

Piedmont Pastiche

A look at recent vintages and zonal variations in this Italian wine region.

Tom Maresca

This past May at the annual Alba Wine Event, the presentation of the new releases — this year, 2006 Barbaresco and 2005 Barolo — neatly coincided with the announcement of the official designation of subzones within the Barolo district. Barbaresco had completed a similar subzoning a year earlier, roughly in time for the release of its 2005 wines — and that vintage was exactly what made the new, additional geographic indications so timely. Rarely has quality in a vintage of these wines depended so much on where and when. In 2005, exactly where the vineyards lay turned out to be crucial: wines from the communes of Serralunga and — especially — Monforte d'Alba showed far better than did, for instance, those of La Morra. And, wherever the vineyards lay, exactly when the grapes were harvested vitally affected the character of the wines — picking before or after “The Rains” (everyone pronounced those words in quotation marks and capital letters) made the major difference in the quality of the wines.

Weather

Even under ordinary circumstances, weather makes the most obvious and easy-to-describe differentiator between vintages. Neither 2005 nor 2006 offered ordinary circumstances, however. While in climatic terms they were almost opposites, in both, autumn rains presented major problems for the harvest and the subsequent vinification.

According to the Alba consorzio's official account, “the climatic conditions experienced over the 2005 vintage were within the norm” — but what it then goes on to describe is far from normal. A mild winter with little rain preceded an early, cool spring, also with little rain, and then a hot, dry June. Two very cool, then two very hot, weeks followed in July, “with no rain at all.” Then came a cool, dry August and a “summer-like” September. Harvest began in October but was interrupted — very significantly — by long, drenching rains. The bigger the vineyards to be picked, the bigger the problems the rain caused. As Valter Fissore, winemaker at the Cogno estate, explains it, “For me and other small growers, 2005 was a good year: We were able to harvest before the rains. The larger properties had trouble. Up until October 3, the weather was fantastic. Then rain, day after day; the harvest halted completely for ten days.”

The 2006 on the other hand endured a very cold winter, reminiscent of the one that preceded the very hot 2000 vintage — an omen that proved accurate. The “long, cold, and wet” winter led into a late spring that quickly turned very hot. As the consorzio describes it, “dry weather and scorching heat continued in July,” interrupted for a few cooler but still dry weeks in August. Mid-September finally brought rain — a lot of it: “Depending on the area, in just four days three to five times as much rain fell as the average for the month.”

The consorzio claims that since “it was almost totally absorbed by soil in a serious state of water shortage . . . all this water did not cause any serious harm to the grapes.” You may feel free to doubt that. With a weather pattern like this, early-ripening grape varieties probably did fine: White wines should be more than okay, and many growers were ecstatic about their Dolcetto in 2006. But Barbera and especially Nebbiolo faced serious problems: While Barbera thrives on real heat, Nebbiolo doesn't, and both these later-ripening varieties would have needed time to deal with all that rainfall. So exactly when growers picked becomes once again the key determinant of the quality of the wine. As the consorzio acknowledges, “those with the patience to wait before harvesting” were rewarded with “sound grapes of excellent quality.” The dire implications of that statement for those who didn't wait are clear.

That's why both these vintages offer some really fine wines as well as some real stinkers, and why generalizations about them are next to impossible. That is also why a marathon tasting like the Alba Wine Event, which presented almost 250 new-release 2005 Barolos and 2006 Barbarescos, remains invaluable: In a generalization-resistant pair of vintages like these two, there is no real alternative to tasting them all, wine by wine. It's grueling and definitely not fun — by the end of the week your tongue feels like the sole of your shoe — but it certainly is illuminating. And on the basis of it, here's the one generalization about these vintages I'll venture: The best wines of both DOCGs fall, with a few notable exceptions, into the four-star range rather than five-star. That is, the best of '05 and '06 are very good wines showing substantial Nebbiolo character, and — most important — they seem already drinkable. These are not vintages that have produced

many memorable wines, but they have given us an abundance of enjoyable ones for drinking now and over the next 10 to 15 years — and that isn't shabby.

Whither

One of the key things all those Alba tastings illuminated for me is what very different results different communes and their subzones achieved, especially in Barolo, which is much the larger, more geographically and geologically varied, of the two DOCGs. For my palate, Monforte d'Alba led the pack by a considerable margin, with its subzone Bussia providing the *crème de la crème*. Serralunga and Castiglione Falletto came next, while La Morra and Barolo made largely disappointing showings, with too many wines that tasted more of the cellar than of the vineyard — I would guess from much effort spent trying to make silk purses out of some pretty recalcitrant sows' ears.

The question this raised for me was, simply, why? That a single producer or a handful of producers in a given zone might do well in a difficult vintage would be statistical happenstance — but that an area as a whole should distinguish itself implies something distinctive about it, something that marks it off from its denominational equals, something that in fact points to the essential logic of distinguishing *crus* in the first place. But Italians generally are a little wary of the whole concept of *crus*, and very wary of any notion of ranking *crus*. The modern experience of serious winemaking throughout Italy is, they point out, much too short to establish any *crus* on the basis of historical consistency. Too many potentially fine sites have not produced great wine because of indifferent winemaking or being planted with the wrong clones or any number of other reasons. Conversely, a few merely middling sites have overachieved because of the skills or devotion of individual, talented winemakers — so any ranking and especially any distinction of sites *qua sites* is bound to be pretty arbitrary, they say.

Even the widely acknowledged expert on Piedmont *crus* and *terroirs*, Alessandro Masnaghetti, maker of the finest vineyard maps anywhere (see sidebar on page 54), expresses caution about attributing too much to specific sites. “The role of *terroir* is certainly important,” he says, “but you also have to remember that the pains so many producers in less famous *crus* have taken in the past 15 years have seriously raised their worth. Also, climatic conditions have altered a great deal, and it's therefore easier now for certain formerly less favored sites to successfully compete with the more famous ones.”

All that being said, I'm still left with the fact that, according to my palate — and, finally, our own palates are all any of us has by which to judge a wine or a vintage — Monforte d'Alba as a whole outperformed the other Barolo communes in 2005, and I'm still stuck like a persistent child with the question why. That performance defies statistical probability: Why?

Stefano Conterno, co-owner of the very prestigious Aldo Conterno estate, gave me the beginning of my answer. “In 2005,” he says, “everybody knew that heavy rains were coming, rains that would probably last for many days. So everybody started harvest at the same time in 2005. This is very unusual for Piemonte: Usually, everybody has his own ideas about when to harvest, depending on his location and what his own preferences are. But in 2005, everybody began harvesting at the same time, and after the rains, they finished harvesting at more or less the same time. In this unique situation, location maybe became more important, and small differences between locations could make a big difference in the wines. I don't want to say that Monforte d'Alba is better than other communes, because I love Barolo from Serralunga and La Morra too, but at that moment in 2005 Monforte possibly had a small advantage — a little bit sunnier, a little bit greater ripeness. Not that it has better soil, but a combination of small things in a difficult vintage.” Another winemaker, Maurizio Giacosa of Giacosa Fratelli, concurs: “I and my enotechnician, Beppe Zatti, both think that in the 2005 vintage, the fruity taste and flavors are more intense in our Barolo from Monforte, compared with the one from Castiglione Falletto. I don't think that in quality they are better but their fruity expression is more intense than usual.”

In spite of Signor Conterno's and Signor Giacosa's admirable reluctance to dispraise other sites, the facts they state imply pretty clearly that, when other variables were removed from consideration, the vineyards of Monforte d'Alba had a slight but significant advantage over others in the zone. In most vintages, that advantage would be minimized by the fact that, in Piedmont, unlike other parts of the wine world where the entire harvest begins when the official word is given, the growers pick when they see fit — so normally any slight advantage in warmth or sunniness or ripeness that Monforte might enjoy would be leveled out by later picking and longer hang time in other areas. But what the 2005 harvest shows us is that there is real reason to distinguish *crus*, that — everything else being equal — some places simply do perform better than others. Or to put it as Alessandro Masnaghetti does, “Exposition and soil remain important because the best

vineyards have clearly and consistently succeeded qualitatively in diverse vintages” — as, to my mind, 2005 demonstrates.

Wherefore

That isn't the whole story, of course. What winemakers do with the grapes after nature has done its best or worst makes the final difference in the wine we consumers finally get. Stefano Conterno again provides some clues to that: “Maybe just as important, I think, is how you handled the harvest and what you did after it. We harvested the top of the vineyards first, and got 40 percent picked before the rains, the remaining 60 percent after. After fermentation, we were very happy with the 40 percent, but the 60 percent we didn't bottle. It just wasn't up to standard — and we couldn't blend it with the 40 percent because it would just have spoiled that good wine. It was a big sacrifice, but we did it to preserve the identity of our Barolo.”

What

The concept of Barolo — and Barbaresco — identity forms the fundamental consideration for winemakers and consumers alike. About 15 or 20 years ago, at a blind tasting of Barolos, I was served a wine that was pale, almost rosé, in color and light, close to straw-berryish, in the mouth. It was lovely. It was charming. If it had been labeled Freisa, I would have scored it very high. But it was labeled Barolo, and as Barolo it was dismal: It had none of the characteristics of the breed. Producers of Barolo and Barbaresco have become as fanatical as Westminster Kennel Club judges about maintaining the standards of their breed. Here's Stefano Conterno again: “After the renaissance of the '90s, when all across the zone producers worked to improve quality, identity became the most important consideration for the winemaker. I don't claim this is the best wine zone in the world, but it is unique, special, with its own distinctive identity, and we all have to preserve that. Location, careful fieldwork, and controlling yield are the keys to that. In our case, we now make 30 percent less wine than we did ten years ago.”

That kind of concern not just for quality but for identity — not just to make a good wine, but to make a Piedmont wine, an Alba wine, a Nebbiolo, a Barolo or a Barbaresco — that's what has led to the official promulgation of “Additional Geographical Specifications” (to use the full bureaucratese) for both DOCGs. Subzoning demanded a lot of work and a lot of attention: There are 65 of them approved for the Barbaresco zone, with seven more pending, and a whopping 177 for the Barolo zone, ranging from one each in the communes of Cherasco and Roddi to over 30 apiece in Barolo, La Morra, and Serralunga d'Alba. This isn't just giving the local folks their 15 seconds of fame: The whole idea is, to use the bureaucratese again, “to enhance the link between product and territory.”

The names of these new subzones will start appearing on labels in 2010, and they will denote wines produced entirely from grapes coming from within that very small named area. Obviously, this is no guarantee of quality — but the hope is that the greater specificity these names provide will be a spur to increasing and/or maintaining quality — a sort of “that's our name on the label” buzz and competitive surge for the folks in downtown Rocche dell'Annunziata or Rocche di Castiglione. Whether subzoning will ultimately have this kind of salutary effect remains to be seen, and it certainly won't be discernible immediately. As with so much about wine, patience is required. But in the meanwhile, devotees of Barolo and Barbaresco, who are many and growing in numbers every year, will now have at their disposal more information than ever before about the wines they love — and that can only be, in the immortal words of *1066 And All That*, A Good Thing.

The 2006 Barbaresco and 2005 Barolo resemble each other in their genial, middle-of-the-road quality and character: soft tannins, good structure, and good Nebbiolo fruit, in Barbaresco more often partially obscured by new or toasted wood flavors than in Barolo, which seems to be at last emerging from its decade-long infatuation with barriques. In fact, in 2005 Barolo is much more fruit-forward than it has been in many years. Both '06 Barbaresco and '05 Barolo are, for the most part, already drinkable, and therein lies their great role: These are wines to drink now and over the next 10 to 15 years while you're waiting for the perfectly proportioned 2001s and 2004s to reach what promises to be a glorious maturity.

Alessandro's Maps

Alessandro Masnaghetti is a highly respected Italian wine journalist, the publisher, editor, writer, mapmaker, and chief cook and bottle washer for *Enogea*, a bimonthly journal concerned to the point of obsession with the wines and *terroir* of Italy's great red wine areas — most notably, Piedmont and Tuscany. He has been producing a series of vineyard maps, in Italian and in English, of individual communes in those zones. These

maps are more accurate, more detailed, and provide more information about sites, expositions, and ownership than any vineyard maps I have seen for any other wine regions anywhere. Thus far, Masnagheti has produced vineyard maps for the townships of Barolo, Castiglione, Monforte, and Serralunga in the Barolo zone; Barbaresco, Neive, and Treiso in the Barbaresco zone; Gialle, Panzano, and Radda in Chianti Classico; Bolgheri and Bolgheri Sassicaia elsewhere in Tuscany; and Mazzon in the Alto Adige. Non-subscribers to *Enogea* may obtain the maps either by contacting, in Italy, almasnag@tin.it or, in the U.S., <http://www.rarewineco.com/>

The Best Wines

Four-Star Wines

- **Abbona Marziano:** Barolo 2005 Ravera: Fresh and accessible, with a slight wood veneer.
- **Alessandria Fratelli:** Barolo 2005 Gramolere: Soft tannins and slightly sweet fruit, with a nice cherry-and-tar finish.
- **Barale Fratelli:** Barolo 2005 Cannubi: Biggish, with forward fruit and good balance. Barolo 2005 Castellero: A very pleasing, well-balanced, medium-scale wine with classic Nebbiolo character.
- **Silvano Bolmida:** Barolo 2005 Bussia: A bit reticent, but with nice tar-and-tobacco accented sour cherry fruit. Barolo 2005 Vigne dei Fantini: Similar flavors slightly hidden by a toasted wood veneer.
- **Boroli:** Barolo 2005 Cerequio: Almost a textbook wine of the vintage — dried roses and leather in the nose, sour cherry and a little tar on the palate, well balanced.