

For wine lovers around the world who enjoy
wine and the good life

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NEBBIOLOPRIMA

NEBBIOLO

The prince of grapes

Alessandra Piubello reports from Nebbiolo Prima and Grandi Langhe, a four-day event that spotlights Nebbiolo, Piedmont's oldest native black grape



International wine journalists and tasters hard at work assessing hundreds of wines of the latest vintage of Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero

Here we are at the 24th edition of Nebbiolo Prima, the traditional preview of Piedmont wines organized annually by Albeisa – the Albesi Wine Producers Union, which manages the use of Albeisa bottles, invented in the early 18th century to distinguish the best Langhe companies. Nebbiolo Prima is a four-day event that for over 20 years has been a not-to-be-missed appointment for the wine world – an authentic platform for spotlighting Nebbiolo, Piedmont's oldest native black grape. Nebbiolo is the indisputable prince of the region's grapevines and one of the most important worldwide.

Nebbiolo Prima is the first Italian wine preview of the year and the first chance to discover the new Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero vintages, all wines made 100% from Nebbiolo, except Roero, which on rare occasions is 95% Nebbiolo. In four mornings, we tasted 306 wines from 221 of the 298 Albeisa member companies. The stars of this edition of Nebbiolo Prima were **Barolo DOCG 2016** and **Riserva 2014**, **Barbaresco DOCG 2017** and **Riserva 2015**, and **Roero DOCG 2017** and **Riserva 2016**.

As usual, the wines were served blind by expert sommeliers and subdivided according to their Denomination of Origin, Municipality and Sub-zone. In recent years, the excellent Albeisa organization has provided a format which offers seminars – context and vintage presentations by the Barolo Barbaresco Alba Langhe and Dogliani Consortium and the Roero Consortium; the genetic and historical aspects of Nebbiolo by the famous ampelographer, Anna Schneider; climate changes by Mauro Buonocore; practical lessons on pruning – local guided tours (to Cherasco this year) and wine retrospectives. At this edition we tasted Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero from 2004 to 2007.

Immediately after Nebbiolo Prima, we were able to take part in the Grandi Langhe, an event specifically for wine experts, where member wine producers present their new Barolo, Barbaresco and Roero vintages and Denomination of Controlled Origin (DOC) wines from the

Langhe area at their own stands.

The 2016 vintage developed slowly but continued until mid October and even later in some areas. It was one of the longest lasting harvests in recent years and a classic year with lower alcohol content than the year before. From the tastings we had, it would appear to be one of the best vintages of late. It should be mentioned that this is one of the most difficult Nebbiolo ranges to interpret. The wines (especially Barolo) are so complex and unpredictable in terms of their development that they can surprise and startle even the most expert tasters. I can name some of the wines that particularly struck me due to the harmonic maturity of the fruit which,



was never excessive; the variety's extensive yet elegant and expressive tannic texture; the way the sip developed and its length, boosted by good textural acidity and tasty annotation; and the balanced and profound compositive clarity. (The 2016 wines are listed in the sidebar).

2017 was not an easy year due to the heat, low rainfall and April frost, which affected the valley floors and cooler hillside areas of the Langhe. The harvest was also one of the earliest in recent times, with Nebbiolo grapes being picked at least two weeks earlier than usual. Nevertheless, on tasting, the territory's essential nature, viticulture's adaptation to the Langhe hills and the experience of the winemakers once more emerged. (For some good examples, check the sidebar). In the Roero area, the wines were more inconsistent, although some names impressed us considerably

Nebbiolo Prima is a four-day event that for over 20 years has been a not-to-be-missed appointment for the wine world



Photo: Bruno Abbona

such as those listed in the sidebar.

The landscape in the Langhe in Piedmont, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is one of the most charming of all areas where vine cultivation is the main activity. We are in southeast Piedmont, on the narrow and steep hills that gradually rise from Liguria towards the Tanaro river. Their name, Langhe, derives from their tongue-like appearance (from the Latin for tongue). This range of hills continues, never-ending, with slopes that are often extremely steep. The best sides, those exposed to the midday sun (Sori) are traditionally planted with Nebbiolo, one of the cornerstones of Italian grape heritage. Although some of its wines, such as Barolo and Barbaresco, can boast worldwide fame, this Italian grape is still anchored in Piedmont, its land of origin. In fact, it is practically non-existent outside this region. Its elegance, finesse, complexity and astounding ability to age, make these wines unique. A “precious grape to be protected”, is how Nebbiolo is described in a notary deed of 1511. This simple but exact and, above all, valid definition still applies even after numerous scientific studies have been made on the grapes’ behaviour during winemaking.

Nebbiolo requires sensitive vintage interpreters, like a tightrope walker dealing

The Langhe in Piedmont is a UNESCO World Heritage site, where viticulture is the mainstay

In southeast Piedmont, the narrow and steep hills gradually rise from Liguria towards the Tanaro river with slopes that are often extremely steep

with a grape that is as tense as a tightrope. It is a variety that needs handling with kid gloves, and a great deal of skill and sensitivity. Only in this way can wines based on elegance and balance be produced. Nebbiolo is a variety that ripens late and much familiarity and experience is required to establish the right harvest period. This is a decision reached by a combination of analytical data and by actually tasting the grapes, especially the skins and pips, to check the most important element for harvesting purpose – the level of phenolic maturity, which will greatly determine the characteristics of the future wine.

In fact, Nebbiolo stands out from other varieties for its phenolic framework, particularly in terms of the anthocyanins (pigments) responsible for colour (of which it is poor) and tannins (of which it is rich). This is another reason why the winemaking is more complicated than when dealing with other grapes that have a more stable anthocyanin content (like Barbera, for example). In general, the first rule for obtaining great red wines from Nebbiolo is to pick the grapes when they are well ripened, without being afraid to wait, because no technology can replace the fruit’s perfect ripening. The true strength of this grape lies in its delicacy and almost human sensitivity in overcoming any whim on the part of the winemaker. In short, Nebbiolo is a grape

that, more than any other, with time gains the upper hand over external intervention, repeating, like an old record player, sounds and suggestions of the natural context from which it comes.

Majestic, aristocratic and velvety Barolo, and the very similar but more easy-going, less imposing and more elegant Barbaresco, are two red wines that, due to their aromatic complexity, phenolic wealth and aging potential, are the most important wines made from Nebbiolo. This is a grape variety indisputably superior in terms of genetic profile, but so bizarre and demanding that even in Piedmont, where it finds its most favourable habitat, it is cultivated on less than 40% of vine-planted land. The wines that have made a name for themselves are profoundly Piedmontese, or rather Langhese, in soul and personality, despite a French connection in terms of family and culture. The territory has been likened to Burgundy due to the fragmentation of the vineyards, the surprisingly complex and profound wines made with just the one grape variety, the way the inhabitants are so attached to their traditions and, finally, the rural soul that it never loses. Indeed, the uniqueness of these wines is striking and is the result of a distinctive synergy that binds man to earth.

The story of Barolo and Barbaresco in the last 20 years is full of recognitions and rewards. Its high quality and commercial success (with the odd high and low) have brought wealth and wellbeing to this historically poor area. Their younger brother, Roero, is earning the respect of consumers. The Roero area covers the left side of the Tanaro river (the Langhe areas are on the right). Here, each hill is a single entity that precariously joins the next, forming a repeated series of steep sparse areas of the same height and shape. The central part of the Roero area has the most representative soils. Here the fine sands mix with marls and, more rarely, with clays. Instead, in the Langhe, the soils are mainly limestone/clay marls. However, some portions of the Langhe hills are clay or sand. The Langhe lands have an incredible variety of terrain, a diversity that allows several different types of soil to co-exist in the same plot. ♦



Expert sommeliers served the wines subdivided according to their Denomination of Origin, Municipality and Sub-Zone

THE WINES AND VINTAGES

VINTAGE 2016 *Barolo Ornato and Parafada by Palladino, Barolo Cannubi by Brezza, Fratelli Serio & Battista Borgogno and Podere Luigi Einaudi, Barolo Bussia by Fratelli Barale, Giacomo Fenocchio and Poderi Colla, Barolo Bricco delle Viole by Vajra, Barolo Bricco Boschis by Cavallotto, Barolo Cerretta by Giovanni Rosso, Barolo Margheria by Pira Luigi, Barolo Brea Vigna Cà Mia by Brovia, Barolo Lazzarito by Vietti, Barolo Monvigliero by Diego Morra, Barolo Rocche dell’Annunziata by Renato Ratti, Barolo Ginestra by Conterno Fantino.*

VINTAGE 2017 *Some good examples are Barbaresco Montersino and Ronchi by Albino Rocca, Barbaresco Rabajà by Giuseppe Cortese, Barbaresco Sanadaive by Adriano Marco and Vittorio, Barbaresco Valleggrande by Ca’ del Baio, Barbaresco Pajonè by Rizzi and Barbaresco Gallina by Negro Angelo.*

WINES FROM ROERO *Roero Bricco Medica by Cascina Val del Prete and Roero Monfrini by Maurizio Ponchione. The Roero Riserva 2016 did better and we could mention Valmaggione by Cascina Chicco, Mompissano by Cascina Ca’ Rossa, Printi by Monchiero Carbone, Vigna Renesio by Malvirà, San Michele by Marco Porello and Sudisfà by Negro Angelo. As for 2015, we pleasantly remember Barbaresco Riserva Camp Gros Martinenga by Tenuta Cisa Asinari dei Marchesi di Gresy, Muncagota by Produttori di Barbaresco and Rabajà by Castello di Verduno.*