



Being the 135th issue of Cosa Bolle, your Italian Food, Wine, and Travel Newsletter.

### Roero, Barbaresco and Barolo: Impressions



Returning to **Cosa Bolle**, I was in Alba for Alba Wines last week, to taste through the newly released **2004 Roero**, **2004 Barbaresco**, **2003 Barolo**, and finish up with about 30 **2001 Barolo Riservas**. In all, 299 wines over 4 days. I'll post the notes when I have finished going over them, but wanted to give my impressions and briefly discuss the vintages.

**We began with Roero**, which is made downriver from Alba, on the left bank of the Tanaro River, across the river from Barbaresco. The terrains are sandier, and as a result tend to yield wines that have richer, more delicate bouquets, but are not as powerful as those from Barolo or Barbaresco.

Within this framework there is of course considerable variation, and with respect to the other appellations there is perhaps more: Roero's farmers have been making wine for just as long as anyone else in the region, but the appellation is much more recent than either Barolo or Barbaresco, and there is perhaps less consensus among the producers about what Roero should be: A wine that displays grace and finesse in a lighter key, or a more muscular wine? Some are going one way and others the other; I found some of the wines in the grace-and-finesse group to be among the best expressions of Nebbiolo poured in the four days, but have reservations about the more powerful group: Unless they are made with considerable care, they come across as bulked up.

This said, 2004 was a very nice vintage, which yielded a pleasing balance of finesse, grace, and power that the various winemakers worked with as they chose. Though they are almost all drinkable now, they are Nebbiolos, and will benefit from another year or two in bottle; I expect most of them to age well for up to a decade.

**We then tasted Barbaresco**, which also is made downriver from Alba, but on the right bank of the Tanaro River; the soils differ from those of Roero (there's less sand, and they're more calcareous) and the wines tend to be more powerful. 2004 was just as good a vintage for Barbaresco as it was for Roero, and the wines display considerable elegance and finesse, coupled with supple muscle. It's a powerful vintage, and the wines tend to be very young; while one could press them into service now with rich red meats, almost all will benefit considerably from further bottle age, and many will continue to climb for a decade or more. In short, the 2004 Barbaresco offers much to enjoy.

If one were to pick nits, **Carlo Macchi** of [Wine Surf](#) (link in Italian) found some of the wines to be slightly dilute, and wonders how long they will age; he says the situation arose because the farmers, who are still smarting from the hail, rain, and heat that befell them in 2002 and 2003, were hesitant to carry out a vigorous green harvest in 2004 for fear that the shoe would drop yet again. I did not note this as much, and think the lighter expressions, which are still quite pleasant, will simply drink well with lighter foods.

**After Barbaresco we tasted Barolo**. Though the Appellation, which extends over all or part of 11 Comuni, is large enough to be quite variable, if one paints with a broad brush one can say that its soils tend to contain

more clay and (I think) rock than Barbaresco's, and consequently that Barolo tends to be more powerful. In equivalent vintages, at least.

However (alas) 2003 has very little in common with 2004: It was the hottest, driest summer in recent memory, with temperatures that climbed up into the 90s (30s C) by mid-May and didn't drop again until well into September. If anything, there were hotter spells; I recall visiting Bruna Ferro at **Carussin** in the Astigiano in mid-June, and it was 43 C, almost 110 F, in their courtyard at 7PM. And coupled with the heat was almost absolute dryness. In short, it was a very difficult summer for the vines; the one positive thing to say about it is that the heat began early, giving the vines time to acclimatize themselves.

And they did, to a degree; I didn't find as many obviously cooked wines as I was expecting to, and this is also thanks to the terrific efforts of the winemakers, who spent the summer managing foliation and doing what they could to keep the sun from striking the bunches directly. And some of the wines are nice. Unfortunately, I found very few that would, when placed in a lineup with wines from more normal years, say 2001 and even 2004, be clearly recognizable as Barolo.

What I instead found was wine after wine that was big, quite alcoholic, with fairly sweet fruit, sometimes berry and sometimes more towards overripe plum (but rarely jammy), ample tannins that are unusually soft for a young Nebbiolo, especially a young Barolo, and low acidities of the sort one associates with an unusually hot vintage. Some, within this framework, were actually rather graceful, but as I said bear little resemblance to Barolo of more normal vintages.

Others, a considerable number, alas, were simply tired, while others still revealed problems related to the vintage, for example the tannic greenness that comes when heat stress interferes with ripening, or the odd aromas and flavors that develop when the must is concentrated enough (sugars continue to accumulate even if ripening of the skins and seeds slows or stops) that the fermentation sticks.

As one might imagine, the state of the wines engendered what is called *sconforto* -- discomfort tinged with despair -- amongst those of us tasting them, and there was a lot of muttering coupled with worried head shaking. Carlo Macchi sums up one current of thought nicely, saying that he wants to give the wines a few more months because his first instinct was to write them all off, but he fears he's overreacting. There was also some cautious optimism; **Franco Ziliani** weighed in saying that things weren't as bad as he expected, and has posted a (lengthy) list of the wines that impressed him favorably -- not that they're great, but they did impress him favorably -- on [Vino al Vino](#) (link in Italian).

**The real problem I see with the vintage**, from a consumer's standpoint, is that very few of the wines are typical of Barolo; the classic Barolo is fiercely aggressive in youth, a squalling toddler if you will, which develops beautifully with time, becoming what aficionados admiringly call a fist of steel in a velvet glove in the space of 3-5 (or more) years, and can continue to improve for a decade or more thereafter. The 2003 vintage is much softer, and while some of the wines are pleasant, I think few if any have the potential for this sort of long-term development.

**So my advice to consumers is** to approach the 2003 Barolo with considerable caution, keeping in mind that what they are buying is an atypical vintage. And in many ways it's a wine lover's vintage, something for those who become a bit fanatical in their passions, and want to know how an appellation will do under every conceivable condition. If you are instead new to Nebbiolo from the Langhe, or less likely to be understanding when faced with a wine that isn't true-to-type, I would recommend that you consider either a Barbaresco or a Roero from the 04 vintage. Both are much more what one would normally expect.

Or, if you are preparing for a special occasion, you might consider one of the 2001 Barolo Riservas we tasted on the last day. They were a refreshing return to normalcy, showing great depth and intensity coupled with supple power, elegance, and finesse -- what one would expect of Barolo from a good vintage. Tasting them, after working through the 2003 wines, was like coming home to a warm hearth on a cold winter's eve: Suddenly, after much trial and tribulation, all was right in the world.