

## The Rittmaster Pages

WEDNESDAY, MAY 26, 2010

### Breakfast of Champions, Day 2: Death by Nebbiolo

Tuesday, May 18th

Made a note to eat more breakfast this morning. After the pummelling I took yesterday at the hands of all that Nebbiolo, I had to muster all of the ballast I could in order to successfully do battle with an extra early start, and what turned out to be another 85 wines at the Ampelion at 10:00 AM.

The morning started with an excellent lecture on the characteristics of Nebbiolo by Dr. Anna Schneider at the Palazzo Mostre e Congressi in Alba. In the did-you-know category are the facts that the earliest mention of Nebbiolo in Barolo goes back to 1266, though there was no appellation of Barolo as such until the Priest of Barolo made it so in 1869. Nebbiolo is, of course, native to Piemonte with Valle d'Aosta claiming some 26 and Valtellina, in Lombardia some 900 of the roughly 6000 hectares planted. Sardegna's 26 hectares, a legacy of the Savoys, alas, is not Nebbiolo at all, Schneider claims. It's Dolcetto! Take that Sardegna.

Another interesting fact is that of the three major clones we know, Rose, Lampia and Michet, only the latter two are suitable for creating newer selections as Rose makes just that, pink, not red, Nebbiolo. But Michet, while an excellent clone, is ravaged by fan leaf virus that both lowers yields (yay!) but also brix (uh, oh). In the seventies and eighties, selections were chosen for their ability to produce high yields but, since 1980, quality has become the foremost criterion.

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#### 2006 Barolo Vintage

Always nice to warm up with 40+ Barbareschi to prepare for the main event! The 2006 vintage in the Barolo zone was considered a more classically styled one with the volume controls one louder....a lot like 2004, some say. My take on it is that it is like 1998 but less consistent. I identified a consistent nose of raspberry (more pronounced in La Morra as I later found, and less obvious in the more structured wines of Monforte and Serralunga). The fruit is complicated to one degree or another by hints of hot 'scorched' earth, something 'seedy' like fennel seed- definitely in the brown herb category- and beefy, mouthfilling tannins. I wrote chocolate-mint for more than a few and those often, it seemed to me, had slightly (or not so slightly in more than one case) elevated alcohols. The best were nicely balanced, juicy and restrained. This first set of wines were all from Barolo and Novello. The controversy amongst the tasters surrounded the famed Cannubi vineyard, which more than one critic in the room called 'alcoholic and insipid.' I wasn't ready to go that far but there were several disappointments from that vaunted site.

As I go through these notes now, I see that I was not very generous with my ratings but I have to say that the vintage is really good- maybe not top to bottom- but very good indeed. 2006 definitely has a prime spot in the Barolo winning streak that now extends from 1995. Here we go:

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2006 Le Ginestre Barolo, Sottocastello, Novello – a benchmark setter  
2006 Elvio Cogno Barolo Ravera- woody but otherwise complete  
2006 Poderi Einaudi Barolo Coste Grimaldi- top notch

(...)

A very well earned buffet lunch (what's up with Salad Russe? Who was the knucklehead who first brought mayonnaise to Piemonte?) was had at the courtyard of Barolo castle. But the respite was short lived as the castle dungeon was loaded with evil-minded men and women just waiting to force more Nebbiolo down our throats.

Same format as yesterday with the accent on the 2000 vintage. So here's what I say about that! The 2000s from blue chip producers like Borgogno, Mascarello, Rinaldi, Cogno and others reveal that, unlike the Barbareschi and Roero wines above, this is not a vintage that will be integrated and perfect ready anytime soon, if ever. Of all the 2000s tasted, it was only Giacomo Brezza's lovely Sarmassa that showed any degree of the complex marzipan-balsamico I was expecting, and even that wine had a ton of palpable tannin. The wines however did show the hallmarks of each respective property's personalities though; Mascarello's elegance, Rinaldi's punch, the mineral-iodine-spice of Borgogno but the best fruit is still submerged in a sea of tannin and whether or not something more interesting emerges with time, we'll need to wait and see. The fate that befell the 2000 Roeros is not, however, encouraging. Most of those have passed their prime and are lean and tannic shells of their former selves. Of course, as I mentioned before, 2000 was ten years ago and most of the current winemakers in Roero were still in the early stages of their careers and this was during the prime of the 'modern' movement where overoaking and extracting Nebbiolo was the norm. Only a few in Roero handled the challenge of this so-called 'perfect' vintage with grace. One would think that the wines made by veteran winemakers working in Barolo's most established, vaunted terroirs would fare better. I know they did, but to what extent, the jury is still definitely out. In the meantime, keep those 'perfect' 2000 Baroli in your cellar under lock and key!

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