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Nebbiolo Prima: Tasting terroir in Alba

Chris Fleming finds much to inspire at the 30th edition of an event devoted to the Nebbiolo wines of Barolo, Barbaresco, and Roero.

By Chris Fleming

Alba, Nebbiolo Prima's host town. Photography by Chris Fleming.

Back in early December, I traveled to Alba to join an international group of journalists for the 30th edition of Nebbiolo Prima. Since 1996, Nebbiolo Prima has been a prestigious tasting of new vintages prior to release, hosted by the Consorzio Albeisa, an association of 318 wineries, with almost every notable producer in the Langhe (Barolo and Barbaresco) and Roero as members.

Over three days, 275 wines were tasted blind, mostly from the 2022 and 2023 vintages, with some 2021 and 2020, and ending with 2010–13. During the introduction, the Consorzio di Tutela Barolo Barbaresco Alba Langhe e Dogliani and the Consorzio Tutela Roero presented figures on total land under vine, grape varieties, and exports. Conspicuously, both the vineyard area and the number of bottles produced designated as Langhe have nearly doubled over the past decade. To contrast, over the past four years, the global wine industry has faced a markedly slower rate of sales, which has exacerbated an excess of inventory at producers, importers, and throughout sales channels. A strategy to progressively increase the presence of Langhe-designated wines for export markets during a difficult period for the global wine industry is a gamble. However, the US receives 18.7% and 19% of the total Barolo and Barbaresco exported, respectively, the highest volume from either DOCG to a single market, by far. These figures may help explain why this gamble has looked like a good bet.

During the tasting, it quickly became clear that, while sommeliers often compare Nebbiolo to Pinot Noir, the differences between the two varieties were apparent, tannic structure the most prominent. Christy Canterbury MW has noted: "[Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo are] both über-aromatic, graceful and pale-colored, but straight Nebbiolo is not without tannin and racy acidity to reinforce that tannin. Nebbiolo tends to be a wine enthusiast's wine. Pinot Noir is more even-keeled structure-wise." My repeated observations have supported this. For example, at en primeur tastings, even with Gevrey-Chambertin, Nuits-St-Georges, Corton, and Pommard, Burgundy's most massive wines, the tannins of Pinot Noir are markedly less forcible and four-square than Nebbiolo. Along with Sangiovese, Tempranillo, and Pinot Noir, Nebbiolo is one of the few varieties that can best transmit minute differences in terroir. As per Consorzio figures, at 37%, Nebbiolo is the most planted grape in the Langhe. In addition to being much of the region's identity, one reason Nebbiolo has been so widely planted is that it's more resistant to diseases than Barbera, Dolcetto, and other varieties.

Overall, many wines showed well, with very good to excellent quality, but I was a bit surprised at the variability in the range of quality from wine to wine, as were some of my colleagues. Some wines were excellent, while others showed extremely poorly. I suspect this amplitude was partly because of recent bottling. Additionally, our tasting sheets noted that some wines were barrel samples. Most of the wines that I rated poorly showed high volatile acidity, specifically acetone/nail polish remover/shoe polish, not all of which were barrel samples. There were more than a few of these, across the regions, communes, and vintages. Conversely, some barrel samples I rated as excellent. Typicity was unmistakable, which I found reassuring. Each *comune di origine*, (La Morra, Castiglione Falletto, Serralunga d'Alba) showed a distinct set of characters, this was also apparent for MGA (*Menzione Geografica Aggiuntiva*) or cru. Several times, after tasting a wine, the tasting sheet confirmed that my glass had aroma and flavor characters which indicated a distinct place of origin.

The Complex 2023 Vintage: Resilient, surprising, and rewarding

Many winemakers regard 2023, though relatively dry, as a very good vintage for overall balance, acidity, and structure, if not "five stars" like 2021, the recent vintage it's closer to. From La Morra *comune* in Barolo DOCG, winemaker Michele Bergadano described, "In general, 2023 was a blend of 2020 and 2021. The power, acidity, strong tannins [of '21] and the [approachable, friendly aromas and flavors of '20, which was] energetic, intense, super adorable [with] freshness, [softness] and drinkability. In 2023, the climate was a little colder and a bit rainier than 2022. [Frequent] summer storms helped keep temperatures more balanced. 2023 is considered a dry vintage because we had a warm winter, good quantity of rain in May, then no rain until the end of August. Rain during the last week of August helped the grapes keep acidity and freshness."

Roero 2023 wines were very good to excellent. Recently more visible in the US market, Roero wines are not nearly as present as Barolo or Barbaresco, but total production is much lower, as well. As with reds from the Loire, Austria and Galicia in northwest Spain, neither heavy nor "hot" with alcohol, Roero wines are agile and gastronomic, with bright acidity, and fresh, red berry, alpine characters. Lithe and nimble Nebbiolos, Roero wines are versatile with a range of foods.

Most Barbaresco 2023s were very good to excellent (Treiso and Neive *comunes*) with only a handful that showed poorly. Conversely, within Barbaresco *comune*, many wines seemed disjointed and out of balance. The *Piu Comuni*-designated (made from vineyards in two or more *comunes*) wines showed well. Roero 2022 Riservas and Barbaresco 2021 Riservas were largely disappointing and perplexing, given the expectations of my fellow journalists and myself. Similarly, the Barolo 2020 Riservas were a mixed bag, with a handful of wines good or better among ten wines that showed poorly. This group left me wondering if some wines simply weren't ready to taste and/or if provenance was an issue.