

# Vallana

Represented exclusively in California by The Rare Wine Co.



What was true then is still so today: for seventy-five years the name Antonio Vallana has meant great *Piemontese* Nebbiolo, yet their extraordinarily complex, long lived wines come not from Barolo or Barbaresco but from the region's other great terroir, the Novara hills of Alto Piemonte.

Here, in the town of Maggiora 100 miles northeast of the Langhe, Antonio's son Bernardo was making Spanna—as Nebbiolo is known in Alto Piemonte—in the late 1950s that took its place easily alongside the wines of Giacomo Conterno and Bartolo Mascarello on the very short list of consistently great Piedmont producers at that time.

Over the next decade or two, Bernardo's wines—bearing *cuvée* names like Montalbano, Cantina del Camino and Spanna del Piemonte—became well known as blue chips for Italian wine collectors in the New York area.

Later, in the 1990s, clients of The Rare Wine Co. got to know Vallana through a series of encyclopedic offers of the legendary wines of the '50s and '60s.

## Reawakening

But this was not the end of Vallana's winemaking story. The family has continued to make not only Spannas, but also Gattinaras and Bocas, each from a particular zone of Alto Piemonte.

Today Antonio Vallana's great-grandchildren Marina and Francis are using many of the same traditional methods and vineyards to fashion wines that would make their ancestors proud: wines of brilliant character that make no concessions to trends, and that are completely true to their place and history.

And, as Vallana was one of our early wine idols, we feel honored to have been appointed the cantina's first-ever importer in California by Francis and Marina.

## Today's Spannas

Francis and Marina make two great Spannas.

The **Spanna normale** is an utterly classic rendering of Alto Piemonte *terroir*. Like the Vallana Spannas of the past, it is traditionally vinified to capture the unique character of the region's unique *terroirs*.

Predominantly Spanna (aka Nebbiolo)—with a dollop of the indigenous Vespolina grape—it provides the hallmark violet and rose bouquet, and is elegantly structured for a long, graceful evolution in bottle.

But Francis and Marina also make a “prestige” Spanna: **Cuvée Bernardo Vallana**, which is a selection of the most concentrated 100% Spanna lots. Vinified and aged longer than the *normale*, it is intended as a very long-lived wine in the mold of the great Vallana Spannas of the past.

For this special bottling, Marina and Francis have chosen the old Spanna Cantina del Camino (Spanna of the Fireplace) label. This was Bernardo's favorite *cuvée* and label; according to Marina this was the wine he made for his friends and family “to drink in good company, in front of the fire” as depicted on the label.

## Gattinara

In great vintages, the Vallanas also make a small amount of Gattinara. The latest release (and now sold out at the winery) is the 2004. One hundred percent Spanna, it is on the threshold of maturity.

As with 2010, Alto Piemonte's growing season in 2004 mirrored that of the Langhe: a great, classic vintage with ideal balance for the long haul. Francis and Marina have captured all of the complexity and ageworthiness of this greater *terroir* and vintage: deep, firmly structured and stunningly perfumed, this Gattinara has it all.

## The Terroir Signatures of the Vallana Wines

While Vallana's wines have proven over the decades that they can be just as rich, velvet-textured and long-lived as the greatest Barolos and Barbarescos, their overall character is strikingly different from that of the Langhe wines.

Alto Piemonte lies at the foothills of the Alps where the warm Mediterranean and temperate Continental climates of Europe meet. The cooling flow of air through the alpine valleys and the presence of large lakes creates moderate conditions that are ideal for Spanna.

Of particular importance are the wide daily temperature swings during the latter part of the growing season, creating great complexity through slow, even maturation of the fruit.

The climate and high altitude, coupled with glacially deposited soils that are naturally high in acidity produces Nebbiolo of haunting perfume, great elegance and unusually long life.

## Living Tradition

It is fortunate indeed that Francis and Marina choose to emulate Bernardo's approach in making the Vallana wines today. Their grandfather was a perfectionist who, as Marina states “would accept no compromise in the quality of his wines, which he loved with all his soul.”

In many other traditional winegrowing families, a new generation will be more interested in putting their personal stamp on the family's image, making changes at the cost of losing what was distinctively real about the wines.

Not so at Vallana, where Marina and Francis clearly relish their roles as defenders of a noble and unique tradition. They not only continue to craft true expressions of Alto Piemonte's glorious *terroirs*, they do so in the same cellars and with much of the same equipment that Bernardo designed and built in his relentless quest to make the perfect wine.

## **Time-Honored Methods**

And so the wines continue to be made by the traditional methods established by Bernardo in the 1950s. The grapes are hand-harvested in small boxes, followed by a strict selection and total destemming. Fermentation takes place in unique 150 hectolitre concrete tanks chosen by Bernardo Vallana as ideal for Spanna based on their shape and capacity.

The fermentation without temperature control is fundamental to the character of the Vallana wines; the temperature rises gradually in concrete, allowing site and season to leave their full imprint. Fermentation generally lasts for one week, followed by a short period of post-fermentation maceration.

Extraction is carefully managed by pumping over, rather than punching down, of the cap to keep it moist while obtaining only fine tannins. The press wine is usually sold off in bulk, as Marina told us "if we think any wine is less than perfect, we don't bottle it."

Malolactic fermentation occurs during the winter in concrete tank, after which the wine is transferred to neutral oak barrels, average 10 hectoliters in size, for aging. Francis and Marina strongly believe in the importance of wood aging as it allows the wine to breathe, but they never use new oak; "the soul of Alto Piemonte nebbiolo lies in its elegance and delicacy which can easily be overwhelmed by a strong oak character."

The time spent in barrel varies by wine: 6 months for Spanna *normale*; 12 months for Spanna Bernardo Vallana, and two years for Gattinara, followed by an extended period of bottle aging before the wines are deemed ready to meet the world.

It is very rare today to find young winemakers with such reverence for their predecessors.

As Marina says of her legendary grandfather: "Most importantly, he left us with wines of incredible finesse and structure that are the greatest inspiration for our work and set the style of the winery. Without Bernardo Vallana, we could not do our work the way we do it, and we feel that being part of this tradition is a great privilege."

In turn, it is our privilege to be able to offer these quintessential examples of a noble winemaking tradition.