

Le Piane – cult winery in northern Piedmont



A bottle of Le Piane Boca, vintage 2018. This Nebbiolo-based red wine from the small DOC Boca (northern Piedmont) has achieved cult status internationally. The Le Piane winery enjoys an exceptional reputation among sommeliers and wine enthusiasts for its authentic, terroir-driven wines.

Overview and history

Le Piane is a small winery in **Boca**, an almost forgotten appellation in northern Piedmont. In the 1990s, Swiss entrepreneur Christoph Künzli acquired the old cellar and remaining vineyards of Antonio Cerri, a winemaker who was over 80 years old at the time. By then, the vineyards in Boca had shrunk considerably – before the Second World War, Alto Piemonte once counted ~40,000 hectares of vineyards, but by the 1990s this had been reduced to just a few hundred hectares.

② Künzli is considered *the "architect of the Alto Piemonte renaissance"*, as he revitalised the Boca region with immense personal commitment. Today, Le Piane produces one of *the most iconic wines* of Alto Piemonte – some critics even consider its Boca to be *"one of the best red wines in Italy"*. Despite its modest size (only about 8 hectares of vineyards), the estate has made a name for itself internationally by preserving the tradition and identity of the region.

Terroir and style



View of the historic Boca vineyards of Le Piane: steep rows of vines on volcanic soil at an altitude of ~450 metres, surrounded by dense forest.

The **Boca appellation** is located on the edge of the Alps and is characterised by **volcanic porphyry soils** and a cooler climate with alpine influences. This special **terroir** gives the wines finesse, freshness and mineral notes that distinguish them from the more powerful Nebbiolos from Barolo. Le Piane cultivates its vineyards in a natural way, using labour-intensive manual methods on steep slopes. Some parcels consist of vines that are over 80 years old⁶, mainly the local Nebbiolo variety (called *Spanna* here), supplemented by indigenous varieties. **Stylistically**, Künzli consistently follows the traditional school: long maceration with natural yeasts, followed by **ageing for ~3 years in large Slavonian oak barrels (20–30 hl)**. The main wine, *Boca*, is a **cuvée** of approximately 85% Nebbiolo and 15% Vespolina, with the spicy Vespolina lending the wine additional complexity and lively acidity. The wines are **elegant, finely structured and multi-layered** rather than opulent, with aromas of red fruits, roses, spices and earthy notes. This distinctive style, with the winemaker's clear *signature*, contributes significantly to Le Piane's cult status.

Special features and philosophy

A special feature of Le Piane is the **combination of tradition and authenticity** with consistently high quality. Künzli adheres to local winegrowing traditions (e.g. the use of old clones and field vines, no new barriques) and has also demonstrated the potential that lies dormant in Boca's soils. His credo is to create wines with "*transparency*" in terms of origin and vintage^{8 9}.

As a result, fallow vineyards have been recultivated and the DOC Boca cultivation area has been expanded again with new plantings¹⁰. Yields are low, everything is done by hand, and minimal intervention is used in the cellar (spontaneous fermentation, hardly any fining or filtration, only moderate sulphurisation). This **philosophy of sustainability and identity** results in wines that impress not through concentration or wood, but through elegance, longevity and unmistakable *personality*. Connoisseurs particularly appreciate the fact that Le Piane **does not chase mainstream trends or ratings**, but goes its own way – which has earned the estate much respect among experts.

International reputation

Le Piane enjoys an excellent reputation within the wine scene today. Wine critic Antonio Galloni (Vinous) ranks Christoph Künzli's winery among "*the most highly regarded wineries in all of Italy*" and describes Le Piane as **a benchmark** for artisanal wines in Alto Piemonte. In reputable tastings,³ Le Piane wines regularly rank at the top of their category. For example, the Boca was awarded 93 points by *Decanter* (2019 vintage)¹¹ ¹² and rated 18/20 points by *the German magazine Vinum*¹¹ – both clear signs of exceptional quality. Even more important than ratings, however, are the opinions of experienced professionals: Tom Hyland described Le Piane's Boca in *Forbes* as "*one of Italy's finest red wines*".¹⁴ Janice Robinson and her team regularly praise the finesse and depth of Le Piane wines (often scoring 17 points and above in blind tastings). In the sommelier world, the rare bottles from Boca have long been considered *an insider tip*: they appear on tasting lists in Michelin-starred restaurants and on "must-try" recommendations for Nebbiolo fans. This broad recognition – from independent wine critics to top sommeliers – underscores the **cult status** that Le Piane enjoys today.

Comparison and regional competition

There are only a few producers of similar renown in **Alto Piemonte**. In **Gattinara** (the region's best-known DOC), the larger traditional winery Travaglini has a strong presence¹⁴, and Roberto Conterno's purchase of the Nervi estate caused a stir among prominent Barolo producers there¹⁴. However, these wineries are significantly larger and, in some years, also operate in a more modern manner, whereas Le Piane, as a boutique winery, pursues a strict quality philosophy. In the tiny DOC **Carema** on the border with the Aosta Valley, Luigi Ferrando's Nebbiolo wines have long enjoyed cult status – Ferrando's fragrant *Carema* is even described by importer Neal Rosenthal as a hypothetical "one bottle of wine for life", and each release⁶ immediately attracts a fan base. **However, Le Piane currently outshines all** its northern Piedmontese competitors in terms of international reputation: Thanks to its unique combination of historical authenticity, consistent top quality and charismatic style, the estate is now considered *the benchmark* and figurehead for the rediscovered Alto Piemonte¹⁴. No other winery in the region has had such a⁶ lasting influence on the perception of this wine-growing area in recent years.

Sources: Le Piane (Boca) has been extensively praised in *Vinous* and *Forbes*,³ among others. Specialist reports⁴ and importer notes underscore the special status of the winery¹⁶. Furthermore,⁸ tasting results in *Decanter* and *Vinum* confirm the exceptional quality¹¹. These consistent assessments by reputable media and experts explain why Le Piane is currently considered the number one cult wine producer in northern Piedmont.

1 3 5 A Duo of Amazing Alto Piemonte Wines: Le Piane's Boca+ Nebbiolo – Flatiron Wines & Spirits NYC

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