Nebbiolo Prima 2023

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Ready for tasting at Nebbiolo Prima 2023. Nebbiolo Prima

It is becoming a habit, it seems. For the third year running, I have attended the Nebbiolo Prima tasting in Alba, Piemonte, the grand preview of the new vintage releases of Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero wines. And, as in previous years, I threw myself into the arduous task of sampling more than 350 nebbiolo wines in just three and a half days. As a community service, of course.

This year's edition featured the new Barbaresco releases from vintage 2020 and the Barolo releases from 2019, as well as the 2018 Barbaresco Riserva and 2017 Barolo Riserva wines. I also sampled a select group of 2019 Roero Riserva wines that served a timely reminder that top-notch nebbiolo is not solely made on the right side of the Tanaro River. Note that each producer is permitted to submit just two wines to the Nebbiolo Prima presentation, and I have only reviewed those wines already bottled, tasting but not reviewing the barrel samples submitted. Even so, this tasting provides an extraordinary insight into the up-coming releases for these wines.

I have described the characteristics of each of the 2017 and 2018 harvests for the Langhe and Roero areas in my reports for the 2021 and 2022 Nebbiolo Prima events, and so will direct you there for further information on those vintages. For this report, I will focus on the 2019 and 2020 vintages. One thing to be mentioned is that having now attended this tasting three years running, I have gained a very strong sense of the character of each of the last five vintages and can provide a thorough appraisal of the relative merits of each.

Looking firstly at the 2020 vintage through the lens of Barbaresco. The growing season for 2020 started quite early but good falls of rain and cooler temperatures through May and June slowed down the plant growth while replenishing the water levels in the soil. This allowed the ripening cycle to proceed in a steady manner as the summer progressed, green

harvesting of fruit ensuring that the crop load was not excessive. The now common practice of sacrificing those excess bunches, as painful as it may be to drop healthy fruit on the ground, is undoubtedly a major contributor to the heightened quality of wine produced in the Langhe and Roero over the last 20 years or so.

The harvest for 2020 was about a week earlier than normal and most reports from the growers indicated that the fruit was healthy with a good balance of sugar, acidity and polyphenol accumulation. As a result, the vintage may be considered to be a very good one, though probably not exceptional.

Certainly the 2020 vintage Barbaresco wines sampled were, as a general statement, very good to excellent, with more elegance and fragrance than power, the best wines offering plenty of drinking pleasure in the short to mid-term. I get a sense that this vintage, like 2018, has suited Barbaresco more than Barolo (though this theory will only be tested with the release of the 2020 Barolo wines next year).

Of 56 Barbaresco wines tasted, I scored 12 at 95 points or more with a further 24 wines scoring 90 to 94 points, a pretty solid showing. My top wine was the Giuseppe Cortese Rabajà, the sole recipient of 97 points. Cortese is a producer that has consistently impressed me, their Barbaresco DOCG 'normale' also showing well this year with 95 points.

Wines being poured at Nebbiolo Prima. Nebbiolo Prima

Another producer that shone was Luigi Giordano, located just on the edge of Barbaresco village. Owning prime vineyard plots all within a few hundred metres of the winery, this little-known family producer (with a mere 100 years of grape-growing history in Barbaresco!) turned out a stunning single-vineyard Asili wine that I happily gave 96 points. A subsequent visit to the cellar not only confirmed the exceptional character of this wine but that their single vineyard Montestefano 2020 (not submitted for Nebbiolo Prima) is yet another step up in quality; both are worth seeking out. Other wines that impressed included the Poderi Colla Roncaglie, Cascina Luisin Basarin, Ada Nada Valeirano and the two wines submitted from the Francone cellars, the Albesani and the Starderi vineyard wines.

Thus to the 2019 vintage Barolo and Roero riserva wines. Last year I stated that the 2019 harvest was a return "to a more conventional course" following two quite challenging years. Interestingly though, the 2019

growing season had more rain than 2018, which is considered to be a wetter vintage. It is, however, all about when that rain comes; I recall that when my wife and I relocated to the Langhe in early 2019, it rained for most of April and a fair chunk of May, making our first few months here a little difficult as we tried to settle in. On the other hand, this rain early in the growing season set the vines up very nicely for the rest of the year, the harvest being slightly later than the norm, which invariably bodes well for wine quality.

This year's tasting of the wines confirms the outstanding quality of the vintage. For example, the 2019 Roero Riserva wines outshone the small contingent of Barbaresco 2018 Riserva wines tasted on the same day. Stand-out wines from this bracket were the Deltetto Roero Riserva DOCG Braja (95 points) and the Cascina Lanzarotti Roero Riserva DOCG Sru Carlinot (94 points).

If I was up-beat about the 2019 Barbaresco wines last year, I am even more enthusiastic about Barolo in 2019. This has been described as a classic vintage though possibly that "classic" reference should be considered in the new paradigm of global warming. I have also seen the word "austere" used to describe these wines, but, generally, I did not find the wines stern or austere in any sense. For me, the trademark characteristic of the vintage is the beautiful ripeness of plush tannins allied to succulent and pure fruit. Even allowing for stylistic variations from village to village and producer to producer, this was an almost universal trait.

Of 176 wines tasted, a staggering 45 wines received 95 points or more, a further 47 scoring 92 to 94 points. This is either a resounding confirmation of the vintage quality and consistency or I am going soft with my ratings in my old age! Furthermore, high-quality wines were found from all villages, although possibly Serralunga d'Alba, Castiglione Falletto and Barolo comunes shone brightest. Even the small village of Roddi, with

its single cru vineyard of Bricco Ambrogio, scored two mentions in the top echelons, the Bruna Grimaldi (96 points) and Lodali (95 points).

In an ensemble cast of stellar wines, who were the standouts? My top wine with 98 points was the Luigi Baudana Barolo DOCG Baudana, make by the good folks at G. D. Vajra. Vajra are proving themselves to be consistently amongst the best producers in the region, and this Serralunga wine is a prime example of their winemaking skills. Otherwise, even if I limit the list to the 97 pointers, there are plenty of wines from which to choose: Poderi Luigi Einaudi and Giuseppe Rinaldi both for their Bussia vineyard wines from Monforte d'Alba; Mario Gagliasso Rocche dell'Annunziata from La Morra; Vietti Ravera from Novello; Brovia Brea Vigna Ca'Mia, Paolo Manzone Meriame and ArnaldoRivera Vignarionda, all from Serralunga d'Alba; Giacomo Fenocchio Castellero from Barolo comune; and Gianfranco Bovio Parussi and Brovia Rocche di Castiglione of Castiglione Falletto—outstanding wines, one and all.

But, to get a comprehensive sense of the vintage, my suggestion would be to go to the Browse Wines section on The Real Review website and search for wines from the Piedmont region, nebbiolo grape and 2019 vintage, sorting by rating. You will see a host of wines with producer names that are amongst the most famous, and some not so well-known. If these reviews help you find the best of the Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero wines that will be available, then my job has been done.

Finally, a quick appraisal of the riserva wines, 2018 for Barbaresco and 2017 for Barolo. The selection of wines presented probably reflect the challenges of those two vintages. I have already mentioned that the small contingent of Barbaresco Riserva wines were slightly disappointing and overshadowed by the Roero Riserva 2019 wines. The 2017 Barolo Riserva wines were more successful in consistency and quality.

My best wine, as it has been in the past, was the Ettore Germano Barolo Riserva DOCG Lazzarito, scoring 97 points and, as I comment, a triumph

for the vintage. Close behind, scoring 96 points, were the Giovanni Viberti Barolo Riserva DOCG Bricco delle Viole and the Fortemasso Barolo Riserva DOCG Castelletto, both wines of pedigree.

We are all creatures of habit, or so the saying goes. As another year of Nebbiolo Prima is completed, with its challenges and pleasures of tasting hundreds of young nebbiolo wines that also just happen to be some of the best wines in the world, then attending this event is a habit I hope to keep. And, of course, reporting on it for The Real Review!