

BARBARESCO & BAROLO 2006

One Langhe legend has slated the vintage, refusing to bottle, yet his fellow producers are full of praise. Who's right, asks **FRANCO ZILIANI**

The decision of one Langhe producer not to make a 2006 Barolo or Barbaresco shocked Piedmont – and the furor shows no sign of letting up. For this was not just any old producer, but one of the Langhe's indisputable greats.

Bruno Giacosa announced last May that he would not bottle the 2006 vintage, but instead sell the wine in bulk to other bottlers. 'There is nothing at all special about 2006: it falls short in every category – nose, typicity, structure,' he said. 'It was a growing season that went crooked from the beginning and never found its balance. You had so much rain during picking and so many problems with ripeness levels and the health of the fruit. The

2006s will not hold up well over time; as they age their weaknesses will emerge.'

Giacosa suffered a stroke in 2006 that left him unable to taste the wines for some time. He is now fully recovered and his words have stirred up the region in which he is a leading light. When the story broke on *decanter.com*, Giacosa was lauded by observers for sacrificing commercial gain in pursuit of upholding quality. So widespread was the coverage that the Consorzio for the Defence of Barolo, Barbaresco, Alba, Langhe and Roero felt the need to post a response to assure readers that 'the great majority of producers and consumers of Barbaresco 2006 [on the market since January 2009] believe 2006 is a very good vintage, with

some exceptional peaks'. Armando Cordero is one. 'For those who worked with real care in the vineyard and cellar, their 2006 will be remembered for its aromatic richness and fine structure. The vintage will provide much pleasure to both producers and consumers.'

Yet the Consorzio's official harvest report says 2006 had 'infrequent rains and lengthy stretches of temperatures both above and below average' which saw the vines alternate between 'periods of rapid vegetative growth and relative stasis'. The 'drought and torrid heat' continued into July, interrupted only by scattered storms 'of little importance'. The first autumn rains came only in mid-September, finally ending the long dry period, but 'were a cause of much concern to growers' of late-ripening varieties such as Nebbiolo.

So who is right? Are the 2006s worth bottling – and drinking – or is it a dud vintage? Looking over the array of 2006 Barbarescos, including the cru selections, that were put on the market in 2009, as well as the long list of Barolos (including the most prestigious) that consumers will see this year, one thing is certain: Giacosa will be alone in skipping 2006. His peers have already sent their 2006s to market or have plans to do so. And many are speaking enthusiastically of the vintage.

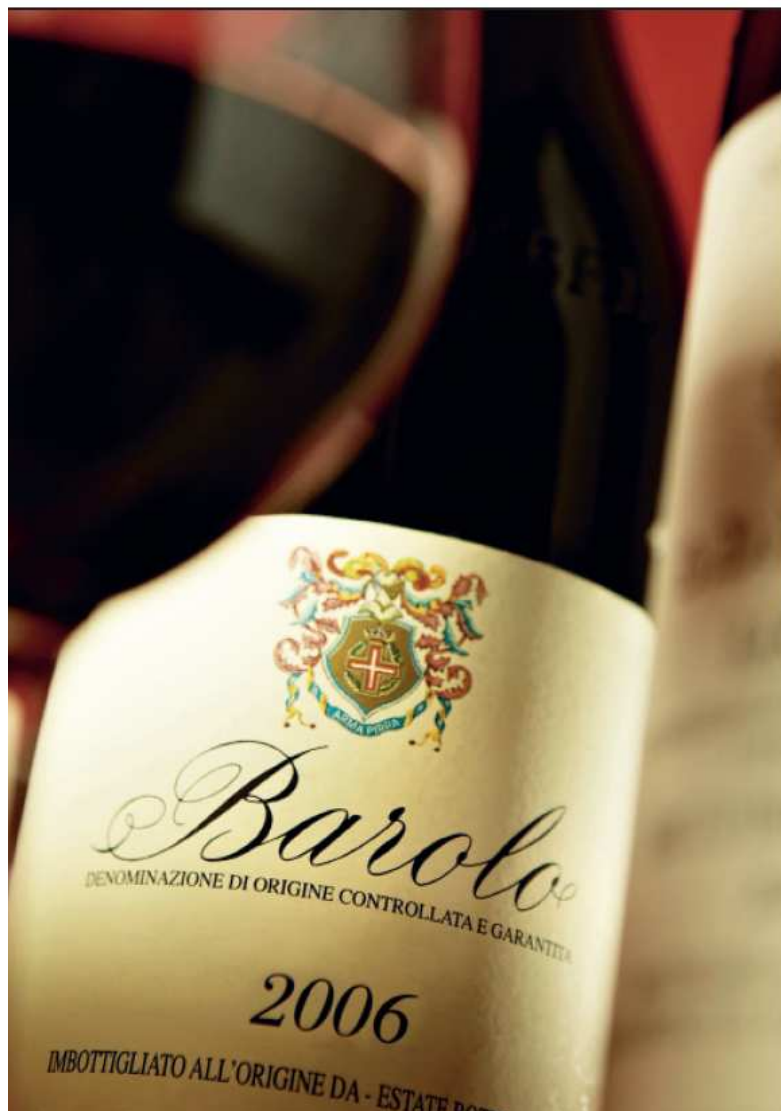
The case for Barolo

What was equally clear in conversations with Barolo producers and from tasting barrel samples still maturing in wood, is that these are powerful wines, deeply



Above: Piedmont's Bruno Giacosa has slammed 2006 as 'falling short in every category'

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Above: noted Barolo producer Mauro Mascarello said he wished all 'bad' vintages were as good as 2006

'Giacosa will be alone in skipping 2006. His peers have already sent their wines to market'

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coloured and full bodied, still quite tannic and closed. One can already perceive a very long, positive future for them, in no way inferior to the 2005s and 2004s. They can be described as wines of good depth, sturdy structure and fine elegance, already more open than the '05s (which were rough-edged at this stage of their life) and which display appealing, snappy tannins and a nervy acidity.

Sergio Germano, who is based in Serralunga d'Alba, goes further, finding

2006 similar to 1996 and 1999: 'Both of these were lean and austere in style, with impressive tannic structures – wines that required considerable cellaring but were complex to their core.' Valter Fissore, of Elvio Cogno in Novello, defines 2006 as 'a very great year, more classic compared to 2007 and 2008 and long-lived as well'

The Brovia family, which boasts the world-class Rocche and Villero vineyards in Castiglione Falletto, rank 2006 as 'a good year, with very elegant wines, displaying a marked aromatic richness and complexity. A year that's quite balanced, where neither depth nor structure are out of proportion, not even the alcohol or the concentration. In short, it's a vintage that is going to be delicious, and quite soon too, but without the characteristics typical of years that are too hot or dry. It's not one of the historic vintages that excite us producers and

passionate Barolo fans, but its considerable forte is its harmony and its aromas.' The 2006 Brovias tasted recently are very rounded, with smooth tannins and remarkable harmony.

The case for Barbaresco

As for the 2006 Barbarescos, not all the wines I tasted were totally convincing, but the vintage as a whole is being favourably received, offering wines that are elegant, round and structured, and not at all aggressive. Rizzi's Pajorè Suran, Rio Sordo or Tre Stelle from Cascina delle Rose, Rabajà from either Cortese or Castello di Verduno, Serafino Rivella's Montestefano, Poderi Colla's Roncaglio, and Montaribaldi's Sorì Montaribaldi, to mention a few, prove that 2006 was more than simply good for Barbaresco (four and a half stars instead of five) and one that fully justifies the decision of the overwhelming majority of producers to bottle their wines and to send them to market, even in an economic climate that is currently challenging for wines at this price level.

Ultimately, of course, it will be consumers who decide on the merits of this controversial vintage. But when asked for his judgement as to whether he would be making his Monprivato Barolo as usual, Langhe legend Mauro Mascarello replied, 'If all of the vintages were as bad as this, I'd love to have them all!' **D**

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Subscribers can read more on Barolo in this month's free Italy supplement. Look out for our panel tasting of 2005 Barolo later this year