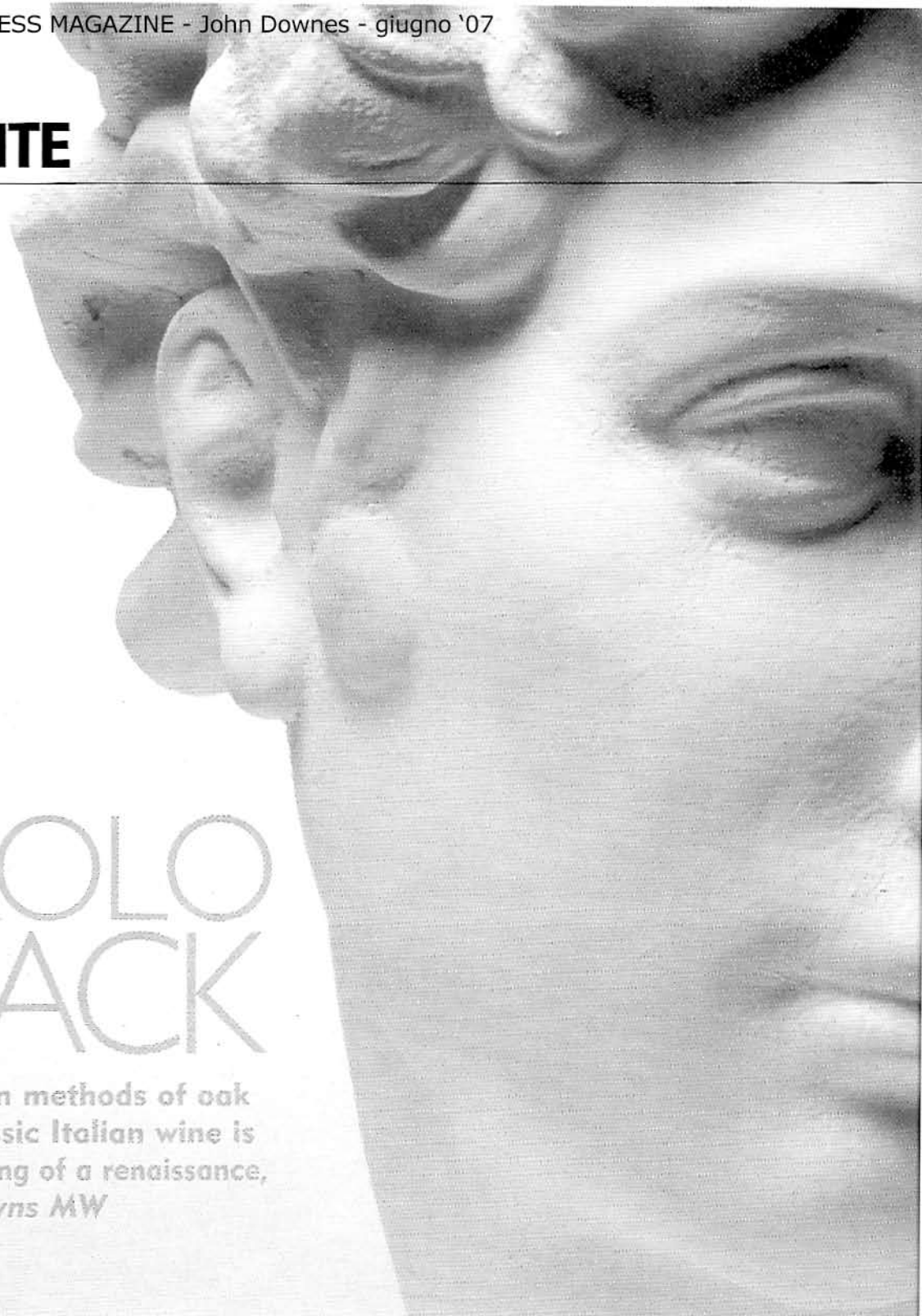


ITALY PIEDMONTE



BAROLO IS BACK

Utilising modern methods of oak ageing, the classic Italian wine is enjoying something of a renaissance, writes *John Downes MW*

AS THEY SAY IN PIEMONTE, Barolo's the powerful king, Barbaresco's the elegant queen. Five years ago I came away from the region thinking that the royals had sold the family silver. Thankfully, a recent visit convinced me that things are back on track.

During my 2002 visit new French oak dominated many 1998 Barolos. Still within the DOCG regulations but more Parker than Piemonte, I was depressed. "The law says Barolo must be two years in oak, it doesn't say what type of oak," explains Ivana Borgogno of

Azienda Agricola Borgogno. As one eminent Italian journalist said at the time, "Good wines they may be but are they Barolo?"

Thankfully, traditional Barolos – powerful fruit aromas, mouthcoating tannins and all – are back. Yes, new 225-litre French oak barriques are a recent addition to the cellars but the finished wines now show a balance that successfully links the modern with the traditional. "We're not gamblers, we take the best from both," confirms Danielle Veglio of Mauro Veglio.

At Boroli the new approach to oak ageing Barolo can be seen in one cellar. "We use 1 litre, 500 litre, 20 hectolitre and 30 hectolitre oak and blend to achieve a balanced result," notes commercial director, Achille Boroli.

Temperature control

Except for the odd dinosaur up in the Piemonte hills no one makes Barolo or Barbaresco in the old fashioned way that incredibly saw 40-50-day fermentations followed by years in the old oak botte. Today, temperature control

stainless steel vats retain aromas and freshness. Evidently, however, some winemakers are following an unusual path. "In recent years the fashion of some has been to go for very high fermentation temperatures, up to 40 degrees, but with my Barbaresco I never go above 30," says Azienda Agricola Punset's winemaker Marina Marcarino.

Barolo vs Barbaresco

With Barolo price tags soaring, the lower priced Barbaresco could now take a greater share of the Barolo market. "As Barbaresco quality improves and our marketing becomes smarter, Barolo will not have it all its own way in the future," adds Azienda Agricola Sottimano's winemaker Andrea Sottimano.

That said, there's no obvious rivalry between the two camps, "the problem is the rivalry between the Barolo producers themselves. They show a typical, closed Piedmontese mentality and rarely meet to compare notes", comments Boroli. Happily this is changing with the well travelled, new generation. They may have encouraged the French oak revolution but their discussions were apparently instrumental in the move back to tradition.

The vineyards of Barbaresco and Barolo are breathtaking. The snowcapped Alps form a distant backdrop to a series of hillsides and valleys above the Tanaro river that produce complicated microclimates. By the end of the day dramatic shadow patterns pass over the vineyards blessing the top sites with those all-important extra hours of sunshine. "Our Cichin cru vineyard is on an excellent limestone, 'tufa' slope, and is totally sun facing," confirms Barbaresco winemaker Anna Lisa Nada of Azienda Agricola Ada Nada.

Generations of winemakers have fine tuned the Barolo and Barbaresco vineyards and a reliable cru system has emerged. Unfortunately, few consumers are aware of these crus or even the top communes.

Barolo is produced from 11 communes with Barolo, La Morra, Castiglione Falletto, Montforte and Serralunga being considered the top five. Within these communes the cru sites carry a premium, "our steep, tufa Villero vineyard is south-south-west at an altitude of 300 metres", says Boroli. That's all very well but the label just says "Villero - Barolo", with no mention of "cru" or the Castiglione Falletto commune. Confusing to all but the anorak.

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Classic: The quintessential Italian wine is returning to its classical roots

Barbaresco's crus also make the difference, "as you travel south west the soils give greener, more aggressive tannins. The cru vineyards of Cotta give finer tannins than those of Pajore, for example", explains Sottimano. "Barbaresco tannins are important. There's a difference between a great mouthfeel and not being able to feel your mouth," quips Renato Cigliuti, of Azienda Agricola Cigliuti.

High Barolo and Barbaresco prices could herald the entrance of the prince, Nebbiolo d'Alba. Produced from outside the vineyard

zones of Barolo and Barbaresco and with one year's ageing, they are lighter in style but offer a good value entry level to Nebbiolo, "our Nebbiolo d'Alba is €6.15 ex. cellars while our Barolo is €17", confirms Luigino Grimaldi of Grimaldi Luigino.

Sweet dreams

Released as regional Langhe Nebbiolo, declassified Barolo and Barbaresco can also be worth tracking down. After tasting many below-par 2003s it's a pity more producers didn't follow this route that year. It can't do the producers, the wines or the region any favours when consumers pay top dollar for these famous labels only to pour disappointing quality. To save their reputation in poor vintages the top producers don't even declassify. "In 2002 we could have produced Langhe Nebbiolo but chose to sell all our production. We only want to sell quality," explains Boroli.

Exports reflect the comparative success of Barolo and Barbaresco with approximately 65% of the former and 52% of the latter leaving the country. The US imports more Barbaresco than Barolo, whereas most of the other countries take more Barolo. "We export 80% of our Barbaresco with our number-one market, the USA, taking 40% of that total," confirms Nada.

"We export 90%, with Germany, our best market, taking 30%, but although the USA takes just 20% that will rise to 30% very soon," notes Barolo's Borgogno. Japan is an important export market taking 7.3% of Barolo and 4.5% of Barbaresco but Russia is the market that's starting to excite the Piemontese. "We export 70% to our top market, the USA, but Russia, now our second market, is growing fast. We've been there for 10 years," reveals Punset's Marcarino.

Not surprisingly, global warming is the hot conversation. Several producers confirmed that in early April their vines were 40 days in advance and by early May were 20-25 days in advance. The Piemontese are dreading another scorching vintage like 2003 and hoping that 2007 will follow 2001, 2004, 2005 and 2006 as good vintages.

They can only dream of a great vintage like 1997. Now that they've finished their love affair with new French oak, thankfully they can also wish for a traditional, long ageing vintage like 1999. **db**