

NEB Newsletter #1

Welcome to the first ever newsletter from NEB (Nebbiolo Enthusiasts and Believers). These newsletters will hopefully appear in the future, but probably on an erratic basis.

In this newsletter, we share:

1. A brief history of the NEB organization,
2. A report on a visit to the Alto Piemonte and a sharing of some California Nebbiolos with a few of those producers by JaRue (Jim) Manning. Jim is a microbiology professor at UC/Davis, a passionate believer of Italian grape varieties, and is working on a book on the role of Italian varieties in California,
3. A few interesting points on Nebbiolo culled from Jancis Robinson's recent book *Wine Grapes*,
4. An account of growing Nebbiolo in El Dorado County of the Sierra Foothills by Ken Musso, and
5. A description of my pursuit of the alleged first Nebbiolo grapes brought to the USA to Colorado in the 1880's.

NEB4: July 20/Paso Robles

Organizational planning is in progress for the convening of NEB4. Brian and Stephie Terrizzi of Giornata Winery in Paso Robles have agreed to host this year's event. The tentative date is Saturday, July 20. Brian envisions a morning technical/tasting session at his new winery, followed by a tasting event open to the public at 15C, a wine bar in Templeton. Additional details will be forthcoming as the event firms up...but mark July 20 on your calendar.

A Brief History of NEB

As many of you are aware, NEB is a pretty casual/rag-tag group of folks who passionately believe there is a role for the Nebbiolo grape variety in the USofA. Mostly, it is composed of people who grow Nebbiolo and/or make wines from that grape. Plus a few others who are merely interested in Nebbiolo and promoting its planting in the US. There is no formal organization, no dues, no secret handshake, no secret decoder rings.

The group was sort of an outgrowth of a casual remark Robert Parker once made that "Nebbiolo is a failure in California". A few (mostly Pinot Noir) producers took umbrage to that remark and the group gradually coalesced. It originally went under the name of NAP (Nebbiolo Advocates and Producers), a blatant ripoff of ZAP. Emilio Castelli suggested an alternative title of NEB, and that has sort of stuck.

These first three get-togethers are tediously detailed in the following reports:

NAP#1 Event Report: http://www.grape-nutz.com/tomhill/09_8NAP.html

NAP#2 Event Report: http://www.grape-nutz.com/tomhill/11_8NAP.html

NEB#3 Event Report: http://www.grape-nutz.com/tomhill/12_6NAP.html

Ken Musso, grower of Nebbiolo in El Dorado County, and winemaker of that Nebbiolo at Due Vigne Winery in the Napa Valley, is sort of, by default, the titular President of NEB. Ken can be reached at: kmusso@comcast.net. I, Tom Hill, am merely a believer in Nebbiolo and its greatness, a longtime follower of that grape, and do some of the janitorial work behind the scenes for NEB. I can be contacted at: TomHillEpeeGuy@GMail.com

NEB3 FALLOUT 5.1
JaRue Manning
University of California
CALIFORNIA NEBBIOLLO: PART 1

Nebbiolo Comes to California

In was in the 1870s and '80s that John T. Doyle, noted lawyer and viticulturist, established a vineyard in Cupertino planted to Zinfandel and other varieties of that period. It was in 1879 that Doyle hired an Italian immigrant named Giovanni Beltramo as his vineyard manger. Beltramo had just arrived from his home in Piemonte and had brought with him cuttings of Barbera which he called Barbera Fino. Doyle had him graft the Barbera onto established Zinfandel vines and, in so doing, established the first Barbera vines to be grown in California.

During the next few years Doyle obtained two selections of Nebbiolo which apparently Beltramo arranged to have brought over. As with Barbera, Doyle had them grafted onto Zinfandel vines in the Cupertino vineyard. The two Nebbiolo selections were called Nebbiolo "Bourgu" and Nebbiolo Fino.

The name Nebbiolo "Bourgu" is a bit of a mystery. Anna Schneider, an expert on Nebbiolo at the Univ. of Tornio has said that she has no knowledge of "Bourgu" but suggested that perhaps it was misspelled and was Borgiu which means "blind"; perhaps referring to the infertility of the first several buds or "eyes" on Nebbiolo. Hi Igard described the leaf morphology and tendency of the canes to split which matched closely the standard description of the Biotype Michet. The fate of the Bourgu selection is unknown. Although listed in University vineyard maps of the 1910s, no record of the selection appears post-prohibition.

Although the fate of the Bourgu selection is unknown, the selection called Nebbiolo Fino was propagated at the University of California Amador Foothill Agricultural Experiment Station beginning in the late 1800s. The selection was subsequently transferred to what is now Foundation Plant Services where it was designated as Nebbiolo Fino. Unfortunately, to meet TBS requirements, the name designation has recently been changed from Nebbiolo Fino to Nebbiolo 01 in the listing of Nebbiolo selections held by FPS. So it seems that one of the original Nebbiolo selections imported by Doyle in 1883 is currently available at FPS. I have looked at the FPS and Univ selection called Nebbiolo 01 and the vine seems true to the Lampia biotype.

By 1885 at the Cupertino vineyard, rows of plants of each selection were producing Nebbiolo fruit which was shipped the Nebbiolo grapes to the University for analysis and wine production. Reports filed in the late 1880s by Professor Hilgard Professor Hilgard contain detailed analyses of grapes and wines harvest from various years.

Importantly, Professor Hilgard was the first to present an overview of the potential for Nebbiolo vines to produce grapes yielding quality wines in California. His commentary of 1888 seems as true today as then: vigorous vines, low yields, very late fruit maturation; wine of very pale color, strong tannins and acidic, has the characteristics to make small quantities of quality wine.

And within a matter of a few years, the wines made by from Nebbiolo grapes including a new selection called "Spanna". By the late 1890s J.T. Doyle, Chas. Krug, Italian Swiss Colony, H. W. Crabb, etc. had won awards at State, National and International competitions for their Nebbiolo or Spanna. The grape called Spanna is genetically identical to that called Nebbiolo (see comments below by Tom Hill).

Nevertheless, of the 20+ Italian varieties which had been imported by then none were listed among the top 10 varieties grown in the State. And of the 294 wines submitted for judging at the convention, not a one was of an Italian variety, even included in a blend. The California taste had already been directed toward off-dry Riesling (Hock), Colombard, Cabernet Sauvignon, etc. Interestingly, in the 1888 report of the 6th Annual State Viticultural Convention, of all of the foreign varieties described there was not an Italian variety listed.

A Place for Nebbiolo in California? Maybe a New Style?

Early producers of Nebbiolo in California followed the wine style of better the Barolo wines. This has continued be the trend. Clearly, Barolo was regarded as the international standard and wines produced in the Valtellina, Gattinara, Ghemme, etc. were at that time essentially unheard of. Yet recently, a question has been raised as to whether the complex Piemonte wine styles of Barolo and Barbaresco are the appropriate models for the wine here in California.

A Tasting of California Nebbiolo in Piemonte with Piemonte Nebbiolo Producers: Looking Abroad for Comments and Ideas

The issue of restyling California Nebbiolo was raised at the NEB3 event organized by Tom Hill and Ken Musso and hosted by the Karmere Winery in Amador last June (2012). While presenting a brief history of Nebbiolo in Italy and California, Darrell Corti (grocer and wine-food expert) pointed out a number of important differences in terroir and winemaking and suggested that California Nebbiolo growers/producers would do well to not try to mimic either the Barolo or Barbaresco wine styles.

To make his point, Darrell noted that the success of Pinot Noir in California came only after producers recognized that attempts to emulate French Burgundy proved fruitless until, with one eye on Burgundy, they altered both growing and production conditions to meet conditions in California. The result was California style Pinot Noir.

Ideas on the Restyling California Nebbiolo Lead to Tasting in Piemonte

Darrell's arguments seemed to resonate with a number of the producers at the NEB3 event. But what style(s) might be best and be a commercial success?

Perhaps a new direction to consider for California Nebbiolo is toward a less complex wine; one with more finesse and harmony having interesting fruit/spice aromas and flavors, with good structure yet non-aggressive astringency and a pleasing persistence that can be drunk within 3 to 5 years or held for some years. So the idea was to find Nebbiolo wine areas which have wines with some or most of these interesting properties and then to see if aspects of the wine production might be of interest to California producers.

Being somewhat familiar with the wines of Alto Piemonte and after talking with Darrell and then some colleagues in Piemonte, this region seemed an excellent one to visit. In addition to looking at some vineyards, arranging a tasting similar to NEB3 seemed a good idea. So the plan was to tour vineyards in Alto Piemonte and organize a tasting of several California Nebbiolo wines for local Nebbiolo producers and note comments from grower/producers.

Why Alto Piemonte?

Arguably, there are three major Nebbiolo grape growing regions in Italy: Langhe famous for its Barolo and Barbaresco; Valtellina in Lombardia so well known for Grumello, Inferno, Sassella, Sforzato, etc.; Alto Piemonte well recognized for Gattinara, Ghemme, Lessona, Boca, etc. Of these the Alto Piemonte Nebbiolo wines have the general properties likely to be most suitable to the California terroir and consumer market.

Alto Piemonte is tucked away in the pre-alpine hilly area above Novara about 90 miles northeast of the Alba and, as described in Part 2, has geologies and microclimates distinct from the other Nebbiolo growing regions including Langhe. This region has rich and ancient winegrape history dating back to pre-Roman times the region. Although debatable, the grape which Pliny the Elder described in 92 AD is thought by some to describe Spanna, which is the current Alto Piemontesi name for the Nebbiolo grape. Recent analysis by Ana Schneider and colleagues at the University of Torino has shown that Spanna grapes from Alto Piemonte show DNA homology with the Nebbiolo grapes of Langhe and the Chiavennesca grape of the Valtellina. (See the synopsis of Nebbiolo grape relatedness by Tom Hill in this newsletter).

Wines of Alto Piemonte are internationally recognized for their excellence as well for being somewhat less complex than their Langhe counterparts and having greater finesse. Typically, these wines tend to be fruity, floral, with spicy acidity, smooth astringency, and a clean crisp fruity persistence, show considerable longevity yet are pleasant to drink within 4-5 years of harvest. Although not large in area the Alto Piemonte possesses eight distinct DOCGs/DOCs, including Gattinara, Ghemme, Lessona, Sizzona, Boca, Bramaterra, etc., reflecting, in part, a remarkable diversity in climates and soils. A detailed commentary of Nebbiolo regions, including soils, climates, grape varieties, clones, viticultural practices, etc. will be provided in Part 2 of California Nebbiolo.

THE TASTING:

Due to limited space two bottles each of five different California Nebbiolo wines were packed. BTW: all California wines were donated by the winery with the exception of the Altamura which was from my cellar; thanks to all! Also, special thanks go to my friends and colleagues, Maurizio Gily and Michele Vigasio, for their great help in arranging the event.

Attending Tasting:

Lorella Antoniolo/Az. Agr. Antoniolo/Ghemme (NO),
President, Consorzio della Tutela Nebbioli Alto Piemonte

Christoff Kunliz/Az. Agr. Le Piane/Boca-Borraggio (NO)
Alessandro Ceretto/Az. Ceretto/ San Cassiano/Alba (CN)
Marco Casati/Cascina Zoina/Oleggio (NO)
Paride Chiovini/Casa Vinicola Paride/Sizzano (NO)
Tiziano Mazzoni e Signora Mazzoni/Az. Agr. Tizzano Mazzoni/Cavaglio d'Agogna (NO)
Francesco Brigatti/Az. Agr. Brigatti/Suno (NO)
Andrea Fontana/Az. Agr. Platinetti/Ghemme (NO)
Dott. Antonello Rovellotti/Az. Agr. Rovellotti/Ghemme (NO)
Marco Arluno (Miru)/ Az. Agr. Miru/Ghemme (NO)
Dave Fletcher/ Az. Ceretto/ San Cassiano/Alba (NO)
Jeff Chilcott/Cisa Asinara dei Marchesi dei Gresy/Barbaresco (CN)
Dott. Maurizio Gily/Studio Gily- Viticulture; Millevigne Journal/Roncaglia, Casale Monferrato (AL)
Dott. Michele Vigasio/Viticolture Tecnica, Vignaioli Piemontesi/Ghemme (NO)
Prof. JaRue (Jim) Manning/University of California-Microbiology/Davis (CA-USA)

Venue:

The tasting was held on October 12, 2012, in Romagnano Sesia, north of Novara in the hills of Alto Piemonte. Over a dozen regional Nebbiolo producers and viticulturists gathered to taste the California wines as well as samples from various DOCs and DOCGs which they had brought along.

Where and Logistics:

Ristorante Alle Torre in Romagnano Sesia was the setting for the tasting. Romagnano Sesia is located in a Sesia river valley nestled between the DOCGs of Gattinara and Ghemme. Nebbiolo wine producers from Alto Piemonte and Langhe tasted and talked through a series of 5 flights of three wines during dinner. I suspect that most would agree that Nebbiolo goes with food or vice versa.

Tasting the wines:

Of the many wines brought by producers, fifteen including the five from California were selected to be served; three wines with each of five flights; one flight with each of the five courses.

California wines:

Harrington, Paso Robles (2009); Musso, Due Vigne, El Dorado (2008); Palmina, Santa Maria, Stolpman (2006); Palmina; Santa Maria, Sisquoc (2006); Altamura, Napa Valley (2001)

Tasting Notes:

OCT. 10, 2102; Ristorante Alle Torre, Romagnano Sesia, Provincia Novara

Format for notes:

Wine type, DOC designation [%varietal], (Producer, Zone, DOC/DOCG/area in Italics), year: Sensory comments. {Remarks/comments of Italian producers on Cal wines}

Note: Producer comments taken at random from remarks at tasting and sent later. Wine notes not in Italics are mine.

1. Vespolina, DOC Colline Novaresi [100% Vespolina], (Brigatti, Suno), 2007: Bright med red; slt violet hue; delicate nice floral and mixed red berry, light herbal nose; tart, crisp, clean, blackberry + mixed fruit; smooth-fine tannins med body with clean crisp, thin midpalate-retrogusto slightly bitter; some minerality, finish clean, ok, moderate persistence of tart red fruit and astringency

2. Vespolina, DOC Colline Novaresi, [100% Vespolina], (Zonia, Oleggio), 2006: Clear, deep dark red-touch ruby; red fruits, raspberry and currant, spicy, pepper; dry, clean, harmonious, mouth filling smooth fine tannins, mineral; clean finish with acid-fruit and bitter almonds, persistent, clean

3. Sizzano DOC [blend= 80% Neb + 10% Vespolina + 10% Uva Rara], Sizzano , (Chiovini, Sizzano), 2007: Deep, Red-ruby, tend to garnet; fruit nose of berry and dark cherry, earth, spicy, tobacco, licorice (?); somewhat angular but with roundness, balance, fruit and good structure, fine tannins; clean fruit crisp persistent finish.

4. Gattinara DOCG [100% Neb], Il Chiosso , (Arluno, Gattinara), 2005: Bright red-slt garnet + orange; delicate fruity nose; clean with dark berry aromas, spice; full with rich berry-cherry flavors, nice acidity, smooth tannin structure, round, bit of leather, balanced; persistent clean complex pleasant finish.

5. Nebbiolo, Paso Robles, (Harrington), 2009: Med red, clear with hint orange; spice, floral, mixed berry and cherry, notes of dust; slt oaky, cherry berry, good acidity, some minerality, balance ok, tannins a touch aggressive; slight tannic clean finish {well made; some rough tannins; ok; too big fruit and tannins; balanced but too much oak, lacks some elegance, young, 5-10 years}

6. Ghemme DOCG [Neb 100%], ai Livelli o dei Mazzoni , (Mazzoni, Ghemme), 2007: Med deep red; fruity mixed berry nose, some floral and spice; blackberry and raspberry, some hint of tobacco and chocolate, licorice; good acid-fruit balance, round, full, rich with firm acidic smooth astringency; pleasant, persistent, complex fruity clean astringent finish, pleasant

7. Ghemme DOCG [Neb 100%], Ronco Maso , (Platinetti di Fontana, Ghemme), 2007: Med dark red, some garnet; complex mixed fruit, spice, dried flowers, pleasant wet garden; dry, lively, full and with good balanced fruit, acid, tannins forward and full; finish fruity long, lingering astringency and fruit, tart and clean, nice

8. Nebbiolo, Sierra Foothills, Eldorado Co, [Field blend; 92% Nebb, 8% Barbera] Due Vigne Nebbiolo, Musso; 2008: Dark red & violet hue; large fruity mixed-berry, ~ cherry and floral nose; mouthfilling, fruity astringency of moderate tannin; persistent fruit and moderate tannin, some noticeable oak, finish clean, persistent, tart fruit with mild tart astringency {Good wine with Nebb character; fruity overly hi oak; color deep for Nebb, blended?, detect Barbera; tannins bit forward, better balance several years; well made, good}

9. Ghemme Riserva DOCG, [100% Nebb], Costa del Salmino , (Rovellotti, Ghemme), 2005: Splendid light-pale red-garnet + brick-orange tint; nose of complex berry and blk currants, rose petals, spice; slight tobacco, balanced, mouthfilling, rich, harmonious, clean fruit, fine astringency; lingering clean aftertaste, goes on forever

10. Nebbiolo, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara Co., [100% Nebbiolo], Stolpman Vyd , (Palmina), 2006: Clear red-orange, brown edges; nose of cherries and blk berry, blk currants, rose, violets, bit oak, tar?; clean entry with mature red fruits, floral, moderate fine tannin, round and full, well balanced; clean finish with pleasant lingering complex fruits, acidity and astringency very good... {quite good wine; elegant, ok fruit; spice, a touch of bitter almond; nice balance, finish clean; fine, good Nebbiolo quality; would like to taste 5-10 years}

11. Nebbiolo, Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara Co., [100% Nebbiolo], Sisquoc Vyd , (Palmina), 2006: Rich red-orange, mixed complex aromas of blk and raspberries (~fruity di bosco), vanilla, floral, spice, touch rich oak; big mouthfeel of fruit and fine smooth tannin, touch candy, dominate rich fruit, tannins and acidity; nice clean finish with rich flavors, full smooth tannins, fruit and acidity, quite good... {a good wine; well structured, well made; too forward in ripe fruit, lush; lacks some balance and elegance of other (Stolpman), too fruity, California style, prefer Stolpman}

12. Boca DOC, [85% Neb, 15% Vespolina], Le Piane, Boca , (Le Piane, Kuntliz), 2007: Star bright-med red intensity; concentrated berries and spice, some floral notes; hints of dry earth; lively, clean med body, astringency is forward, minerals, richness forward and retro yet a lightness; interesting persistency of fruit balanced acidity, finishing astringency-tannins, persistent tart fruit smooth astringency

13. Gattinara DOCG, [100% Neb], Osso San Grato , (Antoniolo), 2007: Wow, bright deep red-ruby-garnet; rich blackberry/raspberry, dark cherry, spicy, floral, violets and dried rose petals; large wine, well balanced, mouthfilling, rich smooth tannin, good fruit-acidity, some minerality; smooth persistent balanced fruit-acid-astringent finish, lingering, clean

14. Barolo DOCG, Bricco Roche, [100% Neb], Bricco Castiglione Falletto , (Ceretto) 2007: Full red slight-garnet; complex medium-intense aroma, mixed berries, cherry, floral, dried flowers-rose, spice, vanilla; velvet tannin structure, berries, dark cherry, round, perfect acid balance, harmonious, mouthfilling; clean long finish, elegant, smooth tannins and complex fruit-spicy acidity, clean persistence.

15. Nebbiolo, Wooden Valley, Napa Co., [100% Neb], Wooden Valley , (Altamura), 2001: Pale red-garnet; looks like an aged B/B; complex nose of aged Nebb/Barbaresco, elegant, slight dark red fruit notes, some rose and bit of tar, some lite wood, moderate acidity, smooth tannins, harmonious, thin midpalate, fine tannin with aged Nebb finish, quite clean. {complex aromas, showing aged; reminds of pretty good aged Barolo character; drink now; showing age and quite far along for a 2001; seems to have aged fast for Nebb, surprised by quality and persistence; quite good;}

ALLE TORRE RISTORANTE

Romagnano Sesia, (NO)

October 12, 2012

Menu

Piccola entratina di benvenuto

*Salame della duja e fidighina di Nibbia
con sfumato di zucca e uvella passita*

Riso carnaroli classico

alle verdure

Groppa di manzo piemontese

*brasato al vino rosso delle colline novaresi
con timballo di patate e rosmarino*

*Nostra piccola degustazione di formaggi
con marmellata di peperoni dolce*

*Torta rustica d'autunno
Semifreddo ai fichi
Caffe espresso*

Comments:

The tasting was a great success. Food and wines marvelously balanced each other. BTW, if in the vicinity of Romagnano Sesia, Ristorante Alle Torre is highly recommended.

At the end of the tasting several producers offered congratulations saying that the tasting of the California Nebbiolo wines was very interesting and all of the wines quite good. They also noted the event was quite different from the larger and highly structured event they are used to. One Langhe producer was especially appreciative saying that the event provided an opportunity to taste not only wines from California but also those from Alto Piemonte.

In a nut shell, all of the California wines were well received, many of whom had never tasted a California wine let alone a California Nebbiolo. Clearly, producers were impressed by the overall quality and the wine being true to varietal type.

As for the Alto Piemontesi wines, there were both subtle and distinct differences as would be expected and overall wines were quite good to excellent. The wines, in general, showed freshness, clean smooth tannins and fruity to spicy persistence. In addition, the wines had approachableness, restrained smooth astringency and balanced mouthfeel with a persistent crisp clean dry fruity astringency on finish. Many of the Piemontesi wines showed notes of flowers (violets) and occasionally tobacco or leather with a cleanliness on the nose and palate that moved into a persistent pleasant aftertaste. It would be interesting to taste all of them again in 5 and then 10 years.

Both the 100% Vespolina and the Sizzona and Boca blended wines were quite good with fresh-lively aromas and flavors with a tart and somewhat spicy berry nose, cherry, surprising complex and round with smooth structure and clean fruity-dry persistence.

Although Vespolina is not commercially grown in California cuttings are available through Foundation Plant Services at the University of California. In recent experiments, several California Nebbiolo wines were blended with different percentages of Italian Vespolina from Alto Piemonte. Results indicate that Vespolina is quite compatible with California Nebbiolo. Darrell and I concur that Vespolina would grow very well in California and make an excellent wine on its own as well as a blending wine for Nebbiolo. Perhaps the blend may lead to a fresh new wine style. More on the blending experiments later.

Part 2 of California Nebbiolo will cover viticultural aspects including terroir, vineyard management, Nebbiolo biotypes and clones.

A further comment: I think Jim's choice of an Italy visit to be the Alto Piemonte region and to show the California Nebbiolos there was a very astute decision. Though less known for their Nebbiolos than the Langhe and Valtellina, their terroir is much more diversified and the style of their wines greater and, probably, more akin to that of California.

Some of those wines are blended with Croatina, Bonarda Piemontese, and Vespolina. That seems to give a richness and lushness to those wines that you don't find in the Langhe or Valtellina. Again, more what you'd expect from California. As with Pinot Noir, purists go apoplectic with the thought of blending the noble Nebbiolo with a "lesser" grape. Purists have been known to be wrong.

Some of those grapes are ones that should be explored in California. In addition, from Northern Italy, one might add Freisa, Brachetto, Ruche, Timorasso, Teroldego, Schiopettino, and Marzemino, all of which can make some very interesting wines. Selling them may be another matter. I believe Jim and Ken Musso are looking at Vespolina.

Tom

Jancis Robinson on Nebbiolo

Jancis Robinson's *Wine Grapes* book came out this winter and an impressive tome it is. Not a book to sit down and read, but certainly one to have available as a reference on obscure grape varieties, as well as well-known ones. I have culled a few points from her Nebbiolo section:

1. Nebbiolo was first mentioned in 1268.
2. Nebbiolo Lampia: the most widespread clone.
Nebbiolo Michet: Not a separate clone, but Nebbiolo Lampia with fanleaf virus.
Nebbiolo Rose: Not a clone of Nebbiolo but a distinct variety of its own. Grown mostly in Sassella of the Valtelline.
Nebbiolo Bolla: A Nebbiolo clone of decreasing importance. Jancis states this is DNA identical to Nebbiolo. Darrell asserts it is not Nebbiolo at all.
3. Nebbiolo's parents are most likely to be extinct.
4. Nebbiolo X ? ---> Nebbiolo Rose
Nebbiolo X ? ---> Vespolina
Nebbiolo X ? ---> Freisa, which is a close relative of Viognier so that Nebbiolo and Viognier are likely cousins.
5. Nebbiolo came either from the Piemonte or Valtellina, based primarily on the number of Nebbiolo's progeny in each area.
6. "Nebbiolo is rivaled only by Pinot Noir in its ability to express the subtleties of different terroirs". I've put the question of "why, what makes Nebbiolo (or Pinot) unique that allows it to express terroir better than other varieties" to any number of experts. None have been able to give an answer that makes sense, other than "because it's so". Both Pinot and Nebbiolo have a propensity to mutate in the vineyard, so maybe that's part of the answer
7. Nebbiolo is also found in the Valle d'Aosta/Donnas; where it is known as Picotendro or Picotener.
8. Blending partners (in Italy) include Vespolina, Bonarda Piemontese (a Northern Italian variety unrelated to the Bonarda of Argentina), Croatina.
9. Nebbiolo struggles to ripen in North Lombardy/Valtellina. The passito style of Nebbiolo is called Sforzato di Valtellina.
10. Mas de Daumas Gassac in the Languedoc is one of the top red blends in the world that includes Nebbiolo, though to a very small percentage.

Growing Nebbiolo in the Sierra Foothills

Ken Musso

Growing grapes is not a simple task let alone an inexpensive one. And certainly one of the most difficult to grow is the famed Nebbiolo. Yes, the plants cost the same as the other varieties and the trellis and stakes the same but the real challenge is in the labor needed to achieve what this grape has to offer.

Suffice it say that when I made the decision to grow the grapes of my ancestors in Piemonte I really had no clue what I was in for. I should have picked up on some of this on one of my visits when it struck me that no matter where I traveled and Nebbiolo was grown there was always someone out in the vineyard. Now I know that they were tucking canes, removing laterals, maybe a few leaves here and there. And always plenty of suckers.

I guess that as the saying goes, you don't get something for nothing. That something being the beautiful garnet color, the ever evolving wondrous nose which runs a broad spectrum of sour cherries, violets, cranberry, black fruits, and even a tarry sensation. All of that wonderful complexity seems to be paid for in the field.

For reference I will point out some basics about where and how my Nebbiolo is grown and then I will try to describe a typical growing season.

The vineyard is located in the Sierra Nevada mountains in El Dorado County at an elevation of 2400'. It is perched about 1800' above the gold discovery site of 1849 at the town of Coloma. While the Davis degree day scale measures about 2550 one of the unique micro climates is the air drainage that takes place from the high mountain elevations as it makes its way down through the American River canyon on its way to the great Central Valley. As soon as the sun sets, the warm air that has been making its way Eastward all day reaches a dead still to be followed by a cool breeze originating high up in the Sierra Nevada now flowing East to West which lasts through the night. On average this temperature change is usually in the 30 degree F range.

Now let's look at some of the challenges of growing this grape. It is often said that Nebbiolo is the first grape out and the last one to be picked. More accurately, at least in my vineyard the grape can leaf out anywhere from the 18th of March to the 16th of April. Most of the time it is in the first week in April. Typically this would be a few days after Pinot Noir for comparison sake. I have harvested as early as September 25th and as late as October 28th which is actually fairly close to cooler climate Cabernet Sauvignon in other more famous valleys in California. Typically the fruit comes in where we like it in the first week in October.

Brix levels are not an issue but high acids and low ph are. In the very cold vintage of 2010 for example we waited and waited for the ph to climb to 3.25 and when it finally got there the brix had reached 29.

The dormant season is a time for pruning and I am a firm believer in using cane pruning instead of cordons. The buds near the head of the vine are notoriously sterile and little fruit is produced even from the first couple of buds on the cane. But cane pruning is the least cost effective method taking me as much as 4 minutes and 15 seconds per vine versus the one minute or so it takes to prune a vine with a cordon system. And Nebbiolo loves to produce tendrils to grab on the wires making it extremely difficult to remove the previous years wood

from the trellis.

I do not generally leave renewal spurs as the vine will produce so many sucker canes you will have ample choice to use for next years canes.

On these mature 17 year old vines I normally leave no more than 16 buds. Normal yields are between 5-7 lbs per vine. Spacing is 6x6 with rows running up and down the hillside and facing due West. Pruning takes place beginning February 1 and I do all of the pruning.

The season starts with the very bright bright green leaves pushing with no hesitation. Once they make their move it is usually full speed ahead. In a year such as this (2013) where March and April were very warm with near record temperatures the vines grew so fast that when an early May light shower passed through the weight of the water on the lengthy canes broke many of the canes off causing a loss of 3-5% of the flower clusters. The canes grow so fast it is imperative to manually tuck all of the canes into the trellis wires which causes yet another issue, the fragility of the Nebbiolo canes. Bend them a little to much and snap! Maneuver a cane drooping low to the bud position on the bottom of the cane and the whole shoot will remove itself without a sound.

Nebbiolo loves to make canes and leaves and fruit not so much. As the canes make their way well past the second set of wires they begin to be pushed by the wind into the next row. If they are not trimmed, or hedged they would form a tunnel over the row. There becomes a battle of the vine to see if the growth of the cane can achieve that feat before the vines finally flower and the vine pretty much stops its rampant growth. Flowering for 2013 at this vineyard site is happening now, May 15, 2013. The vines could be as much as three weeks earlier than normal.

A few questions I ask my self as I tuck canes day after day. Do the sucker canes which so easily fall off do so as almost as a self regulation of the vine? Why do many of the canes bifurcate just as they seem to reach the first wires and then immediately produce deformed and defective flowers that don't produce fruit? Is the reason for Nebbiolo to want to grow masses of leaves and canes to assure that the clusters will benefit from the extra ability to produce sugar before cold weather arrives for good?

Mid season in the vineyard brings its own sets of challenges. To little water in July will cause leaves to yellow and fall off. It is important to keep the vines healthy and green and since we do not have the summer rains as they do in Piemonte this is closely watched with soil moisture probes. Thermal radiation can also be an issue and a fine balance must be attained between keeping enough leaves to prevent sunburn versus too much canopy producing herbal favors and the possibility for powdery mildew.

When veraison finally arrives it is now time to even the vineyard. What I mean by this, and is typical of Nebbiolo is that one vine might have one or two pounds of fruit on it and the next vine 10. It is important to drop fruit where necessary so that the fruit will ripen as uniformly as possible. This is usually attained with one pass.

As more and more of the fruit gains color one more pass is made through the vineyard to discard any sunburned or weakly colored fruit. Finally as brix levels rise and ph levels get to a decent level we pick. The vineyard is picked in the evening into 40 pound lugs which are transported to a sorting station and finally placed into 1/2 ton bins for transport to the winery.

And this is where the dividends begin to show themselves. Comments such as this is the best looking fruit we have yet seen this season are common. The fermentation smells are delicious and only hint to what will develop over the next 24 months. And the wine color more reminiscent of pink lemonade than red wine will begin to take shape as it evolves to a beautiful garnet telling of the beautiful wine to follow.

I wouldn't have wanted to grow any other grape when all is said and done!

In Pursuit of the First Nebbiolo Vines in the US

A few months ago, NEB member Jerzy Maslanka asked me about the first Nebbiolo vines brought to the USofA. He had been reading the book *Wine Heritage: The Story of Italian-American Vintners* by Dick Rosano and it referred to Los Alamos resident John Balagna, owner/winemaker of Il Santo Cellars. Jerzy inquired if I knew John. My response was a definite "yes"...John has been a member of my Los Alamos tasting group since 1973. My curiosity piqued by Jerzy's inquiry, I ordered the book. It definitely is an interesting read, highly recommended.

In Rosano's book, it referred to one Joseph Vezzetti bringing the first Nebbiolo cuttings to the US from the Piedmont in 1880 and planting them on his farm in Brookside, CO (near Canon City and Florence, southwest of Colorado Springs). John Balagna is Joe Vezzetti's grandson and the memory of Joe tending his vines inspired John to found Il Santo Cellars in Los Alamos. In the book, Rosano recounts John's description of the Vezzetti and Balagna families having to bury the Nebbiolo stalks every year to withstand the harsh Colorado winters. Rosano's account of Nebbiolo being brought to Brookside in 1880, for which he did not cite a reference, could have only come from his interview of John.

John is a very close friend and now 92 with a mind as sharp as a tack, as would befit a world-class radiochemist who made very important contributions to the US nuclear weapons program from his first early days on the Manhattan Project. I visit John nearly every Sunday afternoon to share my dinner wine and some appetizers. Rosano's book inspired me to dredge up this history on the first Nebbiolo from John and see if I could actually track down these early Nebbiolo vines up in Brookside.

John has no recollect of talking to Rosano and providing the information in that book. But it is clear that the information Rosano relates could have only come from his interviewing John in the late 1990's. In subsequent talks with John and further investigation, the accuracy of Vezzetti's stake in the first Nebbiolo in the US is, perhaps, a bit suspect.

Giuseppe (his preferred name) Vezzetti hailed from Aglie, a village just north of Torino in the northern Piemonte...the home of Nebbiolo. He went to Brazil to supervise the construction of a Brazil-Chile railroad across the Andes in the mid-1870's. Joe there met his wife-to-be, Caterina, they married, and then returned to the Piemonte. From there, Joe immigrated to Iowa to work in the coal mines there for about a year in the early 1880's. Pining for the mountains of the Piemonte, Joe picked up stakes for Colorado, where considerable mining activity was taking place. Caterina joined him in Denver and they settled into Brookside around 1882. Shortly thereafter, Joe's brothers, Charles, John, Martin, and Maximo, joined

him in Brookside.

A year later, Domenic and Domenica Balagna, John's paternal grandparents, left Cimena just west of Torino and immigrated to the nearby town of Brewster. In the early 1880's, CF&I (Colorado Foundry and Iron) was mining coal near Brookside to stoke their furnaces in Pueblo, CO, and there was much mining and railroad activity in the area. John's description of the mine work then sounds brutal, of course now illegal by OSHA standards.

To service the local mining populace, Joe Vezzetti bought a section of land in Brookside, his brother John cleared the land and planted it to orchards, and Joe opened up a general store in 1892 to sell a variety of goods. Desiring to live on the property, Joe returned to the Piemonte in 1912 and obtained plans for his childhood home in Aglie and built a replica on the western part of his section. They moved into the completed home in April of 1913 and then built a small general store out front. Behind the house and store was a stone baking oven. John recounts how his Grandpa Vezzetti would bake 100 loaves of bread a day.

As farming was not Joe's strong suit, he paid for a fellow Piemontese to come to Brookside in the 1890's, one Anthony Gedda, to farm the property's orchards and other crops. Tony eventually worked off his debt and Joe sold him a small plot on the north side of the property for his home and a small farm.

John is not convinced that Joe brought Nebbiolo cuttings when he immigrated to Brookside. Because of the circuitous route Joe took to get to Brookside, it's highly unlikely that he brought cuttings from the Piemonte in his original immigration. He could, however, have brought some with him on his 1912 return to Brookside. Tony was a farmer, of some type, in Piedmont. It is totally within the realm of possibility that he may have brought some grapevine cuttings when he was brought over by Joe. Coming from Piedmont, those cuttings could have been Nebbiolo.

At any rate, John recalls there were two rows of grapevines on the Vezzetti property. Because of the general store Joe and Caterina ran, John surmises they may have been merely table grapes and he has no recollect of Joe himself making wine from them. But with a large Italian (and Czech) local population, one suspects there may very well have been demand for wine grapes. Italians are known to have fermented a grape or two from time-to-time!!

Domenic & Domenica Balagna gave birth to a son, John (Sr), John's father. John Sr married Maria Teresa Vezzetti, one of Joe's daughters. Eventually, in 1925, John Sr and Mary moved into the old Vezzetti home (along with John Jr and his brother Joe) and continued to run the general store. John recalls that his father had little interest in making wine, but that his grandfather, Joe Vezzetti, did. Or, more correctly, Tony Gedda actually made the wine. These early days of John's life eventually evolved into his passion for wine and winemaking, aided and abetted by his chemistry background.

John got two diplomas at the nearby Abbey of the Holy Cross, went on to Colorado University in Boulder to work on an advanced degree in chemistry until the War intervened. After a stint making poison gas at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, he eventually wound up at Los Alamos Laboratory in the early days of the Manhattan Project in 1943. He was a home winemaker for years afore founding Il Santo Cellars in 1986, eventually closing it around 2005. He made a number of Nebbiolo wines from grapes brought up from the Mimbres Valley in southern NM.

John recounts that the two rows of (Nebbiolo?) vines still existed on the old Vezzetti property the last time he visited it, but his recollect may be a bit cloudy. His sister Margaret recalls them as being a Concord-type grape. John recently recalled that there was another row of vines bordering Cedar Avenue near some irrigation flumes. In pursuit of these vines

and see if they were, in fact, Nebbiolo, I visited Brookside recently and walked the property with the current owners, Cheryl and Kevin Schenk. John had accurately described on the property where these two rows of vines existed. Google satellite images seemed to show two faint lines in the ground, roughly where John located the vines. Alas, when I actually walked that ground, there were no signs of any grapevines. There were some faint terraces (probably the lines I saw in the satellite images), but any vegetation had long been obliterated by intense horse and cattle traffic. And there were no signs of any surviving fruit trees further up on that property. And no vines along Cedar that I noticed.

So....whether the first Nebbiolo that was brought to the US came to Brookside in the 1880's, as claimed by Rosano, cannot be verified with any hard evidence. However.....the search still goes on. It is not outside the realm of possibility that those grapevines John recalls were Nebbiolo. Beside the Schenk's (old Vezzetti) home, there exists a very old (based on the size of the trunks) overgrown grape arbor. Margaret recalls her Dad built the arbor and eventually planted it to grapevines. It would seem likely that he'd have taken the cuttings from his two rows of vines...unless he specifically planted table grapes for eating or sale in his general store. When I'm up there in August for the Brookside Centennial (the town was formally founded in 1913), I hope to examine the arbor vines with John and, perhaps, take possible DNA samples.

But there's more.... just to the west of the Schenk's home is an area that once was the Vezzetti/Balagna pigpen. People slop hogs...feed them leftover table scraps. In this area, there exists a very old volunteer grapevine that used to grow high into the intertwined willow trees. Could this lone vine have come from a seed off Joe Vezzetti's table?? Hard to say.

And yet more....during my exploration around Brookside, I located a row of some 5-6 very old grape vines growing in front of a home about two (long) blocks from the Vezzetti property. Could these cuttings have come from Joe Vezzetti's vines?? Quite possible.

And more....in the nearby (about 10 miles away) town of Rockdale, I noticed a very/very old vine growing beside a house. The trunk looked to be over a foot in diameter and sprawled along a trellis for some 20 feet. One of Joe Vezzetti's daughters married Batista Scavarda, who ran a general store in Rockdale. Maybe more Vezzetti cuttings formed this vine??

Darrell Corti had some comments on this quixotic search for Nebbiolo. He suggests that if any Italian immigrants brought over vine cuttings with them, the time of year of their journey would be crucial to the cuttings surviving and being planted. He thinks such vine cuttings coming this route are unlikely. However, if these Colorado immigrants were fond of Nebbiolo in their homeland, one might guess they could have made arrangements for importing such cuttings so that they would survive.

Darrell points out that Rosano's statement of the first Nebbiolo being in Colorado by Joe Vezzetti is flat-out wrong. Thomas Jefferson brought in Nebbiolo to Virginia before 1810, where it was listed with the dialect spelling of "nebbiul". Presumably, none of those vines have survived. He also points out that Charles Krug had won a medal in the 1860's-'70's for his Napa Valley Spanna (an alternative name for Nebbiolo), indicating Nebbiolo was already in California well before Vezzetti's purported planting in Colorado.

Darrell also doubts Vezzetti's vines were Nebbiolo if, as John recalls, they were being buried to survive the harsh Colorado winters. There would have been no trunks on the vines, simply a mass of canes growing out of the root mass. But, because Nebbiolo is notoriously infertile for the first 12 buds or so, it needs very long pruning and, thus, the burying might not have worked.

But then Darrell throws in some interesting speculation. In that era, Nebbiolo was most prevalent in the Langhe or to the north in Carema. In the vicinity of Torino, it was the Freisa

variety (also known locally as Monferrina or Spana Monferrina) that was able to withstand the harsh inclement weather and, hence, most common around Aglie and Cimena. Thus, he conjectures, if the Vezzetti/Balagna family connections brought over cuttings directly from their homeland; it would likely have been Freisa or, perhaps, something even more rare, rather than Nebbiolo. Curiously, Darrell adds, Freisa was a well-liked variety in California in the mid-late 1800's. Freisa (and Ruche) can make some wonderful wines, with amazing aromatics that can resemble what Nebbiolo gives. Alas, Freisa is almost non-existent in California these days.

So.....this is all a mystery that is still being pursued. Hopefully, the visit in August, when the grapes should still be on the vines and the vines in full foliage, may shed some light on old Joe Vezzetti's vines. At this point, it seems unlikely any of the vines in the Brookside area are Nebbiolo. Rosano's statement of the first Nebbiolo being in Colorado, based on what is probably John Balagna's sketchy memory, is certifiably wrong. Probably, any old vines are nothing more than mere Labrusca table grapes and this is all a wild goose chase. But we may luck out and find they are Freisa...or, even maybe, some variety that's now extinct in the Piemonte. And that would be exciting. The search continues.....details on the 10 o'clock news.

Tom

Quote Without Comment: "Nebbiolo has an advantage over PinotNero because it's only made here (the Langhe). There's PinotNero in Burgundy, but there are also good (Pinots) from other areas, whether California or NewZealand" -- Alberto Taddei/Somm and winemaker at Cantina Selvagrossa.

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Tom