

BAROLO'S BOTANICAL SOUL

BAROLO CHINATO DOESN'T COME KNOCKING. ITS HAND-WRITTEN RECIPE IS OFTEN TUCKED AWAY, SMUDGED WITH TIME, PASSED BETWEEN GENERATIONS. CHINATO IS FOR THE CURIOUS.

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Among the vine-covered hills, the scents of roasted hazelnuts and chocolate drifts from Alba, mingling with the earthiness of hidden white truffles. Scarlet poppies flutter along the roadside while Alpine herbs peek from the shadows.

Eventually, we arrive in Barolo, where an unspoken royal order reigns: Nebbiolo is the sovereign grape, Barolo the King, Barbaresco the Queen. But then there's Barolo Chinato—the oracle, a lesser-known elder cloaked in layers of the familiar and arcane. Impossible to ignore.

Barolo Chinato may mingle in the same circle as vermouth and amaro, two familiar names in the world of aromatized drinks, but it carries a pedigree all its own.

It begins as Barolo DOCG (Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita) wine, then veers into herbs and exotic spices, becoming a potion of intention—a wine lover's amaro, if you will.

No two are alike. One leans into chocolate ganache and aromatic cardamom; another feels like a tempering dose for whatever ails. Each reveals its maker's soul in subtle, bitter nuance.

The alchemy of botanicals often includes gentian root, rhubarb, clove, wormwood, cinnamon, star anise and bitter orange rind—plus one headliner: cinchona. The bark of this native South American tree, also known as fever tree, is a source of quinine, a bitter compound once used to ward off fever and malaria long before it met any aperitif, Barolo or tonic water.

By the 19th century, Italy, and especially Piedmont, had a strong tradition of vermouths, digestivi and aromatized wines. Cinchona had traveled through apothecaries across Europe before landing in Serralunga d'Alba, a Barolo commune, where Barolo Chinato's origins trace back to Giuseppe Cappellano and his friend Mario Zabaldano.

"It is interesting to note that both were pharmacists and lived in the Barolo area," says Augusto Cappellano,

great-nephew to Giuseppe and the fifth-generation co-owner of the family estate in Serralunga d'Alba. "It was probably natural for them to combine spices with a wine they were familiar with, even though at the time, Barolo was not as famous as it is today." (That would come much later, with the appellation's official DOCG recognition in 1980.)

Today, Augusto continues the legacy, preparing infusions just as his ancestors did based on the original handwritten recipe created by Giuseppe using the same 50-pound cast iron mortar he used.

"The cellar where we make Chinato has a particular atmosphere, calm and collected, almost out of time," he says. "It is delicate and meditative work: observing, smelling, tasting, making small adjustments. But it is above all a work of great responsibility because each step represents a direct link with those who preceded me."

Yet not every Barolo Chinato story begins with a mortar and pestle. For Cocchi, it began with a legacy in



vermouth. When the Bava family—six generations of winemakers from Cocconato, Monferrato—acquired the historic Cocchi house in 1978, they embraced its tradition and Giulio Cocchi's original formulas.

"The first to commercialize Barolo Chinato was Cocchi, who already had a strong distribution, thanks to their vermouth," says export manager Giorgio Bava. "It's about botanical balance and drinkability," he adds, sipping from a small tulip glass. "There should be a drying feeling, a dark cacao characteristic, smokiness from the rhubarb root... the Barolo DOCG—it comes from the Bava vineyards."

As he opens a box of artisanal chocolates by Andrea Slitti, he says, "it's the classic pairing: The cacao butter gives roundness; it also tastes dry and bitter, like Barolo Chinato, but Barolo Chinato is also acidic, and so it cleans the palate."

Giorgio's uncle, Paolo Bava—the winemaker and botanist—oversees the process. "We keep the style consistent as a product of the Monferrato countryside," he says.

There is no one path to becoming a Chinato maker. Some come from vermouth, like Cocchi, others from pharmacy and, naturally, also from Barolo producers.

At Pio Cesare, which was founded in 1881, the Chinato tradition traces back to the brand's beginning. But during the mixology boom of the 1950s, Rosy Pio, granddaughter to founder Cesare Pio, decided to stop production—not for lack of love, but to preserve its purity, believing it was best enjoyed neat.

"So my grandmother said, 'Let's write down the recipe for our Barolo Chinato and Vermouth and protect the labels; one day, we'll find a reason to rediscover them,'" recalls fifth-generation owner Federica Boffa Pio.

THE RESULT IS SOMETHING QUIETLY MAGICAL—NOT JUST AN END TO THE MEAL, BUT THE BEGINNING OF A MOOD. IT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN BAROLO REMOVES ITS CROWN, PULLS UP A CHAIR AND STARTS TELLING STORIES.

The handwritten recipe sat in a locked safe in Rosy's bedroom for 60 years.

When Federica entered the family business, she revived both drinks in 2016 using the original recipes and labels—a tribute that her grandmother lived to see.

"It's a Pio expression," says Federica. "For me, it's my connection to our roots—and to her."

Ironically, Barolo Chinato cannot be made in the Barolo production zone. Strict Italian wine laws forbid adding sugar in wine and its mere presence in the cellar presents complexities.

Pio Cesare's Chinato is crafted in Asti in small batches, beginning with their classic Barolo—aged five to six years—then layered with sugar, alcohol and botanicals, including two types of cinchona: calisaya and succirubra. The result, handled with a gentle touch, is a Barolo Chinato that leans into Nebbiolo's natural astringency.

"It comes from the heart of our history," says Federica.

Just a few winding turns away, G.D. Vajra's Barolo Chinato wears an organically colorful label—modest yet refreshing, much like the Vaira family themselves. Their interpretation is both graceful and kaleidoscopic, like the stained-glass windows in their cellar that cast light on their story.

"It started as a memory of a beautiful night around the table," recalls

Isidoro Vaira. "Our father began pulling out every bottle of Chinato we had in the house to taste."

That night turned into a second dinner—this time with about 24 bottles of their own Barolo, each infused with a different Chinato recipe. After hours of tasting and reflection, the family's version was born.

"The Vajra style is traditional—not too commercial. Easy to drink but used with its original intent: a spirit to finish the meal."

It begins with three sunrises. Vajra's Barolo "Albe" is made from three vineyards, each catching the morning light in its own time. From this luminous base, their Chinato takes shape. Brown sugar is added, along with a symphony of 30 to 40 botanicals—rinds, roots, herbs—each selected with care and steeped at a distillery just beyond Barolo.

The result is something quietly magical—not just an end to the meal, but the beginning of a mood. It's a bit of old-world swagger with a wink. It's what happens when Barolo removes its crown, pulls up a chair and starts telling stories. A drink both contemplative and comforting.

Perhaps that's why a sip of Barolo Chinato unlocks its true treasure: a quiet conversation across time for the ever-curious, spirit-seeking soul. **EP**