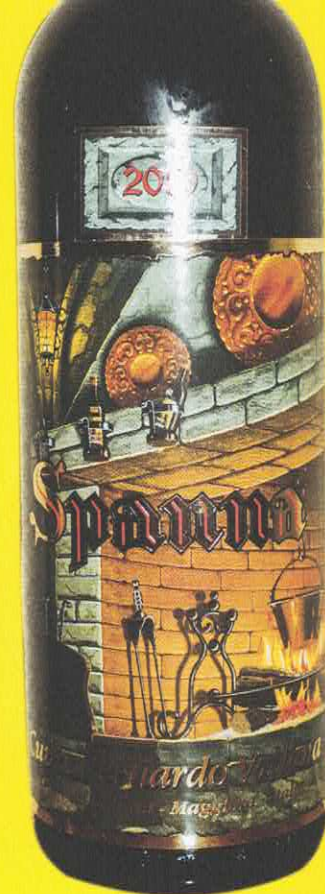


SPANNA IN THE WORKS

Alto Piemonte's Gattinara makes Spanna – AKA
Nebbiolo – that should be on every wino's radar



In André Simon's classic *Wines of the World* (1967) he describes a wine made from Nebbiolo as "the greatest of all Italian red wines". Any wino today would presume he was talking about Barolo, but that's not it. "Tends to be lighter in colour than Barolo and rather more elegant in style", he continued. Barbaresco, perhaps? Wrong again; Simon was talking about Gattinara.

Some might have taken issue with the word Nebbiolo: 100 miles northeast of the Langhe in Alto Piemonte where Gattinara is located, they prefer calling it Spanna. But nobody would have been shocked at the idea that Gattinara was superior to Barolo and Barbaresco. The town's long-standing reputation developed over the centuries since Roman times and was enshrined in an official classification of its vineyards as far back as 1533. But among the many producers making Gattinara in its 1950s/60s heyday, none were as revered as Bernardo Vallana, who took over his father's Cantine Antonio Vallana and bottled the best 10% of his annual production as single-vineyard crus with spectacularly kitsch labels.

Vallana was among the first Italian *cantine* to export its production after the Second World War, and its finest wines were labelled simply 'Vino Spanna' and the name of their individual crus. 'Castello di Montalbano' and 'Traversagna' were from neighbouring Boca DOC, while 'Campi Raudii' and 'Castello di San Lorenzo' – Bernardo's favourite – came from the town of Gattinara itself. All were adorned with uber-stylised labels every bit as effective as the colourful spaghetti western film posters of the time. After Gattinara's official appellation *denominazione di origine controllata* (DOC) was ratified in 1967 (later upgraded to DOCG in

1990) new laws unfortunately outlawed most proprietary names and thus its killer branding. But if you look hard enough, you can still find bottles of rich, beautifully fragrant mature beauties such as 1958 'Castello di San Lorenzo' and 1961 'Campi Raudii' in well-stocked cellars – sometimes including Noble Rot's own – that echo back to another era.

But all good things come to an end. As memories of top vintages such as '52, '55, '58, '61, '67 and '68 began to fade, Gattinara gradually slipped into obscurity. Bernardo Vallana's fall from grace had been more immediate, perhaps expediated by the tragic death of his teenage son. Whatever the cause, a profound change in winemaking happened in the early 1970s, as lamented by wine writer Sheldon Wasserman. "Whatever he did, the wines were magnificent; today they are a mere shadow of their former glory", he wrote in *Italy's Noble Red Wines*. Instead the baton passed to Bernardo's daughter Giuseppina and her English husband Guy Fogarty, who made the wine until his death in 1996, following which their children Francis and Marina have been in charge.

Giuseppina is still present, and on a recent visit enthusiastically guided us around the labyrinthine – and in some places eerily derelict – winery. It's a place that seems frozen in time. In one cellar I ask Giuseppina about a cache of dust-encrusted old bottles, but she's unsure of their provenance. "They've been there since I was a girl," she says, shrugging her shoulders. The same is true of box upon box of faded documents, old labels and neck tags, not to mention the décor and furniture, all of which add to the eccentric retro-charm of the place while emphasising the feeling of bygone halcyon days.

Left, above: Cantine Vallana. Below: Gattinara town

Francis and Marina continue to use some traditional methods – hand harvesting, fermentation and maturation in concrete tank – but for me it is the quality and excitement of those great mid-20th-century bottles that sets Vallana apart.

In the centre of Gattinara town is another winery with one foot in the past: Azienda Marco Petterino. Farming just 2.5ha to make only one wine, a soulful Gattinara Riserva full of roses and dark cherries with a ferrous mineral backbone, the monastic tendencies of septuagenarian brothers Marco and Giancarlo Petterino may explain why their wines aren't better known. Indeed, they have never even left Gattinara, "or even seen the sea", as our translator tells us, forgoing marriage and children to dedicate themselves to wine. The tiny winery is a couple of rooms underneath their house, with a staircase into the cellar so narrow that the *botti* had to be assembled piece-by-piece inside. The wine is bottled after maturing in these hundred-year-old barrels for three years, then released after a decade, and ranks alongside that of Mauro Franchino (a fellow traditionalist who also makes just one cuvée) as the best old-school expression of Gattinara. Two of the town's larger *cantine*, Travaglini (the DOC's largest landowner) and Antoniolo (famed for its 'Osso San Grato' Riserva), have been more proactive in spreading the message further afield with their contemporary-styled Nebbiolos, though Gattinara remains a relatively niche proposition everywhere.

Despite modern wine drinkers ignoring Gattinara for decades, geologists have started paying closer attention to the 95ha of sub-Alpine hillsides overlooking the town (most of which are Nebbiolo, which must represent a minimum of 90% of any blend, though the wines



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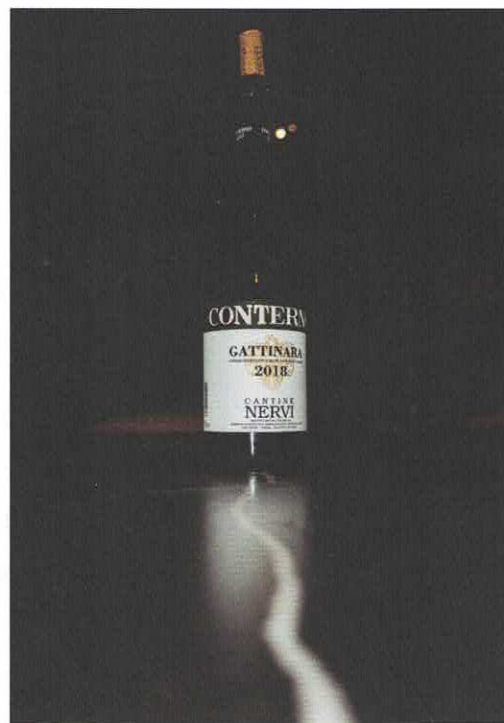
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can include up to 10% Bonarda and 4% Vespolina). The area's distinctive geology, declared a UNESCO geopark, was formed 280 million years ago when the Valsesia supervolcano imploded. Two-hundred and twenty million years later, mineral-rich volcanic earth was churned to the surface when the African and European tectonic plates collided, exposing clay-rich acidic soils laced with iron, manganese, zinc and copper – perfect for growing Nebbiolo for long-lived wines with fine tannins. It is also one of the main reasons behind the arrival of Roberto Conterno of Giacomo Conterno – one of Barolo's great winemaking families – who is reigniting interest in Gattinara at Cantina Nervi.

"Gattinara was waiting to be refreshed, rather than rediscovered, so when the opportunity arose I took it," says Roberto at Nervi's James Bond-style modern winery. That opportunity came in 2011 when Norwegian banker Erling Astrup purchased Luigi Nervi, a once-great estate that rivalled Antonio Vallana during the postwar era, and hired Conterno to analyse the vineyards and old vintages in the winery's cellar. Conterno concluded "it would be impossible *not* to make great wine here", becoming so enamoured that he did a deal to buy it from Astrup in 2018. Roberto describes the 2018s as his first "fully Conterno" releases: a delicate regular Gattinara, and single-vineyard bottlings 'Molsino', which is deep and concentrated, and the silken 'Valferana'. They are sumptuous wines with incredibly fine tannins. "All thanks to the volcanic soil," says Conterno. This terroir was responsible for the wines that inspired André Simon's acclaim of Gattinara and, with many classic regions now priced out of reach for ordinary drinkers, its products should be back on every wine explorer's shopping list.

Rotters' Gattinara

1. Marco Petterino, Gattinara Riserva 2010
2. Mauro Franchino, Gattinara 2017
3. Antonio Vallana, 'Spanna di Castello di San Lorenzo' 1958
4. Nervi-Conterno, Gattinara 'Valferana' 2018
5. Antoniolo, Gattinara Riserva 'Osso San Grato' 2015



Left, top: Giuseppina Vallana Fogarty on a tour.
Left, middle: Roberto Conterno, Nervi. Left, bottom:
Marco and Giancarlo Petterino. Above: 2018 Nervi Gattinara