



THE ITALIAN ISSUE
WINE



The panoramic view of the prized Asili vineyards, with Barbaresco's mediaeval tower in the distance; (inset) Aldo Vacca.



Bargain bin

BARONE Ricasoli's marketing cry is "the true essence of Chianti Classico". Few can argue. The producer, one of the oldest in the region, boasts ancestors such as Bettino Ricasoli, the man responsible for defining the wine style of Chianti Classico in 1872. It's a style built largely around sangiovese, a grape variety that features strongly in the 2006 Ricasoli Formulae Rosso Toscano. The wine was priced between \$25-\$30 a bottle but is now at Armadale Cellars for less. A solid wine showing weight and power; it carries the Chianti Classico stamp of a sinewy, chewy texture, supported by red-berried fruit flavours and pencil-lead tannin fineness.

JENI PORT

2006 Ricasoli Formulae Rosso Toscano is \$20 a bottle if you buy six or more and mention Bargain bin at Armadale Cellars, 813-17 High Street, Armadale, 9509 3055. Free delivery in Victoria for dozen lots. armadalecellars.com.au



CELLAR DOOR

Yarra Burn blow

IN ANOTHER cost-cutting exercise by Constellation Wines Australia, its highly regarded Yarra Burn Winery in the Yarra Valley will close next month. Chief winemaker Mark O'Callaghan is staying but other staff, including talented assistant winemaker Tim Shand, no longer have jobs. O'Callaghan and his team have vastly improved the quality and focus of the wines, ensuring the best fruit is allocated for its sparkling range, including the excellent blanc de blancs. The brand will continue but it's unclear in what format and what wines. Ironically, O'Callaghan last month posted a blog on Yarra Burn's website telling punters about its inaugural open days on October 30 and 31.

Valley flood relief

GOOD news from wineries affected by the recent floods, especially in the King Valley — they are still there. From all accounts, there's been no major damage as vines are still in winter dormancy. Christian Dal Zotto from Dal Zotto Wines says that at the height of the floods, the King River, which normally meanders past the Cheshunt property, became an extension of it. Apart from dislodging a pump house and damaging fences, the floods have just left a muddy mess. Cleaning up is important as Dal Zotto is getting hitched at the winery on Sunday.

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A gift to the world

Jane Faulkner travels to the village that makes nebbiolo affordable for all.

FOLLOWING the signs to Barbaresco will lead to a narrow road of cobblestone at the heart of this village. It's impossible to get lost because it's flanked by a soaring mediaeval tower. It's a special place; with Barolo, it is one of two towns in Piedmont that are famous for the beguiling, tannic red, nebbiolo.

This village is home to renowned producer Gaja but also the most highly regarded co-operative, Produttori del Barbaresco. The dynamic, charming Angelo Gaja has been instrumental in raising the international profile of barbaresco and, by extension, barolo, while commanding exorbitant prices for his wines. Produttori, by comparison, makes the best-value barbaresco.

"I've said this before that the world talks about barbaresco thanks to Gaja but the world gets to drink barbaresco thanks to Produttori," says Produttori's affable export manager Aldo Vacca, who knows this region intimately, trained as a viticulturist and worked at Gaja before joining Produttori in 1989.

"Really, Produttori is in a league of its own because this is the first co-op to produce fine wine and it has always been known for its quality," he says.

It's also unique. Produttori is the only winery in Piedmont that makes just one style — nebbiolo from Barbaresco. Although in its line-up, it produces nine single-vineyard crus but only in the best vintages named after geographical sites; so there's Asili, Rabaja, Pora, Montestefano, Ovello, Paje, Montefico, Moccagatta and Rio Sordo.

A blend of those also goes into Produttori's straight barbaresco, plus there's the excellent Langhe nebbiolo, which is essentially declassified barbaresco fruit. For a co-op, Produttori's output is minuscule — its annual



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production hovers at about 420,000 bottles.

The winery's history can be traced to 1894, when pioneering head of the local oenology school Domizio Cavazza brought together the small, local growers to create the first co-operative, Cantine Sociali. He recognised differences between nebbiolo grown in Barolo and in Barbaresco and hence labelled the wines he made nebbiolo di Barbaresco.

The co-op closed in the 1930s under the fascist regime and like agriculture in general, the wine scene suffered later after World War II. Vacca explains that small family growers were abandoning vineyards for work in the cities but local priest Don Fiorino Marengo realised there would be no parish left if this happened and revived the co-op concept.

In 1958, Produttori del Barbaresco morphed with 19 families who would adhere to the winery's one rule — make only barbaresco. Now, there are 56

Current Co-op releases

2006 Barbaresco Perfumed and complex; smelling of violets, black cherries, camphor. While savoury, it's quite delicate, with super-smooth, chalky tannins. A fantastic introduction to top nebbiolos.

2005 Asili Comparatively full-bodied as this is a warmer site. Builds on the palate yet still brooding and closed. Needs time.

2005 Moccagatta Of all the crus, the most perfumed, with lovely lifted fruit, a touch of violets plus tar and spice notes. Quite fine tannins, medium-bodied, subtle and focused.

2005 Montestefano Usually the most structured of the crus, this is therefore often referred to as the barolo of Barbaresco. Loaded with spice, violets, tar and dark cherries, it has real drive but is still closed with firm, powerful tannins. Cellar for at least five years.

All 2005 single-vineyard wines cost about \$135, with the '06 barbaresco about \$90. Available from Boccaccio Cellars, Balwyn; Enoteca Sileno, North Carlton.

families who have total control over their land — covering about 100 hectares of nebbiolo vines.

The wines were originally made in the church's basement but the operation moved across the road after three years, where it remains today. (A new modern barrel room and bottling line have also been built a few kilometres away).

As with the greatest wine, terroir is essential. That's clear from these geographical sites ranging from 200 metres to about 400 metres above sea level, with the best vineyards facing south to south-east and south-west, largely on clay-based soils rich in

calcium. Sitting in Produttori del Barbaresco's winery, tasting the 2005 cru wines plus the '06 barbaresco, Vacca explains no single-vineyard wine was produced in '06.

"While it was a good vintage, we felt there was not enough personality or distinction between each site so we decided to blend them all," he says. "The point of those crus, they are a function of terroir and you need to be able to taste that." The '06 barbaresco is excellent considering it comprises all that declassified fruit.

Those unfamiliar with nebbiolo will be struck by just how tannic the variety can be. It's a wine akin to burgundy that ages exceptionally well. Barolo is often regarded as masculine as it can be more powerfully structured, whereas barbaresco is more elegant, refined and sometimes deemed feminine. But it can still pack plenty of punch.

The Produttori visit followed four days tasting 400-plus wines as part of the Nebbiolo Prima program, one that gauges nuances of vintage '06 barolo and '07 barbaresco plus riserva wines. It also highlights different communes (for example barbaresco made in Neive or Treiso).

But it's the single-vineyard wines that excite most, making the Produttori visit extra special. Nine single-vineyard wines might seem confusing yet each is distinct in structure, weight and perfume. It's a beautiful way to taste and compare.

Back to the storytelling. Vacca says two of 19 founding winemakers that put Produttori del Barbaresco on the wine map were his grandfathers and later, his father, who was a director at the company. "There's a kind of destiny for me working here," Vacca says. Born and raised in this region, he has barbaresco in his veins. Lucky man.