post-modern BAROLO

A Sommelier's View from the Vineyards and Cellars of Alba

by Henry Davar

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The Sunday before Ferragosto, Italy's Memorial Day and Labor Day rolled into one, we made the six-hour trip from Abruzzo to Castiglione Falletto, a medieval town that sits almost in the center of Barolo.The centro of Castiglione Falletto rests on top of a hill, home to two small hotels, a bar with views across to Serralunga d'Alba, a tabaccaio, and a small panettiere, the parish church of San Lorenzo, the cantina communale, the requisite medieval castle and the Vietti winery. This would be my home for the next three months as I began an internship with the Vietti-Currado-Cordero clan.

Five months ago I had left my post as wine director at *Del Posto* in NYC to live in the wine region that I love most. I had been a student of Barolo and Barbaresco for several years. I had read all the books (twice), owned all the maps, attended tastings and popped corks. It was time for me to learn nebbiolo by picking grapes, pumping over tanks and shoveling *vinaccia.*

In particular, I wanted to figure out where Barolo and Barbaresco were heading. The line between "old-school" and "new-school" producers had been slowly diminishing as many classicists were updating their practices and modernists learning to better manage the use of new barrels. Was a new style emerging?

I first broached the idea of a **postmodern** ***Barolo with Giuseppe Vaira of the G.S. Vajra winery in Verna on the outskirts of the village of Barolo.*** We were tasting his Bricco delle Viole 2005, which surprised me by not following a typical trajectory on the palate: The attack had the restrained high-acid signature of classic nebbiolo but the mid-palate offered a generous pop of red berry fruit that seemed to arrive sooner and last longer than that of classic Barolo. The finish offered satiny, well-integrated tannins and savory, mineral flavors; it wasn't about new oak.

"Growing up I was caught in the middle of the war," Vaira says, describing the tension he felt among his classmates, whose parents were polarized by the modern–classic debate, while his father sought a middle approach. "Ours is a Barolo on tip-toes," he explains, a style with neither foot fully in the modern or traditional camp. He's come to terms with their place in the style spectrum now, he says. "We weren't embarrassed by our *botti* in the nineties and we aren't embarrassed by our barriques today."

Compared to the winemakers of the 1970s and 1980s—the decades of the Barolo Boys, new barriques and the roto-fermenter—many of today's younger winemakers exhibit more sensitivity to the potential of the grapes, the nature of the vintage and the personality of the cru. Indeed, just this past May I had arrived in Alba for Nebbiolo Prima. Over the course of five morning tasting sessions, we tasted over 300 young nebbiolo-based wines, and I counted less than 30 of the wines, or roughly ten percent, marred by evidence of excessive oak or extraction. Since I had always been able to count the rigidly classical producers on two hands, where did the remainder of the wines, like Vajra's, fit in? Was the modern–classical dialectic relevant today?

August 18th, At Dawn

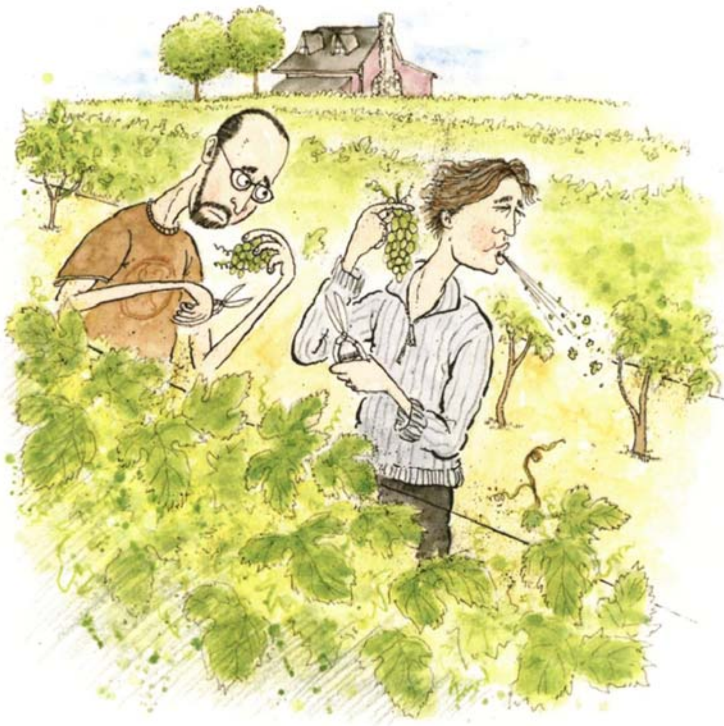
I follow the Vietti team down a trail from my guesthouse into Scarrone, a vineyard surrounding the town of Castiglione. In addition to nebbiolo, Scarrone includes a famed block of barbera planted in 1918 that Vietti bottles on its own. This day, in the middle of August, we're armed with shears to perform a third and final *diradamento* for the season.

Many growers have determined that nebbiolo, which is typically harvested in mid- to late-October, has to be farmed to lower yields (through a combination of planting density, pruning, and green harvest) if it is to have a chance of achieving full physiological ripeness. And, in fact, many producers have pushed yields lower and lower to get riper, more concentrated wines.

Today's final pass at Scarrone is not simply to reduce yields, but also a response to the cooler months earlier this summer. We set out to remove the *ali* (wings) and *punti* (points) of selected clusters. *Gli ali*, are smaller, secondary clusters that act as a safety valve: In a hot, dry vintage, the vine will draw water from the clusters to avoid going into shock.

September 8

Winemaker Luca Currado leads me into a Barolo vineyard to collect grape samples for analysis. Currado does this weekly through August, and then more frequently as harvest time approaches, always tasting grapes along the way. I sneak an arm into his neighbor's vineyard; this guy is more conservative than Currado and had left twice the number of clusters in his vines. ***I expect that the neighbor's grapes would be less ripe because of the higher production per plant, and therefore higher in acidity, but almost the opposite is true: Compared to Currado's grapes, not only do they have less extract, but they have less acidity—and less* energy*—as well.*** Currado's grapes seemed to have the same sense of energy as his finished wines. His 2007s and '08s are all extroverted Barolo, a little less quiet, a little less introspective than more traditional wines.



September 21

The first nebbiolo grapes arrive at Vietti's winery from the Rocche cru in Castiglione Falletto. We crush and de-stem them and the must fills one 50-hectoliter steel tank. Then the dry ice arrives, delivered in 200-kilo chests. During harvest, it's considered smart fun (read: hazing) to terrorize the younger vineyard workers and winery staff by making dry-ice bombs with empty water bottles. An unsuspecting visitor to the winery—or anyone who just happens to take a stroll below the cantina—might be caught by explosions that sound like blasts from a small cannon as the pressure builds inside the sealed bottles and they burst in a cloudy plume (think Tiki cocktail or ersatz volcano).

Currado starts all his reds with a cold maceration at about 11 degrees Celsius for three to four days. Over this period the dry ice not only keeps the must cool but its natural sublimation creates a protective veil over the must, preventing air and oxygen from getting to the must. According to Currado, this helps preserve important pigments that are otherwise easily oxidized and helps to develop finer, estery aromas. "We are copying what our ancestors used to do," he claims. "In the past the harvest would not arrive until late October or even November," due more to the prevailing higher yields rather than climate change. That late in the season, it was already cold in the winery and fermentation would start slowly.

Eventually, the slowly warming must begins to ferment on its own, and Currado adds a selected neutral yeast to ensure an even fermentation. This is a point of contention among Barolo purists. In Vietti's case, the low yields of their vines results in grape must with such a high concentration of sugar that it would be difficult for fermentation to progress evenly or continue to dryness. Even among wineries regarded as classicists, there are producers who prefer selected yeasts, like Giuseppe Mascarello and Oddero. Indeed, in Barolo, the insistence on an even, clean, and complete fermentation seems to concern a contingent of winemakers all along the stylistic spectrum.

September 28

I climb to the top of the fermentation tank to prepare for the post-fermentation maceration. For this we would take a *steccato,* a collapsible screen (literally fence), insert it through the narrow, 18-inch opening on the top of the tank, and then expand it to cover the cap of skins and solids so it could keep them submerged in the liquid. *Cappello sommerso* is a historical Piemontese technique, a gentler method of extraction than pump overs, and has recently seen a resurgence in popularity among several producers. ***"As little as five years ago, we were one of five remaining wineries still using the cappello sommerso. Now more and more wineries have incorporated the technique," says Currado.*** He believes the technique encourages additional soft extraction—crucial in this moment as the alcohol in the must is as likely to extract excessive tannins as well as the colors, aromas and flavors the winemakers are seeking. It also allows the tannins to polymerize, forming longer, softer chains. Currado, like many producers who use this technique, usually macerates the wine for about 30 days. But others go further. Claudio Fenicchio, of Giacomo Fenocchio, kept his 2008 Barolo Bussia Riserva on the skins for 80 days.

October 14

"Which do you prefer?" asked Mariacristina Oddero as she offered me two tastes of wine from barrel. She was pouring 2010s grown at Bricco Chiesa, the vineyard adjacent to her winery, one that she farms organically. Oddero had made the first sample with extended maceration and daily pumpovers, as is typical of the family's wines; for the second, as an experiment, she used cappello sommerso rather than pumpovers.

This past spring at *Del Posto* I had hosted a winemaker dinner featuring Oddero Barolo, placing their wines in the traditionalist camp, as they required significant aging for their rugged tannins to soften. And in the first sample from Bricco Chiesa, I immediately recognized the Oddero signature, the old-school tannins that I tasted in the new releases last spring. There was clearly depth and complexity but the wine seemed introverted.

The second sample was altogether different. The wine jumped out of the glass with generous aromas; the flavors were less tightly wound and the wine had greater length. It was as if someone had loosened the velvet glove, unclenched the iron fist. It was a dramatic example of the gentle power the cappello sommerso can afford winemakers.

Burgundy to Barbaresco

I arrived at the Sottimano winery in Barbaresco having just read Andrea Zanfi's book, *Piemonte, Noblewoman of Wine.* Among other producers, Zanfi profiles the young Andrea Sottimano, his travels through Burgundy and his efforts to integrate what he had learned while respecting the *memoria storica* of his father—the wisdom from 40 harvests. I had read about his return to Piemonte in the early '90s with *"bagaglio colmo di novita,"* his luggage full of news. Like the vignerons he'd met in Burgundy, he was aiming to make wines expressive of their individual terroirs. He preferred to work in a careful, non-interventionist style to eliminate the producer's imprint, used no selected yeasts—and yet he aged his wine in French barriques. I wondered: How can a producer bent on removing his imprint also proudly invoke the dreaded b-word?

Sottimano led me in to his cellar to taste his 2010 Barbaresco crus from barrel. Fausone, from a vineyard at 790 feet grown on sandy soil, was floral and elegant. Cotta, from 60-year-old vines planted on a higher concentration of clay soil, was complex and salty. Pajore, a vineyard at 1,475 feet in Treiso, was cherries wrapped in velvet—focused, pure, and dense. All were wonderfully integrated, harmonious, compelling, triggering an emotional response—goosebumps, in fact—and reminding me of times at *Del Posto* when I would be stopped dead in my tracks after having just nosed a wine I was preparing to pour for a guest. This wasn't a "Hey, this is what a $1,000 bottle of wine smells like" reaction but something more humble, a response to the resonance or the harmonies in the wine. ***Have you ever held a Himalayan singing bowl? That's what this felt like. But most of all, I was stunned: How does Sottimano achieve this in a winery full of barriques?***

I remembered Luca Currado explaining that all of his red wines go through malolactic fermentation in small oak barrels. "Making the malolactic fermentation in oak allows for longer lees contact," he told me. "Lees give life. They are anti-oxidants, they allow me to use less sulfur. They stabilize color, absorb odors, and help create longer polymer chains giving the wines a longer finish."

Sottimano echoes Currado, particularly on the use of sulfur, which he believes mutes the wine in barrique. Both producers stir the lees, a technique more commonly practiced in Burgundy. Sottimano uses 30 percent new oak in his vinification, but he insists the choice of wood is the more important factor in the final wine. "It is not the percent of new wood but the quality of wood that most significantly affects the wine," he says. He has eliminated Bordeaux barrels and is proud of his relationship with François Frères, tonnelier to Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. In the early '90s, when Sottimano first went to commission barrels from the famed barrel maker, Jean François sat and down and said, "I know why you're here," and he recounted the arrival, 20 years earlier, of Angelo Gaja. Sottimano and François worked closely together for four years, experimenting with variations to consider the impact on Sottimano's style. "Together, we tasted different lots of wine aged in different barrels to determine what works best for our wines." He goes so far as to commission three barrels every year for his Riserva. He pays an additional 100 Euro for those barrels and would like to have even more of them, but three is all François would give him. After malolactic fermentation, Sottimano racks into used barrels. "If you taste the wines before the end of malolactic fermentation, you never taste the wood. If you use new wood after, the wood sticks out." Sottimano, in fact, was using French barriques to bring out the character of his vineyards.

Mascarello's Private Hill

It was becoming clear to me that the traditional-modern model for understanding Barolo and Barbaresco has become obsolete. There was nothing heavy-handed about Sottimano's adaptation of modern winemaking philosophies and tools; as he demonstrates, they could help to make wines reflective and respective of their terroirs. Perhaps there wasn't one unique post-modern style. Perhaps post-modern was just a way to shine a new light on a wine that had been evolving for almost 50 years and had arrived at a pure expression of the place where it was being made.

This idea overwhelms me as I sit in the tasting room of the Giuseppe Mascarello winery with Mauro and his son Giuseppe Mascarello. ***As I taste the Barolo Monprivato 2006 and '07 I'm stricken with a combined sense of horror (that the thesis I have been investigating is potentially irrelevant) and exhilaration (that the reason I had originally fallen in love with Barolo and Barbaresco is staring me in the face).*** All talk of winemaking is suddenly irrelevant. I know that Mauro Mascarello is (and I will borrow the words of their US agent) "the last of his generation of great classically inspired winemakers in Barolo," but I had learned that they were farming to extremely low yields. I know that they favor long fermentation but are performing *remontage* in favor of cappello sommerso. They are carrying out malolactic fermentation in a combination of steel and cement tanks. They are aging their wines in large Slavonian oak botti. All of this fades away as I taste Monprivato and realize that I have not tasted a Barolo like it during my stay in Piedmont—for how could I have? Monprivato is an expression of this particular place—a vineyard that dominates one of a series of ridges on the western slope of Castiglione Falletto, surrounded by Bricco Boschis, Bricco Fiasco and Villero. And the Mascarellos have captured its soul completely.

This was the same impression I had when tasting Vajra's Barolo Bricco delle Viole 2005 Vietti's Barolo Rocche 2008 or Sottimano's Barbaresco Pajore 2008. Though the winemakers employ different techniques to capture the spirit of their vineyards, each strikes a chord—a harmony between their vines and the vintage. In the end, is it really about style at all? ■

Illustration by Mark Brewer