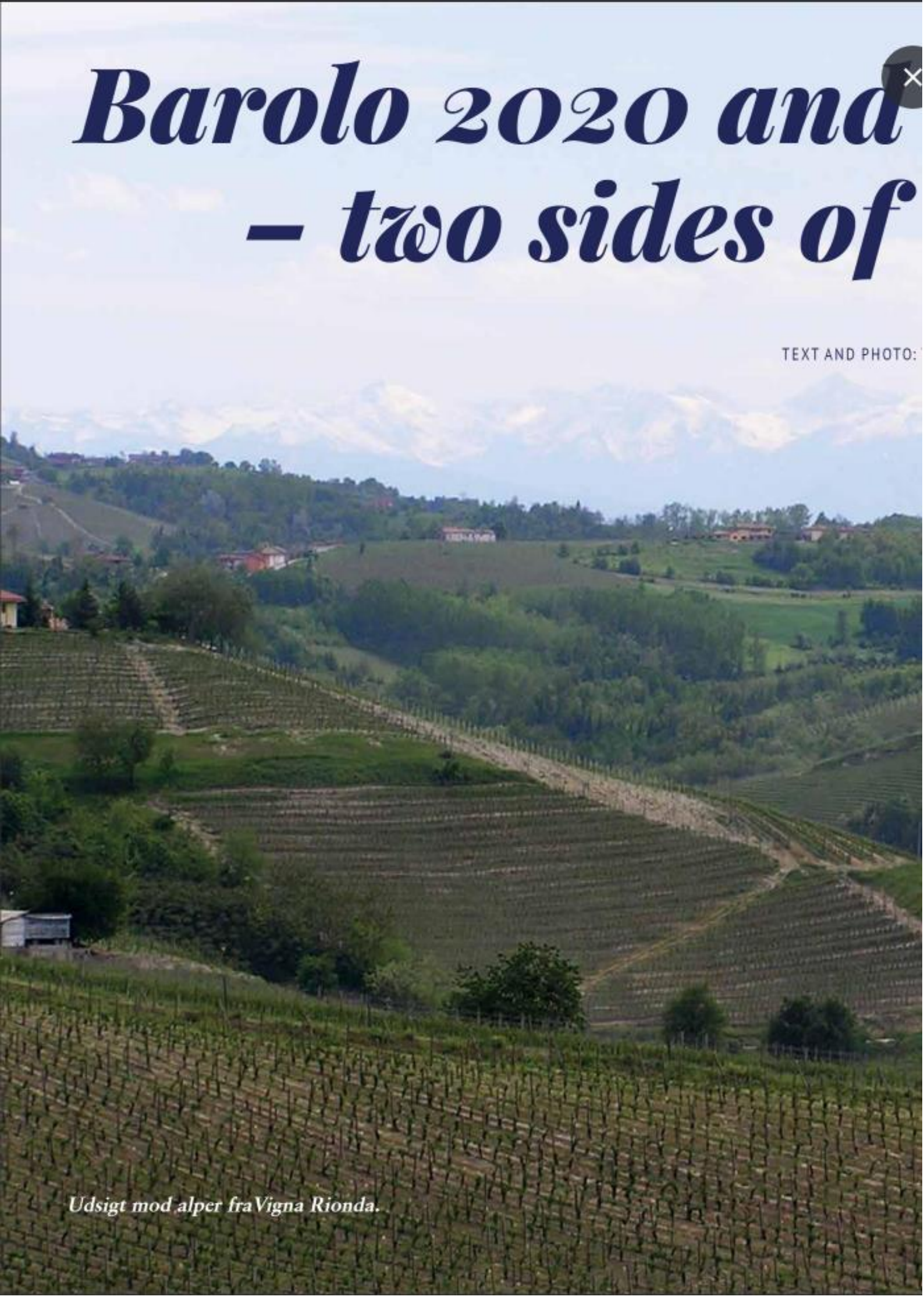
Sommelier

No. 3 - 2024

The Danish Championship for Sommeliers was conducted on the 2nd of September. In this issue we are celebrating the day! In a participants report we get close to the tasks in the final. Inspired by the dedication of our competitors we then venture to lesser-known parts of Europe as well as take a glance at the most recent vintages of Barbaresco and Barolo.

Barolo 2020 and – two sides of

TEXT AND PHOTO:



Udsigt mod alper fraVigna Rionda.

Barbaresco 2021 the same coin

THOMAS ILKJÆR

It is not often that the release of the most current vintages of Barolo and Barbaresco bring two groups of so relatively identical wines on the market. There are differences but in general, we are looking at a bunch of balanced, approachable wines in what could maybe be described as a new-classic style in the two famous appellations.

C'era una volta…The Italian equivalent of "once upon a time" comes to mind, when reflecting on the most recent Barolo and Barbaresco vintages on the market and making an overall judgment. There was a time when the assessment of a vintage of the two nebbiolo wines was a binary decision: worth seeking out or not. As a consequence of this simplistic approach, common in the latter half of the previous century, many a great wine has been missed because it was from a "wrong" vintage, but back then it was a common position that only three or four vintages each decade were capable of making wines of real interest. That is not the case anymore. The change came around the turn of the century with a combination of climate changes and accumulated winemaking competencies in an ever-growing group of new small-scale producers.

Between 1998 and 2021, only 2002 and 2003 stand out as disappointing vintages. Some years undeniably offer higher average quality, and certain vintages produce more top-tier wines. And the point is not that vintage assessment no longer is of any interest in Barolo and Barbaresco. The point is that instead of mere quality, the debate now focuses much more on style. We can see the same kind of development in many other wine areas, especially in Europe and instead of a simple buy/not buy attitude, today there are three main parameters used to make the overall vintage judgments.

Firstly, whether the vintage has yielded approachable and "easy drinking" wines in a more fruit-driven style or more structured ones with less immediate fruit that require time to open. Secondly, whether the wines in the first group are relatively short-lived or with the potential of a medium to long positive development in bottle and whether the wines in the second group will reach a stage of balance and top complexity or remain somewhat hard and unharmonious. And thirdly whether the overall assessment is consistent across the majority of wines (an even vintage) or more variable (an uneven vintage).

These are the main parameters for my take on the 2020 vintage in Barolo and the 2021 vintage in Barbaresco. Most of these wines are now on the market or will be soon. That was not the case when I tasted nearly 200 Barolo 2020s and more than 60 Barbaresco 2021s back in January at the annual Nebbiolo Prima event in Alba, but except for a tiny part of the wines they were showcased in their final bottled versions. Tasting about 80 young nebbiolo wines in one morning session leaves little room for a fair and precise judgment of individual wines but provides a solid foundation for evaluating the vintage as a whole.

2020 BAROLO

The 2020 growing season began with a mild winter, leading to an early start under near-perfect conditions in March and April. However, May and June brought more rain than usual, prolonging flowering and presenting challenges with humid conditions and downy mildew. Regardless of vineyard management practices, this required extra effort, and the final harvest quality and quantity depend on your ability to keep up with the disease. Fortunately, due to the COVID-19 lockdown during this critical period, most producers had time to focus more on their vineyards than normally, mitigating potential problems.

The humid situation continued during summer and well into September with both rainfall and heat summation somewhat above average. More importantly, though neither rainfall nor heat was never excessive but rather evenly distributed which meant that the vines in general did not suffer having sufficient access to water and experiencing high temperatures that secured ripening without causing stress and blocking maturation.

Nebbiolo prima

In September and especially October temperatures went down delaying what up till then had looked like a rather early harvest. At the earlier ripening sites, many producers started harvesting in the last week of September but on October 2nd and the morning after the area experienced extremely heavy rainfall causing a harvest break. Since the weather quickly returned to dry conditions the rain had little effect on the overall quality and most producers completed their harvest by mid-October, aligning with the average harvest dates from 2007 to 2016.*

In many ways, the Barolo 2020 wines reflect the weather report quite nicely. Overall, these wines exhibit harmony with neither a lack of nor abundance in tannin, alcohol or acidity. They are definitely more on the welcoming, approachable side with a mature, red fruit sensations and well-integrated tannins. Unlike for example 2014 and 2017 I believe that most of the wines will both keep very well and develop for 10-15 years, but I am less convinced we will see a lot of wines with a positive development in the very long run. This is based on a returning comment in my tasting notes that many wines lack real mid-palate density and what I call nerve or vitality, as well as the fact that many producers (for example Claudio Fennocchio from Giacomo Fennochhio and Fabio Alessandria from G.B. Burlotto) told me that they took their 2020 Barolos from barrel much earlier than normal.

As with any vintage, there are exceptions and 2020 also produced wines with an overripe, acidity- lacking character as well as austere, fruit-lacking, rustic ones. But they were few and it seems that 2020 was a very consistent vintage with no clear standout subzones or communes. These are wines that you can drink and serve with pleasure more or less from the start but with no need to rush, and you can confidently look beyond the usual top-25 list of producers since there is a fine chance you'll get your hands on a good wine. Every vintage is unique but if pushed hard I would mention 2004 and 2012 as vintages reminding me of 2020.

2021 BARBARESCO

There are of course many similarities between growing seasons in the neighboring areas of Barolo and Barbaresco, but the latter's lower average altitude and proximity to the Tanaro

Smagning Nebbiolo prima

river do make a difference and 2021 is a good example. The heavy rains and snowfall in the winter leading up to the 2021 growing season were the same in both areas though, and that turned out to be very important later in a season when the water reserve helped in a year with significantly less rain than average. It was also a year with higher temperatures and generally warm to hot weather if compared with a historic average. But things have changed and in a more recent context, 2021 was only the second warmest year between 2017 and 2023.

The beginning of the season was generally cooler with a later bud break than many of the previous years. This was fortunate since even an early starter as nebbiolo was less hit when frost arrived at the beginning of April. But in lower vineyards as in many areas in Barbaresco, there was significant damage, and some producers reported a subsequent drop in quantity of 20-30 percent. April and May were relatively cool delaying flowering and even though summer temperatures rose significantly there were no excessive heat waves at any point. Compared to Barolo, Barbaresco had more summer rain which added to the already good water reserves and ensured a balanced and steady maturation with no water stress. Some hail in late July caused some local damages but nothing like the rather catastrophic situation in some areas in Roero.

During summer the 2021 harvest looked to become a very late one but high temperatures and dry weather in the last part of August and especially September speeded things up. In general, the harvest was done in the first part of October with minimal impact from some late rains.

Despite the differences in weather and growing conditions, 2021 in Barbaresco is in many ways a reflection of 2020 in Barolo as far as the overall judgment goes. The wines are generally balanced and approachable with well-integrated and sometimes even soft tannis. nins.

** Data provided by Alessandro Masnaghetti (www.baroloMGA360.it)*