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The Wines of the Valtellina

The ‘Valtellina’ is a long narrow Alpine valley in the Province of Sondrio in northern Italy. The valley runs on an east-west axis, the only one in Italy, which advantageously allows the sheer terraced northern walls, which face south, to capture sunlight throughout the entire day. The southern walls face due north, are shaded, cooler, forested and suited to raising pigs, sheep and goats. Wines have been produced here for millennia (Puleo, 2012) and although wine production today is historically at its lowest level, tradition remains a key focus. The valley begins close to the upper eastern end of the popular Lago di Como and is 25km from the Swiss border, with Milan roughly a two hour drive/train journey away. Yet standing in this place gives the sense of being a long distance from anywhere: the silent majesty of the mountains, the expanse of the valley, the unassuming nature of the region. The people here know they have something great, they want us to know it too, yet there is a confident quietness, and very few are showing off about wine, food or provenance.

The southern valley walls are forested and face north making them unsuitable for grapevines. Vines are perfectly suited to growing on the north walls of the valley (foreground) which face south towards the sun.
Valleys, where large enough, tend to have indigenous habits and a pace of life that lends itself more easily to a ‘traditional’ motif. Being, or trying to be, unique is not a unique problem; practically every food, wine and tourist landscape in the world lays claim to their region standing apart from the rest, however, the race to capitalise on ‘special local features’ often ends up over-egging the pudding, as it were. There is nothing essentially wrong with capitalising on the qualities of a place, it’s the way in which it is too-often thoughtlessly done that can, in the end, ironically make it seem like everywhere else. The Valtellina, though not immune to problems and mistakes, has by and large avoided this so far.

The Food

Within Italy, the food culture of this area is distinctive, and the cuisine is more Alpine than something to be defined by nationality or international borders. The same can be said of its mountain wines, which are as good as they are unknown. Here, the stunning scenery of snow-capped forested peaks, cliffs and late Roman to early medieval terraced vineyards (Puleo, 2012) provide the backdrop for a great food and wine story.
Rye and buckwheat flours predominate and result in sturdy and dense dark pastas, none of which call to mind Tuscany, the Bay of Naples or the backstreets of Palermo. The local speciality, *Pizzoccheri Valtellinesi*, is a pasta dish made with buckwheat flour that is paired with potato, flavoursome Alpine butter in which slivers of garlic have been fried, Savoy cabbage or other mountain greens, and plenty of *Caserà*, a local cow’s milk cheese capable of ageing for up to 10 years. *Risotto all ‘Ortica (nettle risotto)*, made with Lombardy-grown rice and locally picked nettles is delicious, as is *Taroza*, one of the regional food highlights. Puréed potatoes are loaded with butter and cheese and then generously combined with chopped or pureed broad beans in their shell. Served warm in a mound on the plate alongside the regional cured meats at first seems an odd pairing, but like most things in the Valtellina it is more than surprisingly good, it is excellent. Ravioli stuffed with blood sausage and pork and served with iridescent green wild garlic oil, *Grand Montagne* cheese and local lamb sauce, exemplifies the devotion to taste, quality and originality here.

The region boasts distinctive local cuisine but equally does not shy away from other Italian delicacies such as this grilled octopus (left). *Risotto* made with local nettles (centre) and cured local fresh water fish (right) served with fruit.

**The Grapes, the Wine and Current Production**

The grape of importance is *Chiavennasca*, which has long been viewed as a clone of Nebbiolo, the prized red grape of Piedmont, and in particular the Langhe. Whether the grape originated in the Valtellina or in Piedmont is still disputed, so it may be incorrect to suggest this theory. For all intents and purposes, it is the same grape. The dry sunny climate is perfect for Chiavennasca, which has a long growing season, needing ample sunshine to ripen fully. Even prickly pears, normally a fruit associated with arid Mediterranean areas, grow and ripen successfully here on the northern rock. The cooler airs, altitude, and rock-based soils ensure
that these red wines are also distinct from their famous counterparts of the Langhe. They are less rounded, have a pointed acidity and also a freshness that can at times evade the wines of Barolo and Barbaresco in hotter years. Some producers in the Valtellina and there are not many, prefer to get to the point, stating the grape variety as Nebbiolo both during conversation and on their bottle labels. This is understandable, to promote and cause less confusion, while others prefer to stick to the traditional moniker. Whatever grape name is used, the wines have a character that could not be easily emulated in other wine regions and when winemakers describe how the mountain landscape, the varietal, climate and tradition combine to make wines with real personality, it is difficult to dispute or challenge.

Taroz, an intriguing dish of puréed warm potato, butter, cheese and broad beans—served with cured meats including venison.

The DOCG wines are labelled as Valtellina Superiore (including Riserva) and Sforzato di Valtellina, whereas Rosso di Valtellina is a DOC wine. Sforzato is an appassimento wine and something of a curiosity with not every producer making it. The grapes are picked and dried for a number of months, usually until January, when they are pressed and fermented to a dry wine. The process of selecting the best grapes and semi-drying them for a number of months happens in other wine regions throughout Italy, most famously with Amarone della
Valpolicella. Sforzato is altogether a more restrained wine than Amarone and is complex enough to serve with savoury foods.

The leaves of the Nebbiolo (Chiavennasca) vine, and looking west through the valley from the site of Rocca de Piro Castle, Grumello.

The Superiore wines are normally sourced from sub-zones that run through the valley. Going from west to east the most acclaimed are Maroggia, Sassella, Grumello, Inferno and Valgella, and each has been accorded its own DOCG, due to subtly different expressions in the grapes grown there. The wines are made with a minimum of 90% Chiavennasca but are permitted to have a 10% blend of other local grapes, Brugnola, Rossola and Pignola.

Knowing that this is a form of Nebbiolo, it would not be unusual to expect something akin to Barolo or Barbaresco, which are the benchmark for this grape. The wines of the Valtellina are not big, powerful, overly tannic or particularly fruity, yet somehow a subtle amalgamation of all these traits. They are, however, unmistakably Nebbiolo in character, displaying sour cherry, dried flower and earthiness. This is obviously a generalisation as specific wines vary in flavour and aroma from different parts of the valley, as well as differences due to soils, winemaker, use of oak (or not) and time spent ageing. Although lighter than Barolos, Valtellina reds can age very well due to their notable acidity, which allows them to remain fresh, in some cases for decades.
With only three million bottles produced annually in the entire valley, Davide Fasolini of Dirupi winery feels that about two million of them are below par, “it is the remaining one million bottles we need the world to focus on”. Fasolini believes that a revolution of sorts needs to take place in order for these wines to gain the recognition they deserve. In the grand wine scheme of things, one million bottles is not a lot to go around. This adds another layer of complexity to the story of these mountain valley wines. Why so disparaging about the other two million bottles? He believes them to be commercial in style from producers who don’t express the potential of the grape and its surroundings.

The style of terraced vineyards that ProVinea have applied to UNESCO to protect.

On one hand, the wines do deserve to be better known, but if they become popular, one of two things could easily happen. Production volumes will remain the same (because vineyard space here is so limited) and the prices will skyrocket, ensuring these wines become only for those with deep pockets, as well as discerning tastes (it happened with Burgundy and Barolo). The other, and far worse, possibility is that production values and quality become compromised just to feed the demand of the market. Without making snap and ill-informed judgements, it is hard to know what the people working here should do in order to have their wines more appreciated.
To be clear, the wines of this region do sell, and usually the better ones sell out fast, which begs the question: why the need to make the wines more popular? Part of the answer might be the fact that the amount of land under vine is so low.

Winter skiing, woodlands, valley floor pastures, and hot terraced vineyards combine in this Alpine landscape.

There are only about forty producers, the rest are growers. If a grower passes on or stops working the vines, it is very hard to find others to take over. The work here is arduous, time-consuming, and does not reap large dividends like in other famous wine regions. A little fame might go a long way to ensuring a next generation of winemakers here.
A Short History of the Valley

The Valtellina has been at the mercy of politics, both local and international, throughout its history. In the not so distant past some regrettable decisions we made, undoubtedly let by zealous notions of commercial and industrial gain. The valley, for all its natural beauty, has been badly scarred along its floor. Entering from the Lago di Como side, a long vacant string of industrial units, commercial lots and poorly designed garish concrete structures populate what were once meadows either side of the Adda River. This is not unique, eyesores permeate all lands, but one wonders how it came about in such a picturesque place.

In 1902, the world’s first electrified rail line was developed through the valley. With it came prosperity and hope. Thomas J. Puleo (2012) describes how the wines of the region had fallen victim to the unification of Italy having previously been very popular in the areas to the north of it, now present-day Austria and Switzerland. These lands were tenured by the Grison Freestate, a political entity from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. When the Grisons
eventually withdrew back north, they no longer engaged with the wines and foods of the Valtellina. Although wine production continued under new aristocratic landlords, it was vastly reduced and poorly managed. Producers now had to contend with selling their wines southward into the very competitive Milanese market.

The valley became part of Lombardy and the new Italian state in 1861. Phylloxera soon followed and further decimated the terraced vineyards. The causality of what makes a landscape go into decline is often disputable and complex. The post-WWII era saw the construction of hydroelectric dams and indiscriminate commercial and industrial architecture, as was the case throughout Italy and many parts of Europe. Terraces that were no longer being farmed and tended became obsolete and overgrown. These terraces are difficult to maintain and, if neglected, end up prone to collapse and even landslides. Italian wine took decades to find its stride after numerous scandals and inconsistent winemaking had given it a shaky image globally. As one would expect, it was the better known regions of Tuscany, the Veneto and the Langhe who benefitted first from EU funding and a by-then very eager market.

Which bring us to the present day, where Italy’s commercial wines are consumed in vast amounts, with little thought about where they come from or who makes them. It is difficult to assess whether wines from the Valtellina feature heavily in the hearts and minds of Italians and what, if any, contribution they make to Italy’s gastronomic identity as a whole. Domestic sales figures vary from one producer to the next but what is clear is that the export market is important for all of them, even those with only moderate production. Working the terraces is costly and only limited volumes of wine can be produced, this adds to the cost but also to the intrigue of these wines. Naturally, the towns are small, and things move at a relaxed pace. Like great food and wine, life here is grounded in what makes the area stand apart. However, people mention the somewhat delicate position of the region within Italy. Employment is scarce, and many have to commute to Milan, Como and even to Switzerland during the week.

UNESCO

Another pressing matter that is currently concerning some of the wine-makers and growers is how to protect what remains of the ancient terraces from the ravages of time and neglect. In a bid to have these spectacular vineyard terraces recognised, a local collective named ProVinea have applied to UNESCO to list the Valtellina vineyard terraces as cultural heritage worthy of similar status and recognition as other important sites around the world (Puleo, 2012). Not all
the winemakers agree, with some expressing gentle uncertainty about the rush to officially protect the site, if only for the implications that recognition might bring.

UNESCO, as an organisation, has been both showered with praise for its efforts and criticised for allowing damage and profiteering to occur in relation to so-called World Heritage sites. Other wine regions in Italy and Europe have already been granted special status or are on an application list to do so. The benefits of being on a recognised and protected list are obvious and the financial gain that comes with it presumably is one of the main drivers of this heritage club.

As it Stands

The wines and food of the Valtellina are nothing short of magnificent. As the discerning part of the wine world has been pulling back from oaky over-extracted high alcohol wines, the freshness and pared-back character of some the valley’s better wines, will fit this trend perfectly. The urge to spread the word about ignored places, but a hesitation to add to the commodification of a wine culture, or any culture for that matter, brings a dilemma. Some producers are content to leave things as they are and others see the need to secure the future of the region. UNESCO recognition might encourage more people to seek out the wines or visit the region but it could also muddy the waters. For now the question of how and who will continue to make wine on these ancient terraces is intriguing. Naturally, unbridled commercialisation of wines that are in already limited supply would increase prices. One can hope that the more generic Valtellina wineries will see the positives of making wine with more restraint and typicity, giving broader options and a greater supply to those wishing to avoid the mainstream. In the meantime there is little doubt that the serious winemakers here are connected to something worthy and distinctive. Their desire to share it is a blessing.
Some producers have planted non-native vines, such as sauvignon blanc, to make IGT wines. Experimenting with the direction of the rows has also happened in a bid to maximise sun exposure.

Although some vineyards are elevated, the particular climate of the valley allows for ripening, even this far north in Italy.
Sondrio is a central hub in the valley. A quiet, picturesque town easily accessible from Milan by train or car.

Ar.Pe.Pe. are a renowned and traditional producer.
Wines from the Sassella and Valgella sub-zones.

References


Note:

Except for the single reference above, these are the thoughts, observations, photographs and opinions of the author compiled from visiting the area and speaking to people living and working there.