Valle d’Aosta is not only the smallest of Italy’s 20 administrative regions but the least populated, with barely 130,000 inhabitants. Tucked way up in the steep, glacier-capped Alps on the borders of France and Switzerland, it is often overlooked by tourists (with the exception of skiers)—and may not appear at first glance to be a suitable environment for vines, either. But Valle d’Aosta does produce some excellent wines, albeit in modest quantities. Made largely from indigenous grape varieties you won’t find anywhere else, they express the distinctive personality of their extreme mountain terroir.

Geography

The earliest-known inhabitants of this area were the Salassi, who also occupied the coastal section of northwest Italy now known as Liguria. After long and fierce resistance, these Celtic peoples were finally conquered around 25 B.C.E. by the Romans, who subsequently founded the city of Augusta Praetoria Salassorum (modern-day
Aosta). Though little more than a provincial outpost, it was strategically located to ward off barbaric hordes from the north.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, the area passed through the hands of a succession of conquerors, including the Goths, Lombards, Burgundians, Franks, Charlemagne, and the House of Savoy, which also ruled the adjacent region of Piedmont. Valle d’Aosta joined the reunified Kingdom of Italy in 1861 and has enjoyed special autonomous status within the republic since 1948. Today, its official languages are Italian and French (its French name is Vallée d’Aoste), though most people speak the local patois called Valdôtain; there are also a few German-speaking enclaves.

Whoever their rulers happened to be, the inhabitants of this region have demonstrated a stubborn independence, abetted perhaps by the harshness and remoteness of the territory itself. Valle d’Aosta centers around a long, narrow val-
ley that follows the course of the Dora Baltea River from its glacial beginnings on Mont Blanc down to the plains of Piedmont just east of Turin, where it empties into the Po River. Aosta, the region’s centrally located capital and its only true city, lies equidistant from the Gran San Bernardo and Mont Blanc passes. Unlike other Italian regions, Valle d’Aosta has no provinces; its 74 comunes (municipalities) are mostly clustered along the river and the foothills of the Alps.

Winegrowing

Though some vines can be found on the valley floor, where they were historically planted in open squares to enclose vegetable plots or small meadows, the Aostan flatland has generally been reserved for residential and commercial buildings; crops like hay, barley, and fruit trees; and pastures for winter grazing of cattle. With usable space at a premium, people have had little choice but to painstakingly construct terraces or carve spaces out of the rocky earth to create a proper environment for their vines. Following the course of the river down from its source, the left side of the river is known in dialect as Adret, the right side as Envers; most, though not all, of the vineyards are planted on the Adret side.

Protected by mountains on three sides, the Valle d’Aosta enjoys a surprisingly temperate climate. Though winters can be icy, the dormant vines don’t mind; the

**VALLE D’AOSTA REGULATIONS**

**Varieties**

Any of the following grapes, listed in decreasing order of regional significance, may be named on a Valle d’Aosta DOC label, as long as it accounts for at least 85% of the blend.

**White:** Petite Arvine, Pinot Grigio/Pinot Gris/Malvoisie, Chardonnay, Moscato Bianco/Muscat Petit Grain, Müller Thurgau, Pinot Bianco/Pinot Blanc, Traminer Aromatico/Gewürztraminer.

**Red:** Fumin, Cornalin, Petit Rouge, Nebbiolo/Picotendro, Pinot Nero/Pinot Noir, Mayolet, Vuillermin, Gamay, Préméta, Gamaret, Merlot, Syrah.

**Subzones**

Blends are usually field blends; the percentage of the primary grape variety often exceeds the required minimum. Passito or Flétri indicates a sweet dessert wine.

**Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle:** Made from 100% Prié Blanc, which grows only here.

**Enfer d’Arvier:** Minimum 85% Petit Rouge.

**Torrette:** Minimum 70% Petit Rouge.

**Nus:** Minimum 70% Vien de Nus and Petit Rouge, with at least 40% Vien de Nus (a red grape native to this subzone). Malvoisie Nus is 100% Pinot Grigio; although the name Malvoisie is widely used for the local strain of Pinot Grigio, it is officially allowed only in Nus.

**Chambave:** Minimum 70% Petit Rouge. Moscato (or Muscat) Chambave must contain 100% Moscato Bianco.

**Arnad-Montjovet:** Minimum 70% Nebbiolo.

**Donnas:** Minimum 85% Nebbiolo, known here as Picotendro.
rest of the time, the mountain walls insulate them from the extreme cold to the north and west. Fog is rare, with sunny days predominating. Although summer temperatures can be high, the nights are always cool, contributing to aromatic development of the grapes. Minimal rainfall means that mildew is rare, but also that the vines sometimes suffer from drought, especially given the low moisture retention of the soil. For this reason, most modern vineyards are equipped with drip-irrigation systems, supplementing a centuries-old network of channels called rus that bring water from the mountains.

Unlike neighboring wine regions such as Switzerland’s Valais or Lombardy’s Valtellina, where primarily east-west-oriented valleys offer southern expositions and a more constant range of elevations, the Valle d’Aosta takes several wide turns along the Dora Baltea’s steep downward course. It’s divided into three basic wine zones, according to both altitude and orientation: the Low Valley (Bassa Valle), Central Valley (Centro Valle), and High Valley (Alta Valle). While these subregions share the same loose morainic soil with high sand and lime content, their microclimates differ significantly; moreover, each has developed an affinity for particular grapes as well as its own specialized methods of cultivating them.

The Low Valley begins 1,132 feet above sea level at the region’s southern edge, just past the town of Pont Saint-Martin, and stretches north to Saint-Vincent (1,886 feet). Here the principal grape variety is Picotendro, better known elsewhere as Nebbiolo. Most of the vines are still cultivated on an ancient pergola system of stone pillars and wooden frames atop steep stone terraces; the prevalent exposition is western.

At Saint-Vincent, the valley veers sharply to the west, past the city of Aosta to Arvier (2,546 feet). The Central Valley, as the largest of the three growing zones, contains the vast majority of the region’s wineries. Its principal grapes are Petit Rouge and Fumin; vines are planted mostly...
with Guyot trellising on either moderate slopes or wide earthen terraces called ciglioni (though some stone terraces can still be found). Vineyards are situated primarily on the south-facing, Adret side of the river, but there are also significant plantings on the Envers side—especially around the town of Aymavilles, where a slight bend in the river provides slopes with favorable expositions.

After Arvier, the valley turns north again, through the towns of La Salle (3,284 feet) and Morgex (3,028 feet). The High Valley boasts some of the highest vineyards in Europe, reaching over 4,000 feet above sea level, where Prié Blanc is the only grape that can be grown. Since phylloxera never made it this far up, the vines are still on their original rootstock, and new plants are typically propagated using the ancient marcottage method, in which a branch is trained underground for about a year until roots form; the connection to the parent plant is then severed, and a new vine with the same genetic material is born. Growers rely on a peculiarly low pergola system in which grape clusters hang close to the ground. Their proximity to the earth helps insulate them from the harsh environmental conditions, but it also limits ventilation and makes harvesting quite difficult: pickers often have to lie down on their backs and slide under the shallow canopy to get at the grapes.

Valle d’Aosta’s labeling system differs from that of other Italian regions. The entire region has one blanket Denominazione di Origine Controllata (DOC), created in 1985; it’s broken down into three subcategories. The first and most basic is type—red, white, or rosé, from grapes grown anywhere within the region. The second subcategory is variety, indicating that the wine contains at least 85% of one of the 19 authorized grape varieties (see box on p. 88). The third is connected to a specific place, denoting one of the seven official subzones: from northwest to southeast, Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle, Enfer d’Arvier, Torrette, Nus, Chambave, Arnad-Montjovet, and Donnas.
Notwithstanding the surprisingly temperate climate in the river valley, this is a decidedly northern, Alpine environment, and the food—a blend of French and Italian influences—is mostly substantial mountain fare, featuring lots of cheese, polenta, coarse-grained dark bread, cured meats, stews, wild game, and the occasional trout. Local wines make a perfect accompaniment to this stick-to-your-ribs fare, but it also works the other way around: alongside local dishes, the wines make sense in a way they might not if taken completely out of context.

Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle, for example, has relatively low alcohol, light viscosity, and a delicate, milky white-flower-petal aroma, all of which complement risotto Valdostano (made with Fontina cheese) or zuppa Valpellinentze, a typically robust soup of cabbage, pancetta, dark bread, Fontina, and meat broth baked in a terracotta dish and served steaming hot and melting. Petite Arvine, on the other hand—with its medium body and firm acidity, balanced by a hint of residual sweetness—goes as nicely with a molten French-style fondue as with a braised pork chop and cabbage. The exotic floral aroma of a bone-dry Muscat Petit Grain and the rose-hip astringency of a slightly chilled Prémetta pair well with the region’s traditional salt- and Alpine-herb-cured meat products, such as Lardo di Arnad, Jambon de Bosses, and moccetta (air-dried chamois—a type of mountain goat—or beef). And Pinot Gris (also known as Malvoisie) makes an ideal partner for sweet, flaky trout, smoked, baked, or grilled.

When it comes to reds, one of the medium-bodied, transparent, tartly acidic Petit Rouge blends (Torrette, Enfer d’Arvier, Chambave, or Nus) is just the thing to cut through carbonnade, a stew of beef and onions braised in wine and served over polenta. Sinewy Cornalin goes great with roasted fowl or braised pork, while dark, plummy, viscous, spicy Fumin begs for full-flavored wild game or cheese.

This isn’t to say that Aostan wines can only be consumed with Alpine cuisine. A Muscat Petit Grain, for example, would be a fine match for spicy Asian or Indian food, and a Donnas or Arnand-Montjovet would partner nicely with a thick grilled steak. In fact, the unusual, terroir-driven wines of the Valle d’Aosta offer many interesting and exciting pairing possibilities outside their home turf. So why not have fun and experiment?

The remaining wineries are mainly family owned and operated, bottling from 250 to 1,700 cases per year. Most of these winemakers engage in other revenue-generating activities, from running a bed-and-breakfast or restaurant to farming, giving ski lessons, or even maintaining the electrical system in the Mont Blanc tunnel. Many were once members of their local cooperatives.
**White**

*Cave du Vin Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle La Piagne* 2011 $16

La Piagne, enclosed by a stone wall at 3,445 feet above sea level, was acquired and restored by this cooperative in 2007. Though not yet officially certified, it is being farmed organically. In the 2011 version, delicate aromas of hyacinth and jasmine mingle with exotic, slightly unripe starfruit, litchi, and caramelized white fig. A soft attack leads to lemon-syrop acidity and a pleasantly sour aftertaste.

*D&D Muscat Petit Grain* 2011 $NA

Though varietally typical, this Muscat is a bit subtle, showing delicate jasmine, lime, and green-almond aromas. A soft entry precedes a palate with considerable body and tropical-fruit flavors of papaya and pineapple; the tart, dry, slightly chalky finish offers a hint of cinnamon stick and white peppercorns. 13% alcohol.

*Ermes Pavesi Blanc de Morgex et de La Salle Nathan* 2010 $36

Nathan is the winemaker’s son. 70% of the juice from these hand-pressed Prié Blanc grapes is fermented in barriques, with bâtonnage, for one year. Slightly higher in alcohol (13%) than most of its counterparts, the wine gives off an intense aroma of ripe pear plus a touch of varnish. It’s big and full on the palate, with baked-apple flavors backed by cinnamon spice and bay leaf and followed by a long, graceful, burnt-caramel finish and a cleanly acidic aftertaste.

*Grosjean Petite Arvine Vigne Rovettaz* 2010 $26

Petite Arvine is native to the Valais region of Switzerland but is widely cultivated throughout Valle d’Aosta, where it tends to produce fairly simple, fresh, low-alcohol wines with pronounced citrus acidity. This bottling is a bit more complex, perhaps because of the pedigree of the Rovettaz vineyard and 20% fermentation in barriques. A warm honeyed-melon aroma and a hint of toastiness are followed by a soft, almost creamy palate with notes of pear clafoutis. The full fruit is contained by tight acidity, leading to a gentle, faintly chalky finish. 13.5% alcohol.

**Outstanding Recent Releases**

*Malvoisie Nus 2011 $NA*

Pale straw yellow with a slight brownish tinge. Intriguing aromas of white fig and honeysuckle are joined by a suggestion of paint thinner (perhaps from the 14.5% alcohol). Big and muscular, the palate is well toned, delivering ripe Bosc-pear flavors, crisp acidity, and the slightest bit of pétillance. This multilayered, elegant, and sophisticated wine carries its weight (and alcohol) with grace.

*La Crotta di Vegneron Malvoisie Nus* 2011 $NA

An unusual amber color with a golden shine presages an appealing nose of dried golden raisins with a touch of noble rot. On the palate, dried-pear notes are accompanied by a slight oxidation reminiscent of Fino Sherry. It’s quite dry and mineral, with a bitter-lemon finish and subtly tannic aftertaste. Matured in oak barrels on the lees for 12 months, this distinctive wine would be perfect with nuts, Alpine cheeses, and cured hams such as Jambon de Bosses. 12.5% alcohol.

*La Vrille Muscat Chambave* 2011 $NA

La Vrille is a typical, family-owned agritourismo enterprise in the Chambave subzone. Transparent yellow with golden raisins with a touch of noble rot. This one is a lovely, pale reddish pink with a slight brownish tinge and transparent brilliance. The nose suggests strawberry-rhubarb pie; the palate, following a soft attack, is tart and sinewy with tart cranberry and reccurrent flavors. A squeeze of lemon emerges midpalate and brings the wine to a dry, slightly tannic, stony finish. 12.5% alcohol.

*Supérieur Vieilles Vignes 2009 $32*

Made from late-harvested old-vine Nebbiolo matured for 20 months in oak casks. Completely opaque and brownish maroon in the glass, it sends up murky aromas of super-ripe, slightly shriveled fruit. Soft and smooth at first, with ripe black-cherry flavors, the extracted palate expands to reveal leather, licorice, and tobacco in an explosion of sweetness, finishing with pronounced, mouth-drying tannins. An acidic structure prevents this big wine (14.5% alcohol) from falling flat; it’s a great match for strong cheeses, braised meats, or roasted game birds.

*Supérieur Vieilles Vignes* 2009 $32

Barrel-aged and don’t let go. This multilayered, elegant, and sophisticated wine carries its weight (and alcohol) with grace.

**Red**

*La Piagne, enclosed by a stone wall at 3,445 feet above sea level, was acquired and restored by this cooperative in 2007. Though not yet officially certified, it is being farmed organically.*

*Supérieur Vieilles Vignes* 2009 $32

Barrel-aged and don’t let go. This multilayered, elegant, and sophisticated wine carries its weight (and alcohol) with grace.

*Périmet* 2011 $28

Prêmetta is seldom vinified on its own, partly because of its extremely light color. This one is a lovely, pale reddish pink with a slight brownish tinge and transparent brilliance. The nose suggests strawberry-rhubarb pie; the palate, following a soft attack, is tart and sinewy with tart cranberry and reccurrent flavors. A squeeze of lemon emerges midpalate and brings the wine to a dry, slightly tannic, stony finish. 12.5% alcohol.

*Barrique* 2010 $26

Petite Arvine is native to the Valais region of Switzerland but is widely cultivated throughout Valle d’Aosta, where it tends to produce fairly simple, fresh, low-alcohol wines with pronounced citrus acidity. This bottling is a bit more complex, perhaps because of the pedigree of the Arvind vineyard and 20% fermentation in barriques. A warm honeyed-melon aroma and a hint of toastiness are followed by a soft, almost creamy palate with notes of pear clafoutis. The full fruit is contained by tight acidity, leading to a gentle, faintly chalky finish. 13.5% alcohol.

*Nebbiolo Barmet* 2011 $NA

Barmet is the local name for the small, traditional work sheds built underneath the terrace walls. This fresh, bright, enjoyable wine is made from 85% Nebbiolo and 15% Freisa and Neyret. Brick red with pinkish reflections, it displays an inviting nose of Bing cherry. It’s taut and lively on the palate, with fresh reccurrent and sour-cherry flavors; toward the finish, pronounced grape tannins grip the palate and don’t let go.

*Clos Blanc Cornalin* 2010 $NA

Bright, transparent reddish pink in color, this wine smells like sweet, just-picked strawberries and raspberries, but is not at all sticky on the palate; instead, it’s light and fresh, with mouth-puckering acidity and a nice, dry finish. Simple, fresh, and, at 12% alcohol, very drinkable, it would complement many foods, from spicy salami to heavy beef stew; in the summertime, it would benefit from a slight chill.

*Fumin* 2010 $NA

70% of this Fumin is matured in tonneau for 10 months. Dark, opaque
purple-red, with an attractive perfume of violets and tree bark, it displays a concentrated, almost chocolatey palate with ripe black-cherry flavors. Ample acidity keeps the wine from becoming heavy and flat, lingering through a finish that also features mouth-puckering tannins. 13.5% alcohol.

**Di Barrò Mayolet Vigne de Toule 2011 $26**

Dark reddish purple, practically opaque. Ripe black-cherry and pomegranate aromas emerge on the nose, along with a bit of woody undergrowth. The fairly thick-textured palate features notes of ripe blackcurrant, rosemary, and even a touch of chestnut honey, but tart acidity keeps it fresh and lively. The finish is pleasantly sour, with practically no tannins and 13% alcohol. A great wine for mild game dishes like quail.

**Dino Bonin Arnad-Monjovet 2011 $NA**

75% Nebbiolo, 25% Pinot Noir. A pale, transparent orange-red color leads to a rather inexpressive nose suggesting bitter orange rind and rose hips as well as pronounced alcohol. After tightly gripping the palate, tart Bing-cherry and wild-strawberry flavors stretch through a decidedly tannic finish. Restrained, taut, and appealing.

**Enfer Enfer d’Arvier 2011 $17**

85% Petit Rouge, 15% other indigenous varieties including Mayolet, Vien de Nus, and Neyret. Dark brick red with purple-pink highlights in the glass, this blend shows a restrained, earthy nose of frutti di bosco plus a touch of alcohol. Generous, ripe black-plum and black-cherry notes are articulated by peppercorn and nutmeg spices on the palate. Lively acidity keeps the alcohol (14%) in check, and firm grape tannins cap off the finish.

**Feudo di San Maurizio Torrette Supérieur 2009 $26**

90% Petit Rouge and 10% Syrah, matured in oak casks for 12 months. Dark, virtually opaque garnet in color, this wine gives off alluring scents of mature black cherry, dried cranberry, and leather. The palate is big, brawny, and tightly wound yet supple. A hint of wild animal (slight Brettanomyces?) lurks beneath the concentrated, brambly fruit, but it’s not funky or intrusive. The acidity is adequate, the tannins supple, and it’s all topped off by a dry, satey finish.

**Feudo di San Maurizio Vuillemoin 2010 $49**

Vuillemoin is a promising indigenous variety, mostly used in blends, that was once much more widely planted throughout the Central Valley; Michel Vallet is currently the only producer making a 100%-varietal version. His compelling 2010 displays a lovely, almost transparent dark brick-red color with auburn highlights. A sour-cherry aroma mingles with smoky touches of dried fig, porcini, and soy sauce. Full and weighty in the mouth, the wine has a firm, acidic grip, with ripe black-cherry fruit emerging on the midpalate. It finishes sour, with just enough tannin to frame the whole.

**Institut Agricole Régional Cornalin 2008 $29**

A clear, dark red-brick color precedes a tight but potent nose suggesting forest floor, leather, and wild mushrooms as well as fairly high alcohol (14.5%). After a soft attack, the palate blossoms with ripe blackberry, black-cherry, and currant notes; tart acidity keeps it all from seeming stewed. Juniper-berry astringency and a tannic finish are followed by a lingering sensation of spicy black pepper. A big but well-proportioned wine.

**La Crotta di Vegneron Chambave 2011 $18**

Same producer, same vintage, same alcohol level (13%): these two wines offer an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast subappellations. The Chambave contains 70% Petit Rouge and 30% other local varieties. Both are colored a pale, transparent ruby, but the Nus is brighter, with pink reflections, whereas the Chambave tends more toward orange brick. Though neither is particularly expressive on the nose, the Nus shows a touch of petrol and leafy bramble; the Chambave suggests lightly caramelized strawberries. On the palate, the latter offers a syrupy sweetness, with acidity and peppery spice escalating toward the end, leaving a tart, tannic aftertaste. The Nus presents ripe Maraschino cherries, leather, and a hint of dried oregano on the finish. Both are medium bodied, extremely well balanced, and pleasing to drink.

**La Kiuva Picotentro 2009 $17**

Transparent brick red with orange reflections. The tight nose grudgingly offers redcurrant and cranberry scents; the palate is much more generous, with a ripe red-cherry core, a pleasantly chalky edge, and a firm finish. The tannins provide a refreshing astringency rather than structure, making the wine relatively simple but food friendly. 13% alcohol.

**La Source Torrette 2010 $NA**

This is a pretty, transparent red-pink wine smelling of fresh strawberry, white pepper, and allspice. Bright acidity and a touch of astringency balance the fruity sweetness. Practically no tannins; fresh and easy to drink.

**Les Crêtes Fumin Vigne la Tour 2007 $39**

Dark purple-red, bordering on totally opaque black. An earthy aroma of ripe black plum is somewhat obscured by alcohol fumes (though there’s only 13%). Soft and full on the palate, the wine has a good tannic grip, with flavors of macerated black plum, blackcurrant, and pomegranate highlighted by cranberry acidity. Tannins linger on the finish. You can drink this wine now, but it should be even better in a year or two.

**Passito Albert Vevey Blanc Flapi N.V. $37**

Made from late-harvested Prié Blanc grapes. A transparent, extremely pale yellow hue leads to a nose suggestive of fragrant white flowers, with hints of vanilla and white peach. Candied citrus on the palate is sweet but not cloying, and there’s a touch of coconut milk and lemon confit on the finish. 14.5% alcohol.

**Les Granges Malvoisie Nus Flètri 2009 $NA**

Golden orange-amber in color, this Pinot Grigio passito offers intriguing aromas of chocolate-covered orange rind, coffee grounds, and caramel. Its honey-textured palate is velvety but not syrupy, with honey-lemon sensations followed by buttery, caramelized mango and banana flavors. The sweetness is balanced by a slight citric bitterness and mineral finish. 14.5% alcohol.
co-ops or made wine for personal consumption before launching commercial wineries, often facilitated by regional financial incentives. A handful have grown into medium-size businesses: Frères Grosjean produces 8,300 cases annually, and Les Crêtes—the largest independent winery in the region—makes more than 16,000 cases per year. Just about all of the independent wineries belong to an association called Viticulteurs Encaveurs Vallée d’Aoste, which was created in 1991 and currently has 34 members, with Vincent Grosjean of Frères Grosjean as president.

An unusual organization called the Institut Régional Agricole was founded in 1951 by the regional government and the religious Hospice of Gran San Bernard as a boarding school that helped adolescents develop agricultural skills, including grape growing and winemaking. Since 1982, when it became a more formal academic institution, it has also operated a commercial winery and an important research facility that assists in the promotion of viticulture throughout the region.

Until quite recently, wine was considered a basic commodity in the Valle d’Aosta: a vineyard was as essential to economic survival as livestock, a small field of grain, a vegetable garden, and fruit trees. As time passed, these small family plots were divided up among generations of children. Given both the actual and symbolic importance of land here, most Valdostans will not sell a vineyard unless they absolutely have to; if they can’t work it themselves, they will rent it out. The result is a micro-subdivision of an already fractured viticultural environment—making any commercial enterprise extremely difficult to operate, let alone expand. To assemble even small contiguous plots, it might be necessary to negotiate five or six separate rental contracts. Vincent Grosjean, for example, says that the 35 acres of vines he works contain about 30 separate parcels, but even he is not sure of the exact number.

In addition, many vineyards (and virtually all
of the steep, terraced, pergola-trained ones) must be worked entirely by hand, which also entails carrying material up steep stone steps and carrying crates full of grapes down. Some producers have created time- and labor-saving devices such as monorails that bring harvested grapes down to roadside collection points and systems of hoses that channel liquid treatments up into the vineyards. (Other adaptations include spraying the grapes with milk from local cows and hanging plastic bottles of vinegar amid the vines to combat Suzuki flies.) For many today, it simply isn’t worth the trouble; the landscape is littered with abandoned, foliage-choked terraces, and young people are often understandably discouraged from pursuing winemaking as a career.

Still, that hasn’t prevented all of them from entering the business. “I started my winery in 1989, when I was 22, because I liked to drink wine,” says Michel Vallet of Feudo di San Maurizio in the Central Valley. “I had inherited a small piece of land in an impossible place; it was empty, so I decided to plant a vineyard. Little by little, it became my passion; I put everything I earned back into the business and gradually acquired more land.” Today, Vallet works 25 acres (20 owned, 5 leased), from which he makes 5,000 cases a year. His commitment to indigenous grape varieties and the recuperation of abandoned vineyards has grown along with his business; he has just finished the restoration and replantation of an incredibly steep block high above his village of Sarre. “We have more demand than supply, so it makes sense to expand,” he says. “Though it’s hard work, I like what I do.”

Such determination in the face of harsh reality is typical of producers here, both young and old. If their wines can reach the growing number of consumers with an appreciation for distinctive terroir and uncommon grape varieties, perhaps there will be even more incentive to resurrect the Valle d’Aosta’s ancient, overgrown terraces.