosity can lead you to the door, but it doesn't get you through all of them.

Dave speaks Italian well and with a vocabulary wide enough to argue with a local, but the Aussie phonetic quickly gives him away: foreigner—not one of them. By contrast, Elenora speaks it with such precision and sass that I think it's difficult for even the most nationalistic of nationalists not to concede to her. Their daughters speak the language like they were born to it, the youngest being a native while the other was just a toddler when they moved there. Long before that old station was their home, it's fitting that it was where the village's older generations passed through and crossed paths with whichever foreigner happened to be passing by.



LANGHE NEBBIOLO + BARBARESCO 'RECTA PETE'

In 2023, Dave's wines didn't suddenly become better to prompt us to represent him across the entire country. They simply continue with a greater realization of a vision that started twenty years ago—overnight success twenty years in the making. Despite how compelling the 2023s are, I can't say with certainty that they're better than all that have come before them, though they likely are. What's most important is that Dave believes his Barbarescos best represent his work up to this vintage.

I tasted these three together over the first two hours, then I tasted them individually to understand how they function on their own. Overall, the profile of the wines is red-fruited and finely crafted but not clinical: they have emotion and singularity even if Dave tries to exclude his hand in their profile. He's long complained about many famous growers' top Barolos and Barbarescos in the region whose fruit profiles are already sagging a year after bottling, while their first Nebbiolo wines, Langhe

or d'Alba—are fresh, vibrant and with even more energy. I tend to agree with this assessment and think there is room for greater improvement in preserving freshness in top growers' top cuvées.

If Dave tried to bottle energy and freshness with his 2023 Barbarescos, he succeeded brilliantly. What was especially insightful was a review I did of their vineyard details after tasting them for a few hours, and two crus were spot on with what they should've shown based on exposition and general soil type. While still quite close in style, Ronchi and Faset each gradually revealed exactly what their respective sites suggest they should. And now, Dave has three vineyard-blended wines bookending the crus, with 'Trepunti' as what he considers his top wine.

Long before I even tasted Dave's **2024 LANGHE NEBBIOLO**, he set out to convince me that it was one of his greatest personal triumphs. It was a difficult vintage, and he put in his time getting it to capture the beauty of this season with near-perfection. The first nose catapults out like kids on Christmas Day at the crack of dawn. It wasn't easy to describe at first with so many charming, voluptuous, and richly spiced sweet red fruit notes that you can't get a grip on what's taking the lead in this full-court press. Sweet black and red licorice, Earl Grey, glycerol tea and potpourri, Persian mulberry, nutmeg spice cake, sweet orange peel, sweet red and purple flowers kick off this very exotic and beautiful Nebbiolo. It never relented over the day I revisited it numerous times, making it yet another stunning example of what's happening in the affordable category that crushes the field on quality and price.

Tasted the same day as the 2024 Langhe Nebbiolo, the **2023 BARBARESCO 'RECTA PETE'** narrows the focus. While the Langhe Nebbiolo expresses Dave's broader, more exuberant aromatic signature, this wine is more restrained, complete and structured—as it should be. The nose is tighter and leads with taut red flower, sweet licorice, spicy plum, sweet mint, and lifted balsamic and plant resin aromatics. The palate is full for this lighter approach, the finish long, and the palate tight but curvy and charming. This is a magnificent expression of a serious vineyard-blended Barbaresco. The 2023 is unquestionably Dave's most attractive Recta Pete since we started working together with the 2016 vintage. As a standalone Barbaresco outside of the company of Ronchi, Faset and Trepunti, Recta Pete could easily carry Dave's now sterling reputation on its own.

BARBARESCO CRUS | RONCHI & FASET

The 2023 single-site wines are where everything about the profile begins to speak absolutely true to the site. Blended wines can be even more compelling than single-site wines, particularly when the blend is intended from the start rather than a fallback declassification. Though they are only shades of difference under the same hand compared to other cantinas who make wine from the same vineyards, the differences between Ronchi and Faset are clear from the first pour in color, aroma and palate. The separation widens with each subsequent pour, and into the second day they maintain their differences in overall profile but move closer in tannin mouthfeel.

RONCHI is much lighter in color than Faset. Rather than rich sweetness, the nose leans toward childhood cherry sours alongside dry, well-shaded woods—California backcountry sequoia groves on a hot day. The palate immediately follows the nose with energy, freshness and zip. Porcini appears retronasally. Surprisingly hot in the back to start. I love this elegant but serious Barbaresco style. Rather new-modern than old-school, it's much softer than Faset with a smoother but structured palate. The tannins are finer than Faset, and in the context of the two, it matches exactly what I expect from lighter soils and an east-facing site.

Dave Fletcher Barbaresco



FASET immediately answers from the opposite direction. It's darker in color than Ronchi but still very pale and transparent. The character follows the nose but is richer in this context. Darker licorice, raspberry syrup, bright but concentrated red cherry, a very fruity style at the moment, fresh minty greens—more sclerophyllous tree leaf than soft plant—dried Sicilian orange peel, chestnut, stewed dark red rose petals and a touch of leather at the start. The first taste is surprisingly tense and acidic. I expected something a little richer. The palate fruits are actually redder than the fruits suggested by the nose.

The second pour follows the line of the first. The tannins are elegant in the context of the greater Barbaresco and Barolo regions' wines, but firmer and chunkier than Ronchi. Barky, orange peel palate. This is a wine for next year. Ronchi is for today *and* next year. It stays bright, and the palate agrees with the nose. This totally matches what one would expect from a south-facing site with greater clay content: coarser, bigger tannins, and slightly riper, darker fruit.

After an hour and a half, Ronchi has fully fleshed out. The deliciousness has significantly elevated. The tannins become more stern and dusty, and the wine slightly more bitter than Faset. The palate is gorgeous but tighter with more of those licorice notes.

Faset also benefits from the extra air. The tannins are softer, the fruit more supple, only gaining ground. It becomes more sappy and concentrated on licorice and sweet red fruit, with maybe a touch more welcome bitterness at the end, always remaining a little coarser than Ronchi.

The second day is equally revealing.

Twenty-six hours after opening, Ronchi is wheatgrass fresh. A little barrel-y too, but not like Faset. This still feels and tastes like Barbaresco, but the overall impression is more modern in fruit integration and structure. The second pour is better again than the first. More Aperol and Campari orange-red characters. Pleasantly oxidized strawberry skin.

Faset heads in another direction. The first pour is slightly more oxidized—as is typical of a wine like this sitting around undisturbed for 18 hours. The second pour is much more crystalline and pure; sweet dark licorice and Twizzler-like red fruit come back.

Both are beautiful, and with a little oxygen sparge the following day, they pick up about fifteen minutes later from where they left off the previous day.

VERTEX | LANGHE NEBBIOLO 'TREPUNTI'

Then there is Trepunti. On first smell, I get it. This is what Dave wants to do.

The particularity of a single cru is fascinating. It's something we can all relate to: the individual. Our American society is built a large part of its identity around it. But single-site or not, what we want in our glass is harmony. We can sing by ourselves, dine by ourselves, travel by ourselves, but we are, as humans, more complete in the company of others.

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go farther, go together.”

Where we lack depth as people, the right company can fill our void. When we take a hard line, good company can soften it. Trepunti, the blend of three sites (*three points*), all massale selections planted in Barbaresco by Dave himself, and their grapes unified in the cellar to fill what gaps might exist. Younger vines alone from a particular site may not carry the day—often growers in the region distinguish between “Nebbiolo” as young vines and then Barbaresco or Barolo, with the old Nebbiolo wines intended for those distinctions—but three vigorous young vine parcels planted in three of the most talented corners of Barbaresco just might. In fact, they did.

From the first pour, the blend of Trepunti is deeper than Faset and Ronchi on the nose; it combines the finesse and power of both of these crus but ups the ante. Initially, I find it harder to isolate aromas than I did with Ronchi and Faset. Roasted chestnut, sweet reddish licorice, wild dark cherry, dried orange peel and dusty limestone arrive almost simultaneously, less as individual notes than as one continuous impression. This wine feels more like a current of emotion than a collection of descriptors—a capture of Italian wine culture from Etna through Toscana and into Piemonte, with Nebbiolo the vector and Dave the outsider-looking-in mind and hand.

I don't know if Trepunti represents Dave's vision of the culture he adores and has committed his life to. But it would be a good thesis to establish himself in Barbaresco, a region once known for singular Barbarescos blended with many vineyards before the onset of single-site exploration. He has Italian citizenship, and his wines speak Piemontese dialect—a French-inflected Italian.

The alloy of Staderi, Montestefano and Roncaglie produces a wine of genuine harmony and captures so many facets of Italian wine culture. However, Trepunti isn't a perfect wine. But for Dave, it's the culmination of his young life's work distilled into just seven hundred bottles, drawn from three parcels each too small to bottle on their own.



For many of us in the wine industry, it's a dream to become a winemaker. But for others, an even greater dream—for those who love the process from its beginnings in nature to its finishing touches in the cellar—is to become a winegrower: *vignaiolo(a)* in Italian, *vigneron(ne)* in French.

To be a vignaiolo is to be the direct communicator and interpreter of a vineyard from the birth of the new season and its final agricultural expression in a bottle. As a former sommelier, former wine cellar worker, and now an importer, I can imagine the difference in respect one has for a cluster they've grown themselves compared with one first encountered at harvest grown by someone else. For a winemaker, when the grapes arrive at the cellar, the connection starts to form. A vignaiolo, by contrast, well understood the grape's life long before the cellar. They watched the vine—oftentimes chose the rootstocks and selection, dug the hole and planted it themselves—through winter pruning, budbreak, flowering, fruit set, and through nail-biting spring frosts, drought, hail, heat, and harvest, long before there was any wine to speak of at all. They know what it's been through, its strengths, its weaknesses and its tendencies.

There can be a different kind of forgiveness in that relationship. It can be gentler, rather than harder. It allows something to become more fully what it is rather than asking it to become something it is not. When the vineyard belongs to someone else, the temptation to alter must be stronger—a sort of hedging of the bet on someone else's work. When someone has shepherded that vine themselves from the beginning, perhaps a greater (conscious or unconscious) trust in what was already decided in the vineyard carries into the cellar.

That doesn't mean a vignaiolo doesn't intervene. The interventions begin in the vineyards long before the wine is realized. By the time the grapes reach the winery, many of the most important decisions have already been made. I don't know if this is universally true, but I think it can be felt in certain wines. It's felt in Trepunti.

Dave didn't simply blend three vineyards to create Trepunti. He chose and planted the massale selections himself, raised the vines, harvested the fruit, and in 2023 shepherded it all into a mere seven hundred bottles. Trepunti is a beautiful composition, an invitingly cultural and deeply personal wine. It isn't compelling only because of its consonant harmony, or because some might think it's a perfect wine. It's compelling because whatever remains belongs there. The first and most important decisions were made long before the grapes ever reached Dave's cellar.