

HILL CROP
The vineyards of Valtellina, Italy, on slopes so precipitous that some grapes are transported by helicopter or funicular.



EPICUREAN TRAVEL

STEEP IMPACT

As climate change reshapes winemaking around the globe, a hidden valley in the Italian Alps is turning out wines of distinction—in extreme, vertiginous conditions.

BY CHRISTOPHER ROSS PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIANNA GLAVIANO

THIS IS A PLACE where you find man working against nature,” says Danilo Drocco, director of Nino Negri, a 122-year-old winery in the Alpine valley of Valtellina, Italy. “It’s a fight. It’s not normal to work and make wine here.” He downshifts as his car strains to climb the narrow, winding, white-knuckle roads toward Inferno, a sub-zone infamous for its near-vertical incline, rocky soil and blistering heat in summer. There is a phrase for this kind of winemaking in Italy: *viticoltura eroica*, or “heroic viticulture,” founded in the belief that grapes grown in the most extreme places, exposed to the harshest conditions and highest elevations, disclose a special intensity and sublime elegance.

Located in the far north of Italy on the Swiss border, about 60 miles northeast of Milan, Valtellina is home to breathtaking landscapes and a winemaking legacy that dates back to the pre-Roman days of the Etruscans and Ligurians. The fickle Nebbiolo grape—the source of Piedmont’s kingly Barolos and brooding Barbarescos—thrives here, producing wines of bracing freshness and aromatic delicacy. Yet this valley has remained largely hidden, cloistered inside the foreboding, snowcapped Rhaetian Alps, unknown even to many native Italians.

Drocco, 53, spent his career in Piedmont’s hilly Langhe region, making Barolos at top wineries like Fontanafredda, but decided to uproot his life and move to Valtellina this past spring because he believes the future of Nebbiolo is here. Climate change is already beginning to remake the global winegrowing landscape; some regions are being hurt while others, like Valtellina, are helped, as the altitude preserves freshness even as temperatures and ripeness levels rise.

“You can see why they call it hell,” he says, laughing as he points at a vineyard plot baldly exposed to the sun’s rays and so steep as to be almost impassable. A rocky outcropping holds the key to what Drocco says is a cornerstone of Valtellina’s wines. The vines here—many a century old—develop root systems that spider deep underground, eventually tapping into the substrate, or what Drocco calls “the mother rock,” imparting a flinty minerality to the wine. “Every terrace has its own history,” says Drocco. “I like to discern little by little the secret of this valley.”

“**I HOPE YOU ARE NOT** suffering from vertigo,” says Isabella Pelizzatti Perego, a fifth-generation Valtellina winemaker, as she navigates a footpath along the edge of a sharply sloped vineyard during the last weeks of the October harvest. “Otherwise we’re in trouble.”

Even without vertigo, the view at this gusty height, roughly 1,800 feet in elevation, is dizzying. To the right, the terraced vineyards of the Sassella subzone drop precipitously to the city of Sondrio in the valley below. Beneath an immense blue sky, the Adda River flowing through town looks like a glistening silver thread.

Pelizzatti Perego, 49, who runs the winery Arpepe with her brothers, Guido and Emanuele, is one of the reasons the secret of Valtellina is starting to get out. The wines from this 159-year-old family-run estate have become objects of cult adoration in Japan and

the U.S., poured at restaurants like Blue Hill at Stone Barns and Del Posto. The siblings took the business over from their father, Arturo, after his death in 2004. They are among Valtellina’s most traditional producers, employing chestnut barrels for aging and extended periods of maceration of more than 50 days.

Arpepe is best known for its Riserva wines, each produced from Nebbiolo sourced from a single zone—such as Sassella, Grumello or Inferno—and released only in the finest vintages. Demand has surged in recent years, outstripping production and selling out supplies. Volume is limited because in these rugged conditions everything must be done by hand. “People say, ‘You don’t even use a horse?’” says Pelizzatti Perego, gesturing at the hill she’s just descended, where butterflies dart through vines. “Tell me how I could bring a horse up here.”

A giant red funicular zips overhead. Arpepe transports grapes to the winery in cable cars because the steepness makes hauling them on foot or by car too difficult and time-consuming. Nino Negri—Valtellina’s largest producer, whose 2010 Superiore Quadrio landed on *Wine Spectator’s* Top 100 list in 2014—uses a helicopter to move grapes.

The latest harvest is by all accounts an epic one for the region. “People are already talking about the harvest of the century,” says Pelizzatti Perego. A team of pickers—mostly young men, muscular and tan—maneuver their clippers through the vines and drop bunches of grapes into crates. Among the group are off-duty snowboarding instructors and aspiring winemakers, a youthful generation that Isabella is eager to develop. Elsewhere in Valtellina, wineries like Dirupi and La Perla di Marco Triacca represent an up-and-coming class of producers. “It’s so important because it’s the only way to preserve what we have,” says Pelizzatti Perego. “The tradition has been passed down from generation to generation.”

Despite the region’s growing popularity, Pelizzatti Perego worries that the industry is endangered. Up until the 1970s, Valtellina boasted 7,400 acres dedicated to winegrowing; today that number has fallen to around 1,800. Almost all the wine produced in Valtellina was once exported to Switzerland, which granted tax exemptions—until the 1980s, when the agreement fell apart. Subsequently, thousands of acres were abandoned or turned into apple orchards. Today many of the owners of these vineyards, often a fraction of an acre in size, are becoming elderly and are no longer able to tend the vines. Isabella and her brothers buy up vineyards for sale whenever possible. “We’ve lost far too much already,” she says. “We cannot lose any more land.”

Before heading back to the Nino Negri headquarters, Drocco visits an old drying shed on top of a hill. Inside it is dry, dark and cool; racks of uncovered grapes are stacked almost to the ceiling. Through large windows with no shutters, a breeze scented with lavender and rosemary rushes over the grapes, an ancient process of drying known as *appassimento* that concentrates the fruit as moisture dissipates. These grapes are used for Nino Negri’s Sforzato, a style that has been Valtellina’s best-known export, possessing a deep red-cherry richness yet still light on its feet.



SLOPE TO TABLE Clockwise from top left: An Arpepe Sassella poured at Ristorante Trippi; a worker carries grapes on his back; grapes being fed into a destemmer; Arpepe’s fermentation vats.



Outside, Drocco notices a prickly pear cactus, common in sun-drenched Sicily but less so, one might think, on the icy slopes of the Alps. This is one of the paradoxes of Valtellina: Here in the mountains, the valley’s climate is not unlike that of the islands off the coast of North Africa. The Mediterranean climate makes its presence felt in the wines, which betray aromas of balsamic vinegar, figs and dried herbs.

Claudio Alongi, Nino Negri’s other winemaker, descends into the dim cellars that reach four stories underground to taste tank samples and vintages at various stages of fermentation and aging, walking past century-old casks black with age. He steps into a room with dust-covered bottles dating back to 1913 to grab a few recent releases to uncork for visitors.

In every year what he most looks to achieve is typicity—a specific expression of the Nebbiolo grape raised in these conditions, all but impossible to

replicate elsewhere. A 12-year veteran of Nino Negri, Alongi learned the craft from the former winemaker Casimiro Maule, an iconic figure in the region who was instrumental in spreading Valtellina’s wines throughout the world. Maule in turn had learned the craft from Carluccio Negri, who inherited the business from his father, who founded it in 1897.

A sample from 2008, thought to be a difficult vintage, is plush and precise, touched with blackberry and violets. A 2001’s tannins have unwound, showing tertiary notes of rust, tobacco and spice. In a 1999 bottle, the mother rock reveals herself in a smoky minerality that lingers on the palate for minutes. Against the flux of time, these wines are an echo of the land, with each custodian of the vineyards not necessarily making the same wine from decade to decade, but searching for a similarly elusive result: the essence of Valtellina. ●