

FOLKLORE

Bittersweet
ELIXIR

Made from secret recipes a few barrels at a time, Barolo Chinato is a delicious wintertime sipper.

*Story and inside photos
by Patricia Thomson*

Photography courtesy of Stefano Buttafoco

A

fter-dinner drinks are hardly the fashion these days, but Barolo Chinato is enjoying a moment. A

bittersweet digestive produced in Piedmont since the late 1800s, it's riding high on Barolo's popularity. It satisfies the yen for handcrafted products, being made a few barrels at a time by serious winemakers from secret recipes. It's a delicious wintertime sipper and goes great with chocolate. All of which make it a perfect gift for the oenophile in your life—which may mean you!

Vermouth and its progeny

Aromatized wines are as old as wine itself. The Romans empirically understood that botanicals' medicinal properties were best extracted by alcohol, so ancient wine was routinely infused with herbs and spices.

This practice continued in folk medicine to modern times, for both humans and animals. One Barolo producer, Aldo Vaira, remembers

label." Indeed, the soothing yellow flower is among the cornucopia of ingredients found in G.D. Vajra's Barolo Chinato.

The modern history of aromatized wine takes off in 1786 in Turin with the invention of vermouth. In essence, vermouth is a wine that has been fortified, aromatized, and sweetened. Produced on an industrial scale, its consistency is paramount. Thus the wine in vermouth is always of neutral flavor, and vintage variation is avoided. The key to a vermouth's character is its botanicals, and its defining ingredient is wormwood, a bittering agent also used in absinthe.

By the late 1800s, aromatized drinks were all the rage. Coca-Cola was concocted in 1886 by an American pharmacist and briefly sold as a patent medicine. But among the fashionable set in Piedmont, the drink of choice was vermouth or the newly invented Barolo Chinato—"and Barolo Chinato was the most noble of all," says Roberto Bava, whose wine-making family owns Cocchi, the 125-year-old winery that was among its creators.

Giulio Cocchi was a Florentine pastry chef who came to Asti intent on making vermouth. In 1891, he founded his vermouth and sparkling-wine firm and launched a

floating. You touch one duck, and all the other ducks start moving."

Cocchi's version includes over 30 ingredients, including bitter-orange peel, gentian (an alpine flower), Chinese rhubarb, cardamom, and star anise. Some contribute aromatics, others bitterness, and many have proven medicinal properties; quinine, for instance, is one of the world's oldest remedies for fever and malaria. When making chinato, each ingredient is separately crushed and soaked in alcohol, then the alcohol is siphoned off, filtered (or not), and a precise dose goes into each wine barrel. Sugar completes the picture, balancing the bitterness.

Based on the "wine of kings and the king of wines," Barolo Chinato does indeed have noble pedigree. And for awhile, its popularity held. But gradually it was vanquished by the cheaper, more alcoholic category of digestives called amaro (literally *bitter*). Here too quinine is the primary bittering agent, but amaro contains no wine whatsoever; it's simply alcohol, water, sugar, and botanicals.

Barolo Chinato hit bottom in the 1980s. As the prestige of Barolo wine grew, so too the price of its primary ingredient. Meanwhile, mass-produced amaro not only had price on

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assisting with a cow's breech birth as a young veterinary apprentice. "They tied a cord to its leg and slowly pulled. I don't remember any more!" he says with a laugh. The squeamish apprentice was revived with grappa, but they gave the cow and her newborn some wine infused with *tanacetum* (tansy), whose flower is a traditional tonic. "That's why *contadini* used to keep a big bottle of it in the stall," he says. "I believe that, historically, before inventing *amari* for us, they invented it for cows, which were more precious to *contadini* than people back then." For Vaira's own ailments, his mother would dole out homemade Barolo Chinato. "In all families, there was a culture of herbs, the simplest being chamomile," says the winemaker. "That's why I wanted it on the

franchise of Cocchi Bars that extended from Turin to Savona. Along the way, he tried something new: Instead of using neutral wine as his base, he reached for Piedmont's very best: Barolo. And instead of wormwood, he used *cinchona calisaya* root—*china* in Italian, quinine in English.

Cocchi's Barolo Chinato still follows the original recipe, a tattered handwritten page that's kept under lock and key. "Normally for recipes of aromatized wines, the older they are, the more complex they are," says Bava. "Everybody can get a formula from a book. But the secret is the savoir faire. Combine mint and rhubarb, and you get a third flavor. Imagine multiplying all these herbs. It's like a bowl of water when you have something

its side, it had heavy advertising. Even today, brands like Averna, Ramazzotti, and Fernet Branca probably ring a bell, even if you don't know exactly what they are.

Cocchi and chocolate

It was at this moment, in 1979, that Bava purchased Cocchi. While the company's portfolio of vermouth, sparklers, and grappa might have been a smart acquisition, "Barolo Chinato was more of a problem than an opportunity," Roberto Bava recalls.

"There I was, a young producer sleeping over the offices of Giulio Cocchi in Asti," he continues. "I was on the second floor, and the botanicals were down in the cellar. The smell was a sensorial feeling. Can you imagine



A glass of Barolo Chinato, a perfect balance of spice and wine, bitter and sweet.



Cocchi and Cappellano, originators and benchmark examples of Barolo Chinato, with the Castle of Barolo in the background.

ANTICA RICETTA DI GIULIO COCCHI
CASA FONDATA NEL 1891
Massime onorificenze
BAROLO CHINATO
VINO AROMATIZZATO A BASE DI CHINA CALISSAJA
COCCHI
PREPARATO CON BAROLO A DENOMINAZIONE D'ORIGINE CONTROLLATA E GARANTITA
INGREDIENTI: BAROLO, ZUCCHERO, ALCOL, CHINA, INFUSO DI ERBE AROMATICHE, SPEZIE.
VINO AROMATIZZATO
50cl e 1700ATAGO1090 ALCOL 16,5%

CASA FONDATA NEL 1870
CAPPELLANO
VINO AROMATIZZATO
BAROLO CHINATO
Dot. G. CAPPELLANO
VINIFICATO, AROMATIZZATO ED IMBOTTIGLIATO DA CAPPELLANO Dr. GIUSEPPE SNC IN SERRALUNGA D'ALBA - ITALIA
zucchero 18% 17,5%vol

having 100 kilos of anise? 300 kilos of cardamom? In some way, I've been genetically modified by the spices!" But to arrive at his *aha* moment regarding chinato, Bava had to change context.

The occasion was a 1995 tasting Bava helped organize as president of Compagnia del Cioccolato, an Italian chocolate society. (He has a passion for all things fermented: wine, coffee, tea...and chocolate.) The Italian sommelier association had invited him to speak in Assisi, where he paired various chocolates with alcoholic drinks, from moscato passito to single-malt scotch. Bava included Barolo Chinato, not imagining that it would come out on top. But it did, especially paired with chocolate of 55 to 80 percent cacao. "Barolo Chinato was not only fitting; it was doing the 1+1=3. You taste them together, you get synergy," he says. "That's magic." From then on, his marketing strategy was set.

Cappellano, the master

Another believer in chinato's magic is Augusto Cappellano, heir to the other original recipe still in production. (No one knows which came first.) While Cocchi's was devised by a confectioner, Cappellano's was

Piedmont to reestablish the winery on new ground. He had nothing, other than that recipe in his pocket.

Teobaldo became a revered Barolo producer, but also worked hard to rekindle the reputation of Barolo Chinato. Augusto witnessed the difficulty. "I remember when I was a child, around 1980, Barolo Chinato was absolutely forgotten. My father continued to make it in tiny quantities. The requests were so small that, when someone would ask for a bottle, my father would send me down to the cellar to bottle one bottle. It was very entertaining, because we used the old technique." He pantomimes sucking the end of a tube, as if siphoning wine from a barrel. "I would always mess up! By the time I was done, my head would be spinning."

Nonetheless, Augusto's first adult responsibility was making the chinato. "I like Barolo Chinato very much because I love chemistry," his major in school. He displays a metal pestle the size of a billy club which he uses to crush the thirty-some spices, herbs and barks.

"My approach to the recipe is almost religious," says the winemaker, who remains faithful to the handwritten notes passed down through the generations. "I'm full of

Conterno, who passed away with his family's Barolo Chinato recipe locked in his head.

Aldo Vaira remembers Conterno's chinato with nostalgia: "In 1986, there was a bad hailstorm, which destroyed the vines. The next day I was desperate and went to see Aldo Conterno. He didn't offer me a beer or a Coke. He offered me a glass of Barolo Chinato. That is to say, it was a *cosa della famiglia*—something of the family. It was the maximum he could give, which was a beautiful thing."

That's part of its appeal: Barolo Chinato is familial, made a barrel or two at a time, and not necessarily commercialized, but kept for friends, family, and close patrons.

It was only this year, for instance, that Fratelli Alessandria started including their Barolo Chinato—made since 2008—on the winery brochure. Though part of the new wave of chinato producers in the Langhe, their recipe is a legacy. Founded in 1870, Fratelli Alessandria is one of the oldest wineries in Barolo. Going through some papers, the winemaker's mother discovered a recipe for Barolo Chinato that probably dates from the late 1800s. "My grandmother was an elementary school teacher, and she liked to take notes," says Vittore Alessandria. "We found,

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invented by a pharmacist, Augusto's great uncle Giuseppe Cappellano, who inherited the Cappellano winery in Serralunga with his brother, Giovanni. This recipe, dating from the late 1800s, is characterized by the scent of anise and, not surprisingly, is less sweet than the pastry chef's.

It enabled Augusto's father, Teobaldo, to restart the Cappellano winery from scratch. The original property had been dispersed after the death of Giovanni and Giuseppe. Teobaldo's father went to Ethiopia in the army and stayed there to raise his family. As an adult in the 1960s, Teobaldo returned to

respect for the research, the choices, the experimentation of my great uncle. Every spice has its own contribution. You enter into an area between chemistry and alchemy, a place that's almost magical."

Today Cappellano's is considered the benchmark Barolo Chinato. Giuseppe Cappellano, whose sepia portrait hangs overhead, should be proud.

A family thing

Augusto is lucky his ancestors wrote down the recipe. Others did not, like Victor Zabaldano (another originator) and Aldo

like, 35 different spices."

This was the push they needed. No one in the family particularly liked grappa, and Vittore was chagrined about seeing so much limoncello—an interloper from southern Italy—sold locally. So they fatefully stepped into the magical world of Piedmont's noble digestive. Today, Vittore says, "sales are going quite well. The interest is still alive. And so we are going on."

Patricia Thomson (@dolcetours) splits her time between Brooklyn and Piedmont. When she's not writing about wine, she's running wine tours through her company, La Dolce Vita Wine Tours.



Augusto Cappellano with his great uncle, pharmacist and Barolo Chinato inventor Giuseppe Cappellano.

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