

The Australian

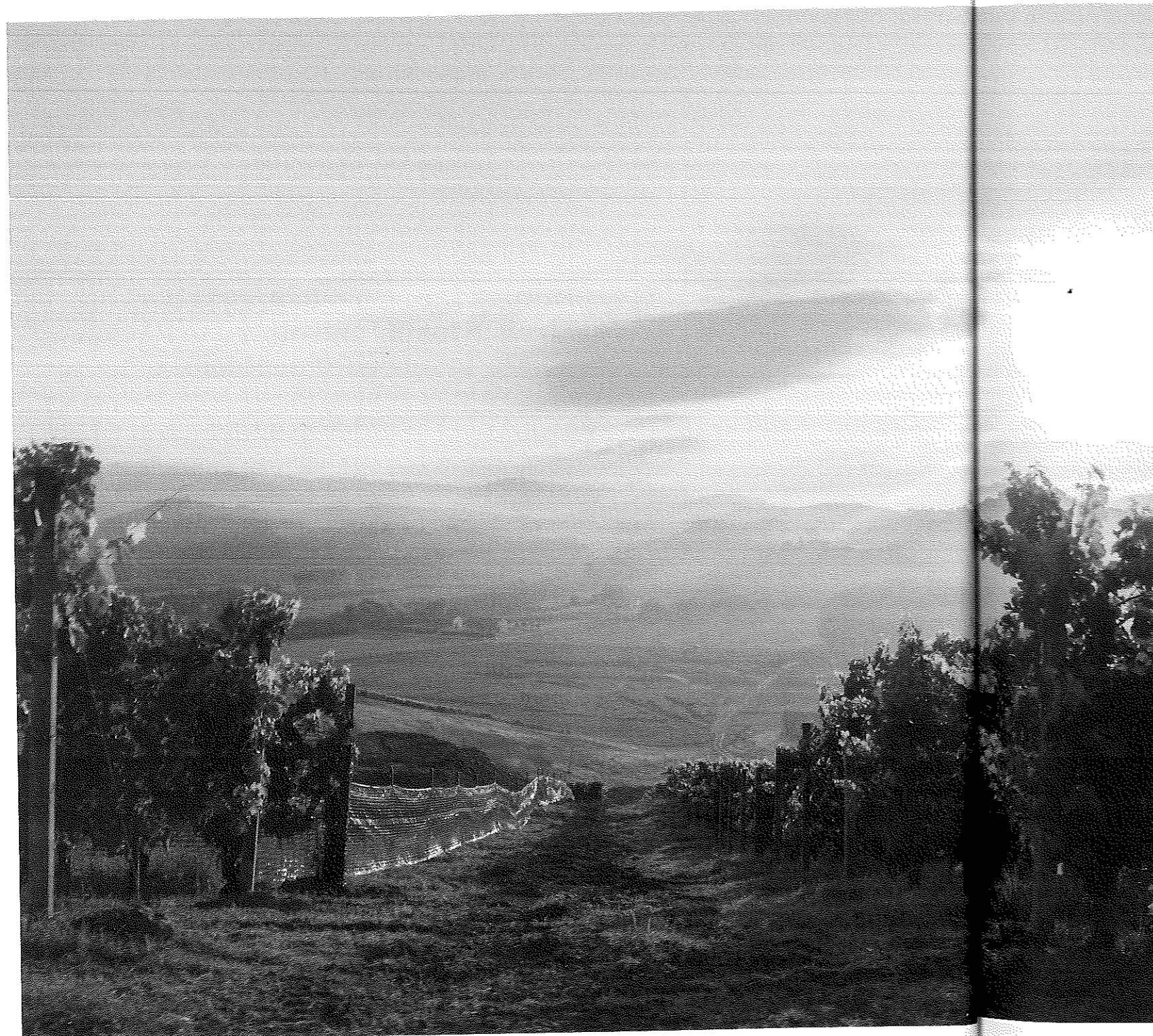
Extraction

In 2012, Dave Fletcher packed up his Australian family and moved to Piedmont in search of nebbiolo.

We take a look at his wines, his experiences and his pets in order to understand what lured him to his new home.

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Author
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Photographer
James Morgan



Trading in the pressures of the concrete jungle for a life of siestas and aperitivos in the Mediterranean is a popular topic for travel journalists and victims of a midlife crisis alike.

The clichéd portrait of a fuchsia hued afternoon—the sun setting over Tuscany with Sophia Lauren peeling grapes to the sound of Luigi Tenco’s voice—is a common fantasy. Though, however sweet the smell of truffle honey may be, the Tuscan sun provides a less glorious glow when viewed from the shoes of an EU economist. Primary manufacturing is continuing its steep decline as European companies pursue cost cutting measures in Eastern Europe and China. Likewise, the EU is being torn apart by the ever declining value of the souvlaki and the paella respectively. Thus begs the question, why on earth would anyone move from Australia to Italy?

Turning his back on economic reason, Dave Fletcher, along with his wife Eleanor and their one-year-old daughter Gigi, made the decision to trade in their Nissan Navarra 4X4 utility van for an Alfa Romeo hatchback. “Italians are confused by our decision to move here, they wonder why an Australian would leave such a beautiful country to come to a place where there are not many job opportunities.”

Born in South Australia, Fletcher defected to Victoria early in his winemaking career. Like many Australian winemakers, his formative years revolved around making wine for strong brands, public

companies and the wine show system. He spent his teenage years filling 2 litre flagons and 21 litre drums of bulk wine for Tinlins of McLaren Vale. A bring-your-own container service, Tinlins is something Fletcher remembers fondly, “One day, I’ll end up back there, when I’m a crusty old man and I’m sick of wine writers ... one day, I’ll be filling flagons again.” After Tinlins, Fletcher completed a formal winemaking qualification at Adelaide University and set about a career path that included a quality wine focus.

Fletcher cites two key mentors as the yin and yang of his past: Nick Walker of O’Leary Walker in the Clare Valley, South Australia and Kevin McCarthy of T’Gallant on the Mornington Peninsula (now part of Treasury Wine Estates, previously Fosters). Nick Walker instilled Fletcher with a sense of urgency and an understanding that every finite detail of the winemaking process matters. According to Fletcher, Walker was “very anal and straight down the line” but Fletcher stopped short of labelling Walker as ‘scientific’. “He tested the wines so many times but that mainly involved tasting, so it would be doing him a disservice to say that he was scientific. It was more about monitoring the details of the wine and understanding where it

was headed." As one of Australia's most age-worthy wine styles, the rieslings of Clare Valley were the perfect platform for Fletcher to learn about wines with tension and acidic focus.

In contrast, Fletcher's other mentor, Kevin McCarthy, had a more emotive approach to winemaking. "He taught me that it was important *not* to be overly scientific about it, that I shouldn't get stuck with everything I learnt at university; he taught me how to feel the wine." McCarthy was quite an unusual character for a corporate winemaking group. He was well travelled and intrigued by fringe winemakers such as Josko Gravener from Friuli in Northern Italy. In 2007, as a winemaker within the Fosters group, McCarthy produced a blended white wine that spent six months on skins. The result, to be known as *Claudius*, was a powerful cloudy wine that predated the current trend for orange wine by four to five years—not typical of a company such as Fosters. McCarthy recollects that Fletcher also had a unique streak. During the 2007 vintage, Fosters were having problems with smoke-tainted fruit from the Strathbogie Ranges in Victoria. McCarthy recalls Fletcher worrying about the quality of the fruit, "he really loved that fruit and he tasted it every day even though he didn't need to. He wanted it to be OK even though it was tainted ... I found it heartening that this new kid cared so much about the fruit."

Understanding the quality of fruit on the vine was something Fletcher developed and refined during his time at Fosters. With a multitude of sub-brands inside Australia and also overseas, Fletcher was responsible for identifying the best fruit, its subsequent harvest time and then allocating it to the appropriate Fosters label. During this time, he also travelled extensively, completing vintages in California, Burgundy and even Kazakhstan. "In California, I spent my time driving nonstop up and down the coast from Santa Barbara to Napa Valley, back and forth. We got to work with some incredible cabernet vineyards around the Stags Leap district." In Kazakhstan, Fletcher held a consulting role for Issyk Winery, an ancient property producing wines from indigenous grapes as well as French and Greek varieties. Whilst it would be easy

to conclude that these were the worst wines Fletcher has ever produced, he is adamant that his university project, a whopping 16.5% alcohol sauvignon blanc from the Adelaide Plains is the worst wine he has ever made. "We were forced to harvest it late because of the timing of university holidays ... it was an achievement to ferment all the sugar into alcohol." Likewise, Fletcher's visit to Burgundy in 2004 provided difficult natural conditions; the vintage suffered from too much rain. Red burgundy from 2004 commonly displays green aromas such as tomato stalk. Whilst Fletcher wasn't enthralled with the quality of the fruit from the vintage, he recalls the visit as his first opportunity to be "amongst the vineyards of the greats."

In 2007, Fletcher spent six months living in Alba in Northern Italy, making wine with Ceretto Winery. During this time he built a strong rapport with head winemaker, Alessandro Ceretto. Whilst the winemakers in Piedmont are generally traditional and conservative in nature, Alessandro Ceretto is an open-minded, cocky livewire inspired by biodynamics and the teachings of Rudolph Steiner. Speaking of Ceretto, Fletcher says, "He is crazy! I think he is turning me into a Budhist." Fletcher's pragmatic New World perspective was something that proved valuable to Ceretto, so much so, that five years later he offered Fletcher the role of assistant winemaker in the family business. Inspired by nebbiolo and the soils that Ceretto Winery had access to, Fletcher accepted the offer. His wife Eleanor, a lawyer by training, supported his decision and within four months, they had relocated to Piedmont with their infant daughter. Ironically, as part of the relocation Fletcher needed to find a new home for his black Labrador named Cannubi—after Fletcher's favourite nebbiolo producing vineyard. Widely considered to be a benchmark vineyard, Cannubi is a parcel of land located near the township of Barolo. According to Fletcher, "It is a great mix between the soils from the communes of La Morra and Serralunga. The mixture of clay and sand produces wines that are full of so much elegance, power and strength that they can age a very long time." Unsurprisingly, Fletcher's endgame is to make his own wine from Cannubi fruit and thanks to his current position at

044.9597° N 007.9194° E Piedmont Coordinates

Piedmont

Country. Italy

Capital. Turin

Area. 25,402 square kilometres

Population. 4.4 million (30.11.2010)

Dialect. Piemontese

GDP—Nominal. €127.0 billion (2008)

— Per capita. €28,500 (2008)

Geography.

The geography of Piedmont is 43.3% mountainous, along with extensive areas of hills (30.3%) and plains (26.4%). Piedmont is the second largest of Italy's 20 regions, after Sicily.

Note.

In Piedmont the autumn fog is referred to as *La Nebbia*, which is thought to have inspired the name 'nebbiolo'.

The Piedmont town of Alba is home to the largest white truffle auctions in the world.

Ferrero SpA is located in Piedmont; during hazelnut season the smell of roasted hazelnuts permeates the region.

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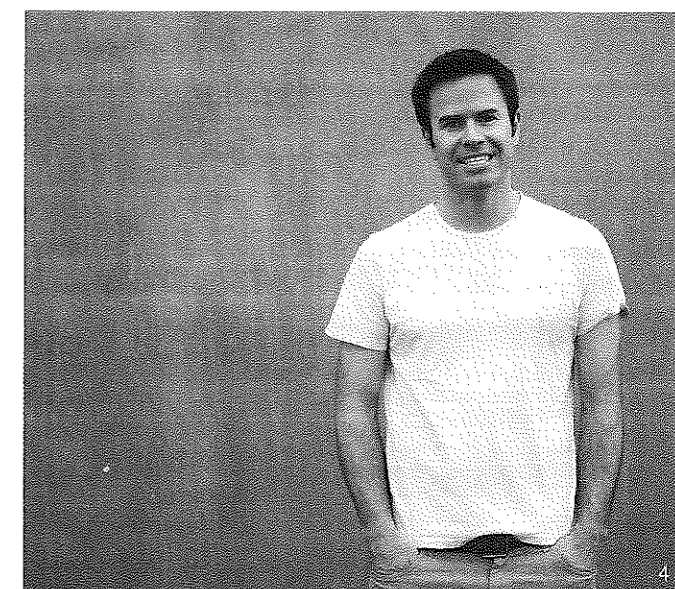
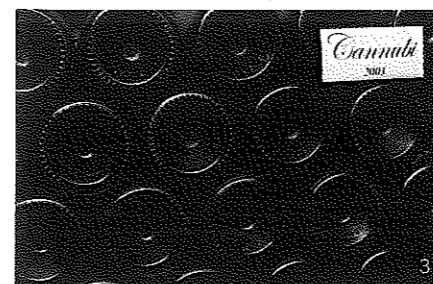
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- 2 'The Berry', Ceretto Winery
- 3 Cannubi 2003 bottles
- 4 Dave Fletcher





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5 The barrel room, Ceretto Winery
6 Barolo from the cellar

the Ceretto Winery, he is closer to that goal than he has ever been before. "I'm in the position where I have the support of the Ceretto family. I can make my private wines using their facilities. As a result, the capital outlay is far lower than it would be to run your own business in other industries."

Under his own label, *Fletcher Wines*, Fletcher produces wines in both Australia and Italy, solely from the nebbiolo grape. Working with only one grape has allowed Fletcher to better understand its idiosyncrasies and ultimately, to produce a better product. His first vintage of Italian nebbiolo was made from barbaresco fruit at the Ca du Rabaja Winery. Fruit for his Australian nebbiolo is sourced from the Malakoff vineyard in the Victorian Pyrenees and from the Ann Lees vineyard in the Adelaide Hills of South Australia. Whilst a few producers make nebbiolo in Australia, Italians are not enthralled by the idea; to them it is treason. In his experience at tastings in Italy, Fletcher indicates that when the topic shifts to nebbiolo produced abroad, Italians "tend to become pretty disinterested and change the subject very quickly. Some of the winemakers are intrigued to know what it tastes like but no one really cares."

Fletcher takes a consistent approach to all of his winemaking, which in turn allows the particular region, season and climate to express itself in the glass. As an extremely thick-skinned grape, crafting elegant wines from nebbiolo requires careful handling of the skins to ensure a deeply flavourful wine without offensively mouth puckering tannins. Akin to the modern producers of barolo such as Renato Ratti and Paolo Scavino, Fletcher's fermentation and maceration process generally takes around 7 to 10 days. This approach results in a wine that is more welcoming when it is young. The tannins are softer and lesser in volume and the aromas tend to blossom earlier. The alternative approach (known in Italy as the traditional approach) involves an extended skin contact period of 25 to 30 days.

The traditional approach is practiced by wineries such as Poderi Aldo Conterno and the areas oldest co-operative, Produttori del Barbaresco. The extended maceration greatly increases the volume of tannin but this is offset by a different

style of tannin. When maceration is carried out over a longer period of time, the tannin compounds bind together and provide a different mouth feel. Whilst each of the modern and traditional styles have their respective charms, Fletcher's use of the modern approach has undoubtedly assisted his sales within the Australian market, which generally prefers soft and juicy wines. His permanent move to Italy has forced Fletcher to place a temporary hold on his Australian nebbiolo production. The flipside is that he will spend more time understanding the established vineyards and crus of Piedmont. "It is great to be in an area that is so specific to the variety, you can start to hone your understanding of the soil types and how they affect the wines."

It would be easy to suggest that Fletcher's decision to relocate to Italy was in pursuit of pure nebbiolo and yes, in part it was. However, there was so much more at play. It was a lifestyle change: a decision to accept excellent espresso in spite of frothy bubble bath milk based coffees, a decision to love Italian wines because the bottle stores don't really sell much else, a decision to teach his young daughter Italian because all the schools teach in Italian. Of course, all these decisions come with subsequent realizations: learning that no wine should be consumed without food in close proximity, finding that Italians gesticulate when they are happy, when they are sad and when they aren't quite sure how they feel, learning that terroir is as much about the people living on the land as it is about the grapes that express it and discovering that Penfolds really is a good name for a dog when you are homesick. A



Fletcher Wines, *Per Ella*
Sparkling Nebbiolo 2010

The wine is surprisingly deep in colour considering its young age. The bright lemon core fades to a pale watery rim. Autolytic aromas of digestive biscuits confirm the three years on lees. Fruity aromas of roasted pineapple, Meyer lemon rind and pink grapefruit come from the glass. The palate is bone dry and much leaner than the aromas suggest. Flavours of lime sherbet and chalk are assisted by that of a creamy mousse. The wine displays a savoury finish. 11.5% abv

Fletcher Wines,
Pyrenees 2010

Bright ruby in colour fading to a burnt orange rim. Aromas of blackberries and violets lead the nose, which has a subtle undercurrent of blackcurrant and eucalypt. The palate is sweetly fruited on entry and echoes the aromas on the nose. The tannins are subtle but short and fat, quenching the fruit. Drink now or within five years. 13.5% abv

Fletcher Wines, *The Minion*
Nebbiolo 2011 Victoria

The grapes are sourced from secret sites across Victoria. The blend will change each vintage with a focus on drinkability. The aromas are fruit focused: ripe cherries, raspberry and blackberry yoghurt. The palate has slight twiggy and sappy notes. Acid driven, there is also a slight eucalypt note that sits behind the woody rosemary notes. It holds low tannin for a nebbiolo. The wine is crunchy, fresh and ready now. 13% abv.

Fletcher Wines,
Barbaresco 2009 (left)

The first wine that visually looks like typical Old World nebbiolo with a slight garnet hue towards the rim of the glass. The aromatics lead with fennel seed, raspberry and mulled wine spices of clove and star anise. The minerality is chalky. The palate is hallmark nebbiolo; broad and sinewy tannin matched together with fresh and crunchy acidity; ripe and ready now. 14% abv

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