

Alba Wines Exhibition: 2002 Barolo, 2003 Barbaresco

by Franco Ziliani

"Hardly encouraging," must be the concluding verdict from the 11th annual Alba Wines Exhibition—the prestigious blind tasting that the Unione Produttori Vini Albesi organizes for professional wine writers from all round the world.

Fewer wineries and fewer wines than usual were on show this year—144 and 270 respectively—with the controversial 2002 and 2003 vintages put to the test. There were 49 2002 Barolos, as well as 66 Barbarescos and 30 Roeros from 2003, flanked by 35 2004 Nebbiolo d'Albas. The early evaluations of these wines were, as might always have been expected, disappointing.

It is hardly the fault of the wineries, the blame falling instead on the difficult growing seasons. In 2002 a violent hailstorm cut a swath through wide areas of Barolo, and heavy rains fell during the harvest. In 2003 there was a deadly summer heat wave. So it is not surprising that both vintages have yielded rather unusual wines, far removed from the most eloquent expressions of Nebbiolo.

A few figures clearly demonstrate just how unusual 2002 was for Barolo. The zone's 1,509ha yielded 5,960,667 bottles—a drop of almost 3 million bottles, or 33 percent, with respect to both the 2001 total of 8,876,000 bottles, and the provisional 2003 total of 8,711,200 bottles.

The destructive hailstorm hit on September 3, 2002, with Barolo, La Morra, and Castiglione Falletto at its epicenter, but it also swept through Novello, Verduno, and Monforte d'Alba—only Serralunga d'Alba escaped relatively unscathed. The season's bad weather cut deeply into production: The harvest had to be later than normal and very selective, so longer and more costly. It inevitably yielded rather ordinary wines, devoid of more complex characteristics.

In 2003, Barbaresco achieved 3,484,000 bottles from 637ha, amounting to an increase of 917,000 bottles, or 36 percent, over 2002's 2.5 million—roughly

on a par with 2001, but 500,000 bottles fewer than present estimates for 2004. Despite the fairly normal production volume, however, the memory preserved by all of us who sweltered through that torturous summer is a stark reminder that 2003 could never be a normal vintage for Nebbiolo-based wines. Rainfall was scarce, at just 10.4in (265mm) by the end of August, compared to 32.7in (830mm) in 2002 and 15.3in (390mm) in 1997. The budbreak and grape harvest were early, with bunches showing obvious signs of sunburn, and grapes reaching extremely high sugar levels while acidity levels tumbled.

Although there were some encouraging exceptions, the results from this tasting were far from promising in several ways. Commercially, the 2002 Barolo and 2003 Barbaresco (and Roero) will prove difficult to sell, since the media tom-tom continues to send out negative messages about these vintages. Persuading a potential customer to believe the opposite—even that trying these wines, different from the norm as they may be, may be worthwhile—will not be easy. And in truth, in terms of the wines themselves, only a small number seem worthy of the historical identity, the name, the prestige, and the price of Barolo and Barbaresco.

In those cases where the winemakers strove to achieve the best balance possible; where they attained at least some level of crispness and drinkability; where they reconciled themselves to more slender structures and shorter-term wines; where they prioritized fruit, harmony, and that natural smoothness that is after all part of Nebbiolo's DNA, then the results were honest, intriguing, and even surprising in some cases.

On the other hand, the results were very disappointing in the many cases where producers had treated the 2002 and 2003 Nebbiolo grapes as though they came from great years like 1999 and 2001. Many wines—and in particular many of the 2002 Barolos and 2003 Barbarescos—revealed a lack of those very characteristics that go to make a good Barolo or Barbaresco such a magical and unique wine: aromatic complexity; elegance

and finesse; an emphatic but not overly aggressive raft of tannins; and a texture suitably firm but wrapped by velvety fruit.

Too many 2003 Barbarescos revealed a lack of balance and succulence, being marked instead by strident tannins that were bitter, green, and drying on the finish. They are wines with neither backbone nor flesh, even though the nose is often weighed down with fat, flabby, overripe fruit. Most baffling and distressing of all is the excessive oakiness they display, the result of too much time in too much new wood—and this in a year that should have signaled to any sensitive winemaker a much lighter touch.

There are, as always, however, certain honorable exceptions, which deserve recognition even more than usual. Among the most successful wines are Cigliuti's *Vigne Erte*, Carlo Boffa's *Vitalotti*, Marchesi di Gresy's *Martinenga*, Massimo Rivetti's *Serraboella* and *Froi*, Rizzi's *Boito*, Molino's *Ausario*, and the wine of *Punset*.

Turning to the 2002 Barolos, the most impressive performances were turned in by a group of wines from *Serralunga d'Alba* (an area only lightly affected by the September 3 hailstorm)—namely, those of Michele Reverdito, Gigi Rosso's *Arione*, and Massolino *Vigna Rionda's Margheria*. These are sinewy wines with sturdy tannins, fresh, lively, and beautifully layered, with considerable complexity.

Also praiseworthy are some of the offerings from *Castiglione Falletto* (*Vigna from Mandorlo di Giocosa Fratelli*), *Verduno* (*Monvigliero from Castello di Verduno*), and *Novello*, as well as a few from *Monforte d'Alba* (in particular those of *Conterno Fantino* and *Elio Grasso*, and the *Costa Bussia of Tenuta Arnulfo*).

The wines from the village of Barolo itself, on the other hand, were quite disappointing, as were a good many of those from *La Morra*, with the exception of *Monfalletto di Cordero di Montezemolo*. Displaying little definition, distinction, or personality, they were marked by astringent tannins and slight fruit—the all-too-frequent hallmarks of this troublesome vintage.