



Nebbiolo Prima 2019 unveiled the best examples of Nebbiolo, Italy's most famous grape variety which goes into making the noble wines of Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero.

Alessandra Piubello reports

Nebbiolo Prima is an annual event that previews newly released vintages of DOCG Nebbiolo wines, organised by Albeisa (the Union of Alba Wine Producers). Albeisa was founded in 1973 with the aim of promoting the great wines of Alba, Piemonte.

Nebbiolo Prima 2019 was the 23rd edition of this event. In four intense days, surrounded by lush green hills amidst UNESCO World Heritage landscapes, we tasted about 290 wines from approximately 200 wineries. They were Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero, three of Nebbiolo's best-known interpretations. Specifically, the wines were Barolo 2015 and Riserva 2013, Barbaresco 2016 and Riserva 2014, Roero 2016 and Riserva 2015. We were in Alba, the ancient capital of the Langhe, the chosen theatre for Nebbiolo Prima's unmissable performance. This year, the traditional event was brought forward from May to January, allowing us to experience the magic of the snow-covered Langhe hills.

The name Albeisa comes from a historic bottle that dates back to the 18th century when wine producers in the area wanted unique and recognizable bottles to promote their wines. In 1973, on Renato Ratti's intuition (an internationally known visionary in Italian wine) 16 producers decided to re-use the ancient Albeisa bottle with its unique shape

The imposing Barolo Castle in the heart of the Langhe hills from which the name of the wine, Barolo, comes



Vineyards in the Langhe zone south of Alba. Barolo and Barbaresco lie within its boundaries

and embossed brand name. Today, the non-profit Albeisa association, presided over by Marina Marcarino, has about 300 members with the glass symbol that is identified as the trademark container of the best wines of the Langhe. The association organises seminars about the region including an overview of Langa wines and the local food.

Langhe and Roero terrain

To the right and left of the River Tanaro, a 276-kilometre long river in northwestern Italy, stretch the vineyards of Nebbiolo, the king of Italian red grapes. The varied landscapes are unforgettable, the vast horizons marked by towers and castles, the silence broken only by the sound of workmen in the vineyards and fields. The high quality of the grapes grown here is due to the unique composition of the soil.

The Langhe soils of Barolo and Barbaresco

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were predominantly formed in the distant Tortonian and Helvetian eras and consist of calcareous/clayey marl with some parts of the hills featuring clay or sand. The different types of soil co-existing in the same plot of land give the grapes unique characteristics that reflect in the wines in terms of elegance and refinement.

At La Morra and Barolo the soils are of sedimentary clay-chalk interposed with greyish-blue sandstones. At Castiglione Falletto and partly in Monforte d'Alba greyish-brown sandstones prevail, while layers of yellow-reddish sand, grey-brownish sandstone alternating with grey-bluish marl have formed at Serralunga d'Alba and also in Monforte d'Alba.

Nebbiolo is known for being highly sensitive to soil variations and climatic conditions. And so in Barolo (Cannubi, Sarmassa, Castellero, San Lorenzo, Le Coste) and in La Morra (Monfalletto, Rocche dell'Annunziata, to name a few vineyards),



Bird's eye view of Barbaresco vineyards in the Langhe hills covered with a blanket of snow

the wines are very elegant, fruity and round.

Serralunga d'Alba in Piemonte probably provides the most enduring Nebbiolos with a hesitant, not totally uniform tannic structure. The vineyards on the southeastern side produce less austere wines compared to those in the southwest. Although capable of great aging and with fine aromatic qualities, the Barolo wines of Monforte d'Alba are less biting and structured than at Serralunga. In Castiglione Falletto the wines have vigorous tannins with an aroma reminiscent of cocoa and are appreciated for their considerable freshness.

The Roero extends to the left of the River Tanaro in a system where every hill represents one single entity, linked tenuously to the next, forming a series of multiple, steep cones, all of the same height and shape – a shifting and charmingly untidy environment that can also influence the fragrance of the wines. The central part of the Roero territory has the most representative soils. Here, the fine sands

blend with marl and occasionally with clay. In the peripheral areas, to the west beyond le Rocche going towards the Po valley, the soils are mainly of continental origin and the sands therefore make way for red earth, tending towards clay and shingle. Here the land is poor in carbonates and less suitable for vines.

Barolo

This is the great Italian wine par excellence, obtained exclusively from Nebbiolo grapes. It originates in the heart of the Langhe hills, a few kilometres south of the city of Alba, surrounded by green hills and overlooked by imposing medieval castles including that of Barolo, which gave its name to this world-famous wine. Some of the central wine producing communes in the Barolo zone are La Morra, Monforte, Serralunga d'Alba (with its military castle towering between the hills), Castiglione Falletto, Novello, Grinzane Cavour. Starting in 1807, the history of Barolo



The author at Nebbiolo Prima 2019 in Alba assessing the new vintage for Sommelier India



Sommeliers lined up ready to pour the newly released vintages of Nebbiolo Prima 2019

is directly linked to the Marquises of Barolo when the then Marquis, Carlo Tancredi Falletti married a French noblewoman in Paris, Juliette Colbert di Maulévrier, the great-granddaughter of the Sun King's minister of finance. Juliette was the person who actually realized the great potential of the wine produced in Barolo. On her husband's death in 1838, she became the owner of an immense area of land and, using her links with Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour (a lover of Burgundy wines), she asked for assistance from the Count's French oenologist, Louis Oudart. It was her idea to present the wine as a gift to the Savoy King Charles Albert which decided the fate of this wine. It conquered his palate and Barolo became the ambassador of the Savoyes of Piemonte in all the courts of Europe, as "the king of wines, the wine of kings".

Barbaresco

The history or legend of Barbaresco appears to date back to when the forests in this area, dedicated to the Roman god Mars (from which the cru "Martinenga" gets its name), were cut down by the Romans to plant vines. But in reality, this wine which struggled to impose its own identity, started in the late 1800s when,

Barbaresco compensates for the strength and structure that it sometimes lacks with balanced alcoholic content, soft tannins, acidity and intense aromas

in his castle in Barbaresco, Domizio Cavazza, director of Alba's oenology school, made the first lots of wine from Nebbiolo grapes that took the name of Barbaresco. Before this, the grapes in the Barbaresco district merged with Barolo and there was no true separation.

The four production areas are Barbaresco, Neive, Treiso and San Rocco Seno d'Elvio. The altitude differences in the various municipalities produce wine with different characteristics due to Nebbiolo's varied ripening. For example, wines in Barbaresco are generally more complex on the nose, elegant and structured (the Asili and Rabaja crus are famous) while in Neive, they are pleasant and sweetly expressive. In Treiso, they are more surly and tannic.

It can generally be said - depending on the individual producer - that Barbaresco compensates for the strength and structure that is sometimes lacking in it with factors such as balanced alcoholic content, soft tannins, acidity and intense aromas, which evoke the fragrance of violets and fresh berries.

Roero

Some say that the name of this area to the left of the Tanaro comes from the noble Roero

household; for others it derives from "rovere" (oak), since these trees abound in the landscape. The district includes about 20 municipalities. Those with the most vines are Canale, Montà, Monteu Roero, Vezza d'Alba, Santo Stefano Roero and Castellinaldo. The vineyards, sometimes with steep slopes are at an altitude of between 200 metres and 420 metres.

In this area, Nebbiolo produces reds that are sometimes more fragile compared to the other two, Barolo and Barbaresco, although they are intense, pleasant, fruity and tasty. Unlike Barolo and Barbaresco which are both 100% Nebbiolo, Roero is allowed to use 95% Nebbiolo with 5% authorized red grapes from the same zone.

Wines and vintages

In 2015, abundant water supply due to heavy snowfall saved the vines from being stressed in the hot weather from mid June to end July, with July temperatures peaking at 40°C. August and September were normal so the Nebbiolo grapes ripened perfectly, although a little earlier compared to other years. This was a year that produced elegant and harmonious wines with fine tannins and good aging prospects.

Some producers who achieved high quality in 2015 were: Bricco delle Viole by Vajra; Parafada by Palladino; Bussia Dardi Le Rose by Poderi Colla and Bussia wines by Giacomo Fenocchio, Barale Fratelli and Silvano Bolmida; Cannubi by Poderi Luigi Einaudi and Fratelli Serio & Battista Borgogno; Margheria by Pira Luigi and Gianpaolo Pira; Pietrin by Franco Conterno; Bricco Boschis di Cavallotto Tenuta Bricco Boschis; ... but the quality was so good that many more could be mentioned. It will be a year to remember.

Let's look at 2016, a year that developed slowly until the end of September. It too was a classic year. Superior in the glass, the wine was less alcoholic than in the previous year. It will probably be one of the best vintages in recent years. Of the Barbaresco 2016 wines we tasted, the most memorable were Ronchi by Albino Rocca, Rabaja' by Cortese Giuseppe, Ovello by Cascina Morassino, Basarin by Adriano e Marco e Vittorio, Rizzi by Rizzi, Rabaja' by Cascina Luisin, Rombone by Figli di Luigi Oddero, Gallina by Prinsi... but here, too, the list is long. Roero 2016 includes Valmaggioro Audinaggio by Cascina Ca' Rossa, Oesio by Enrico Serafino, Monfrini by Maurizio Ponchione. ♦