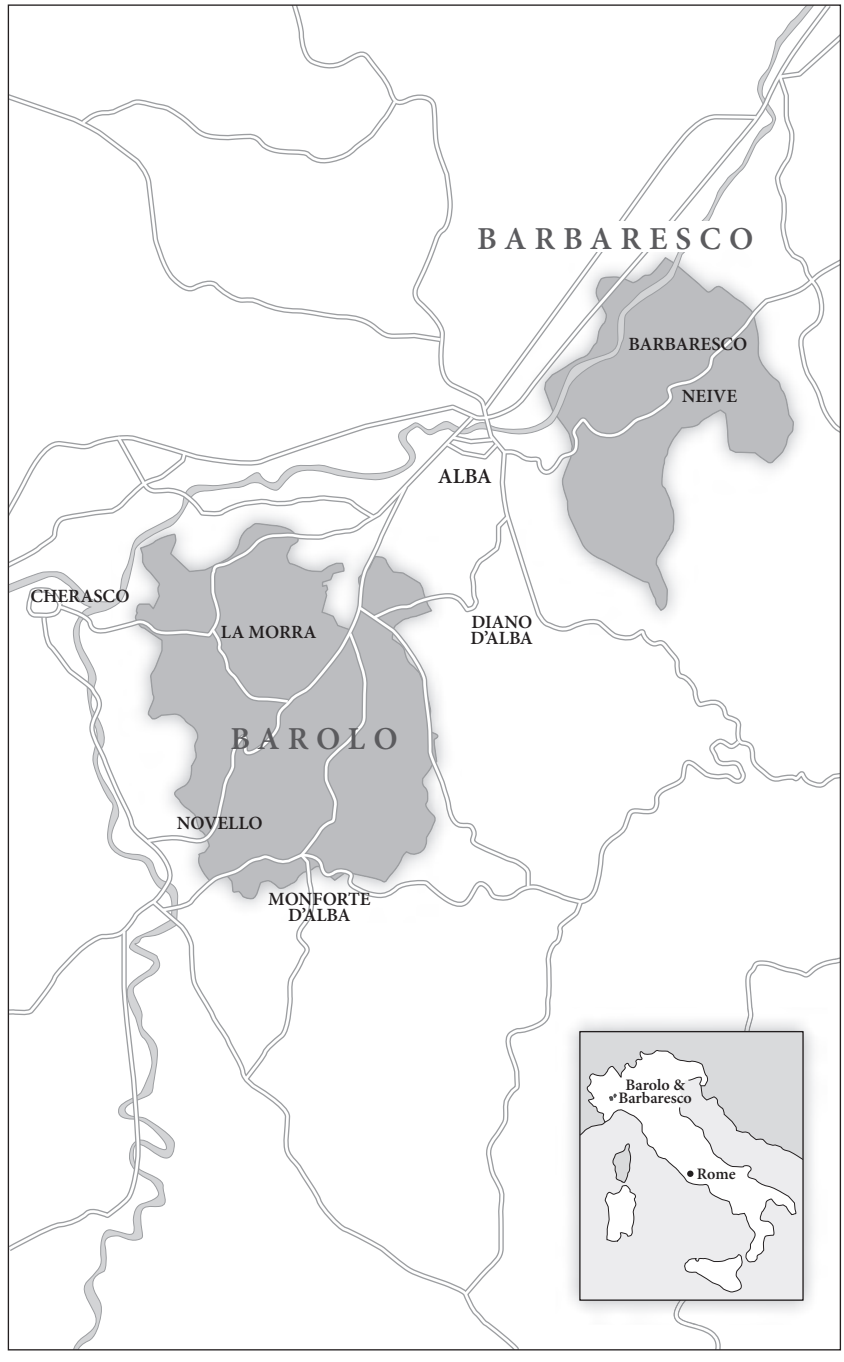
Introduction

BAROLO AND BARBARESCO, THE PRIDE OF PIEDMONT

LOCATED IN THE NORTHWEST, PIEDMONT, which means "foot of the mountain," is Italy's second largest region and borders Switzerland and France as well as the Italian regions of Lombardy, Valle d'Aosta, and Liguria. True to its name, Piedmont is the most mountainous region in Italy, and not only do mountains cover more than 43 percent of its surface area while hills make up another 30 percent, but the region is also surrounded on three sides by mountains. On clear autumn days, somewhat rare, since much of the region is often shrouded in autumnal mists and fog, the sight of these snow-capped mountains towering in the distance behind extensive networks of undulating vineyards that have turned blazing gold and red mesmerizes the many wine and food lovers who descend on southern Piedmont every October and November to taste the area's prized white truffles and celebrated wines. On those clear days one can also make out the pyramid-shaped Monviso. According to locals, Monviso, one of the highest and most picturesque peaks in Italy, is the real-life inspiration for Paramount Pictures' iconic logo, and from a spring beneath its majestic slopes rises the river Po, Italy's largest river.

The entire region is considered one of the most important in Italy in terms of quality wine production, and Piedmont prides itself on not producing any IGT (Indicazione Geografica Tipica) wines, which are less strictly controlled than the country's DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) and DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) designations. Piedmont boasts a whopping forty-five DOC wines and fifteen DOCGs, including Barolo and Barbaresco, widely known as Italy's most noble wines.

Barolo and Barbaresco both hail from a hilly area known as the Langhe. Located in southern Piedmont, the Langhe (also sometimes referred to as



MAP 1. Overview of the Langhe showing both Barolo and Barbaresco on either side of the city of Alba. In June 2014 Langhe became a UNESCO World Heritage Site, along with Roero and Monferrato.

simply Langhe and also Langa) spreads out around the town of Alba. The Langhe hills reportedly take their name from a Celtic word meaning "tongues of land," which, with a bit of imagination, describe the shape of the area's steep, extended hills that run parallel to each other and are divided by deep, narrow valleys. It is here, in the Barolo denomination to the southwest of Alba and in the Barbaresco growing zone northeast and east of the city, that native grape Nebbiolo yields world-class wines of renowned structure and complexity. The best Barolos and Barbarescos are on par with the finest bottlings from Burgundy, Bordeaux, and Montalcino, and are among the elite wines of the world.

Nebbiolo is also planted in tiny amounts in other select areas of Piedmont, including in Roero, just on the other side of the Tanaro River from the Langhe, but the zone's highly sandy top soils produce wines that mature early, and in general they possess less perfume, structure, and complexity than their cousins over in Barolo and Barbaresco. However, Nebbiolo planted in one particular area in Roero, in the Valmaggiore site located in the Vezza d'Alba township, can yield wines with lovely floral aromas, bright red fruit flavors, and elegant tannins. Even a few top Barolo producers, including Bruno Giacosa and Luciano Sandrone, make Nebbiolo d'Alba Valmaggiore, and these wines have a growing fan base. The grape is also cultivated in Ghemme, Gattinara, Lessona, and Carema, all in Piedmont, as well as in the Valtellina area of Lombardy and in parts of Valle d'Aosta.

Even though Nebbiolo can yield very good and great wines from these areas, they rarely match the complexity and sheer majesty of the best Barolos and Barbarescos. It is therefore no coincidence that none of these other wines are obliged under their production regulations to be made solely with 100 percent Nebbiolo, although to be fair, a number of producers in these areas, especially in Roero, Valtellina, and Carema (where only two producers turn out Carema Doc's entire annual production of 50,000 bottles), use exclusively Nebbiolo even if their production codes allow them to add other grapes. Barolo and Barbaresco on the other hand are obliged by their production codes, rigidly controlled under Italy's DOCG system, to be made exclusively with Nebbiolo.

Brave producers in other parts of the world, including California, Washington, Australia, South America, and even Baja California, Mexico, with few exceptions, have met with little success with the variety. Having said that, I would like to note two wineries in the United States, Palmina in California's Santa Barbara County and Barboursville in Virginia, that are

making Nebbiolos that show surprising varietal typicity alongside the grape's intriguing combination of structure and finesse. Wines from both producers also demonstrate aging potential that should allow them to develop even more complexity with cellaring. However, these two wineries are among a handful of exceptions, and of all the noble grape varieties, Nebbiolo remains one of the least planted in the world—and with good reason.

Nebbiolo, like Pinot Noir and Sangiovese, is a notoriously demanding and finicky grape that truly excels—on what is for Nebbiolo a relatively large scale—only in the very specific growing conditions found in the Langhe. However, this is not to say that every Barolo and Barbaresco is an exceptional wine. Even though the number of excellent wines across the board is indeed impressive, finding them can be a monumental challenge. Not only are there a number of large bottlers that still prefer quantity over quality, but one of the biggest obstacles for wine lovers is making sense of the dizzying number of labels available today from the myriad of small and very small producers that have emerged since the 1990s. Many if not most of these firms make a range of Barolos and Barbarescos from nearly 250 officially recognized vineyard areas between the two denominations, and there are also notable stylistic differences between producers and their wines—all of which has created widespread consumer confusion. An explosion in production over the last two decades has only exasperated the situation.

Since the mid-1990s, following profound cultural, agricultural, and technical changes that were set in motion some years earlier and turned Barolo and Barbaresco into two of the most sought-after wines from Italy, production in both denominations has soared. A look at annual bottle numbers shows that overall production of Barolo more than doubled between 1996 and 2013: from 6,192,267 bottles in 1996 to a potential of 13,902,404 bottles in 2013. Barbaresco, which is about a third the size of Barolo in terms of both hectares under vine and bottle numbers, increased from 2,406,800 bottles to potentially 4,681,737 bottles in the same period. One of the biggest changes in this period is that many small farmers in both denominations stopped selling grapes to the handful of large producers and bottlers that dominated Langhe's wine scene for decades. Today there are more than one thousand growers between the two areas and more than five hundred producers who make and bottle Barolo and Barbaresco as well as companies that just bottle and sell the wines. And over the past twenty years, zealous growers and producers have cut down woods, fruit trees, and hazelnut groves to make way for Nebbiolo, and to this end many have also pulled up vines that were

previously planted with other grape varieties in order to plant Barolo and Barbaresco vineyards in their respective areas.

Because Nebbiolo is extremely site sensitive, it yields different results depending on where in the growing zone it is planted. Producers in Barolo and Barbaresco have long understood that some vineyards and even entire vineyard areas, known locally by the French term *crus,* are superior to others, and as far back as the late nineteenth century, Lorenzo Fantini, in his *Monograph of Viticulture and Enology in the Province of Cuneo,* published in 1895, classified certain vineyards, such as Barbaresco's Rio Sordo, as "first-rate." Yet it wasn't until the 1980s that producers in both denominations began adding cru names to labels on a wide scale. Seeing, however, that these crus were unofficial until 2007 for Barbaresco and late 2009 for Barolo, before this, producers outside the historical cru borders claimed to be inside, while others began using their own made-up fantasy names to adorn labels. As a result, and to the ire of those producers with holdings in the heart of the Langhe's top vineyard sites, the historical cru names started to lose significance.

To combat the problem, after more than a decade of delimiting the growing zones that generated bitter disputes and infighting among producers and authorities, in 2007 Italy's Minister of Agriculture officially recognized 65 distinct vineyard areas (defined by the extraordinarily languid term *menzioni geografiche aggiuntive* or "additional geographic mentions") in Barbaresco, with another added later bringing the total to 66, and in December 2009, it sanctioned 170 vineyard areas in Barolo (that came into effect starting with the 2010 vintage), although only a fraction of these defined areas are truly remarkable. On top of this, Barolo producers can also produce Barolo designated by the eleven villages that make up the denomination. As if having over five hundred individual producers and 247 microzones did not already bewilder even the most determined Barolo and Barbaresco lover, producers are also allowed to add their individual vineyard name to the more general cru area shared by numerous producers. And, lest we forget, estates that had the foresight to register their own invented names before the geographic mentions became official—and who could prove they had been actively using the name on the labels—are allowed to use these "fantasy names" in lieu of one of the geographic mentions—for example, Gaja's Sorì Tildin.

This is where this book comes into play. *Barolo and Barbaresco* will guide wine lovers through the daunting array of labels, crus, and vineyards, village by village. The chapters dedicated to the individual villages will give readers