



# FOOD & DRINK WEDNESDAY



Wine importer Weston Hoard with the staff at Roman's, a restaurant in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Below, a selection from Piedmont, Italy.

## Just a Piedmont Kind of a Guy

What happens when you take a very tall Scandinavian from Minnesota and put him to work in a winery in Piedmont, Italy, where he doesn't speak a word of Italian, let alone Piedmontese?

It may sound like the premise of a joke or perhaps a reality television show, but that's how Weston Hoard became the self-declared "Piedmont Guy," an importer of overlooked and obscure wines from the Italian region.

How the 6-foot-4-inch Mr. Hoard came to spend four years in Italy is both a professional and a personal

tale. The story began in 2006 when Mr. Hoard was at a wine tasting in Chicago, his home at the time. Elisa Scavino, whose father is the famous Barolo producer, Enrico Scavino, was in attendance and Mr. Hoard found himself as much taken by the winemaker's daughter as the winemaker's wines.

Their courtship evolved in an old-fashioned way. "We started out writing each other," said Mr. Hoard when we met last week at the Wine Library in Springfield, N.J. They corresponded for nearly a year before they met again in Paris.

A few months after their

time in Paris, Mr. Hoard moved to Italy—and went to work in the Scavino wine cellar. "I didn't speak Italian. I didn't know anything about a cellar," he recalled with a laugh. "I spent a lot of time in silence."

Eventually, Mr. Hoard became proficient in both the language and the work—so much so that he became the winery's export director. "I owe my career to the generosity of that family," he said.

The personal part of the story came to an end: Mr. Hoard and Ms. Scavino, now both 33 years old, broke up and Mr. Hoard returned to the U.S. in 2011 with the idea of importing great but affordable Piedmont wine. "I wanted to bring in Nebbiolo that was under \$20 a bottle," he said, noting that too many examples of the grape—chiefly the wine Barolo and Barberesco—cost many times that amount. Indeed, these two pricey examples are often the only experience oenophiles might have of wines from Piedmont.

Mr. Hoard started in his home state with three producers. "If you can make it in Minnesota selling Nebbiolo, you can make it anywhere," he said—a twist on Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" song. It was only a matter of time before he moved to New York in 2015.

The city was, in many ways, a much easier place to sell his wines. The Nebbiolo



grape is quite hip among New York sommeliers, after all. "The hardest part is getting in the door with the right people," he said.

It also helped that Mr. Hoard joined forces this past fall with Grand Cru Selections, a New York-based wine distributor with connections and an impressive portfolio of prestigious producers. Right now, he represents seven producers.

Unlike the wine directors of restaurants in the Midwest who might have to "show what they learned," Mr. Hoard found that New York

wine professionals were more confident in their knowledge and didn't have to demonstrate they knew just as much as Mr. Hoard did. "What I loved about the New York market is that the ego of the buyer is checked," he said. (That's the first time I think I've heard that Midwestern wine buyers had bigger egos than their New York counterparts.)

If a New York wine buyer liked Mr. Hoard's wines, they would stock it and it will sell, he said. The Wine Library's Ian Dorin, who was seated nearby for a good part of our conversation, agreed. For example, Mr. Dorin had purchased several wines from Mr. Hoard including a 2011 Luigi Giordano Cavanna Barbaresco that was selling very well. The Barbaresco was an incredible deal at \$35, he said. (Indeed, it is. I decided to buy a bottle and a man behind me in the checkout line had one in hand. It was his second bottle. "It's really good," he said.)

I had one more question for Mr. Hoard. How did he come up with the name of his company, the Piedmont Guy? It was a move to democratize the region, he explained. "I think Piedmont has a bit of snobbery to it," he said. "It's my way to take a name and make it a little less formal. It just kind of came to me."

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