

Dogliani – devoted to Dolcetto

It's often afforded only passing attention as the gentle cousin of Piedmont's more statuesque reds, but Dolcetto finds its spiritual home in one small region where wines of substance and cellaring potential are produced. Tom Hyland investigates the Dogliani difference



PECCHENINO
2015
san Luigi
Dogliani

Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita
Prodotto dall'Azienda Agricola Pecchenino
Dogliani - Italia - Prodotto in Italia

THE TOWN OF Dogliani, situated about 16km south of the Barolo zone, is a quaint hamlet of about 5,000 inhabitants. Known to tourists for its classically styled duomo and strikingly beautiful cupola, Dogliani also has a special significance for wine lovers, as it is the epicentre for the finest examples of Dolcetto in the Piedmont region – wines that often tower above their competition and are evidence that remarkable, even ageworthy wines made from the Dolcetto variety do exist.

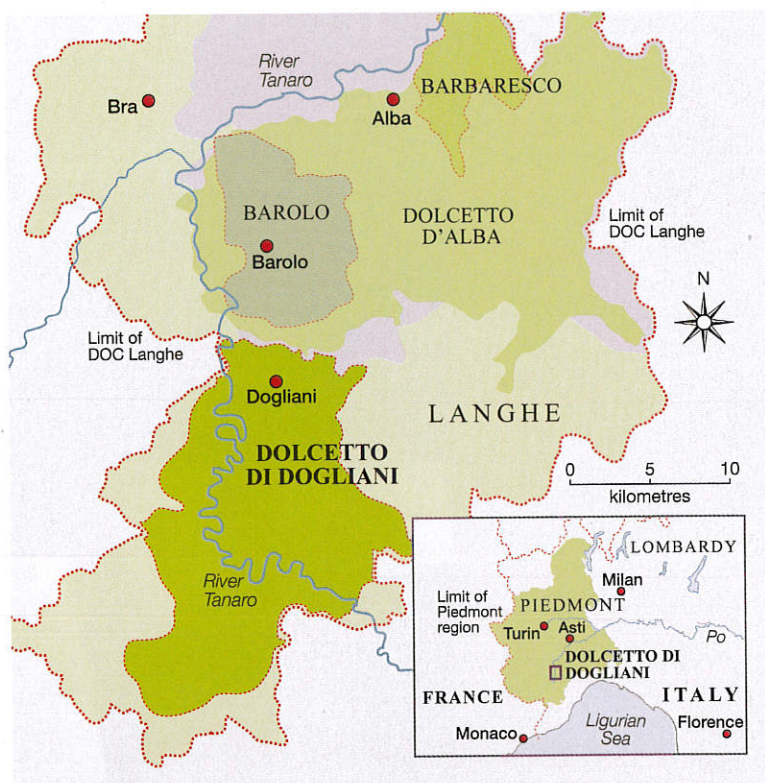
In the southern sector of Piedmont, there are seven DOC and DOCG designations that produce Dolcetto, including Dolcetto d'Alba, Dolcetto di Ovada and Dolcetto d'Acqui. While variations exist – the Ovada wines are often matured in wood, while others are generally stainless steel-aged – most examples of Dolcetto are notable for their tasty berry fruit, good acidity and moderate tannins; in other words, pleasing wines for short-term consumption.

But examine Dolcetto from the Dogliani zone and you experience wines that have deeper colour, more complex aromas and often greater varietal purity, as well as a more refined structure, rendering them as wines that offer ideal complexity and freshness, sometimes even after a decade. The producers are so proud of these wines that the finest superiore examples – having a slightly higher level of alcohol and aged longer – are now labelled simply as Dogliani; the term Dolcetto di Dogliani remains as an approved term for the zone's entry-level wines. Thus the word Dogliani now has a similar association in Piedmont as Barolo and Barbaresco; just as those wines are produced exclusively from one variety (Nebbiolo), the term Dogliani refers to a 100% Dolcetto from a specific zone.

Easy on the oak

As to why this territory so close to Barolo is planted to Dolcetto, not Nebbiolo, the main reason is to do with the local topography, according to Nicoletta Bocca, proprietor and winemaker at San Fereolo, one of the area's most prominent producers. The territory is wide open, with most vineyards situated at elevations of 320m-560m above sea level, leaving the vines exposed to strong winds. 'There is much more wind in Dogliani than in the Barolo zone,' says Bocca. 'For Nebbiolo to grow well, it must be protected from the wind. But Dolcetto grows well in these conditions.'

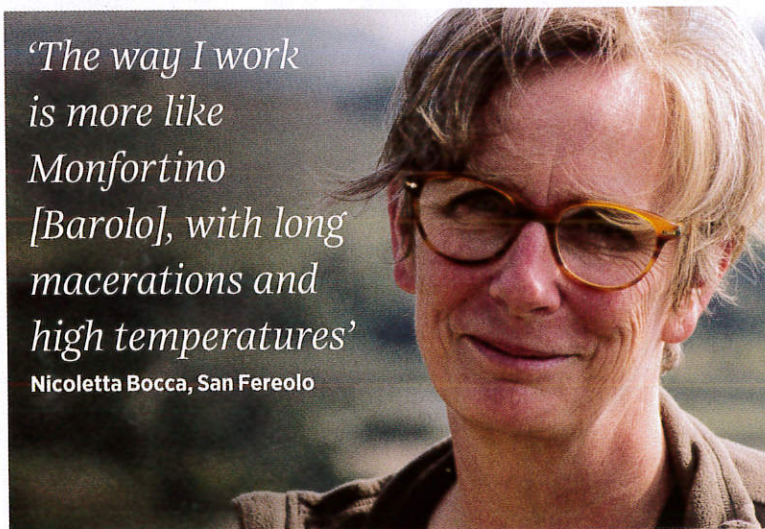
Planting near the top of hills, known as *sori*,



Photograph: Tom Hyland/Cephas. Map: Maggie Nelson

*'The way I work
is more like
Monfortino
[Barolo], with long
macerations and
high temperatures'*

Nicoletta Bocca, San Fereolo



is also an important factor, as this results in wines with more expressive perfumes and deeper structure. The vineyards of Francesco Boschis that are used for the firm's Sori San Martino bottling are located at some 520m elevation and were planted in 1945; offering intensely fruity aromas, this wine is among Dogliani's finest expressions, year-in, year-out.

Most producers release two or three wines each year; lighter versions are made from younger vines and are almost always steel- or cement-aged; while the more formidable Dogliani Superiore are often from older vineyards, with a few also aged in wood. On the subject of which ageing vessels should ➤

Left: Dogliani wines typically have deeper colour, more complex aromas and a more refined structure than other Dolcettos

be used, Orlando Pecchenino, of the eponymous winery in the San Luigi sub-zone, varies his approach – his San Luigi offering is steel-aged while his Sirì d'Jermu is matured in large oak casks. 'If you use wood,' he says, 'it has to be non-toasted to preserve the fruit aromas. We tried ageing the wine in barrique but it didn't work, as the tannins from the wood were too strong.'

Sweet irony

While the area's producers continue with their efforts, they realise they face an uphill battle in the marketplace; the principal reason is highly ironic, as it has to do with the word Dolcetto itself. Literally meaning 'little sweet one' in Italian, Dolcetto has a difficult time being taken seriously by some journalists and consumers. The sweetness of Dolcetto refers to the appealing black raspberry and cranberry fruit, and not the finish of the wine; as the tannins of Dolcetto are inside the seeds, and not the skins as with Nebbiolo, you don't feel the tannins – thus the 'sweet' sensation.

Dolcetto has also had to fight the insipid

comparison with Beaujolais, the implication being that neither has good ageing potential. Bocca's top-of-the-line 2007 and 2008 San Fereolo are still in great shape, and promise five to seven more years of drinkability. Yet she discounts the suggestion that she is the only one who can or does produce ageworthy Dogliani. 'I think everyone can do it,' she states. 'It's more about being unafraid of the tannins, and it's related to the way you vinify. It's also linked to the perfect balance of the soil we have and the climate being open to the mountains, as the breezes allow the grapes to ripen more consistently in the hot summers.'

The soil composition has much to do with producing a wine with ideal structure. While much of the Dogliani zone comprises clay and marl, which promotes stronger tannins, the San Luigi sub-zone has more sandy soils, resulting in more perfumed, but less tannic wines – the Pecchenino San Luigi bottling is a model of the charm and grace of a stellar Dogliani. As Bocca's estate vineyards do promote firm tannins, she vinifies with an eye on ageworthiness. 'The way I work is more like Monfortino [the famed Barolo from Serralunga d'Alba],' she says, 'with long macerations and high temperatures. You can extract certain things. You lose part of the fruit, but then you achieve a wine that can age and develop.'

Close to the land

Is the future bright for Dogliani? Anna Maria Abbona, a leading producer, notes that while Italian journalists often write about Dogliani, as it is a part of Piedmont's history, 'foreign journalists tend to concentrate on only Barolo and Barbaresco'. Forlornly, she adds: 'Many ➤

Dogliani: a note on vintages

Because of the different tannic structure that typifies Dolcetto, the grapes must be very ripe – if underripe, they will have green tannins. In 2013 and especially 2015, ripeness was not a problem, so these recent vintages are prime candidates for ageing. For now, the majority of the finest Dogliani Superiore 2015s have yet to be released, so seek out the 2013s, as these wines display excellent structure. As for 2014, the acidity is there, but as it was a cold, rainy year, the wines, while attractively styled, are generally not as complex as these other two vintages.

'We tried ageing the wine in barrique but it didn't work, as the tannins from the wood were too strong'

Orlando Pecchenino



don't even know the difference between Dolcetto from Acqui and from Dogliani.'

Bocca believes Dogliani will continue to be successful, thanks to the closeness and humility of its vintners. 'We have always had small producers in Dogliani, not companies or an individual that owned a lot of land. This is important, because everybody was in charge of a piece of land – they were not servants. This family tradition keeps the wine alive.'

Abbona agrees: 'Dogliani is an expression of one land, of a love emerging from a wine when it seems that the market doesn't want to accept it. We define resistance; the producers of Dogliani are truly special people.' **D**

Tom Hyland is a Chicago-based author and educator specialising in Italian wines. His latest book is The Wines and Foods of Piemonte

'We define resistance; the producers of Dogliani are truly special people'

Anna Maria Abbona



Photograph: Tom Hyland/Cephas

Hyland's picks: 10 best Dolcettos from Dogliani



Francesco Boschis, Sori San Martino, Dogliani Superiore, Piedmont 2013 94

£13 A&B Vintners, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Philglas & Swiggo

From vines planted in 1945. Ripe red cherry, cranberry and red poppy aromas; super-ripe but great balance, excellent persistence and beautiful structure. Great

typicity. **Drink** 2022-2028 **Alcohol** 13.5%

San Fereolo, Dogliani Superiore, Piedmont 2007 94

N/A UK www.sanferoelo.com

This wine is arguably the longest-lived of all Dogliani. Distinctive aromas of eucalyptus, red cherry and red pepper. Great freshness, excellent concentration with persistence and harmony. Sleek tannins and good acidity, superb varietal purity. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 14.5%



Anna Maria Abbona, Maioli, Dogliani Superiore, Piedmont 2013 93

N/A UK www.annamariabbona.it

Produced from vines planted in 1936. Aromas of black raspberry, cranberry and lavender. Medium-full style with excellent structure and backbone, varietal purity and outstanding persistence.

Drink 2020-2028 **Alc** 14.5%

Cascina Corte, Pirochetta Vecchie Vigne, Dogliani Superiore, Piedmont 2013 93

N/A UK www.cacinacorte.it

Distinctive aromas of raspberry, anise seed and talcum powder. Elegantly styled, medium-bodied with great persistence and structure. So clean, with ultra-fine tannins. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

Pecchenino, San Luigi, Dogliani, Piedmont 2015 93

£14 Oddbins, Winetraders

One of Dogliani's defining producers. Exquisite red plum, cranberry and lavender aromas. Sweet fruit, ideal ripeness, medium-weight tannins, good persistence. **Drink** 2018-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

Gillardi, Cursalet, Dogliani, Piedmont 2013 92

£16 Ester Wines

From 100-year-old vines, a ripe, robust style of Dogliani with black plum and myrtle perfumes. Impressive depth of fruit, good acidity, notes of black olive in the finish. A bit atypical, but well made.

Drink 2017-2020 **Alc** 14%

Luigi Einaudi, Vigna Tecc, Dogliani Superiore, Piedmont 2012 92

£16-£19 Lea & Sandeman, TryWines, Vinexus, Vini Italiani

60- to 70-year-old vines form a cru in the San Luigi zone. Ripe black cherry, wild strawberry and birch bark aromas.

Medium-full, good ripeness, excellent persistence, elegant tannins and fine typicity. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 14.5%



Marziano Abbona, Papà Celso, Dogliani, Piedmont 2014 92

POA *For the Love of Wine*

One of Dogliani's most celebrated bottlings. Ripe black plum and red poppy aromas. Rich mid-palate, excellent complexity and richness on the palate with impressive persistence and

good acidity. **Drink** 2017-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

Chionetti, San Luigi, Dogliani, Piedmont 2015 91

£16.30 Vinumterra

A legendary producer that emphasises Dolcetto's appealing fruit. Cranberry and red rose aromas. Medium-bodied, juicy and succulent, showing lovely balance with a round, soft finish. Simple, tasty pleasure. **Drink** 2017-2020 **Alc** 14%

San Fereolo, Valdibà, Dogliani, Piedmont 2015 90

N/A UK www.sanferoelo.com

The entry-level Dogliani from this great producer. Red plum, strawberry and carnation perfumes. Rounded tannins, juicy finish. **Drink** 2017-2022 **Alc** 14%

For full details of UK stockists, see p104