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Young Italian Winemakers Challenging Old Timers in Barolo

By John Mariani - Oct 13, 2013

To judge how far barolo has come in the past three decades, check out the prices on some of these better-known bottlings. Angelo Gaja “Sperss” goes for \$315, Brovia Monprivato, \$372, while Giacomo Conterno Monfortino Riserva costs \$638.

Pretty remarkable for a regional wine that some producers were giving away before 1980. “In the 1970s, if you bought one bottle of cheap dolcetto in Piedmont, you’d get a bottle of barolo free,” says Achille Boroli, 36-year-old winemaker and owner of Boroli winery in Alba in the heart of the barolo region.

Today barolo, named after a local village and made from the nebbiolo grape, is now considered one of Italy’s most prestigious red wines. It was one of only three wines awarded the government’s Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) status in 1980, when that classification was introduced.

Since then, hundreds of newcomers have entered the fray. Wine-Searcher.com shows 500 different barolo labels on its [website](#), and that’s only a partial list. The approved zone for planting barolo, though not huge, takes in about a dozen villages in Piedmont, leading to variations in soil and style of the finished wine.

Chestnut Barrels

Barolo is always a big, highly-concentrated wine, which by DOCG law must spend at least three years aging, two in oak or chestnut barrels. A riserva must age for five years, two in barrel.

Old-style barolos are said to require 10 years of additional bottle aging to reach their prime.

Newer styles of barolo are usually aged in smaller French barriques, with less tannins, so the wines are fruitier, a direction that has pitted the old timers against the new guys in the “Barolo Wars.”

Boroli’s wines are clearly of the recent camp. Achille’s father, Silvano, whose family is in the publishing industry, bought prime vineyard property in the Langhe region of Piedmont in 1997.

Today it is a small production winery with a range of wines in addition to barolos. The company has also opened [Locanda del Pilone](#), a small hotel and restaurant with a cooking school.

Burrata Cheese

At a tasting with Achille Boroli at [New York's](#) Sandro's restaurant over plates of gnocchi with burrata cheese and onion-and-bacon rich spaghetti all'amatriciana, I was delighted to find his barolos were very easy to drink right now; you certainly wouldn't need to wait 10 or even five years for them to achieve their peak. All had a signature of black and white pepper components.

Starting with the most youthful, the 2008 Barolo (\$40), which spent two years in barrel and 18 months in bottle, showed the power of the nebbiolo varietal as well as its earthiness, distinguishing barolo from other Italian reds like chianti classico or Piedmont's other great red wine, barbaresco.

The 2008's tannins are still not softened up but the fruit is already splendidly forward.

The 2007 Cerequio Barolo (\$79), from a First Category Cru vineyard, was magnificent, reaching every taste bud on the palate and revealing velvety tannins and the scent of truffles in the nose. Here you find the explosive power of barolo along with a finish of great elegance, all at 13.5 percent alcohol.

Full Bodied

Boroli's Villero Barolo, also from 2007 (\$71), comes from the region of Castiglione Falletto, known to produce a somewhat fuller bodied wine -- this one has 14.5 percent alcohol -- that takes its time coming into focus.

I found this, like the other Boroli examples, ripe and achieving a balance of fruit, acid and tannins that echo older styles, yet are indicative of the sound modern winemaking techniques of the region today.

I also got to taste Boroli's Chinato (\$67), an interesting vermouth-like wine infused with the bark of the South American cinchona bark, which the people of Piedmont believe helps prevent malaria.

Though the sickness isn't much of a problem in [Italy](#) anymore, the wine endures as a dessert beverage.

In the "Barolo Wars" I try to remain neutral, though I have long cherished the chance to savor very old or old-style barolos that reveal the tastes of another era. As I get older, however, the happier I am to find young winemakers like Achille Boroli who have carefully crafted a newer style without compromising barolo's essential character.

Many other Giovanni-come-lately winemakers have, and their sales have suffered as a result.

(John Mariani writes about wine for Muse, the arts and culture section of [Bloomberg News](#). The opinions expressed are his own.)

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