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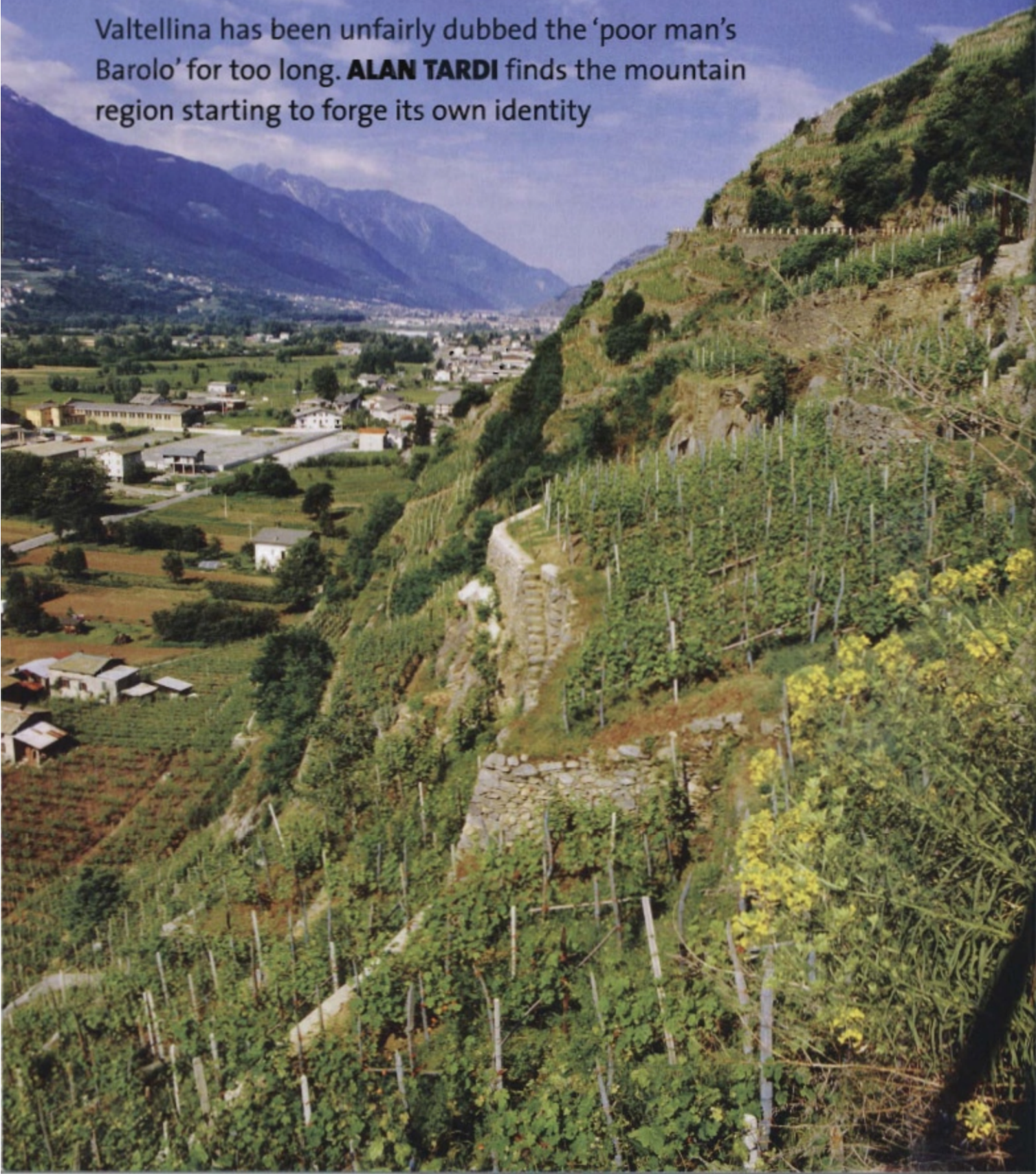
The 2010 Italy issue

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NEW-FOUND NEBBIOLO

Valtellina has been unfairly dubbed the 'poor man's Barolo' for too long. **ALAN TARDI** finds the mountain region starting to forge its own identity



As I board the train in Milan and chug along the shore of Lake Como, I feel a mounting sense of guilt, as if heading to an illicit rendezvous. I live in the Barolo zone of Piedmont, the undisputed capital of the Nebbiolo grape. And here I am in Lombardy, on my way to the only other place in the world with serious plantings of Nebbiolo. 'Traditore!' ('Traitor!'), I imagine my Barolisti friends admonishing.

When the train plunges into a dark tunnel, I wonder if I am being punished. But moments later I emerge into bright sunlight and a breathtaking landscape of steep mountains shooting up both sides of a narrow valley. Shortly afterwards, the train lurches to a stop at Sòndrio where Valentino Borzi, director of the Valtellina Consorzio, is waiting for me.

We lunch over wine and a plate of Bresaola. I take a sip: the wine has the familiar character of Nebbiolo, but it's leaner, more transparent, with the subtle aroma of faded flowers and earth rather than fruit. Borzi announces: 'Valtellina is at an exciting and critical turning point.

'This is Nebbiolo, but it's leaner, with aromas of faded flowers and earth rather than fruit'

For a long time, we have been sleeping, but the alarm clock has sounded: we must wake up, pull ourselves together and come down from our mountain.'

Valtellina is a small, self-contained viticultural area, with two DOCGs (Valtellina Superiore and Sforzato della Valtellina); five geographical sub-zones (Maroggia, Sassella, Inferno, Grumello, and Valgella); and 34 wineries. There are 800ha (hectares) under vine, nearly all of it Nebbiolo – or Chiavennasca, as the locals call it.

Guido Bulgarelli, the Consorzio's agronomist, shows me the vineyards. 'In most wine regions, vines are planted in spots created by nature, but these were all constructed by man hundreds, maybe thousands, of years ago.' The locals, he explains, piled rocks into walls and filled them with dirt carried up from the valley floor, creating steep, narrow terraces that cling to the rock. 'They must have been crazy – but it works. The vines get full

southern exposure [hence why they're only planted on this side of the valley] and great ventilation. Plus, the stones absorb sunlight during the day and radiate heat at night, helping to insulate the vines. It's just very hard work.' Each hectare of vineyard requires 1,200 hours per year and many terraces are accessible only by foot. There are more than 2,000 growers in Valtellina (with an average holding of less than 0.5ha) but relatively few wineries.

Bulgarelli continues: 'The micro-climate is fantastic, but the only way to express it is to keep yields low. The days of maximum quantity are over.'

I ask about the sub-zones. 'The differences are very subtle; after all, they all have the same southern exposure and sandy-limey soil. What really matters is the depth of the soil (which varies from about 20cm to 1m), the altitude, and the way people work in the vineyard and winery.'

Our first winery stop is Triacca, a typical Valtellina operation. Founded by a Swiss family in 1897, its vineyards and winery are in Italy while its offices and its customers are in Switzerland. Historically, most Valtellina wine was shipped there in bulk and sold in large formats like the demijohn. But 'the demand for cheap *vino sfuso* (bulk wine) is dying with the older generation,' says Giovanni Triacca. 'Higher-quality bottled wine is the future, but many consumers still associate Valtellina with the mediocre bulk wine of the past. We need to change that perception and find new customers.'

Standard bearer

On the way to our next appointment, Borzi explains Valtellina's DOCGs. The first, Valtellina Superiore, must be made of Nebbiolo (up to 10% of three other indigenous varieties is permitted, but most producers use 100% Nebbiolo) from within the Superiore zone, and aged for at least two years, at least one in wood. With three years' ageing, a Superiore may be labelled 'Riserva', and if all the grapes come from a single sub-zone, its name may be listed on the label. I ask Valentino about the other DOCG, Sforzato (known as Sfursat locally). 'I'll let Maule tell you

about that,' he replies, as we pull into a cobblestoned courtyard.

Nino Negri, one of the oldest (also founded in 1897), biggest (about 1m bottles per year) and most widely distributed wineries of Valtellina, has long been a standard-bearer for the region. And Casimiro Maule, a tall, softly-spoken, white-haired gentleman who has worked here most of his adult life, is its standard-bearer. The company, which has 38ha of vineyard and buys in grapes from its own co-operative of 200 farmers, was acquired by Gruppo Italiano Vini in 1986.

'We must reinvent ourselves,' Maule says, 'and in order to do that, we must reinvest in ourselves. We need to replant our vineyards to improve quality and efficiency, and renovate our *cantinas* so we can make wines to compete with the best.'

Sforzato is made by the *appassimento* process, in which harvested grapes are dried for several months before vinification, substantially reducing their liquid content and increasing intensity of flavour and alcohol. Aldo Rainoldi of Cantina Rainoldi describes the procedure as 'very tricky', as the grapes must be in perfect condition to avoid the risk of oxidation and rot.

The grapes are transported to *fruttai* ➤



Above: Valtellina is closer to Switzerland than to Piedmont, but its wines still manage to harness the Nebbiolo grape to good effect

Left: cultivating Nebbiolo on Valtellina's steep slopes is a labour-intensive process

The grapes are transported to *fruttai* where the drying takes place. Maule takes me to visit two of them. The first is a large, industrial-looking shed in which perforated plastic crates containing a single layer of grapes are stacked to the ceiling. The building can hold 600,000kg of grapes, and the temperature, humidity and ventilation are all controllable. Only the best – about one-sixth – go into the Nino Negri Sforzato; everything else is declassified. The second *fruttai*, located in an old stone building in a terraced vineyard, has a comfortable old-world feel, with great views and grapes laid out on wooden racks. Maule reads my mind: 'It's much nicer, isn't it? But it's not practical; we keep it mostly for show.'

Back in the car, he admits: 'The market for Valtellina collapsed in the 1980s. We're making a comeback, but it's not easy.'

Age no barrier

If numerous minuscule farmers and a few large wineries is the historic reality of the Valtellina, perhaps small independent wineries growing and vinifying their own grapes is the future. Dirupi, which began operations in 2004, is one of the youngest wineries in Valtellina. And so are its proprietors: 'When Davide [Fasolini] and I finished wine school, we could have gone anywhere,' says Pierpaolo Di Franco, 'but we decided to create our winery here. This is where we're from and this is where we want to stay; if we don't do it, who will?' So they refurbished one of the many old abandoned cellars in Sòndrio, which they rented for practically nothing, and contracted with numerous elderly growers who were more than happy to let the 'youngsters' work their vineyards. Dirupi currently produces 10,000 bottles of Valtellina Superiore from 15 separate plots (3ha in total) and almost all of it is sold before it's released.

ArPePe is one of the region's oldest wineries – and also one of the youngest. Founded in 1860 by Arturo Pelizzatti, it grew into one of Valtellina's most important firms until a family division in 1973 led to the sale of the winery to a multinational company. Arturo, grandson of the founder, found himself in the awkward position of having to work for a new owner which did not share his family's high standards. Needless to say, he did not last long. The new owner wanted out by 1984 and Pelizzatti was able to regain some prize vineyards and the winery; he was not, however, able to get back the original name, so he invented the unusual amalgam (**Arturo Pelizzatti Perego**).

Pelizzatti was convinced Valtellina

could produce superior wines, so he severely reduced the yields, vinified grapes from different vineyards separately, and let the wine age for extended periods in large chestnut casks. Before long, ArPePe gained a reputation both for its unique wines and its unorthodox founder. Tragically, Pelizzatti died prematurely in 2004 but fortunately, daughter Isabella and son Emanuele were keen to follow in his footsteps.

Emanuele scoffs when I ask if he went to wine school: 'Absolutely not! As a kid, I watched what my father went through, and wanted no part of it. Then, something happened... The combination of the Nebbiolo grape and our microclimate can create something really special,' he explains. 'It's not about structure or concentration; it's about minerality and finesse. Ours is a patrimony of elegance.'

As I prepare to return to Piedmont, Emanuele's words echo in my head. His story seems emblematic of the Valtellina

'The market collapsed in the 1980s. We're making a comeback, but it's not easy'

region as a whole: a long history, an arduous journey; the need to reinvent oneself; huge potential and an obsession with a unique, demanding terroir.

On the train home, I feel no pangs of conscience: Valtellina, I now know, is not attempting to usurp the Langhe, and its wines should not be construed as a 'poor man's Barolo' (even though they do cost substantially less). These wines must be enjoyed on their own terms.

Back home, I taste nearly 50 wines from Valtellina and find most of them to be well-made, interesting, distinct from Piedmont versions of Nebbiolo and reasonably priced (most Valtellina DOCGs cost more than a Langhe Nebbiolo and less than a lower-priced Barolo). That evening, with 50 almost-full bottles of wine, I invite some local Piedmont producers to taste. Many come; all are curious and some impressed. 'It's different from Barolo,' several remark. 'Some are very good. And it's definitely Nebbiolo.' **D**

Alan Tardi's book Romancing the Vine, about living and working in a small village in Barolo, won a James Beard Award in 2006

TARDI'S TOP CHOICES



Mamete Prevostini, Albereda, Valtellina Superiore Sforzato 2006 ★★★★★ (18.5/20)

Aroma of roasted coffee, blackberries and tobacco. Full and lush, with black cherry and liquorice. 2012–2016. **N/A UK; www.mameteprevostini.com**

Rainoldi, Sassella Riserva, Valtellina Superiore 1999 ★★★★★ (18.5)

Alluring nose of pomegranate, dried fig and strawberry. Earthy palate of chocolate and dried cherries. Now to 2020. **N/A UK; www.rainoldi.com**

Fay, Cà Moréi, Valtellina Superiore Valgella 2006 ★★★★★ (18)

Liquorice, tar and rose-petal nose. Ripe black cherry envelopes the palate. Firm but supple tannins. Now to 2015. **£18.95–£22.95; GIW, SWS**

Nino Negri, Vigneto Fracia, Valtellina Superiore 2005 ★★★★★ (18)

Black cherry and bay leaf aromas. Cherries and chocolate on the palate. Now to 2014. **N/A UK; www.ninonegri.it**

ArPePe, Rocca de Piro, Valtellina Superiore Grumello Riserva 2004 ★★★★★ (17.5)

Candied-violet aroma, with orange peel, strawberry and redcurrant. Now to 2014. **N/A UK; www.arpepe.com**

Nera, Valtellina Superiore Sforzato 2004 ★★★★★ (17.5)

Stewed-berry nose; explodes in the mouth with cherry and cassis. Now to 2015. **£27.46–£27.99 (2003); Evy, ITD**

Conti Sertoli Salis, Corte della Meridiana, Valtellina Superiore Riserva 2004 ★★★★★ (17)

Earthy aroma of coffee and prunes. Ripe blackberries and cassis. Now to 2013. **£24.99; ITD**

Nobili, Inferno, Valtellina Superiore 2005 ★★★★★ (17)

Cherry and cranberry nose, with intense ripe berries on palate. Leathery finish. Now to 2013. **N/A UK; www.vininobili.it**

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