

Poured with Pleasure

"If it's good in a glass, I'm pouring it"
Bill Marsano's Blog on wine and spirits and cooking.

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Barolo Bodies Forth

When I was one-and-twenty I heard a wise man say,
Barolo is the king of wines, and wine of kings: hooray.

Hardly a man is now alive

Who remembers that famous day and year,

And those that are must might'ly strive

To keep its memory bright and clear.

–Col. Pesto

In other words, Barolo has lost its gleam. Piemontesi resting on their truffles have been outpaced by the folks Curzio Malaparte called **i maledetti toscani**. While Piedmont was preoccupied with Fiat's 500s, Olivetti's Letteras, Pirelli's tires and Ferrero's Nutella, **The Cursèd Tuscans** rebuilt Chianti Classico and Vino Nobile, invented SuperTuscans, revived Scansano and ignited Brunello di Montalcino to the point that the market's thirst and pocketbook had to be appeased with Rosso di Montalcino, its **fratellino** or baby brother. Brunello even got its own **scandalo**—the mark, in Italy, of having truly arrived—in the inevitably named Brunello gate of fragrant memory. [Kerin O'Keefe is brisk and lucid on this in her excellent **Brunello di Montalcino: Understanding and Appreciating One of Italy's Greatest Wines**, just out from University of California Press.]

'But you digress!' cries my nextdoor neighbor, the punctilious Fussy Galore.* 'Get to the point!' Fussy is right as usual, so **revenons à nos moutons**, as the French may still say: our subject is not While Piedmont Slept but **Why**.



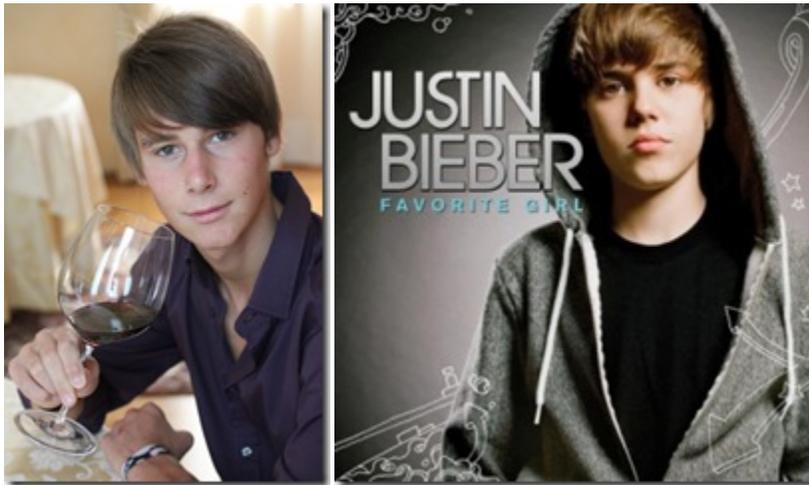
Cascina Adelaide, beneath Barolo's castle.

Leonardo LoCascio, founder of Winebow, says one reason is cultural: 'There are many small producers. They have a natural reserve and sometimes a bit of a Burgundian attitude: we make the wine, and if you want it you can come and get it.' And small production, sometimes less than one bottle per vine, means high prices. 'So Barolos,' he adds, 'can have the status of collector's items. The producers have lost the battle for everyday consumption, but I'm not sure the situation is all bad, since the market has lately become truly international.' The Chinese, for example, thirst immoderately for Barolo and, having more money than Warren Buffett put together, can afford to. LoCascio adds that 'The Nebbiolo grape is high in tannin, and the wines are hard on release,' so it's hard to tub-thump for wines that won't be opened for two decades. Unlike the competition: 'Sangiovese wines are pretty much ready to drink—even Brunello.'

Barolo's challenges are seen in the Roberto Voerzio quintet LoCascio imports. Voerzio makes fewer than 50,000 bottles a year. His Brunate, Cerequio and La Serra fetch more than \$200 a bottle, and his Riserva Capalot and Sarmassa sell only in magnums at well over \$400. OK, Voerzio has cult status. But still. Thus it was gratifying to see Barolo emerge recently from what Henry James called the edge of the glittering ring to resume what he also called dancing in the central glow. Suddenly, **dal blu**, several producers have bodied forth here in Manhattan, where burning Sappho loved and sung.

Marchesi di Barolo's event at BLT Prime on E. 22nd St., featured the Abbona Quartet: owners Anna and Ernesto and their successors-elect, Valentina and Davide. All of them hard-working and handsome. Especially Davide, who hypnotizes enough bebies of fainting pre-teens to make Justin Bieber wail disconsolately, 'What am *I*, chopped liver?']

We opened with their Riservas of 2000, 2001, 2003, 1990, 1980 and 1970, then floated to lunch on the 2007 Sarmassa, Cannubi, Coste de Rose, and Barolo di Barolo. For lagniappe, a little Rosso Arneis, a touch of Gavi di Gavi, a whiff of Zagara Moscato d'Asti, and a few **glicks** of the **digestivo** Barolo Chinato [made with cinchona bark, hence its quinine sting]. A **glick** is what the bottle says when you tilt it—and the amount thus poured. Were they good? Is Justin Bieber chopped liver?



Davide

Chopped Liver

The estate was the manger of the first Barolo Revolution, in the mid-1800s, when, Valentina said, 'Barolo was a sweet wine.' Of course: Piedmont is cold, high and alp-ridden, given to stopping fermentation early and leaving much residual sugar behind. Accounts vary, but it was either the Marchesa Giulietta Falletti or her neighbor, the Count of Cavour, or both who summoned from France one Louis Oudart. He was turned loose in the Marchesa's cellars to good effect. His merthods soon spread, notably to the cellars of nearby Fontanafredda. As that was a property owned by King Vittorio Emanuele II, the 'Wine of Kings' tag stuck.

Something more than a century later came Renato Ratti's revolution, which was more of an evolution, actually. Renato aimed at eliminating oxidation and other defects, and at softening Barolo's billy-club tannins without resort to heroic aging. His innovations won some converts but not wholesale conversion, thus dividing the producers into two camps: the traditionalists/fossils and the modernists/reneades, who argue to this very day. His son Pietro's credo for his Barolos—Marcenasco, Conca and the new entry, Rocche, which were poured and inhaled at a portfolio tasting—'is the same as that passed to me by my father . . . lavish great care on the vines to obtain the best grapes possible, then respect the grapes in the cellar.

Balance, elegance, refinement, complexity: these are the characteristics that I wish for my wines: every day, at every vineyard, in every wine.'



Pietro Ratti and crew.

Smiles and clean clothes suggest this photo was taken *before* work began.

Well, OK: everybody says **that**, but when does change go from improvement to loss of identity? 'It's **wine** all right, but is it still Barolo?'—that's the Bone of Contention, the Apple of Discord, the Fruit of the Loom. Much like cosmetic surgery, come to think of it. And so traditionalists/fossils insist on protracted fermentations and aging in huge **botti** and bottle far beyond DOCG minimums. The hottest issue in the style wars is, as in Montalcino, the Mod/Ren idea adding other grapes to what has ever been a 100% varietal wine. Trad/Fos are outraged: **Per la vergogna!** This is as it should be. Wine, the ineffably twee Kay Carino reminds us, is a thing of nuances and distinctions in its very soul.

Like most of his fellow producers, Pietro goes beyond Barolo. His Barberas, d'Alba Torriglione and d'Asti, were on the table with his Dolcetto d'Alba Colombé and Nebbiolo d'Alba Ochetti. But no luck on his Villa Pattono SuperPiedmontese, a Barbera-heavy blend with Cabernet and Merlot.

Fiorenzo Dogliani threw a lunch in the wine cellar of Tony May's SD26, which like Duffy's Tavern is 'where d'leet meet t'eeet', especially when Fiorenzo is pouring a passel of his Beni di Batasiolo wines. Food-friendliness is a hallmark of BdiB, and Fiorenzo and I happily agreed, despite having little common language, that the table is where wine truly belongs: it is its true terroir. BdiB's line goes beyond **normale**, **riserva**, and five single-vineyard Barolos to whites, including Roero and Gavi di Gavi; sparkling wines; and other soldiers marching in the Piedmont Parade.



Dogliani family in the '70, when Beni di Batasiolo was founded. At center, Papà Antonio, inseparable from his hat, white shirt and tie, faithful dog, wife and eight children, in more or less that order.

I will say that we did all of them proud, but to me the most interesting was the new Moscato Spumante Rosé. Yes, **amici**, a rose-red Moscato, tinted with a red-cheeked Moscato clone grown in Trentino-Alto Adige. It's the newest of Fiorenzo's range of bubbly, which include Asti [as if by law], Moscato d'Asti Bosc d'la Rei, Spumante Metodo Classico Dosage Zero, Pinot-Chardonnay Spumante Brut and Brachetto Spumante. And it comes just in time: Prosecco looks like conquering the casual bubbly category, and so I'm rooting for the success of Moscato Rosé. It's fizzy and light and pretty as a smile. It's sleekly sweet and summer-ready as a string bikini. The biggest Barolo bash in Manhattan was the work of the newborn Accademia del Barolo, under whose gonfalon 14 producers have united [yes, united!] to promote their flagship wine. The event was held at Del Posto, which it is OK to go to now that management has ceased skimming tips and will fork over 5+ million in



makeup bucks to the help.

Backstory: In the early '70s, Gianni Gagliardo, son of a near-teetotal family, married a wine grower's daughter and then wine itself, becoming head of his own house** about a decade later. He instituted his annual Asta [auction] di Barolo in 1998 and his son Stefano, now in charge, fostered the Accademia. Not easy, Stefano says: 'the Piemontesi are mountain people; they are tough and stubborn and extremely independent. No one tells them what to do. You can't **recruit** these people.' The Accademia came about organically; morphing itself into being 'based on a virtual

group already existing when the Barolo Auction was held last year.’ That independent streak is why Stefano [left] says that when it comes to the idea of adding other varieties to Barolo, ‘You know, in our area there at least 350 producers, and so you can listen to 350 points of view on any question. So I don’t believe that a proposal of that kind would have a chance to succeed’.

Ten of 14 Accademia **soci** or members presented their 2007s: Gianni Gagliardo, Azelia, Cordero Di Montezemolo, Damilano, Franco M. Martinetti, Michele Chiarlo, Paolo Scavino, Pio Cesare, Luigi Einaudi and Prunotto. [Not present: Monfalletto, Vietti, Voerzio and Conterno Fantino]. The witty Anthony Giglio lightly led the guided tasting, which was followed by an unguided buffet tasting of oldies dating to 1990—all of them crus, several in magnum, some riservas. Producers who were braced on the style wars were clearly pretty sick of it. Michele Martinetti said ‘Sometimes people like to wear our clothes for us. It’s not a question of modern or traditional. The question is **Do you like it?**’ Alberto Cordero added ‘Are you traditional? Are you modern? I hate that question. There is only Barolo.’ Stefano Gagliardo would not be drawn; instead he offered his favorite pairing: ‘Chocolate and old Barolo!’ ‘Nuff said.

Other Barolos showed and shone here and there about the same time: Sobrero, Aldo Conterno, Carretta, Cerretto, Elvio Cogno, Fratelli Revello, Palladino, Gaja, Giacomo Conterno, Giuseppe Mascarello, Castello di Verduno, Giuseppe Rinaldi, Guido Porro, Luciano Sandrone, Luigi Pira, Paolo Scavino and Vietti. All in all, a rewarding group. Such a **mitzvah** to have Barolo’s flag planted so firmly here again. **Salute!**

Travel Notes

Piedmont is a beautiful, region, easy of access from Milan and the Lakes, and if at first glance it suggests Tuscany with taller mountains, more Italians and fewer Germans, it’s also more workaday and less prettified. Unlike Tuscany, it hasn’t been groomed and manicured—**Hoovered**, as the Brits put it—into something that’s more diorama than domicile. Wedged between French and Swiss alps to the west and north, and the Ligurian Apennines to the south, the region is well named: Piemonte [Piedmont] means “foot of the mountains.” Turin is the Big Truffle, busy with business and industry, although not quite so much as formerly. The Le Meridien chain and the peerless Renzo Piano have turned Fiat’s Lingotto plant—an enormous avant-garde structure that opened in 1923 as the world’s largest and most advanced factory—into a stylish hotel with shopping, music, theater and convention facilities. It doesn’t make Fiats anymore, and its unique rooftop test track, where once Fiat Topolinos and other models pattered bravely round, is now off-limits to the internal-combustion engine. On the other hand, it’s wide open to joggers.

Then there’s the Piedmont of yesterday, which lives in the countryside and doesn’t run panting after the new and the novel but instead looks to its history and traditions. It is a landscape of mountain-backed broad valleys slashed by glinting Alpine streams, of spiky hilltowns that are never lovelier than when seen looming above pale carpets of gauzy harvest fog. This is nature’s Piedmont, rich in parks

and nature preserves and home to an earthy gastronomy of clear, assertive flavors, undiluted and untampered-with. Matt

Kramer calls it “Italy’s most glorious regional table.” I have misty memories of the old woman who wouldn’t sell me a cheese until she’d picked out one that satisfied her and wrapped it in vine leaves before my eyes. And then there was a tiny restaurant called [and in] Madonna della Neve, where they served my tiny delicious **ravioli del plin** in semi-traditional style. That is, not on a napkin on a plate, but just on a napkin on the table. [Real traditional style dispenses with the napkin.]



La Signora wasn’t willing to sell me a cheese unless she’d wrapped it herself.

Of course, there are the white truffles, hunted at night by cagey peasants called **trifolai** with their hounds. Imagine: *Piemontesi* were once ashamed to eat such stuff as fungi grubbed from the dirt, even as New Englanders back in the day were disgraced by their lobster suppers. They were signs of backwardness and shameful poverty. Now that truffles are \$100 an ounce and more, the stigma has rubbed off to such an extent that the Chinese are faking them as fast as they can. [One sure way to tell: the fakes have almost no smell; the real ones stink most heavenly.] In

October and November the annual fair dominates Alba, the wine country’s metropolis and oomphalos of truffledom. During the fair I like to saunter the length of the Via Maestra, Alba’s main drag, greedily inhaling as shop doors open to expel rich, reeky gusts of truffles’ rank, decadent, intoxicating aroma.

Excellent and plentiful **agriturismo** lodgings range from modern and spa-like, such as Beni di Batasiolo’s Il Boscareto, to romantic, castle-like havens on the order of Renato Ratti’s Villa Pattono, which dates to the 1700s. Some are small as Fratelli Revello’s and Cordero Montezemolo’s while Castello di Verduno manages to be fairly large but still intimate. All have dining on-site, as do Marchesi di Barolo [Il Foresteria] and Gagliardo [La Vineria del Barolo]. The simplest thing to say about these places is that no one ever wants to leave. And so, here’s where to find the **agriturismi**: ilboscaretoresort.it, villa-pattono.com, revellofratelli.com, castellodivedrduno.it, corderodimontezemolo.it.

I’ll offer just one alternative to **agriturismo**: the Castello di Novello, in the town of that name, just a few miles south of Barolo. Huge but with just 11 period rooms, it is a castle that is frankly beyond belief: a 19th Century Victorian neo-gothic extravaganza offering vast valley panoramas and gloriously decorated with towers, pointed-ogive windows, crenelations Juliet balconies, grand stairways and enough other bits of architectural foofaraw to suggest Lucille Ball in a fright wig and a touch of Charles Addams. It is, as the Italians say, **suggestivo**, by which they mean evocative, romantic and thrilling. And not to be missed. It even has reasonable rates. Find details at icastelli.net.



Castello di Novello:

Extravagance meets confection.

Buon viaggio!