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Barolo's Marvelous 2007 Vintage

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As we know, all good things must end. And since Barolo has enjoyed the strongest series of vintages in its history since 1996, I was entirely prepared to hear the sound of a string snapping when travelling to Alba this summer to taste the new releases from the 2007 vintage. Advance word had it that a warm growing season produced ripe, soft wines with less detail and structure than the 2006s, which didn't quite sound like my cup of tea. But the indisputable fact is that the 2007 Barolos are terrific.

This conclusion was driven home quite forcefully in May during intensive blind tastings of more than 300 new releases in Alba under the name, "Nebbiolo Prima." I reported on these tastings last month in connection with the best wines I tasted from Roero and Barbaresco, and if you saw that column, you'll recall that they are conducted over five days for about 50 writers from around the world in an ultra-professional manner. Three identical white rooms provide the setting, and all of the pouring performed by top Italian sommeliers, with roughly 65 wines presented each morning.

Since we're talking about 65 highly structured Nebbiolo-based wines, that's a rather hard slog, I confess. But Nebbiolo Prima is the finest event of its kind in the world, and I find nothing quite as fortifying as a flight of really extraordinary wines. And that's exactly what I tasted--flight after flight.

This month's column includes all of the top wines that I tasted in two categories, 2007 DOCG Barolos and 2005 Barolo Riservas, with the 2007s being much more numerous. These wines will likely be compared to the stylistically distinct 2006s for many years, and this comparison actually echoes one from a decade ago involving 1996 and 1997. In that case, the wines from the warmer 1997 vintage were the more intensely hyped of the two, but have now been surpassed (in my view, anyway) by the fresher, firmer, more complete and complex wines of 1996.

Although a similar outcome with the wines from 2006 and 2007 can't be ruled out, I think that the 2007 Barolo are significantly better than their counterparts from 1997, and that they'll continue to challenge the wonderful 2006s over the long haul. As a group, they are a little rounder and softer, but dozens of them show highly nuanced, intricate aromas and flavors, and few of them seem stewed or obvious in their ripeness. Most are structured with plenty of fresh acidity, and though their tannins are riper and softer than in the 2006s, they show no lack of guts or grip.

What they *do* show is a very user-friendly profile that will permit them to be enjoyed relatively early by those who lack cellars or patience--or who simply like primary fruit notes as much as they enjoy secondary aromas and flavors from bottle ageing. To be precise, though, while many of these wines *can* be enjoyed soon or even now, almost none of them *need* to be consumed soon, or indeed anytime during the current decade. They've got the stuffing and structure to last, and they've also got sufficient sweet fruit to keep appealing flesh on the bones of those famous Barolo tannins.

To provide a bit of background on process behind the reviews that follow, I tasted all of the wines below, blind, in five carefully conducted peer-group tastings. Every recommended wine was tasted at least twice, with a second evaluation performed before the identity of the wine was known to assure the accuracy of my score (since order of presentation can have a distorting effect). They are set forth below in order of excellence, with the highest-scoring wines topping the list.

When the producer's name includes both a family and a given name, the family name usually appears first in order. This is a convention followed by the organizers of the Nebbiolo Prima tastings, though it is not one that was followed with perfect consistency. In a few instances I have taken the liberty of making corrections, but generally I have simply conveyed the producer names as designated in the tastings.

Names of particular vineyards and/or proprietary names of wines appear in quotation marks. The final element in the entries (following a comma and prior to a colon) is the name of the commune (or village) from which the wine was sourced, which may be of interest to serious students of these wines and which rarely appears on labels.

Don't fail to scroll down to find the eight wonderful Barolo Riserva wines from 2005 at the bottom of this column. It seems that fewer Riservas are made each year, and there are some good reasons for that, but they need not detain us here. However, the best wines made with the extended oak ageing called for in this category are extraordinary, whether made in a modern or a more traditional style (which roughly comes down to a distinction between use of new barrels or older, larger casks).

One last word on the quality of the 2007 Barolos: It is so high and so broadly distributed that I needed to confine the full reviews to wines that I scored at 93 points or higher and I still ended up writing a 4,000+ word column!). You'll see a list of wines that scored 92, and I've got notes on many other wines that were quite strong but down another notch or two. If you want to learn a bit more about one of the wines scored at 92, or have a question about a favorite wine that doesn't appear below, send me an email at mfranz@winereviewonline.com

Elvio Cogno "Ravera," Novello: This wine is complete in all respects and very well made, with excellent concentration and depth of fruit as well as balanced wood and tannin. While not quite as expressive as the very top performers at this stage in its development, it is as very evenly proportioned and poised for a long period of improvement. **93** [It bears noting that this producer also made a bottling labeled as "Cascina Nuova" which is, in 2007 as in other recent vintages, among the very best values in Barolo. Moreover, the house's top wines don't appear because they are on an (admirably) delayed release schedule: The current release "Pernice" is from the 2006 vintage, and it is among the most alluring wines of that vintage at this early stage, and the 2005 Vigna Elena is exceptionally refined, alluringly perfumed, and built for two decades of development.]