

Postmodern Barolo

The War that Never Was

ALAN TARDI

After 30 years of the so-called Barolo Wars—the heated debate between the forces of modern and traditional Barolo—many key players have finally declared a truce. But what actually took place during this period? More important, where does Barolo winemaking stand today?

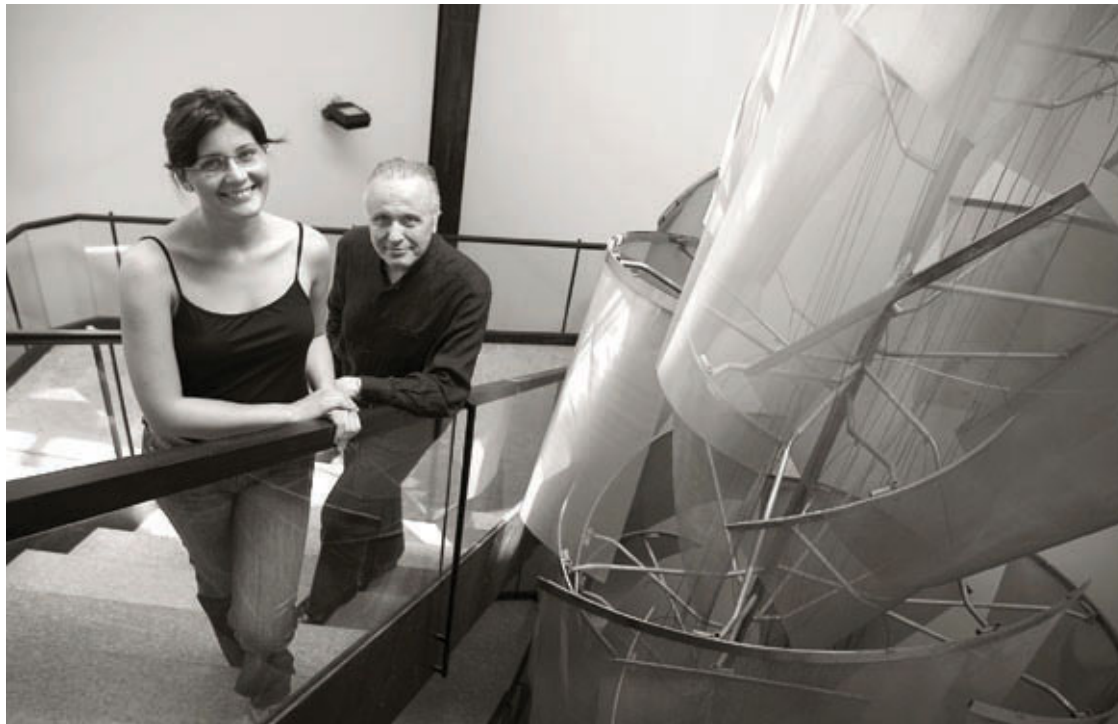
Historical Context

Barolo (the wine) was consciously created a century and a half ago by a small group of noble landowners who were intimately familiar with French wine. The House of Savoy, which held territory in what is now France, ruled Piedmont from 1801 to 1814. These gentlemen-farmers had had enough of the pink, half-fermented, slightly fizzy, semi-sweet plonk being made in their own wineries from the local Nebbiolo grape, and they decided to

bring in outside experts to apply more sophisticated, “modern” techniques to their winemaking. Barolo was thus born out of a revolt against the region’s own traditions.

Over the ensuing decades, the power of the nobility dwindled, and many peasants were eventually able to acquire land. Wine was considered a basic foodstuff, and most grape growers were subsistence farmers who made some wine for themselves and sold the rest to a handful of larger wineries. Nevertheless, the dry, Nebbiolo-based wine from around the town of Barolo began to develop a reputation outside the immediate area. The original Barolo appellation was created in 1927.

After World War II, these small farmers began to assume new roles as entrepreneurs: they acquired vineyard land and machinery, focused on commercial grape growing and winemaking, and produced a good deal more than they needed for themselves. They worked hard and spent little; many were able to put money aside and send their children to school. Some



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even began to bottle and label their wines.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Barolo wine began to trickle into the United States. At about the same time, the postwar generation, born into relative prosperity, was starting to become active in the family winemaking businesses. The Gaja winery, founded in 1859, was already quite successful when Giovanni Gaja handed the reins to his 20-year-old son Angelo in 1961. But the ambitious Angelo aimed to improve the quality of Gaja products and to put Barbaresco—which was even less recognized internationally than Barolo—on the wine map. In 1967, he bottled a single-vineyard Barbaresco from Sorì San Lorenzo (joining Alfredo Currado of Vietti, who made his first single-vineyard Barolo Rocche in 1961). In 1970, Gaja did the unthinkable, especially for the son of a mayor of the town of Barbaresco: he ripped out

the Nebbiolo vines in a prime site, Bricco, and replaced them with Cabernet Sauvignon.

“In the '70s and '80s,” says Angelo’s daughter Gaia—who, since 2004, has become increasingly active in running the winery—“‘traditional’ was a pejorative term, used to describe a wine that was rough, bland, and oxidized, with harsh tannins, volatile acidity, and no color or fruit.

Corkscrew museum in Barolo (far left); Barbaresco producers Gaia and Angelo Gaja (top); harvest time at Vietti in Castiglione Falletto (below).





Gaja vineyards overlooking Barbaresco (left); Vietti vineyards in Serralunga d'Alba (above).



This was understandable, given the way grapes were grown at the time, but it was a system of winemaking that had many defects. My father set about correcting them.” For instance, he reduced yields significantly through more severe

pruning and green harvesting—a practice that was almost unheard of locally at the time. fully matured grapes, that was no longer necessary.” In 1978, Angelo began aging his wines in French barriques as well as the large *botti* of oak, chestnut, or acacia wood historically used in the region. Finally, he put a high price tag on his wines, maintaining that they rivaled the world’s most prestigious bottlings, and started traveling around the world to promote them. Collectors and journalists took note. And so did other winemakers.

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“In the traditional manner of viticulture, you *had* to leave the wine in large casks for five to seven years to try to soften the harsh tannins,” explains Gaia, “but with healthy, per-

The New Generation

In the 1980s, yet another generation of producers emerged to take up the banner from the likes of Gaja, Currado, Pio Boffa, and Bruno and Marcello Ceretto. These young winemakers were energetic, enthusiastic, and full of new ideas. They took a fresh, critical look at their methods, often turning to France (especially Burgundy) for guidance—much as their noble precursors had 150 years earlier. They drastically cut back yields and shortened maceration times; some invested in new technology like rotary fermenters and temperature-controlled tanks, and some employed commercial yeasts to control fermentation. Most noticeably, many, following Gaja’s example, started using barriques.

“It was a very exciting time,” remembers Chiara Boschis of Barolo’s Borgogno family, which acquired the E. Pira & Figli winery in 1981 after its fabled proprietor died. (Luigi Pira is thought to have been the last winemaker within the commune of Barolo to crush grapes by foot.) “There was a whole group of us young producers—Domenico Clerico, Luciano Sandrone,



Chiara Boschis of E. Pira & Figli in Barolo.



Photos courtesy of Terlato Wines International (top left), Vietti s.r.l. (top right); photo by Etienne van Sloun (bottom)

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ways and new. As the stubborn old guard continued to soil their hands in the vineyards, the new group of stylish young winemakers, dubbed the “Barolo Boys” (many under the savvy tutelage of high-end wine broker Marc de Grazia), hosted fancy dinners in New York and Los Angeles and poured their accessible, “new-style” Barolos for adoring crowds. Modernity was sexy, tradition was passé, and the philosophical battle was in full swing.

A War or a Disagreement?

In fact, the dividing line between modern and traditional was never really all that clear to begin with: many so-called *modernisti* (including Angelo Gaja) never completely abandoned the *botte*, but used a combination of large casks and barriques, some new and some used. For example, Enrico Scavino, who began working in his father Paolo’s winery in 1978, began using barriques in 1982 after detecting some olfactory problems in the wine. “The barrique better fixes the color and permits greater microoxygenation,” he says, “but I was afraid two years in new wood would be too much, so we did the first year in barriques and the rest in large cask.” In 1995, due to the “harshness of Slavonian oak,” he got rid of all the old *botti*; two years later, he replaced them with 2,500-liter casks made of “softer, sweeter, more elegant” French oak. Except



Photos by Alan Tardi (top, middle right, bottom); photo © Azienda Agricola Sandrone (middle left)

Elio Altare, Guido Fantino, Giorgio Rivetti, and Marco Parusso, to name just a few—who got together all the time and blind tasted lots and lots of wine, both ours and other people’s. We discussed what was good, what was bad, and how it could be better. We were totally obsessed with trying to make the best wine in the world.”

When Boschis took over the winery in 1990 and began using barriques, her father Franco stopped talking to her. And that wasn’t the only family feud: after Altare took a chainsaw to the old *botte* in the family winery, his father Giovanni disinherited him. On the other side, the legendary Bartolo Mascarello plastered the motto “No Barrique, No Berlusconi!” right on his label. The use of barriques versus *botti* became the symbol of contention, the line in the sand between old

Luciano Sandrone (top left) and Sandrone cellar in Barolo (middle left); Maria Teresa Mascarello (middle right); Bartolo Mascarello, right, as a young boy straddling a *botte* (below).



OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Bartolo Mascarello Barolo, Barolo 2007 \$89

Transparent brick red with pink highlights. In the nose, a touch of alcohol leads to aromas of fresh, bright redcurrant; wild strawberry; and sour cherry, with hints of dried flowers, worn leather, and asphalt. The pleasantly restrained palate offers dried cherry, cranberry, and even caramelized strawberry. Supple tannins emerge on the way to a pleasantly astringent, slightly bitter, and spicy finish. A graceful wine that is decidedly present yet understated and elegant.

Comm. G.B. Burlotto Barolo Monvigliero, Verduno 2008 \$47

Transparent red with a slight brownish-orange hue. An aromatic perfume of strawberry jelly mingles with hibiscus and honeysuckle. Ripe strawberry and star-fruit flavors, backed by fresh bay leaf, evolve into caramelized orange rind and cinnamon stick. Soft, unobtrusive tannins underlie a gracious palate, with no hint of the 14.5% alcohol. Simple as it seems at first, there's much more here than meets the eye—including the fact that Burlotto continues to crush grapes for this wine by foot.

E. Pira e Figli Chiara Boschis

Barolo Via Nuova, Barolo 2007 \$72

Dark red, with nice transparency. Soft, muted aromas of black cherry, bay leaf, and rosemary are set off by pronounced alcohol. Slightly green tannins surround a ripe, almost sweet berry core. The wine is round and full on the palate but well proportioned; a long flavor arc gracefully fades into a dry, tannic finish. Throwing some sediment, it has room to grow.

Elio Altare Barolo Arborina, La Morra 2008 \$80

Dark purple-black with reddish highlights. Ripe wild juniper and blackberry aromas linger beneath a leafy, woody cover with a trace of alcohol. After a soft attack, the palate is full, fleshy, dense, and intense. Super-ripe black-cherry and plum flavors are almost sweet, but with just enough tart blackcurrant acidity to counterbalance the heft. Fruit flavors turn to licorice, which yields to firm yet supple tannins and a lingering, mouth-puckering finish. Multilayered and tightly wound, but with enough balance to pull it off.

Gaja Barbaresco 2008 \$169

Transparent brick red with a pink rim. Fresh, ripe aromas of cranberry and strawberry pie are followed by a hint of pink peppercorns. On the palate, notes of small wild berries, tree bark, and graphite are suggestive of a young Grenache or Cabernet Franc. The wine shows admirable reserve,

with tart acidity, brambly tannins, and a clean, subtly mineral finish.

Lorenzo Accomasso Barolo Rocche dell'Annunziata, La Morra 2005 \$NA

Lorenzo Accomasso is something of a local legend—one of the few remaining “traditionalists” in the sense that he is still operating much as he (and most other small wineries) did 40 years ago. This Barolo is a pretty garnet-red color—dark but still transparent, with a slight brownish tinge. A bit oxidized and volatile on the nose, it displays an alluring aroma of mature black cherry with hints of dried berries and violets and noticeable alcohol. The restrained palate has sensations of new leather and varnish. Supple tannins follow a surprisingly soft attack; the smooth, almost creamy finish leads to bitterness and a slightly resinous aftertaste.

Paolo Scavino Barolo Bric del Fiasc, Castiglione Falletto 2006 \$89

Dark purple-red; shiny and transparent. Bright, fresh black-plum aromas are backed by licorice and bitter chocolate with hints of asphalt and lilac. The palate offers super-ripe, concentrated black-cherry flavors with a refreshing touch of tree-bark astringency; it's full bodied but soft and supple, with just enough acidity to keep it from seeming heavy. Pronounced green-grape tannins kick in midpalate and bring the wine to a nice, dry finish. Very solid, not flabby, but needs time for the tannins to soften.

Roberto Voerzio Barolo La Serra, La Morra 2007 \$215

Bright garnet-red with an orange hue; translucent in the glass. After a nose of Bing cherry, the soft attack fills the mouth with ripe cherry, Damascene plum, and raspberry, articulated by dried tobacco leaf and sage. Firm tannins show up toward the finish, with a cedary, cigar-box aftertaste. Intense and concentrated; there's a lot going on here, but even more chomping at the bit to get out.

Sandrone Barolo Cannubi Boschis, Barolo 2007 \$135

Dark maroon-purple to black; dense but not murky. Ripe, macerated black-cherry notes mingle with *frutti di bosco* and blackcurrant, followed by toffee, a hint of black pepper, and star anise, plus a not-unpleasant undertone of tar. The plush, dense palate is big yet not overbearing, framed by firm, toasty tannins and tart berry acidity. The aftertaste is green and tannic, but this wine should mellow out over the next three to five years.



Roberto Voerzio at his namesake winery in La Morra.

for the interim period between 1995 and 1997, he has always used a combination of large and small barrels. Sandrone, another supposed ultra-modernist, never used barriques at all but rather 500-liter *tonneaux*. “This is the optimal-size barrel to age Nebbiolo,” he says, “but there’s really nothing new about it: a 500- to 600-liter barrel, called a *boutal* in Piemontese, was traditionally used in the towns of Barolo and Castiglione Falletto, the original ‘classic’ zone of Barolo.”

To Boschis, “the size of the barrel is irrelevant. Barolo is a wine that must age, and the barrel is a tool with which to do this—but it should be invisible. Does anyone really care what type of knife the chef used to prepare a great dish of food? The important thing is how it tastes. If a

Photo by Alan Tardí

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wine tastes like wood, it's not good." Roberto Voerzio agrees: "To make barriques or *botti* be the deciding factor between modern and traditional is overly reductive and completely wrong. That's not what makes the difference. What *does* make the difference is low yields and the possibility of controlling the temperature during fermentation." Since leaving his father Gianni's traditional winery to start his own eponymous house in 1986, Roberto has charted his own path, marked by extremely low yields (sometimes less than a pound per vine) and high-density plantings (nearly 20,000 vines per acre in certain vineyards). Still, Voerzio maintains, "I'm not modern, but I'm not traditional either. I guess you could call me a modern traditionalist."

Although such characterizations may seem confusing, they are not uncommon in Barolo, which finds itself at a particularly interesting point in its evolution. The one-time upstarts now have grown children who are starting to come up with ideas of their own; they themselves are beginning to look back as well as forward. If the distinction between modernity and tradition was ambiguous from the beginning, today it is practically nonexistent.

In 1996, Angelo Gaja, the person largely responsible for the original upheaval, reclassified his groundbreaking, top-shelf, single-vineyard Barbarescos from Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG) to Langhe Rosso DOC, and he now blends the Nebbiolo with 5% Barbera. This was a big step, whether you consider it backward or forward. "Piedmont is not Burgundy," says Gaia Gaja, sounding very much like a staunch traditionalist. "*Crus* are not part of our tradition. Today Gaja makes only blended wines: either a blend of vineyards—as in the case of our Barbaresco, which contains Nebbiolo from 14 different vineyards—or a blend of grape varieties, as in our single-vineyard wines."

"With all this change and experimentation going on, some mistakes were bound to be made; some people went too far," admits Boschis, who last year bought several large casks, ostensibly to use in blending Nebbiolo from several small vineyards she recently acquired. Although she condemns what she calls a "witch hunt" against the barrique, she acknowledges that "sometimes there is a hint of new wood in the wines when they're very young."

Following the 2011 vintage, Elisa Scavino convinced her father Enrico to try aging a Barolo completely in large casks. "With our system of combining small and large barrels, I really don't think it will make much difference," says Enri-

co, "but she is right to give it a try. The wine will tell in a few years." The Boroli winery, which entered the Barolo game at the crest of the modernist wave in 1997, added some big casks in 2006. Many other modernists are going back to large casks and long fermentation cycles—and some are even starting to take a fresh look at their long-forgotten cement tanks.

A few of the steadfastly traditional producers take this apparent backtracking as a vindication of their philosophy, a capitulation of the errant modernists. "They said we were old fashioned, outdated, and that our wines stank," says Maria Teresa Mascarello, who has been faithfully carrying on the family customs since the death of her father Bartolo in 2005. "Before they insulted us; now they want to make wine like us."

Remembering the "war years," Fabio Burlotto of Comm. G.B. Burlotto, one of the most



Enrico Scavino (top left) and daughter Elisa (left) of Paolo Scavino in Castiglione Falletto.



Photos by Davide Dutto (middle), Alan Tardi (bottom)



Sandrone vineyards in Barolo (top); Fabio Burlotto of Comm. G.B. Burlotto in Verduno (middle); La Morra producer Lorenzo Accomasso (bottom right).

historic wineries in the region, says that “I was very young, but this wasn’t an easy period for us; no one was interested in traditional wines. We experimented with barriques for a few years, but we just weren’t happy with the results. I do think, however, it is good to keep an open mind and explore new techniques and technologies.” Adds Mascarello, “Tradition doesn’t mean standing still; it means evolving while respecting the foundation that came

before. Even my father said he didn’t make the same wine as his father did, but there was still a continuity.”

“This ‘war’ might have been invented in the press,” Boschis believes. “But it wasn’t all negative; it gave them something to talk about, which created a buzz and focused an attention on this region that had never been there before.” Voerzio concurs: “Many of these new ideas that came out during that time were abandoned because they didn’t make sense from the very beginning. They didn’t take into account the fact that there were two or three generations before that had brought winemaking in this area to a very high point. The idea that traditional wine smelled bad is not true; those who worked well made sure it didn’t. There was never any war between modernists and traditionalists; it was more a war of journalists.”

Elio Altare, who is often credited with (or blamed for) fanning the flames of discord between the two camps, also insists that “there was

never any war. Sure, there was competition, two different ways of looking at things. But there’s nothing wrong with that. I fight for mine, you fight for yours, and may the best man win. Then we all go have dinner together. I never understood what all the fuss was about. The barrique is just wood, and it’s been around for a long time. Stainless steel is modern; destemmers, pumps, and tractors are modern; and today everyone, even the most traditional producers, uses them. I respect and honor the handful of historic wineries that have always worked well; I like traditional wines, as long as they’re made well. And some of them are spectacular. Those flavors remind me of my youth and the wines of my father.”

Barolo Today

One point on which almost everyone in Barolo agrees is that winemaking practices have changed greatly since the modern revolution. “Fifty years ago, green harvest was unheard of,” says Burlotto. “Now everybody does it. Today everyone keeps their wineries clean, which was something that was very difficult a generation or two ago.”

As Scavino sees it, “In the past, there were only a handful of wineries that made good-quality wine. Now there are many wineries, and just about everyone makes good wine. There may still be only a few really great ones, but it’s hard to find a flawed bottle today, and this was certainly not the case in the past.” Even Maria Teresa Mascarello admits that although “the new generation didn’t invent quality, they did bring a new force and a new way of thinking to this region. Things here took a big jump forward, the market changed, and importers came knocking.”

Today there are almost as many different ways to produce a great Barolo as there are hills in the Langhe, and there is room for all of them. Mascarello is not likely to make any radical



Photo © Azienda Agricola Sandrone (top); photos by Alan Tardi (middle, bottom)

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changes in her approach; I recently tasted the 2008 vintage, and though it was supple and approachable in a way that no just-released Barolo would have been 25 years ago, it remains totally true to the house style. Nor will Altare significantly alter his winemaking methods: “A five-day, controlled-temperature fermentation and two years in barrique—that’s our recipe,” says daughter Silvia, “and we don’t plan on changing it in the foreseeable future.”

Some years ago, I was visiting with Mascarello when Altare stopped by to chat. He seemed like a family friend rather than a blood enemy. “I made wine differently than Bartolo did,” Altare recalls, “but I respected and admired him: he was true to himself, a maestro of life.” On a wall in the Altare winery hangs a large photograph of Elio and Bartolo laughing and talking together. And on the desk in the Mascarello tasting room is a photograph of a very young Bartolo sitting on barrels marked “Barolo”—barrels that look remarkably like the aforementioned 500-liter *boutal*. “Tradition is nothing more than good innovations that stuck,” Altare concludes. “Now my daughter is a ‘traditional’ winemaker; she makes wine the way her father did.” 🍷

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Pio Cesare vineyards in Barbaresco (top); Ceretto vineyards (below left) and cellar (below right) in Alba.

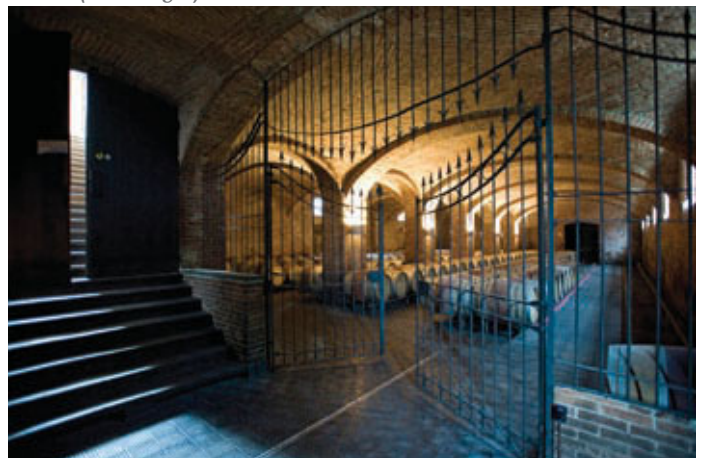


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Photographed at
Catapano Dairy
Farm, Peconic, NY.
Beet and Chevre
Risotto, with Rioja
Blanco, right.



Noah Schwartz, one of the culinary world's rising stars, and owner of Noah's on Long Island's East End, is a stickler for details, serving only organic, locally grown and harvested food paired with the best wine. His choice for many of his creations are wines from Rioja, the best food pairing wines on earth — pure genius for their complementary nature. Visit vibrantrioja.com to learn more.

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