

McDuff's Food & Wine Trail

Taking a bite.... Three parts wine blog, one part food blog, plus a dash of music, cycling and other cultural phenomena.

Monday, June 14, 2010

[Elvio Cogno, Novello](#)

Each afternoon throughout Nebbiolo Prima, following the big morning tastings and a quick lunch, attendees had the opportunity to visit one winery, selected from amongst a number of regional producers participating in the daily event program. From the options for day one, I selected the Novello-based estate of Elvio Cogno, a producer whose wines I'd been wanting to get to know better. What better way than going straight to the source?



It was a beautifully warm, sunny day in the Langhe. As we pulled into the driveway at the Elvio Cogno estate, a couple of us were quite tempted to forgo the customary tasting in favor of a dip in the family's infinity pool.



Any thoughts of a dip in the pool were quickly put aside as current winemaker Valter Fissore and his wife Nadia Cognito (Elvio's daughter) emerged and talked to us a bit about the general lay of the land surrounding their winery. With eleven hectares under vine, the winery sits atop the Bricco Ravera hill, just outside of Novello. The Cognito family has been making wine in the Langhe for four generations. The history of the estate itself, though, is relatively recent, going back just to 1990, when Elvio Cognito left his partnership position at Marcarini to purchase land and establish his own estate.



The hilltop town of Novello, with the Maritime Alps in the background — the view to the south from Cognito's patio.

After the quick geography lesson, it was straight to the winery tasting room, where Valter Fissore led us through the entire slate of wines he produces.

1. **Langhe Bianco "Anas-Cëtta," Elvio Cognito 2009**

I think it's fair to say that Cognito's example of Nascetta, a relatively obscure vine indigenous to the Langhe, is one of the best known. Of the 4.5 hectares of

Nascetta planted in Novello, 1.5 belong to Cognito, and they've produced this bottling, called "Anas-Cëtta," every year since 1994. Varietal examples of Nascetta such as this were admitted to the DOC discipline under the umbrella Langhe Bianco designation beginning in 2004. As of the 2010 vintage, Nascetta will have its own DOC: Langhe Nascetta.

After a one-day cold maceration, Cognito's Nascetta begins its fermentation on native yeasts in steel tanks. After a short period, 30% of the wine is moved to old barriques for completion of its primary fermentation. After six months on the lees, including batonnage, the two batches are remarried and allowed to integrate in tank prior to bottling. In the 2009 vintage, about 30-40% of the wine went through malolactic fermentation. The end result is a wine of medium body and medium acidity, full of pear fruit and a dash of white pepper, and with a very distinct nose of mustard seed, goldenrod and freshly baked whole wheat bread.



Valter Fissore in the tasting room.

2. **Barbera d'Alba "Bricco dei Merli," Elvio Cognito 2007**

The Bricco dei Merli (vineyard of the blackbird) is a 1.8 hectare parcel located just down the hill from the winery. Amazingly, 30-40% of the fruit comes from 150 year-old, pre-phylloxera "pied franco" vines. The wine is aged for one year in a mixture of new, large casks (new casks here always see Barbera first, before being used for Nebbiolo) and older barriques (which are currently being phased out at the estate).

When first poured, the '07 showed very ripe, slightly pruned fruit. As it opened, though, the wine became fresher and, for this taster, much more delicious. Rich yet nervous, full of fresh blueberry and boysenberry fruit.

3. **Langhe Rosso "Montegrilli," Elvio Cagno 2007**

Speaking with Valter, it's clear that "Montegrilli" is his wine — "mio vino," in his words. It is a 50/50 blend of Barbera and Nebbiolo, co-fermented in steel then aged for about a year in 2nd, 3rd and 4th passage barriques. The Nebbiolo in the blend comes from the best of Valter's young Barolo vines where the fruit ripens early enough to be picked simultaneously and co-fermented with the generally earlier ripening Barbera. The wine shows lovely, opulent aromas, brimming with 2007 character (ripe and forward). It drinks much like the Barbera "Bricco dei Merli" but with sterner aromas, firmer structure and more evident minerality.



4. **Langhe Rosso "Montegrilli," Elvio Cagno 2008**

If the 2007 version was Valter's wine, the 2008 is clearly Valter's joy. He calls it his Gevrey-Chambertin. The '08 was produced with the same general disciplines as the '07 but saw a less intensive oak treatment, being aged in botti rather than barriques. Bottled only one month prior to our visit, it was already showing beautifully, with very elegant structure and red-fruited and floral aromatics. Fantastically drinkable.

5. **Barbaresco, Elvio Cagno 2006**

Barbaresco is a new venture at Cognito, produced from a leased 0.6 hectare vineyard of 20-30 year-old Nebbiolo vines in the Montesommo cru of Neive. After a 20-day maceration and fermentation with a submerged cap, the wine spent a little over a year in casks of Slovenian oak before bottling. Very nice if somewhat simple in character, this, like the preceding "Montegrilli," was defined primarily by its elegance, putting it in stark contrast with the majority of [2007 Barbaresci I'd tasted earlier in the morning](#).

6. **Barolo "Cascina Nuova," Elvio Cagno 2006**

Yielding from young vines (6-12 years) in Novello, "Cascina Nuova" is the most approachable and value-oriented of the four Baroli produced at Cognito. Quite elegant, delicate and fresh in style. It ages for two years in large casks, followed by six months of bottle age.



The squared-off inox tanks used at Elvio Corno were designed not only to optimize use of space (think about the shape of boxed wine vs. bottled wine in a shipping container or on the shelf) but also to facilitate the submerged cap method of maceration that Valter favors.

7. Barolo "Ravera," Elvio Corno 2006

"Ravera" is a south-facing single vineyard cru of 4.8 hectares situated in Novello. Corno's 2006, produced specifically from the michet and lampia clones of Nebbiolo, underwent approximately 40 days of maceration, with pump-over for the first 10-12 days followed by 25-30 days with a submerged cap. It was then finished with 24 months aging in botti. Very young, forceful and somewhat closed at present, but very promising.

8. Barolo "Bricco Pernice," Elvio Corno 2005

Another new wine at the estate, "Bricco Pernice" is a two-hectare plot within the cru of Ravera that is planted entirely to the lampia sub-variety of Nebbiolo, with vines ranging from 10-50 years of age. Its name refers to the prevalence of partridges in the area. After a 30-day submerged cap maceration, it spent 30 months in new-to-Nebbiolo casks (used once previously for Barbera, which takes more kindly to entirely new oak per Valter) and another 12 months in bottle prior to release. Riper and with a more baked-fruit aromatic profile than "Ravera" or "Cascina Nuova." Very well done.



9. **Barolo "Vigna Elena," Elvio Cagno 1999**

First produced in the 1997 vintage, "Vigna Elena" is named after Valter's daughter who, at age three, drew the picture that has since become the label art for this cuvée. Now nineteen, Elena is a graphic artist whose more recent work includes the [label art](#) for "Bricco Pernice."

The wine comes from a one-hectare vineyard of 29 year-old vines. It's produced entirely from the rosé clone of Nebbiolo, of which Valter is a particular champion in spite of it fairly widely being considered an "inferior" sub-variety. As Valter explains, for this cuvée, which he produces only in exceptional vintages, he's looking for a Burgundian sense of elegance, not power. At eleven years of age, it's showing the encroachment of some maturity along with lovely aromatic development yet is still very, very young tasting. There's a whiff of brett but just enough to add some savage interest to the wine's overall character. Oh yeah, the technical stuff: 30-day submerged cap maceration, 36 months in 40 hectoliter casks of Slavonian oak and 12 months of bottle age prior to commercialization.



10. **Barolo "Ravera," Elvio Cogno 2001**

Valter was particularly keen to show us his 2001 "Ravera" as it had been selected as the top wine out of twelve 2001 Baroli tasted as part of a *Decanter* master class on the day prior to our visit. The 2001, aged for one year in tonneaux followed by another in botti, showed a more overt wood influence than its younger counterpart from 2006. It handled that wood with no problem, though, exuding a ripe, dark and beautiful nose full of menthol, teak and dark, spicy fruit. Firm, dusty tannins brought it all together on the palate. Very fresh in color and aroma, this should have a long life ahead of it.



After our tasting, Valter led our small group on a quick tour of the family's recently expanded and renovated winery. Undertaking such work in Piedmont, in Italy in general, takes patience beyond the realm of virtue and into that of absolute requirement. Obtaining the necessary work permits and designing all exterior aspects according to historical specifications often makes such projects take years.



At Cognito, that combination of patience and diligent work have paid dividends in the form of a lovely winery space, not overly large but with enough space to allow for plenty of bottle storage and to facilitate comfortable and efficient work flow, from vinification through barrel aging and on to bottling.



As you'll have surmised if you made it through the technical aspects of the above tasting notes, a variety of shapes, sizes and sources of oak wine vessels are utilized at Cognito, ranging from barriques through the foudres and large casks shown in the above picture above. As it seems is the case at so many producers throughout the Langhe at the moment, Valter is moving more and more away from the use of barriques and more toward medium- to large-scale wood.



Valter has come up with a pretty tidy solution for dealing with those small barrels as they rotate out of the production cycle. Barrique stave fencing, anyone?

Some might view that shift as a step away from modernism and more toward the centrist position on the Piemontese stylistic spectrum. More cynical minds might look at it as following fashion. To me, having visited and gotten a closer understanding of the wines, it seems first and foremost a natural step in the ongoing and ever changing, ever cyclical efforts of a man trying to make the best wine possible from what nature has provided.



In closing, this shot goes out to all the friends and associates I've annoyed (and have yet to annoy) by publishing photos of them here at MFWT over the years. That's me with Valter, the Langhe hills rolling to the horizon.

[Elvio Cagno](#)

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