



RASSEGNA STAMPA

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C O G N O



Piedmont Comes of Age



This year, I left my tastings of the wines of Piedmont energized and excited. Simply put, I have never encountered so many delicious wines from so many different producers. Of course, there are always varying levels of quality based on the characteristics of specific vintages (see 2008 Dolcetto below), but the simple fact is that Piedmont's wines have never been better and more consistent across the board.

In order to understand what is happening in Piedmont it is instructive to look at the last 20-25 years of history. Like many regions, modern technology had a profound impact on the quality of wines beginning in the 1980s, with the widespread adoption of temperature control in fermentation, the reduction of fermentation/maceration times and the introduction of French oak barrels, which also led to shorter periods of oak aging. Many of the wines that brought attention to Piedmont in the 1980s and 1990s were made in the so-called modern style that among other things relied heavily on the use of French oak barrels. Lost in the polemics around shorter fermentation times and French oak was that growers were also paying much more attention to limiting yields in their vineyards and to cleanliness in their cellars. In the latter half of the 1990s, Piedmont's growers made a number of profound wines, but many of these wines reflected a style that was at times extreme in its search for color, concentration and size.

Over the last few years, however, producers have matured and the region has begun to witness a fascinating convergence of styles. The more modernist producers have largely backed off the new oak, gradually lengthened fermentation times and moved away from excessively low yields. At the same time, traditional producers have raised quality by limiting yields and paying more attention to replacing their old barrels. Perhaps even more importantly, all of the work that growers have put into their impeccably farmed vineyards over the last 25 years is finally starting to come through in a very big way now that the plants are of a certain age and the veneer of excessive intervention in the cellar has been peeled off. As a result, overall quality, purity of varietal expression and consistency in Piedmont have never been higher.



Barolo and Barbaresco have often been difficult wines for the general wine-drinking populace to embrace because the tannins can be formidable when the wines are young. That is increasingly not the case. Advances in viticultural and oenological practices and generally more favorable weather conditions are putting producers in a strong position to make delicious wines that can be appreciated upon release. Young Nebbiolo is much more approachable than it has ever been, which means that as consumers encounter these wines for the first time they are much more likely to fall in love with them. The number of terrific Langhe Nebbiolos and, to a lesser extent, Nebbiolos from Alba bears this out. Today, it is difficult to find a bad bottle of wine in Piedmont. To be sure, young Barolos and Barbarescos still tend to close down in bottle, but not in any way that is meaningfully different than the finest grand cru Burgundies or top Bordeaux. I am increasingly convinced that within the next 10-15 years the appreciation for Piedmont's top wines will explode globally as consumers become more familiar with the wines. Most of the very finest wines are made in small quantities of a just a few hundred cases, so it is likely that prices will eventually have to catch up, even if that will take a while given the current state of the global economy. Readers with the financial resources to do so should take advantage of the current weakness in the market and the abundance of high quality vintages that are or soon will be available to build a collection of fine Barolo and Barbaresco at what very well might look like bargain prices in the future.

And Now, For The Not So Good News....

While it is quite clear that overall quality has risen dramatically in Piedmont, the region also faces significant challenges. New plantings of Nebbiolo continue to grow, stripping the hills of valuable forests and weakening these fragile ecosystems. Numerous vineyards were damaged by landslides during the winter of 2009 at least partly because tree root systems are no longer in place to hold soils together during times of stress.

It is no secret that demand for high-end wines from all regions has slowed abruptly. Even last year, at the tail end of the 2004 Barolo campaign, a number of great, benchmark wines were offered to US consumers at substantial discounts. So far reception to the 2005 Barolos has been tepid. One major producer told me quite candidly he bottled less of his 2005 Barolos because he feared they wouldn't sell through. Other producers have quietly begun bottling Langhe Nebbiolo in an effort to quickly monetize some of their efforts rather than risk sitting on thousands of unsold bottles of Barolo or Barbaresco. I was struck by the very high overall quality of many of these Langhe Nebbiolos. It is fairly obvious (among the region's serious producers) that growers are paying more attention to their entrylevel wines, which plays right into the hands of savvy consumers, who will find no shortage of well-priced wines in the market.

Barbaresco 2006: Highs and Lows

The 2006 vintage in Barbaresco has turned out mixed results that fall short of those the region saw in 2004 and 2005. Overall 2006 was a hot year, yet rain and hail during the harvest caused growers headaches at the most critical part of the season. Just after the fruit was picked, the prospects for the 2006s seemed uncertain. At the time, one of Barbaresco's reference-point producers told me he would likely not bottle his top singlevineyard selections. Later he changed his





mind and like most producers ended up bottling his top wines. The Produttori del Barbaresco plan to release their Riservas, although the wines are still in barrel.

Of course, life wouldn't be interesting if there weren't one exception and in this case it is none other than Bruno Giacosa, arguably the most revered producer of the entire region. Giacosa's announcement he would not bottle his Barbarescos (and Barolos) touched off a series of furious volleys back and forth on the merits, or lack thereof, of the 2006 harvest. As I wrote in my reviews of Giacosa's new releases, I doubt anyone, including Giacosa himself, will fully understand all of the nuances of his decision. One thing I am very certain about is that Giacosa's comments on the quality of the vintage should only be interpreted within the context of his own wines, rather than as a damning of the entire vintage, as was mistakenly attributed throughout much of the press.

To be sure, 2006 is a mixed vintage in Barbaresco for the reasons I note above. However, the best wines are clearly outstanding, even if they can't match the 2004s or 2005s for consistency, complexity, or ageability. For the most part, these are pretty, mid-weight Barbarescos suited for near-term drinking. Within that context, readers will find plenty of wines well worth seeking out.

The most positive trend emerging from Barbaresco is the increasing number of growers making important wines. As recently as a few years ago, that wasn't always the case, and to tell the truth, even today Barbaresco's producers don't always capture the full potential of top vintages like 2004 that require an extra measure of sacrifice in the vineyard. That said, young producers like Renato Vacca, Luca Roagna and Andrea Sottimano, among others, are well-poised to write the next chapter of history in Barbaresco. The Produttori del Barbaresco have never made such consistently outstanding wines in their 50+ years of history, and prices remain exceedingly fair for the quality of what is in the bottle. Among the region's longestablished stars, Angelo Gaja and Bruno Giacosa show no signs of slowing down, while producers like Bruno Rocca and Bruno Nada who have been making great wines for some time continue to impress. In short, despite a mixed 2006 vintage, I am increasingly optimistic about Barbaresco and its wines.

More 2005 Barolo

A number of late-release 2005 Barolos will be appearing in the marketplace over the coming months. The more I taste the 2005 Barolos, the more I like the vintage. Once again, Nebbiolo proves to be a very hard grape to understand. Towards the end of the growing season producers knew they were likely in for a protracted period of rain, so most chose to pick ahead of the inclement weather. The vast majority of fruit was picked with lower physiological ripeness (the ripeness of the seeds and stems) than is the custom today. Many of the wines showed hard, grainy tannins when they were young that were particularly coarse even within the context of baby Nebbiolo. Yet with bottle age the wines continue to gain focus and balance while showing great fruit in a transformation that is truly remarkable. 2005 remains a vintage of smaller scaled Barolos vis-à-vis the kaleidoscopic, layered 2004s, but the best wines have enough purity of fruit and acidity to develop nicely for a number of years. The finest 2005 Barolos will deliver considerable pleasure in a more immediate style than the 2004s.





2008 and 2007 Update

As I wrote in Issue 184, 2008 appears to be a good, but not great, vintage, particularly for Dolcetto and the young Barberas that are coming on the market. In general, the wines are soft and approachable, but lack a touch of depth that might otherwise elevate them. 2008 saw a wet spring which caused an irregular flowering and crop set. Uneven weather continued into the early summer, and it wasn't until the end of the summer that the heat finally arrived. The conditions were most challenging for Dolcetto and Barbera, two varieties that ripen earlier than Nebbiolo. Many of the 2008 Dolcettos and Barberas reveal slightly unpolished, grainy tannins and lack the stuffing of top vintages. The gorgeous conditions in the late summer and early fall of 2008 were much more favorable for Nebbiolo, which today looks like the most successful variety of this challenging growing season.

The 2007s are far more consistent across Piedmont's main red grapes. In 2007 a cool summer helped restore a measure of balance after a record-breaking winter that was unusually warm and dry. The 2007s are soft, perfumed, silky-textured wines that have always shown well right out of the gate. I was especially struck by a number of superb 2007 Barberas, the best of which are exceptionally elegant, pure and refined. Stylistically the wines resemble the 2004s, but with a touch more fruit. The 2007 Barbarescos will be released in 2010, the 2007 Barolos in 2011. So far, what I have tasted in 2007 Barbaresco and Barolo looks highly promising. Broadly speaking, the wines possess gorgeous aromatics, generous ripe fruit and silky tannins, qualities that are hard to find in one vintage. Once again, at this stage a comparison with 2004 seems apt.

Roero: Full of Promise

This small appellation across the valley from Barbaresco seldom gets much attention because for many years most of Roero's best wines were bottled by producers outside the region, including Bruno Giacosa's Arneis and the Nebbiolo d'Alba Valmaggione made by both Giacosa and Luciano Sandrone. That all started to change in the mid-1990s under the leadership of Matteo Correggia, a young producer who inspired so many growers here through his passion and commitment to quality. Sadly, Correggia died in a tragic tractor accident in 2001 but his legacy is very much alive and well among the many growers who he influenced.

The soils, rich in minerals and with a high percentage of sand, yield wines that are typically perfumed, steely and medium in body. The main grapes are the white Arneis and the red Barbera and Nebbiolo. Arneis is a floral, mineral wine with a flavor profile that tends towards apricots, peaches, flowers and almonds. The Barberas of Roero, bottled as Barbera d'Alba, also show a pronounced minerality that captures a nice middle ground between the Barberas of Asti and those made in the Barbaresco and Barolo producing villages further south. Nebbiolo can be bottled either as Nebbiolo d'Alba (for the simpler versions) or the new Roero DOCG that prescribes more stringent requirements on yields and aging. Today there are only a handful of important Roeros but these bottles suggest that the region is capable of producing wines that can hold their own with Barolo and Barbaresco. Speak with old-timers in Piedmont and they will tell you that in previous generations large négociants would buy Nebbiolo in Roero to make up any shortfall in Barolo and





Barbaresco grapes. Roero's leading producers include Malvirà, Matteo Correggia, Val del Prete, Almondo, Hilberg-Pasquero and Ca' Rossa, all of whom make wines well worth discovering.

Piedmont's Ten Most Underrated Producers

Piedmont, like most wine regions, remains dominated by the image, history and quality level associated with a small handful of iconic growers. As phenomenal as the wines of those producers can be, today there are a number of estates making very fine wines for a fraction of the cost. These are some of my favorite under the radar producers (in no particular order). All of these estates have two things in common; each of their wines is consistently excellent to outstanding in their respective peer groups, and prices offer good value. To be sure, Barolo, Barbaresco and top-flight Barbera are rarely inexpensive in absolute terms, but your dollar is likely to go further in Piedmont than it is in many, if not most, of the world's most celebrated regions for fine, cellar worthy wine, including Bordeaux, Burgundy and California. Here, then, is my top ten list of Piedmont's most overlooked wineries: Brovia (Castiglione Falletto), Cavallotto (Castiglione Falletto), G.D. Vajra (Barolo), Cantina del Pino (Barbaresco), Roagna (Barbaresco), Fratelli Alessandria (Verduno), Alessandro e Gian Natale Fantino (Monforte), Cascina Val del Prete (Roero), **Elvio Cogno (Novello)** and Produttori del Barbaresco (Barbaresco).

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