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One of the most fascinating aspects of Nebbiolo is its ability to express an extraordinary amount of information with regards to vintage, site, microclimate, terrain and a host of other variables. That seemed to be the overwhelming takeaway from my tastings of the 2006 Barolos. To gain as much perspective as possible, I tasted the 2006 Barolos next to vintages 2005, 2007, 2008 and 2009 (where the wines were through malo) at a number of estates including Giacomo Conterno, Altare, Clerico, Brovia, Conterno-Fantino, Bartolo Mascarello, E. Pira, Sandrone, Scavino, Vietti, Roberto Voerzio and others; while at a handful of addresses time constraints allowed for a comparison with just 2005 and/or 2007. I was struck by how distinct each of these vintages is, but most importantly my tastings emphasized a point I think is crucial when it comes to making purchasing decisions; in the vast majority of cases readers will be best served by focusing on the finest producers over vintage characteristics, which by nature are always generalized. All of the wines in this article were tasted between November 2009 and January 2010. I will provide notes on the later-released 2006 Barolos in the October issue. A number of wineries and importers had not set prices as we went to press, but generally readers should expect prices that are in line with the 2005s, if not a touch lower.

To be sure, getting a handle on recent vintages in Piedmont is no easy task. Since 2004 every harvest has been at least above average and in some cases utterly profound. Vintage 2006 is probably the hardest of the current vintages in the pipeline to get a grasp on. For starters, hail was an issue in many places, most dramatically in La Morra, where parts of Arborina were devastated. Bruno Giacosa's decision to not bottle his 2006 Barolos and Barbarescos (which I addressed in depth in Issue 185) caused a great amount of consternation among producers and was a popular subject of discussion in my visits with growers. It's worth taking a moment to remind readers that Giacosa's decision not to bottle his 2006s is largely the result of what was a very difficult year for him personally, rather than an indictment of the overall quality of the vintage.

The winter and spring in 2006 were relatively uneventful. The summer was quite warm, which yielded super-ripe Dolcettos and Barberas. Nebbiolo is late to ripen, however, and the vines benefitted greatly from well-timed spells of rain that fell in August and September. Evening temperatures dropped during the final month of the growing season, allowing the full development of color, expressive aromatics, ripe fruit, healthy acidity and powerful structure. So far, it looks like the villages of Monforte and Serralunga were the most privileged, perhaps because the fruit ripens a touch later in both villages, which gave growers the ability to maximize the full potential of the ideal conditions towards the end of the maturation cycle.

The 2006 Barolos are big, powerful wines the best of which reveal extraordinary balance as well as significant potential to improve in bottle. Today the 2006 Barolos remind me a bit of the 1999s with perhaps a touch more density and richness. Producers describe the vintage as 'classic' by which they usually mean a year characterized by well-balanced weather and cool nights during the harvest, conditions that tend to yield firm, sturdy wines with the capacity to develop and age positively for many years, such as 1989, 1996, 1999, 2001 and 2004; as opposed to ripe years where the nights during the final month are warm and the wines are more overtly fruit-forward, such as 1990, 1997, 2000 and 2003. These definitions are tricky, because although the thought of a 'classic' vintage can cause the most diehard Barolo aficionados to salivate, the reality is that there are more than a few excessively stern, angular wines that I doubt will ever find their balance. Nevertheless, the finest 2006 Barolos – and there is no shortage of fine bottles – reveal a modern expression of ripeness married to a firm sense of structure that readers are likely to find immensely appealing, although many of the top wines will require cellaring.

One of the key metrics I look for in evaluating a vintage is the quality of the entry-level Barolos, in some quarters still known as Barolo *normale*, a term I deplore but sometimes use simply for clarity. The best of these entry-level Barolos are gorgeous and well-balanced. It doesn't hurt that producers have made a concerted effort to improve those wines in a weak market where demand for their higher-end bottlings is slackening by adding some of the juice normally destined for their more expensive selections. Still, it is impossible to ignore the success of the best of the Baroli *normali* in 2006. Sadly, despite the quality of the wines, I fear the 2006s will be overshadowed by the 2007s, which are also shaping up to be extraordinary, albeit in a very different style. Of even greater concern, especially to producers and the trade, is the weak demand for Barolo (and high-end wine overall), particularly in the United States. I was astonished to learn that a number of producers I visited in late November 2009 had still not shipped a single bottle of 2005 Barolo to the US.

**A Preview Of The 2007 Barolos**

The 2007 Barolos are some of the most exciting, electrifying and viscerally thrilling wines I have tasted in over a dozen years of visiting Piedmont. As was the case throughout continental Europe, the winter essentially never appeared in Italy. Temperatures remained well above normal and precipitation was non-existent. As a result, plants and flowers were a full month ahead of schedule in the early spring. Summer temperatures, instead, were quite moderate, which allowed the maturation of the grapes to slow down. Temperatures dropped again in September, allowing for cool nights during the final phase of maturation, which is essential for developing the aromatics that are a big part of what makes Nebbiolo such a magnificent grape. The 2007 Barolos combine elements of cold and warm vintages to a degree I have never seen before. Today the wines come across as similar in style to the 2004s, but with more opulence and depth of fruit. The 2007 Barolos will be immensely appealing on release due to the relatively low acidities and sheer density of fruit. I have already heard one producer tell me rather dismissively "2007 is a vintage the Americans will love." In addition to finding this stereotypical BS ridiculous in the year 2010, my guess is that the wines will appeal to a broad public. Critics may claim the wines won't age. One look at the development of the 1985s and 1990s – two warm vintages that weren't supposed to last – show that, if properly stored, Barolos from hot years can easily drink well to age twenty-five and likely beyond.

#### **An Update on the 2005 and 2004 Barolos**

As I wrote in Issue 185, the 2005 Barolos have turned out better than I originally expected. However, when tasted next to the 2006s, it is clear they lack the stuffing and density of the finest years. In time, I expect it will become clear that 2005, while interesting, is the least exciting of the batch of current vintages. It is a year to be especially selective, and a vintage that should offer quite a bit of value given the current economic climate. I don't have much to say about the 2004 Barolos other than the wines appear to be shutting down mightily in bottle. If a window still exists for sampling the top 2004s, it is closing rapidly.

#### **Eating and Drinking in Piedmont**

Another of the other main topics of conversation during my trip to Piedmont this fall was the awarding of two Michelin stars each to Antica Corona Reale (known locally as da Renzo) in Cervere and Piazza Duomo in Alba, which is understandably a huge source of pride for the locals. The food at da Renzo can be sublime and the service is usually outstanding, but unfortunately the wine list is full of holes and bottles aren't properly stored. My one meal at Piazza Duomo was a disaster. Normally I would be more inclined to be forgiving, as I spent many years working in restaurants and am fully aware of the unexpected things that can, and often do, happen. Still, there is no excuse for treating diners rudely and not excelling in those aspects of the dining experience such as service that are much easier to control. In today's economy no business can afford to treat customers with the arrogance, disdain and indifference I experienced at Piazza Duomo. Both Renzo and Piazza Duomo fall far short of what readers expect from a two-star experience. In particular, wine service is far more professional at any number of New York City restaurants with no Michelin stars and far humbler aspirations.

The Piedmontese table is certainly one of the richest in Italy. When paired with the wines, there is arguably no other region in the country and few in the world that offer diners such a breadth of utterly mind-blowing dishes and bottles, particularly in the fall, when white truffles grace Piedmont's dining rooms. For that reason, I continue to be deeply disappointed by many restaurants in Piedmont. Most restaurateurs would kill to have such an abundance of raw materials to work with but the Piedmontese routinely squander many of their greatest gifts. Wine service in Piedmont's top restaurants is generally appalling and far out of line with the level today's diner is accustomed to throughout the world. By now I have forgotten how many times I have been served cooked, ruined bottles at Michelin-starred restaurants, which is especially disappointing when they are wines I have rated highly. I often wonder what diners think when they order these same bottles.

There are a few beacons readers should look to for the finest wine and food Piedmont can offer, where bottles are cellared properly and treated with the respect they deserve, including La Ciau del Tornavento in Treiso, Da Guido (in the Relais San Maurizio) in Santo Stefano Belbo and La Libera in Alba. At virtually all of Piedmont's big-name restaurants wine is a hit and miss affair. The safest bet is to stick with a young Dolcetto or Barbera that hasn't had the time to be ruined. Alternatively, readers should inquire about corkage and bring in their own wines, although that makes it much harder to enjoy an older bottle. Diners should feel absolutely no hesitation to send back pricey bottles that are dull, brown, lifeless or otherwise damaged. Of course, the best solution would be for Piedmont's restaurateurs to properly cellar their wines. I find it amazing, and frankly sad, that butter, milk and cheese are kept in the refrigerator, but

bottles of some of the rarest and most extraordinary wines on Planet Earth are left for years in the sun and in warm temperatures, only to be sold years later at obscene markups to unsuspecting diners. I will never forget the sight of a room full of Piedmont's most famous wines, all standing upright and exposed to light in one of the region's highly decorated restaurants, simply because the owners were too lazy to put the wines in their temperature controlled cellar! Readers need not worry about the cooked 2001 Conterno Barolo Cascina Francia, I was served the last bottle.

—Antonio Galloni

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