



# DIRECT PRESS

OCTOBER, 2022

## PIEDMONT: FRINGES OF THE FOOTHILLS

### Surrounded by mountains

and planted to vines, Italy's Piedmont is one of the most famous and picturesque wine regions in the world. The Alps encircle the region, and three quarters of the Piedmont is either mountain or hillside. 45,000 hectares are planted to grape vines: that's about the size of Brooklyn and Queens combined. Most of the wine culture is centered in Langhe, home to Barolo and Barbaresco, some of the most famous, and often most expensive wines, in the world. For many years that's all I knew of the Piedmont, but as is often the case, there is another narrative of Piedmont with its own remarkable characters happening just outside these borders.

As visually stunning as the Langhe hills are, criss-crossed with vines as far as the eye can see, it is monocultural farming at its extreme. Drive an hour from Alba, the biggest town in Langhe, and the realm of Piemontese royalty gives way to its polar

opposite: a hippie commune. Valli Unite (*Press 4 mix/white*) is a cooperative in the Tortonesi hills that started in the 1970s. Today, 30 people work around 100 hectares of land, but instead of Langhe's monocultural grape growing approach, only 25 hectares at Valli Unite are planted to vines. The rest are taken up by orchards, cereals, vegetables, beehives, livestock, pasture, and forests full of truffles.

Not far from Valli Unite is Cascina degli Ulivi (*Press 4 mix/white*) where a similar philosophy inspired the late Stefano Bellotti to convert 30 hectares of family land into a polycultural farm in the 1980s. He stopped using chemicals in the vineyards after seeing the results at a neighbor's farm, and began working Biodynamically and using the teachings of Rudolf Steiner back in 1985. This was radical then but Stefano's persistence and determination played a huge role in making Biodynamic farming a legitimate pursuit. He was an easy target for many who wanted to dismiss his funky wines or scoff at woo-woo concepts of farming, but he felt it was a return to

common sense in the face of the fanatical pursuit of money and opportunism at the expense of everything else. While it's true that there was a loosening of regulations that caused the quality of the local Gavi DOC to plummet severely in the 70s and 80s, Stefano was driven more to dissenting against the way soil and ecosystems were being destroyed in the name of 'science.'

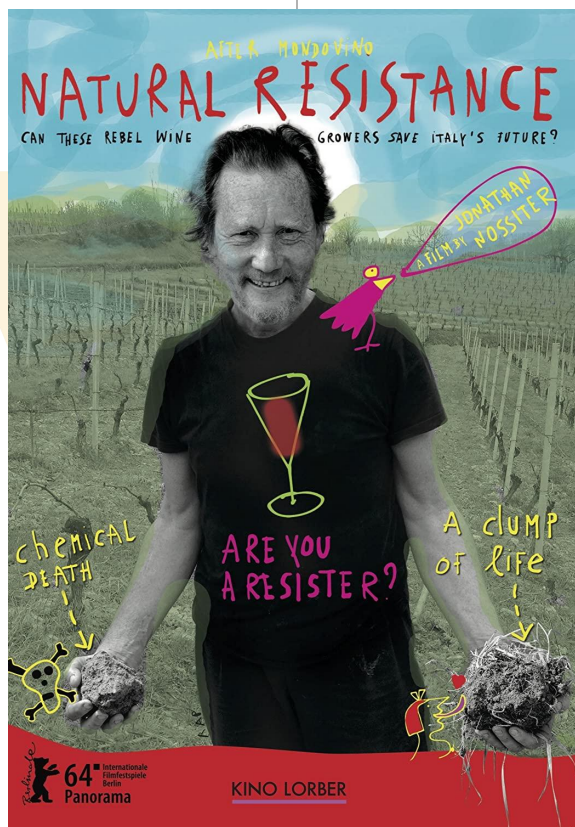
"Some criticize that what we do is too esoteric. Well yes, Biodynamic preparations are esoteric! Almost everything we do is partly esoteric, because science can't explain everything. If I look at you from across the street and at that exact moment, you happen to turn your head towards me and we make eye contact, that's not something you can calculate, plan, measure or explain. To understand this is simply to acknowledge being part of a larger whole." - *Stefano Bellotti*

Way before his passing in 2018, he was regarded as one of the most influential natural winemakers anywhere, and one of the most prominent advocates for Biodynamics, along with Nicolas Joly. I got

the opportunity to stay at Cascina degli Ulivi last month, where the work continues under Stefano's daughter Ilaria Bellotti and Filippo Mammone. While I was there grapes were coming in after their first day of picking, bees were buzzing, and the many forms of life that Stefano had nurtured were still thriving.

Figures like Stefano are so important because it is difficult to be the first person to fight against the status quo. But once one person does it, others see a path forward and entire communities can spring up. Monferrato, the second biggest wine producing region in Piedmont, is less than an hour from Alba and Turin, and just under two hours from Milan and Genoa. Yet the Monferrato hills seem an entire world away from these cities.

When I visited there at the beginning of September, I had no idea that Monferrato was at the center of a burgeoning natural wine scene, in some ways the Beaujolais to Langhe's Burgundy. There are a growing number of winemakers popping up there who are following in the footsteps of Stefano Bellotti.



*Stefano Bellotti, above, is featured in Jonathan Nossiter's film 'Natural Resistance' and is a highly recommended way to see his work and philosophy up close.*



Much of this new energy in Monferrato centers around Cascina Iuli. Direct Press members may have noticed a few appearances by Iuli in the past year (*Direct Press December 2021, July 2022*), and they have proven to be some of the most popular selections on our shelves, too. The husband and wife team of Fabrizio Iuli and Summer Wolff have influenced not just local winemakers, but even Austrians like Martin Arndorfer (*Direct Press October 2021, February 2022*), who interned with Fabrizio in the early 2000s. Summer is a New York ex-pat and Fabrizio was born and raised in the small town of Montaldo di Cerrina where he and Summer live with their two children. Between the two of them they pull in a seriously diverse group into their orbit, bringing new life to a remote mountain town that went from a population of almost 500 people before World War II to under 100 today.

It's easy to understand the attraction to the Iuli ethos. In addition to having about 20 hectares of beautifully-farmed vines in-and-around the rolling hills behind their home, Fabrizio crafts wines that run the gamut from playful red/white coferments like 'Ta Da' (*Press 4 red*); to serious, hearty Barberas like 'Barabba' (*Press 2*). Infused in all of the Iuli wine is a deeply soulful touch that seems to cut across every boundary in the wine world. Like many of my favorite producers, Iuli makes wines that I can share with everyone. This makes sense, since Fabrizio and Summer have an outsized capacity for sharing. They seem to have an endless parade of visitors, including family, close friends, pilgrims from the wine trade arriving from New York or Amsterdam, other winemakers; and now school-aged children and their families.

*[Above] Fabrizio Iuli grew up in the tiny village of Montaldo di Cerrina, where his family's winery is now at the center of a thriving group of ecologically-minded winemakers in Monferrato*

During the pandemic, Summer started a Waldorf school — following the writings of the same Rudolf Steiner who is behind Biodynamic farming — in the valley behind their house. What began as a way to get her young children into a better school environment during the darkest days of pandemic virtual learning is now a destination for people from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Family homes not occupied in the town of Montaldo since the 1950s are being restored to accommodate new arrivals to the Village Forest School from all over the world, and a mix of languages can be heard from the outcropping of custom made classroom yurts overlooking the Iuli farm.



The Iuli's circle includes a whole roster of people making wines that run counter to the prevailing narrative of Piedmont. This includes friends such as Nadia Verrua of Cascina Tavijn; Francesco Brezza of Tenuta

Migliavacca; Deirdre O'Brien and Maurizio Caffer of Val Liberata (*4 mix/red*); and Eleonora Costa and Luigi Armanino of Crealto (*4 red*). Summer and Fabrizio also rent vines from their neighbor at Azienda Gaia, and they have made a line of wines called Prima Piuma (*4 mix/red*), finally convincing Gaia's oenologist Gianluca Ravizza to work with native yeasts and zero sulfur, and together they pulled off a terrific 'zero/zero' Nebbiolo that members will receive this month.

All of the above are farming organically at the minimum and with very little intervention in the cellar. Many are working with Nebbiolo, but in Monferrato it's Barbera seems to steal the show when it comes to wines with the most gravitas and age-ability. Yet this group of winemakers' ability to explore the potential of more fringe grape varieties like Grignolino, Slarina, Ruché, Freisa, and Baratuciat is what I think sets Monferrato apart from the strictness of Langhe, where there is more at stake if the wines stray from the classic profile. The extra flexibility of winemakers in Monferrato will prove to be crucial in the coming years as temperatures rise. The hot weather this year resulted in one of the earliest picking seasons on record in the Piedmont, with grapes being brought in the last week of August instead of September. Heritage varieties with less potential alcohol like Slarina and Baratuciat are going to be very important for anyone who doesn't want to be drinking 15% alcohol wines on a hot day.

*Maurizio Caffer [left] and Deirdre O'Brien of Val Liberata, a ten minute drive from Cascina Iuli, in a valley known for a peasant uprising in the Middle Ages. Maurizio and Deirdre are the first to grow grapes here since the 1940s.*



Fabrizio Iuli has been very vocal about this and it has driven his efforts to seek out forgotten grape varieties that can thrive in the changing climate and make wines with less extraction. On the 90 degree-plus days I was in Piedmont, it was pretty hard to find anything in the realm of glou-glou to quench my thirst, so I was even more appreciative when I finally got to drink some lighter wines from Fabrizio, Val Liberata, Migliavacca, and others.

Just like in France, where Burgundy and Bordeaux dominate the wine culture, Langhe dominates in Italy. What's happening just outside in places like Monferrato and Colli Tortonesi, is akin to the excitement you can sense in places like Beaujolais, the Ardeche, and the Loire. Yet I felt something warmer in the scene around Iuli, a sense of genuine friendship between these winemakers and families that is not always seen in the competitive wine business. They vacation together, their children play together, their doors are always open to each other. It sounds corny but it's really no joke in these isolating times. Even before my visit I was drawn to these wines because of the warmth, generosity, and spirit of play that I felt when drinking them. I'd like to imagine that's not a coincidence, that the spirit of the people somehow was coming through their wines, beckoning me to see their world. Wine is often a blank slate for our projections and is ripe for unquantifiable romanticism but sometimes it's as simple as admitting that it is also a tool that brings us together in small but meaningful ways.

Salute!

*Jonathan Kemp*

*Bruno Sant'Anna*

*[Above L-R] Eleanora Costa of Crealto, Summer Wolff, and Fabrizio Iuli with their own children and students from the Village Forest School*

**[Valli Unite Bianchino NV](#)**

**Colli Tortonesi • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 White]**

100% Cortese from the fun-loving crunchy crew at Valli Unite, a 100 hectare commune in the Tortonesi hills. About a quarter of that property is vines, the rest is a polycultural farm, so there's honey and salami being made along with wine. Started in the late 1970s, it's Italy's first natural wine cooperative and now includes 30 members who “believe natural vinification is a social responsibility.”

The Bianchino certainly lives up to this, an affordable, everyday quaffer. It has three days of maceration on the skins, not enough to make it orange, but enough to give it a little texture to go along with the snappy acidity. Pear skin, bruised apple, and a little note of Parmesan rind on the finish make this more complex than it would seem at first glance, but it remains unpretentious and thirst-quenching. *Jonathan Kemp*

grape behind Gavi in the middle of the 20th century, but quality went steeply downhill in the 1970s and 80s as worldwide demand was met by loosening the regional regulations around yields and borders, letting the market be flooded with industrially made plonk. Most of the Gavi I first encountered was about as exciting as a free bag of pretzels on a three hour flight. Stefano Bellotti of Cascina degli Ulivi was a big advocate for the potential of Gavi and he also found a path to organic Biodynamic farming by 1985, making him one of the most visible figures in the early world of natural wine and Biodynamics. Since 2015



**[Cascina degli Ulivi "Semplicemente" Bianco](#)**

**2021**

**Novi Ligure • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 White]**

Thank goodness for Cortese, which is the one of the best sources for inexpensive, crisp, refreshing white wine in Northern Italy. Cortese was gaining renown as the

the Gavi DOCG has rejected Ulivi's Corteses because they are unfiltered and have more color than the filtered, sterilized Gavis that have come to dominate. In spite of this, the Ulivi wines are some of the few interesting examples of what Gavi could be.

'Semplicemente' is certainly rustic Cortese, bottled without sulfur under crown cap to prevent the cork from popping out — this is

*Pictured above with grape skins over their teeth, the merry misfits at Valli Unite's natural commune are a far cry from the more aristocratic polish found in towns like Barolo and Alba*

not too much of a concern these days, as the wine is a little tamer and it's not too funky for most people. White flower, sea salt, and ginger, with a subtle spritz, it's such a satisfying wine to open before dinner and enjoy with anything from pasta to picnics to pork chops. *Jonathan Kemp*



**[Cascina Val Liberata 'Anarkoide' Grignolino](#)**

**2020**

**Monferrato • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 Red]**

Deirdre O'Brien and Maurizio Caffer met in Ireland where she was a doctor and he was growing bored with office work. They returned to his native Italy and restored an old farmhouse in a valley that long ago was home to peasants who sacked and burned the local ruler's hilltop castle, hence the name of the winery: Val Liberata, or liberated valley. They've brought some order to the vineyards and beehives they tend, re-introducing agriculture on land that had been abandoned since the 1940s. They are committed to farming using Biodynamics and are certified organic, so they are still allowing plenty of freedom to the ecosystem that has been happily saved from any chemical sprays over the many decades of benign neglect.

'Anarkoide' is a reference to Grignolino's 'anarchist' personality. It was ripped out in favor of Barbera and Nebbiolo in much of the Piedmont because of its unpredictable nature, but is making a comeback. Val Liberata's Grignolino is one of the most "natty" versions I've come across, probably the funkier of the lineup this month, but it is wildly delicious in addition to being wild. Hibiscus, rhubarb, violet, and blueberry notes with a tangy, nervy energy. This is perfect with a bit of a chill and goes down easy. A touch of chewy crunch and spice will leave you wanting more of this rustic, anarchist mountain wine. *Jonathan Kemp*



**[Prima Piuma Monferrato Nebbiolo 2020](#)**

**Monferrato • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 Red]**

Summer Wolff and Fabrizio Iuli have quite a community of fellow winemakers in the Monferrato hills, and they are bringing neighbors into the natural wine world as well. Their neighbor, Azienda Agricola Gaia, had beautiful organic fruit that he needed help selling, so Summer and Fabrizio work some of the vineyard rows themselves and collaborate with Gaia's oenologist Gianluca Ravizza to make the Prima Piuma wines. Though he was resistant to fermenting with

*[Above left] Maurizio Caffer of Val Liberata displays the hard, brittle, chalky soil typical of the Monferrato hills.*

*[Above right] Gorgeous Nebbiolo bunches at Val Liberata, almost ready to be picked*

wild yeasts and eschewing sulfur, the hands-off Iuli approach has now prevailed. The Nebbiolo from Prima Piuma is a lovely example of how this grape variety can be more finessed and ethereal in the

Monferrato region, compared with Langhe. Black plum, cherry, and oolong tea, this wine has a lot of grippy, silty tannins to sink your teeth into but it retains a terrific freshness. There is a silky, viscous, savory depth that is particularly tasty. I would not have guessed it had zero sulfur added or

that it was 15% abv. It is a dangerously drinkable wine, so make sure you have some *agnolotti* or *ossobucco* to help soak up this red.

*Jonathan Kemp*

**Iuli 'Ta Da!' 'Vino Rosso 2021**

**Monferrato • Piedmont • Italy**  
**[Press 4 Red]**

Fabrizio Iuli has lived in the calcareous, white clay soils of Monferrato his whole life and is one of the best in the region at showcasing the chalky lift that is possible from his native hills, where no synthetic chemical treatments have ever been used. This is despite the ridicule that he and his father were subjected to for not following the ways of modern viticulture. The surrounding forest has given the vines further isolation and protection from

agrochemical overspray. These days, Fabrizio's organic vines are getting more respect than ever, and his wines continue to adjust in style as climate changes the game.

His 'Ta Da,' (a phrase Fabrizio uses often) shows off his ability to adjust and make wines in a style that is uncommon in the area. It is a field blend of Pinot Noir, Grignolino, the near-extinct Slarina, and the obscure white grape Baratuciat. It's a

perfect example of his goal, as he says, to make "wines that are easy to drink, not banal, possibly elegant, fresh, dynamic and crisp."

Fruity and light, perfect with a chill, it is a nice departure from the robust,

tannic wines that are found everywhere in Piedmont. A happy, chuggable wine that will work just as well with spicy Indian food as it will with *pasta aglio e olio*.

*Jonathan Kemp*

**Crealto 'Agricolae' Barbera 2020**

**Monferrato • Piedmont • Italy**  
**[Press 4 Red]**

Eleonora Costa and Luigi Armanino came to Monferrato from Genoa in 2008 and took over a winery that looks out on a spectacular vista of vines, forests, and



*[Pictured above] Crealto's vineyards and sweeping views looking north toward the Alps*



mountains. Named Crealto after the Piemontese word for chalk, the soils lend a mineral finesse to what are otherwise hearty, tannic wines. Their 'Agricolae' Barbera is a fantastic example of their approachable, warm style. While it's not a shy wine, it has notes of spiced apple, cinnamon stick, cranberry, and Ethiopian Yirgacheffe coffee to complement the darker cherry and cacao flavors. It is a crowd-pleasing red with some meat on its bones but plenty of spicy, lively, textural elements to match. It sees three weeks of maceration before aging in steel tank for eight months and another 2-3 months in bottle before release. Perfect for the cooler weather that is approaching. Eleanora and Luigi are certified organic, pick everything by hand, and keep sulfur additions to a minimum in the cellar. *Jonathan Kemp*



**[Bera e Figli Arcese Bianco 2020](#)**

**Asti • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 4 White]**

Bera is in the part of Piemonte that is famous for Moscato d'Asti, a famously bulk-produced, sweet wine. They wouldn't be the most obvious place to look for some of the most progressive, natural

*[Above] Alessandra Bera*

winemaking and farming in Europe, but that is in fact the case. They are a true outlier in the Canelli area, where Moscato has been planted since the 1300s and their estate dates to 1785 when the Bera's ancestors bought the property from the Knights of Malta. As Alessandra Bera says, "My father took over the estate from my grandfather in 1964 and continued working the exact same way. He once told me 'Why should I poison myself? My father was able to work without chemicals so why can't I?'"

Though Bera makes far and away the best Moscato d'Asti, in my humble opinion, 'Arcese' is not Moscato but a blend of the other white grapes they farm: mostly Arneis and Cortese, with some Sauvignon Blanc, Vermentino, and Favorita. Some vintages are made with zero sulfur additions, some have a tiny amount; so when bottled with a bit of leftover sugar this wine will often have a little spritz that gives it a lively kick. Super easy to drink, it's lower-acid and softly perfumed, a lovely bottle to open for midday refreshments, perfect with some focaccia, *bagna cauda*, or spicy Sichuan cuisine. *Jonathan Kemp*

**[Altre Vie Roero Arneis Anfora 2021](#)**

**Roero • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 4 White]**

Just outside of Langhe is Roero, where the white Arneis grape is the featured variety. For many years Arneis has produced a lot of uninspired wines and very few made without extra trickery in the cellar. This example from GianLuca Colombo and Federico Scarzello's new Altre Vie project is

a rare example of someone trying successfully to elevate Arneis to something compelling and different, here by using clay anfora, a little sulfur, and nothing else. The fruit is sourced from a friend's sandy, sunny vineyard, and farmed using Biodynamic practices. It has the soft, pear aromas more typical of Arneis, but there is an elegant, fine texture to the wine, with a nice edge that cuts through without losing its pleasant demeanor. GianLuca was named Italy's best young winemaker in 2014, and yet his goal is to avoid displaying the mark of his winemaking so that "only the vineyard, the vintage, and the grape should speak." *Jonathan Kemp*



**Iuli 'Barabba' Barbera del Monferrato  
Superiore 2019**

**Monferrato • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 2]**

Barbera from Monferrato has long been in the shadow of those from blue-chip estates

who also make Barolo and Barbaresco. That's partially why this Barbera, from Iuli's oldest, highest elevation vineyard (that has since been ripped out), was called 'Barabba.' As Fabrizio Iuli explains, "We liked the idea because just as Barabas in the Bible was given a second chance, we felt that the Monferrato region also deserved a second chance in the face of other, better known regions."



This Barbera really captures the Iuli spirit in its ability to express not only power but the fresh, mineral edge that comes from their white, chalky soils. Bing cherry, black tea, and cumin notes work in tandem with fine-tuned tannins and snappy acidity. It's a generous but layered, nuanced wine that will improve with time in the glass or time in the bottle. It really shines with hearty food, cutting through carbs, tomatoes, and fat. The forests that surround the vines are filled with not only white truffles but wild boar who feast on Barbera grapes. Some of the boars end up in Iuli's famous 'Barbera Pig' stew and get washed down with a healthy slug of delicious 'Barabba.'

*Jonathan Kemp*

*[L-R] Iuli vineyards surrounded by forest; Fabrizio Iuli surrounded by concrete tanks he has restored. These small tanks are traditional for the area but many were replaced with stainless steel. Now they are again in demand.*



**[Cascina Degli Ulivi 'Nibiô' Dolcetto 2014](#)**

**Novi Ligure • Piedmont • Italy**

**[Press 2]**

This wine contains everything that embodies the spirit and approach of the late, legendary Stefano Bellotti, who made this wine a few years before his passing in 2018. Embracing Biodynamics as far back as 1985, he was a huge figure in the push for natural wine and better farming in Europe.

Cascina degli Ulivi is still a lush, mixed farm with

livestock, cereals, beehives, pastures, and of course grapevines, and the wines and the farm are safely in the hands of Stefano's daughter Ilaria. The agriturismo attached to the farm is a beautiful place that is not to miss if you're in the area, with wines from the estate that are not found elsewhere; plus some friendly dogs and cats that I particularly enjoyed meeting when I was there in September.

Dolcetto was the main grape of this part of the Piedmont before the phylloxera scourge of the late 1800s, and it's clear why. This is age-worthy and complex wine with an abundance of character. Made with zero sulfur from roughly 60 year-old vines and aged in huge old botti for two years before bottling. Because the Nibiô vines are from a less sunny, northeast facing site, it is a nervy, rustic wine. Iron and umami dominate, with rhubarb, horehound, and feral notes. Crunchy grape skin, tangy tension, and complex aromatic potpourri make this unique. It's an energetic wine with both intrigue and power that will continue to soften with time in the bottle. Drink it now with a good decant and a plate full of roast beef or risotto with wild mushrooms and chicken livers. *Jonathan Kemp*



*[1] View from Cascina degli Ulivi's cellar [2] Ulivi's Nibiô Dolcetto with risotto prepared from ingredients grown on their farm [3] Filippo Mammone, Ulivi's winemaker [4-5] Ulivi's feline dinner companions with the author*

