

COSA BOLLE IN PENTOLA – KYLE PHILLIPS

Bartolo Mascarello, Prosecco & More: Being the 121st issue of Cosa Bolle in Pentola, your things Italian newsletter

Making up for the long hiatus by compressing things a bit.

Meeting with Bartolo Mascarello

One of the nicest things about the Alba Wines exhibition, aside from an opportunity to taste through most of the Barolo and Barbaresco production (the notes will soon be on the IWR site), is the opportunity to meet with winemakers, and one afternoon Bartolo Mascarello very kindly agreed to receive some of us at his home. He's the Grand Old Man of the Langhe, the wine maker everyone acknowledges -- according to Elio Grasso, "You may agree with him, and you may not, but you will learn from him." And you certainly do; in the course of the great wave of innovation that swept Piemontese winemaking he stood fast. He'd have none of it, and said to us, "Wine sinks its roots in the hills, and not in Franco-Californian techniques that may be valid, but that I won't use. Just Nebbiolo, Barbera, and Dolcetto. Now there are other vines as well, but they have no history here. One mustn't confuse the introduction of new vines and the construction of enormous sheds with progress and development."

You might think he's being conservative, but he's quick to correct you, saying that he's a traditionalist instead. He respects the work, and the conclusions reached by those who have gone before, and simply wishes to continue along that path, saying that progress is making the wine better, not making more of it or making it mature faster. "I age my Barolo in wood for 3-4 years before bottling it," he says, and feels that the buyer should age it further; he finds the current emphasis on ready-to-drink wines mistaken, and while he's at it also says that the current emphasis on concentration is equally mistaken. "Wine should be as nature makes it," he feels, adding that concentrators mask the nuances of the wine, especially if they are followed by barriques.

So what wood does he use? Large, of course; "I don't make wine for beavers," he says, and caused a stir a few years ago by hand-labeling a number of bottles with a label that said "No Barriques, No Berlusconi." Mr. Berlusconi's supporters objected, and since this was just before an election (which Mr. Berlusconi won, becoming PM), complained to a judge who declared the labels "illegal electoral propaganda" and had the bottles confiscated. One wonders what became of the wine.

With any luck, it was enjoyed; as for what it was, Bartolo doesn't believe in making crus. He has plots in the Cannubi, San Lorenzo, Rué, and Rocche vineyards (the last inherited from his grandfather), and blends the resulting wines to obtain a well-balanced optimum. In other words, a Barolo whose sum that is greater than the parts, and it follows that the relative percentages will vary from year to year. Most of the wine goes into 750 ml bottles, but in great years he also bottles about a thousand magnums, which he sets aside. In poor years, on the other hand, the wine becomes Langhe Nebbiolo.

Things have of course changed immensely since he began making wine. He

first saw Americans when the Germans retreated in 1945 -- they gave out cigarettes, with real tobacco, not the straw the locals had smoked for years, and Bartolo and his friends puffed for a solid week -- but when the soldiers went away so did everyone else, and nobody -- not a Swiss, not a German, not an American, came back for more than 30 years. "Times were tough," he says, and to survive the farmers planted corn and wheat in the vineyards between the rows. The great change came in the 80s, when producers shifted their emphasis towards quality. The foreigners came back, the economy boomed, and the younger generation, which had abandoned the land in favor of greater job security in the cities, returned to the land. Among those who returned was daughter Maria Teresa, who left the university to oversee day-to-day operations, while Bartolo "consults" (he has been wheelchair-bound for a number of years). They make 15-20,000 bottles of Barolo and lesser volumes of Barbera and Dolcetto, and though they are redoing the cellars, when we visited the new area was still under construction. The old, which was built by Bartolo's father in the 20s (his grandfather was the cellar master of the local cooperative winery, which was shut down by the Fascists), has wooden botti that have metal hatches on their fronts rather than the old wooden plugs -- with the hatches it's easier to get into them to clean them, "Our only concession to the present," says Maria Teresa -- and stacks of bottles patiently aging. The fermentation of the Barolo is 15-20 days, in cement, with two pumpovers daily, after which the wine is racked into cement to settle for two weeks, and then goes into large wood, which is now all oak, though they used to have chestnut as well. The malolactic fermentation happens naturally, usually in the spring, when it warms, and the wine stays in wood for another 2 years thereafter, being racked as need be, and clarified if need be before bottling. In short, once the harvest comes in there's minimal technological intervention.

Maria Teresa didn't go into detail on the fermentations of the Dolcetto and Barbera now, but said that in the past the producers of the Langhe would rack the newly fermented Barbera, Dolcetto and Freisa onto the Nebbiolo marks, to make the wines more powerful, livelier, and longer-lived. In other words, they practiced the ripassa technique that is still used to strengthen Valpolicella Superiore today. She didn't say why the technique is no longer used, but I would expect it's because improvements in vineyard and cellar technique have made it superfluous.

Our visit ended with a tasting of Bartolo Mascarello's 1990 vintage, poured from a magnum that was filled in 1994, and opened several hours prior to our arrival. It's elegant almandine, with an elegant, deft bouquet that mingles tobacco and dried roses with delightful fairly tart berry fruit. On the palate it's rich, full, and very much alive, with extremely bright citric-laced cherry fruit supported by deft velvety tannins that flow into a long clean cherry finish with lasting acidity. Great elegance, depth, and life, combined with extraordinary freshness; it's an eye-opening wine that shows what the traditional techniques can lead to. And also a food wine; though I very much enjoyed the way it evolved and opened in the glass as we talked, its brightness is such that it will truly shine with a rich Piemontese roast or stew. Should you happen upon a bottle, buy it, though you shouldn't feel any need to open it soon. Wait for the proper occasion.

Prosecco: Bubbly!

The antithesis of a well-aged Barolo is of course something light, fresh, and preferably sparkling. Prosecco, for example, and though I've had occasion to write about it in the past, it's well worth touching upon it again. For those unfamiliar with the wine, it's produced around the towns of Conegliano and Valdobbiadene, in the province of Treviso in the Veneto, and as is often the case with Italian wines, if you look at it closely you'll discover that it's a door into a complex and fascinating world. To begin with, if the label simply says "Prosecco" it can be from the flatlands, and this explains why so much of the Prosecco one encounters in Italian bars, where it's one of the more common aperitifs, is uninteresting -- wines from the hillside vineyards will say Prosecco di

Conegliano-Valdobbiadene (or one of the two), and here things pick up. There are a number of different styles, with the wines from the lower hills around Conegliano tending to be richer but less refined than those from the higher hills around Valdobbiadene, and the best being Prosecco Superiore di Cartizze, from a specific hill in the township of Valdobbiadene.

The Consorzio per la Tutela Del Vino Prosecco di Conegliano Valdobbiadene organizes an annual meeting called Vino in Villa, which I was fortunate enough to attend this year; it was held in the Castello di San Salvatore, a magnificent fortress overlooking the town of Susegana that was begun in the 1200s, expanded into a princely residence in the 1600s, and (alas) became an Austrian stronghold during the Great War, which led to its being heavily shelled. It has taken the Collalto family almost a century to restore it, but they have done a beautiful job and if you happen to be in the area you should by all means visit. See the Conti Collalto winery's site, (http://www.collalto.it/index_eng.html), for details.

About 70 producers participated, and as one might expect the vast majority of the wine being poured was bubbly. But there were a couple of other things that merit a brief aside (in addition to some quite interesting wines from estates on Germany's Pfälzische Weinstrasse): still Prosecco and bottle-fermented Prosecco. The former is by now a bit of a throwback; before the introduction of the Charmat method that's behind the freshness of Prosecco's sparkle just about all Prosecco was still, and most of it was locally consumed. I tasted a few, and though they were perfectly acceptable white wines, to be frank they were not exciting.

The bottle fermented Prosecco was much more interesting: Small amounts have always been made, adding a little liqueur de tirage to the best still wine, corking it, and tying down the cork lest the pressure that builds up as the yeasts in the wine ferment the newly added sugars pop it out. The wine is kept upright, with the lees settling to the bottom of the bottle, and after about a year it's ready; the traditional accompaniment is sopressa, a local salami. We tasted 4, ranging in age from 2003-2001; by comparison with modern Prosecco, which is pressurized in large tanks using the Charmat Method, they were slightly cloudy, and had bouquets that were more powerful but not as fresh, with the apple one expects from Prosecco not as crisp, and mingled with pineapple acidity and sulfur pungency that likely came from the lees; only one of the four had some moist breadcrumbs as well on the nose, combined with floral accents (and no sulfur). On the palate the wines were rougher and more disjointed than modern Prosecco -- especially the 2003, which was still fermenting -- and also richer, with some yeasty

savory notes that are again a gift of the lees. In short, bottle fermented Prosecco is less fresh and heavier than its Charmat-pressurized cousin; I found it to be quite interesting, but also quite particular, and though I would drink another bottle myself, I wouldn't recommend it to you unless you are a lover of enological curiosities and unphased by a degree of rusticity. Where to find it? Locally, because it don't travel well, and this is yet another excuse for visiting a surprisingly beautiful, and almost completely unknown part of Italy.

Returning to what generally comes to mind when mentioning Prosecco, due to time constraints I was only able to taste through about half the producers, and selected a mixture of wineries I knew and (to me) unknowns. Col Vetoraz was, as I expected, very good, as was Drusian; I especially liked Col Vetoraz's Valdobbiadene Prosecco Extra Dry, which will work nicely as an aperitif or with foods -- it's a little defter than their Brut, which is also nice -- and Drusian's Prosecco Valdobbiadene Superiore Brut and their Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Spumante Dry Millesimato 2003. In terms of style, Col Vetoraz is a bit lush, and more forward, whereas Drusian is more tightly controlled; as a result I might choose the former as an aperitif or in the evening, and the latter with a meal or at a party where food was also being served. Col Vetoraz is imported by North Berkeley (CA), and Drusian by Vinity (CA) and Panebianco (NY).

Among the happy discoveries are (in the order I tasted them):

- * Sorelle Bronca, whose Prosecco Valdobbiadene Brut has delightful crisp green apples mingled with hints of pear and minerality on the nose, and bright apple fruit backed by bitter overtones that lead into a long clean finish; it will work very nicely with delicate fish or white meat dishes, and vegetable frittata too. Quite nice, and I also liked their Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Extra Dry. Imported by Oliver McCrumb (CA) and Panebianco (NY)

- * Bisol, whose Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Crede has an airy bouquet with green apples mingled with apple seeds and hints of sweetness, while the palate has Granny Smith apples backed up by mineral bitterness and more crisp apples in the finish. Imported by Vias.

- * La Tordella, which has just started bottling (and isn't imported to the US yet); their Prosecco di Valdobbiadene Dry Superiore di Cartizze has a rich crisp green apple bouquet laced with bitter almonds and, nice apple fruit with some ripe peach supported by deft sparkle on the palate, flowing into an apple peach finish; it's elegant and seductive and will be perfect on a summer evening or at poolside.

- * Zardetto, which gives an impression of being a larger winery, and whose wines are a bit more polished than some, in particular the Prosecco di Conegliano Superiore Dry Zeroventi, which has delicate apple fruit mingled with some toasted sesame seeds that add depth on the nose, and rich green apple fruit balanced by sparkle on the palate, flowing into a clean finish that gains definition from mineral bitterness; it will work nicely as an aperitif or with foods. Imported by Winebow.

As I said, this is a sampling; I'll be posting the notes for all the wines tasted in the member's section of the IWR site.

Women Travelers

Moving in a very different direction, last week I attended Bell'Italia, a food and travel show held in Carrara that included several conferences

dedicated to specific subjects, one of which was how to tailor travel to meet the needs of women traveling alone for either business or pleasure. Some of the proposals aimed at pleasure travelers struck me as frankly improbable, for example organizing one-day fashion design classes for women who are taking a few days off, though other options, for example vacations that include time devoted to health and beauty -- massages, mineral water baths, mineral-rich muds, and so on, struck me as quite feasible, as did cooking classes and hikes led by women. What I had expected to hear and did not was a suggestion that there be greater emphasis on the role of women in the past both among Guides leading tour groups and in guide books; Gabriele Giuntoni, who guided us through the marble quarries above Carrara, and also through Lunigiana, told me he had expected the same thing, and had begun to uncover incidents both fascinating and sobering.

For example, the Malaspina Family, who were lords of the Lunigiana, one of the most important trade routes connecting central Europe and the western Mediterranean, were required by feudal law to divvy up the inheritance among the male heirs, the scope of said provision being to keep a single Malaspina from gaining total control over the trade route. Now it happened at one point that much of the family inheritance was concentrated among three brothers; the younger two teamed up to kill the firstborn and thereby increase their holdings. Then one of the murderers killed the other, and it looked like he would get everything (being a noble gave him impunity of the sort most of us do not enjoy). However, they found out that the firstborn's wife was pregnant; she was put under guard to protect her from her brother-in-law, and when her labor began had to go to the town square to give birth before the assembled multitudes, so they could see with their own eyes if the child that came from her belly was male or female. It was a boy, and he inherited all of his father's holdings, in addition to (I expect) part of his dead uncle's. Gabriele knew nothing more of the mother, and the lack of information on her as a person other than the mother of a (male) heir is a sad commentary on the times she lived in.

Returning to the conference, the most interesting talk was by Sabrina Giannetti, who owns the Hotel Eden (<http://www.edenhotel.it>) in Cinquale, a town along the coast a few km south of Carrara. Women look, she said, for specific things in a hotel:

First, security, and attention on the part of the staff (equal treatment in restaurants, exercise areas, and so on);

Second, a mixed staff because some subjects are much easier to bring up with one's similar;

Third, well lit parking adjacent to or, better yet, within the hotel complex, which also makes carrying bags easier; she mentioned that many German hotels now reserve the spaces closest to the entrance for women;

Fourth, products for women included among the toiletries supplied by the hotel (makeup remover and so on);

Fifth, more varied breakfasts, with organic foods, health foods, and so on.

And then, if they are traveling with kids (in Italy the single parent traveling or vacationing with kids still tends to be the mother), they want: High chairs, cribs, playpens and such, in good condition (despite the Italian love of children Italian hotels and restaurants are surprisingly

behind in this respect by comparison with North America);
Kitchens flexible enough to work around a child's naptime if need be;
Play rooms, kid's areas (beach, slope, playground, etc) and organized activities for kids;
Someone to talk with when the going gets rough.

All of these suggestions make perfect sense, and I found myself thinking they were pretty obvious. However, there are times you need someone else to point out the nose on your face, and this is, I think, one; none of the places I have stayed in recently are doing these sorts of things (with the exception of mixed staff at the desk, and in some cases parking), despite their being nice hotels. Quite possibly the provisions haven't occurred to the management; some will take thought, and perhaps an investment to enact (secure parking, for example), but as Ms. Giannetti says, they make for satisfied customers -- both male and female with regards to the kid provisions -- and satisfied customers both come again and spread the word.

Chianti Travel

Winding down, Aida, one of the more dynamic Florentine publishing and media companies, has just started a new bi-monthly magazine called Chianti Travel, with the support of the former Consorzio del Gallo Nero (now del Marchio Storico Chianti Classico, thanks the Californian Rooster Brothers' registration of the word Gallo). It's an interesting magazine; everything is printed in Italian, English, and German, and though one might expect this to make it weighty or difficult to follow the layout people have done a very deft job of it and it doesn't flag at all. The content? Well, each issue begins with several pages dedicated to Chianti Classico the wine -- the introductory issue has a talk with Giovanni Ricasoli, President of the Consorzio, as well as the story behind the Gallo Nero and the origins of the Appellation, which is one of the oldest in the world -- followed by sections dedicated to each of the Communes making up Chianti Classico, which cover all sorts of things, from hamlets and villas to pig farmers to places to stay, and a rundown of upcoming festivals and whatnot. In other words, they've got a keen eye for detail and go beyond the obvious, both qualities that bode well for a bimonthly magazine dedicated to a relatively small area. They mention things I was unaware of despite my having driven almost every road in Chianti, and I await future issues with considerable interest.

Distribution will be both national and abroad (in large, well furnished newsstands of the kind one finds in Barnes & Noble), and it is also available by subscription. The site isn't up yet, but you will find some information at <http://www.aidashop.com>.

We have again gone on overmuch, and the vintage considerations will have to wait until next time. This time's proverb is Neapolitan: Chi nun pò avé 'a porpa, s'attacca all'osso -- He who cannot have flesh will make do with a bone.

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Want to comment? Drop me a line at Kyle@cosabolle.com

PS -- Please forward this to anyone you think would enjoy it! If you would like to read past issues (nothing in them really gets stale), you'll find them on the IWR site, through <http://www.cosabolle.com>. Access to the online archives is via subscription -- in other words there's a yearly charge that helps us to offset our costs -- and includes extras of various kinds, including illustrations and links to other resources. IWR subscribers automatically have access to the Cosa Bolle archives.