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Alta Langa – Raising Italy's Bubble Bar

photo credits: Michaela Morris

The Italians have great affection for bubbles, particularly Champagne.

According to the Comité Champagne, Italy is consistently one of its top five export markets. Stats aside, I have experienced this empirically. When I started traveling to Piedmont in the early 2000s, visits to Barolo estates often started, and/or ended with Champagne. However, 20 years later, proud producers are popping home-grown sparklers – not Franciacorta or TrentoDOC, but Alta Langa. This *piemontese* denomination was officially established as a DOC in 2002 with inaugural bottles launched in 2006. Shortly after, in 2011, it was elevated to DOCG.

Though not historic in name like Barolo, Alta Langa's origins date back over 200 years. In fact, Piedmont boasts Italy's first traditional method sparkling **wines** thanks to the Sambuy counts who modeled their bubbles after the prestigious examples of **France**. Subsequently, pioneer Carlo Gancia brought back his learnings from Champagne and set up shop in Canelli in the mid-1800s. While his first examples featured Moscato, the company eventually championed Pinot Nero.

But it wasn't until 1990 that a group of seven prominent producers – including Gancia – banded together to launch the “Spumante Project.” The 10-year trial represented a collective focus to develop traditional method sparkling based on Pinot Noir and Chardonnay from dedicated sites. “There hasn't been anything else like this in Italy,” asserts Paolo Rossino, Director of the Consorzio Alta Langa. From the original experimental 20 hectares, the denomination has grown to 440 hectares, with a projected maximum of 600 hectares. Despite its name – Alta Langa – the production area expands well beyond the Langhe hills and covers 149 communes in the southern Piedmont provinces of Cuneo, Asti and Alessandria. Plantings, however, are restricted by a minimum altitude of 250 metres – one of the few denominations in Italy with such a stipulation. In practise, the estimated average elevation of Alta Langa vineyards is 450 metres. Moreover, at least one producer – the Vite Colte cooperative – has set an even higher minimum of 500 metres.



“Quality was always the vision,” says Roberto Bruno, Managing Director at Fontanafredda – another of the original seven. All the wines must hail from a single vintage and require a minimum of 30 months on the lees with an additional 6 months for Riserva. Following a recent vote among producers, the latter will eventually see an increase to 60 months.

The commitment to quality has brought smaller producers into the fold as well. “Initially we felt that the denomination was just for big companies,” admits Alberto Cane at Marcalberto, whose family eventually embraced the appellation in 2013. Today there are more than 70 wineries producing Alta Langa.

In 2023, 2 million bottles of Alta Langa were sold and 3.2 million produced. This is a drop in the bucket compared to Champagne’s 300-plus million, however it represents a substantial increase in a relatively short time. Most – 90% – is consumed in Italy. “The problem with Alta Langa is the competition from Champagne, as prices are similar,” explains producer Marco Capra. That said, he has expanded his production from a mere 5000 bottles to 60,000 due to local demand.

After enjoying the occasional glass here and there, I was finally able to taste a critical mass – 36 wines blind. Most were either dominated by or exclusively Pinot Noir and almost two-thirds sported either a low (extra brut) or no dosage. Generally malolactic fermentation is blocked to preserve acidity, and, for the same reason, grapes tend to be picked very early – in late August. The resulting wines can be austere, and some were shy in the classic nuances associated with traditional method sparklers. In particular, the rosés struck me as somewhat superficial.



Piero Quadrumolo, president of Vite Colte

Conversely, those that stood out tended to see longer on the lees than the denomination's minimum, with somewhere between 42 to 72 being the sweet spot. Above all, it is clear that a serious commitment to traditional method [sparkling wine](#) as well as experience count.

Recommended

Vite Colte 'Seicento' Pas Dosé 2019

After dedicated experiments, the Vite Colte cooperative's first ever commercial zero dosage hails from a few choice vineyards reaching a minimum of 600 metres. It is dominated by Pinot Noir and spends 42 months on lees. I tried this at the end of 2023, a few months prior to its official release in February and it was still very tightly wound and stern. Nevertheless, suggestions of candied lemon peel and baking bread were promising. Shored up by a steely backbone and brisk acidity, the palate is lean and vertical with tense bubbles. Another few months in the bottle should serve it well.