

Fletcher's Barolo laughs

Sometimes it's who you know. Piedmont may draw many a wishful Australian winemaker, but the fruit to produce a top-flight nebbiolo won't be sold to just any blow-in

You'd be hard pressed to find a famous wine region around the world without at least a handful of flying Australian winemakers. With the vintage done and dusted in Australia, every year thousands pack their bags for a working holiday in wineries dotted around the northern hemisphere. Vintages in great regions and chateaux guarantee hefty bragging rights plus the chance to sharpen skills working with some of the world's top fruit. But sometimes the opportunity to make spectacular wines is just too great and our best are lost to faraway lands for good.

South Australian winemaker Dave Fletcher, now based in northern Italy, had an unglamorous start to the wine game at a young age, helping his older brother cart drums of the stuff from McLaren Vale and delivering them to the suburbs of Adelaide. Unsurprisingly, it was not love at first sight, and Fletcher tried out a number of career options: engineering, banana farming in Queensland and dive mastering in Egypt. But after a few stints working in vineyards and helping out with wine bottling he finally bit the bullet and began his studies toward a winemaking degree.

Typical winemaking gigs in the Clare and Yarra valleys followed, but it was in 2005 that his life changed its course almost overnight, through a single bottle of Italian nebbiolo. Crafted close to Turin, this wine started an obsession that would lead Fletcher some years later to uproot his young family and transport them across the globe on an international vinous pilgrimage.

Of the hundreds of fine wine grapes, Fletcher had chosen possibly the most difficult to tame. While many have planted this famous grape outside of its homeland, it is only in a small pocket of Piedmont in northwestern Italy that nebbiolo shows its brilliant best aromas of tar, rose and cold tea beautifully balanced with the firm tannins and the spine-tingling acidity that make them ripe for long ageing.

Fletcher's first foray into northern Italian life was in 2007, with a string of vintages at the respected house of Ceretto. In 2012 a full-time winemaking position at the same firm became available and his Italian future was sealed. While the role certainly made a move easier, it also fulfilled the dreams that Fletcher and his wife Eleanor, a lawyer, had for a lifestyle change with their two daughters. Curiously, while many winemakers in Australia would see working in northern Italy as a dream job the locals remain a little bemused that an Australian winemaker would leave home for the economically crisis-ravaged Italy.

Once set up, Fletcher's next challenge was to find a space for his winery. A drink with a local producer turned up an old, rundown property for sale: the original railway station of the town of Barbaresco. When it was built, it was on land owned by aristocracy and no expense was spared during the initial construction, making for a grand venue. But the project has not been



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without its challenges, including a long-winded process to secure the property from the government and layers of Italian bureaucracy to negotiate for renovation approvals.

Until the renovations are finished, scheduled for 2016, Fletcher will continue to rent winemaking space as he has since 2009, when he crafted the first vintages. Without any vineyards — the cost of land is almost prohibitive — he sources fruit from various local growers. Unlike in Australia, where grapegrowers will usually sell their fruit to the highest bidder, the prized nebbiolo grapes from the towns of Barolo and Barbaresco are sold on the basis of personal relationships, with outsiders often shut out. Luckily Fletcher's time at Ceretto and friendships he has forged have given him an almost unique opportunity for a foreigner to buy the best fruit and create wines in exceptional regional styles.

In Australia Fletcher also makes quality nebbiolo from the Pyrenees and Adelaide Hills. Through his Australian and Italian wines runs a thread of elegance, understated power and complexity, hallmarks of top-flight nebbiolo. There are also plans for a very untraditional oaked chardonnay and sparkling wines from Italy this year — no doubt bringing more than a touch of Australian style to this hallowed ground. **W**

2012 FLETCHER WINES ADELAIDE HILLS NEBBIOLO

Sourced from one of Australia's oldest parcels of nebbiolo this mid-weight red shows much of the grape's characteristic savoury style fresh acidity, medium weight and plenty of tannins combined with layers of cherry, floral and mulberry fruit. It will improve over the next eight years.

2012 FLETCHER WINES THE MINION NEBBIOLO

Fletcher puts plenty of effort into finding the best parcels he can for his Australian nebbiolos. The 2012 Minion, sourced from the Pyrenees, King and Yarra Valleys, is a dense and savoury style: layers of tar and cold tea aromas with pretty raspberry and spice with plenty of fleshy tannins. It needs another five to eight years to show its best.

2010 FLETCHER WINES BAROLO ALTA PETE

A superb Barolo from a great vintage in an elegant style, it shows classic pot pourri, tarry fruits with lifted red cherry and herbs. Full-bodied, bright and youthful it shows seamless balance of tannins and fruit and will improve in the bottle over the next 15 years.