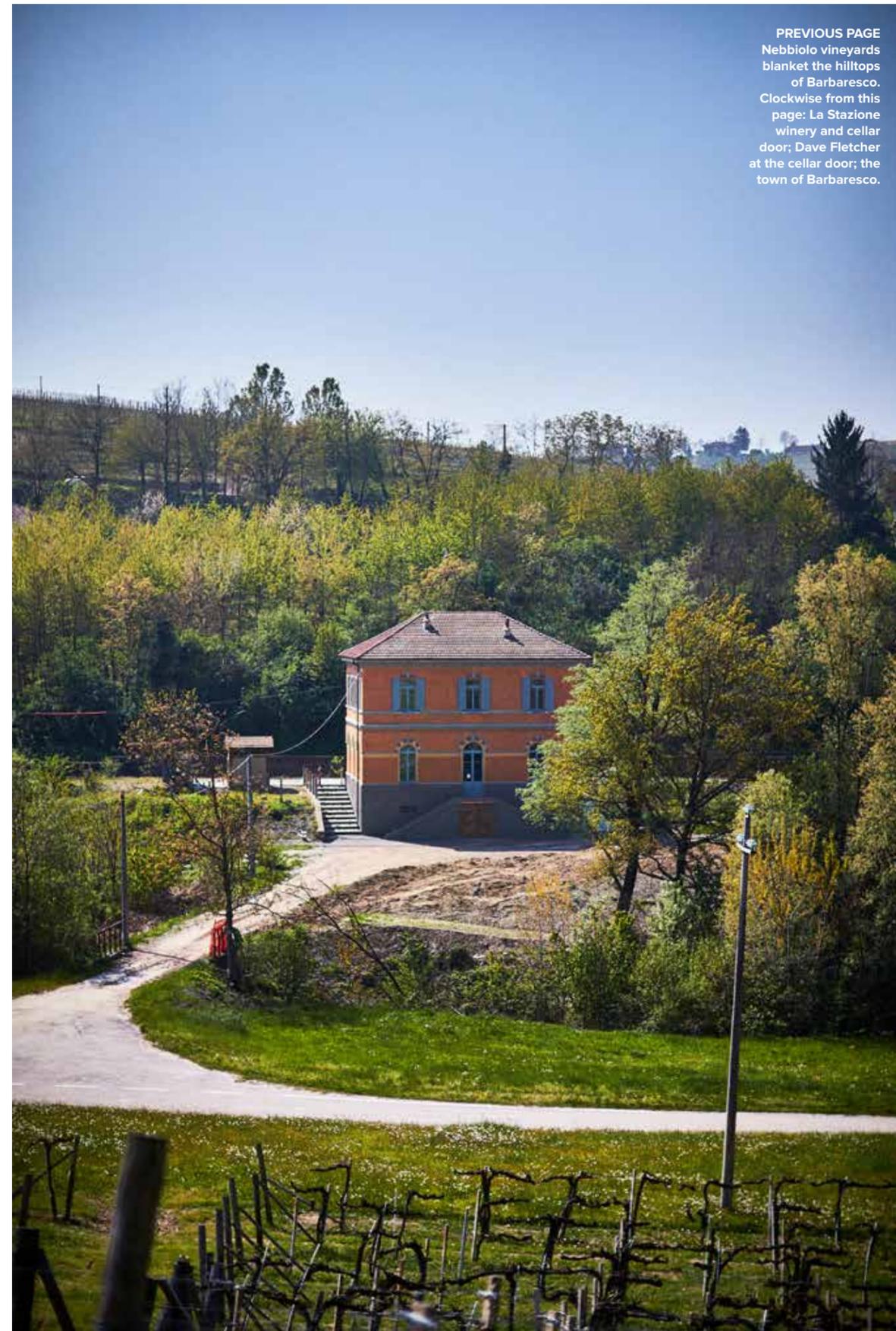


Next stop

An Australian couple enamoured with nebbiolo has opened a winery and cellar door in a century-old train station in Piedmont. ALECIA WOOD climbs aboard.

Photography PAUL BARBERA

Barbaresco



PREVIOUS PAGE
Nebbiolo vineyards
blanket the hilltops
of Barbaresco.
Clockwise from this
page: La Stazione
winery and cellar
door; Dave Fletcher
at the cellar door; the
town of Barbaresco.



A heavy haze drapes the hill overlooking Barbaresco's old train station. It's a warm, misty morning – such mornings are common during spring and summer in the Langhe wine district of the Piedmont region, in Italy's north-west. By autumn the mist transforms into lingering, blanketing fogs. So distinctive is this fog – “nebbia” in Italian – that the area's most prized wine grape, nebbiolo, is said to be named after it.

South Australian winemaker Dave Fletcher recalls his first taste of Italian nebbiolo, back in 2000. He was studying oenology at the University of Adelaide at the time. “It was the first time that a wine really hit me,” he says. “It really invigorated an interest in something new.” Curiosity about the native Piedmontese grape turned into fascination, and a new life. Dave and his wife, Eleanor, opened their own winery and cellar door, La Stazione, this year in the derelict train station that served the town of Barbaresco for nearly 75 years.

Grown commercially in the region as early as the 15th century, the nebbiolo grape produces wines with high acidity and tannins, the ability to age well over many years, and a complex nose often featuring cherry, tar and rose. The coveted DOCG (Denomination of Controlled and Guaranteed Origin) Barbaresco and Barolo wines are made from 100 per cent nebbiolo – aged for a minimum of two and three years, respectively – and grown and produced exclusively in the Piedmontese zones of the same names. Others, such as Langhe Nebbiolo and Ghemme, must be made with mostly nebbiolo and can be blended with other local grapes such as barbera, dolcetto or vespolina.

Beyond Piedmont, nebbiolo has reached vineyards in California, Argentina, South Africa and Chile; Australian wineries have also adopted the grape as their own, mostly in the Yarra Valley, the Hilltops region in southern New South Wales, the Victorian Murray Darling and the Adelaide Hills.

Dave's fascination with nebbiolo led him to this foggy valley in Barbaresco. With more than six years' experience making wine at Tinlins Wines in McLaren Vale, O'Leary Walker Wines in the Clare Valley and, in the Yarra Valley, at Treasury Wine Estates, Maddens Rise and Sticks, he rewound to the beginning, starting an apprenticeship in 2007 at Ceretto Wines, a renowned Langhe producer of biodynamically grown Barolo and Barbaresco.

“After the 2007 vintage, it was like, this is where I want to concentrate, on nebbiolo,” he recalls. “I felt to be a successful producer of nebbiolo, you really need to prove yourself here [in Piedmont].”

In 2009, he launched Fletcher Wines as a virtual winery. Without his own land or equipment, he bought grapes from Piedmontese growers and negotiated the use of winemaking equipment at Ceretto, allowing Fletcher Wines to produce strictly >



controlled Barolo and Barbaresco, as well as a Langhe Rosso blend (equal parts nebbiolo, cabernet sauvignon and merlot). At the same time, he started making two nebbiolo wines in Australia from single-vineyard grapes grown in South Australia and Victoria. "I chose to make an expression of nebbiolo that's in that youthful phase, with a fruit-driven style, because it complements the expression of terroir," he explains.

In 2012, Dave was appointed as an assistant winemaker at Ceretto. He and Eleanor moved to Piedmont with their baby daughter, Georgina; their second child, Emily, was born in Alba in 2013. "Landing where I have, I'm incredibly lucky," he says. "The opportunity to take on a winemaking role in such a historical, family-oriented wine production area is one in a gazillion."

One afternoon over drinks, a local winemaker mentioned that Barbaresco's old train station was on the market. "He'd said it half in jest," says Eleanor, "but we went down to have a look and instantly fell in love with it."

The couple bought the station in 2014. Built in 1917 and unused for some 20 years, the building was structurally sound but in need of extensive renovation. "It's in an amazing location among the best vineyards of Barbaresco," Dave says. "Elle fell in love with the façade and the way it was structured inside. I fell in love with the idea of how I could turn it into a winery."

Wineries in Piedmont typically require advance bookings for visits, and tastings and tours aren't always available in English. The Fletchers wanted to introduce a more casual, traveller-friendly wine and food experience at the station. "We had this vision of the station being a hub, encouraging people to enjoy wine tastings while also experiencing the region generally," says Eleanor.

Clockwise from above: tasting area at La Stazione; cheeses and prosciutto; Fletcher Barbaresco "Recta Pete"; Dave Fletcher with his C15 Langhe Chardonnay; Eleanor Fletcher taking a private tasting; agnolotti del plin from a cooking class.



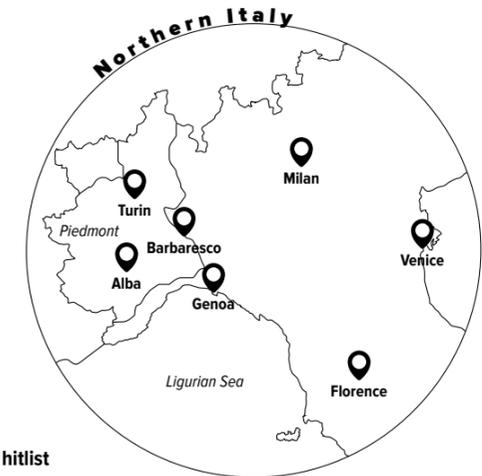
The restoration of the heritage-listed building took longer than they'd expected. "I'd say we were highly naïve, but I would also say we were both born optimists," Eleanor says with a laugh. Excavating the cellar, for example, entailed painstaking removal, storage and checking of piles of dirt and rubble.

The Fletchers opened La Stazione in May this year. They're now in the middle of the vendemmia, the harvest, from which they'll make their first wines on the site – a chardonnay, a Barbera, a Barbaresco and the Langhe Rosso blend – unfiltered and limited to 15,000 bottles. (Fletcher Wines' Barolo will continue to be produced at Ceretto to comply with zoning regulations.)

Five wine tanks are housed in the station's former waiting room, while oak botti (barrels) and barriques are stored in the underground cellar. The old station master's office has become a light-filled tasting area bordered by the original wooden ticket booths, and storage rooms have been converted into a bar and a kitchen.

The couple offers visitors guided flights of up to five wines and tastings, and charcuterie and cheeseboards to enjoy along with a bottle or wines by the glass. Eleanor will expand the truffle tours she's been running for the past few years with a local hunter, and La Stazione is now hosting laid-back cooking lessons on Sunday afternoons, run by two Piedmontese women who own the nearby butcher and pasta shop. There are also plans to turn the upper level of the station into a bed and breakfast.

Meanwhile, Dave's love affair with nebbiolo continues. "It's such a complex variety to work with," he says. "It's probably not going to be something I'll ever get my head around in my lifetime." ●



Dave and Eleanor Fletcher's hitlist for eating and drinking in the Langhe district of Piedmont.

Eat

"**Trattoria dai Bercau** is where we go for really traditional food – it's quite a big lunch," says Eleanor. "There will be a stream of antipasti, then a choice of pasta – normally that includes agnolotti del plin and tajarin. For dessert, they bring out a string of choices, but the best one is always the bonet, the traditional Piedmontese chocolate pudding made with crushed amaretti biscuits." Via Beato Valfrè, 13, 12060 Verduno, +39 0172 470 243, bercau.it

"**La Ciau del Tornavento** has an amazing view of the rolling hills of the nearby towns of Treiso and Barbaresco," says Dave. "They have great wine, too. You can visit the cellar underneath the restaurant – it's incredible. It has a collection from every top producer in this zone." Piazza Leopoldo Baracco, 7, 12050 Treiso, +39 0173 638 333, laciadeltornavento.it

"**Ristorante Rabaya** is a quintessential Barbaresco dining experience – elegant yet traditional dishes, a beautiful outdoor terrace with a view over the vineyards and great attention to detail," says Eleanor. "The menu is seasonal and constantly changes." Strada della Stazione, 12, 12050 Barbaresco, +39 0173 635 223

Drink

"**Le Case della Saracca** is a wine bar, restaurant and hotel in a restored medieval castle in the historical centre of Monforte d'Alba, at the top of the hill in the town – it's really beautiful," she says. "It's the most picturesque town in this zone. They've got a massive list of

all the great wines, a huge spread of nibbles for aperitivo, and you can taste Barolo by the glass." Via Camillo Benso Conte di Cavour, 5, 12065 Monforte d'Alba, +39 0173 789 222, saracca.com

"**Barolo Bar** is a lively wine bar that's frequented by wine producers, locals and tourists alike, with a beautiful outdoor terrace for the warmer months. You can enjoy many local wines by the glass," says Eleanor. Via Giuseppe Garibaldi, 11, 12065 Monforte d'Alba, +39 0173 789 243

"**Vinoteca Centro Storico** is located at the foot of a [14th-century] castle in the village of Serralunga d'Alba," she says. "All the local wine producers go there to drink Champagne and eat great food. There's a mix of Italian wines as well, and they do prosciutto carved off the bone." Via Roma, 6, 12050 Serralunga d'Alba, +39 0173 613 203

Stay

Villa d'Amelia is a boutique hotel with 37 rooms and a Michelin-starred restaurant, about 20 minutes' drive from La Stazione near the town of Benevello, overlooking the vineyards of Barolo. Rooms from €180. Località Manera, 1, 12050 Benevello, +39 0173 529 225, villadamelia.com

Getting there

La Stazione, in Barbaresco, is about an hour's drive south of the nearest major airport, in Turin. The cellar door is open for walk-ins Thursday to Saturday from 10am to 6pm. Group cooking classes are held on Sunday afternoons during truffle season (10 September to 26 November; bookings required); private classes can be arranged on request. Truffle hunts can be organised during hunting season (21 September to 31 January). Strada della Stazione, 29, 12050 Barbaresco, +39 0173 380 211, lastazionebarbaresco.com