

Sep 24 08:00 | by Andrew Jefford | [Comments \(3\)](#)

Jefford on Monday: Enigma Variations

[Like](#) 1 [Tweet](#) 3 [g+](#) 0 [Share](#) 4

As I took a few pictures (like the one below), I felt puzzled. I tasted some of the wines from these hillsides, and the puzzle deepened to intrigue. A few emails later, and I understand a little more. It's a story of the astonishingly responsive relationship that can grow up, over time, between human beings and the land in their care



This is Santo Stefano Belbo in Piedmont's Langhe: magnificent vine-growing hills, as you see. Barbaresco is under 15 kilometres away; Barolo fewer than 25. Land, here in Cesare Pavese's home village, is less expensive than in Barolo or Barbaresco, but not dramatically so; the cost of working the hillside vineyards is just as high. Yet you won't find a single Nebbiolo vine in the landscape above; instead, this village has more Moscato planted than any other commune (around 1,060 ha). A bottle of decent Barolo will set you back €30 or €40; good Moscato d'Asti can be had for under €10. How do the producers here make a living? Why don't they rip out all the Moscato to plant Nebbiolo?

First, there is basic economics. The yields are higher for *Moscato* than they would be for *Barolo* - over double, if you take it to the limit. (The *Moscato* maximum would be around 108 hl/ha, while the maximum for serious *Nebbiolo* would be 50 hl/ha or so.) Further post-fermentation economies are possible, given that *Nebbiolo* requires a variety of storage vessels and plenty of time to relax in them, while freshness is the ideal for almost all *Moscato*. (Some unfermented *Moscato* must have to be refrigerated and stored until required, however.)

Next comes *terroir*. *Nebbiolo*, the locals say, has never been planted here. Why not? That seems almost mysterious. The altitude of the hills here is identical (200 metres to 500 metres); ditto for the meso-climate and range of aspects. A century or more of selection and experiment, though, has convinced growers that that it's the soil which makes the difference. In contrast to the often dense, limey marls which *Nebbiolo* likes, the soils in *Santo Stefano* are finer and sandier, ideal (they say) for drawing out the perfume in *Moscato*.

History plays a role, too. The vineyards here were planted with red varieties in the past: *Barbera* and *Dolcetto*. They outnumbered *Moscato*. Riccardo Bianco of *Azienda Marco Bianco* has one of the few centenarian plots of *Moscato* in the area, planted by his 'crazy' great-grandfather at a time when everyone else favoured red grapes and pastureland. Then, though, came the technical innovations which created the gossamer-light, aromatically pristine *Moscato* of today, with their low alcohol and high sugar levels.

At that point, this land seemed to acquire its uniqueness; other nearby hills, perhaps, could produce better *Barbera* and *Dolcetto*, but none more fragrant *Moscato*. There are surely few examples anywhere in the wine world of varietal aptitude traced out with as much nuance as in the *Langhe* hills of *Piedmont*. Some hills in the region, indeed, carry all four varieties (and others, too) at different spots according to height, aspect and soil type.

Moscato, of course, is one of those wines (like *fino sherry* and much *Champagne*) where truth to type is almost the highest aesthetic goal. It doesn't stop producers trying to push the boundaries: Riccardo Bianco produces the aged *Cané* (a *Moscato* whose 1999 vintage sells at €145); the low-yielding, dryer than usual *Crivella*, from the best vintages only; and, most challengingly of all, *Meramentae*, a *Moscato* 'brut charmat' fermented to dryness, and with some intriguing autolytic notes. Alessandro Boido at *Ca d'Gal* produces a *Vigna Vecchia Moscato*, too.

Didn't they, I wondered, secretly long to make a craggy, tannin-drenched *Nebb* just once in a while? "It would be a risky endeavour," says Riccardo Bianco, "like planting *Moscato* in *Barolo*, where it would be structured but aromatically insignificant. So ... not really. In my DNA I have the love for this land and the *Moscato*, for its freshness and its lightness, its intriguing perfumes and flavours, made in the magical hills of *Pavese*." What a difference a few kilometers can make.