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The Three Big B's of Italy

And life gets more exciting with each passing day.

And love is either in your heart, or on its way.

These lyrics from the classic Frank Sinatra ballad “Young At Heart” are a perfect descriptor for the ageless wines of the Italian trifecta; Barolo, the nearby Barbaresco, and Tuscany’s kingpin known as Brunello di Montalcino. Many wine lovers would agree that they are utterly mystified by the fascinating world of these three Big B’s of Italy. Italian native Mauro Cirilli recently returned to the San Francisco Wine Center to enlighten some of them on the captivating matter. Previously working as a Sommelier at prestigious hotels and restaurants throughout Italy, Mauro is currently the Wine Director of Press Club in San Francisco and also heads the newly formed North American Sommelier Association. With the help of a marvelous lineup of wines including producers such as Gaja, Vietti, Poggio Antico, and several more, Mauro led the class on an enchanting exploration of these three regions and both the classic and modern styles that are produced there. Here’s a taste of what we learned...

Barolo presents the most dramatic and dense expressions of the Nebbiolo grape that are known by their pronounced tannin and acidity, as well as a rich body and aromas of roses and tar. As some of the world’s most ageable wines, it can take upwards of 15 years or more before these can be pleasantly enjoyable to the human palate. What many found most intriguing in our lineup of wines was the 1990 Parusso Barolo Mariondino. Upon first opening the bottle, pouring a bit into a glass, then smelling and tasting the wine, it appeared to have this pungent and acerbic acidity that radiated from the glass. At first whiff, it seemed like this wine was not only passed its prime, but had already crossed into the afterlife of wine. Mauro then poured himself a small glass and put it up to his nose, swirled, smelled again, and preceded to taste. With a marveled expression on his face, he reassured everyone to let the wine breath for a few minutes and that all would soon be understood. After tasting through a large portion of the wines on the list, we finally met again with the Parusso. To our astonishment, that sharp acid was no longer but instead a flurry of earthy minerals and dried fruit aromas waltzed into our noses and onto our palates. It was as if this wine was not dead at all but very alive with maturity and supple grace. After seeing everyone’s expression while tasting this wine, Mauro looked pleased. In his attempt to explain this less than subtle phenomenon, he simply said, “See, he’s not dead... Just tired and needed a moment to wake up and express himself.”

-Julie Albin

Wine List

1. Marchesi di Gresy Barbaresco “Martinenga” 2007

2. Bruno Rocca Barbaresco “Coparossa” 1996
3. Gaja Barbaresco 1988
4. Luigi Einaudi Barolo Terlo 2006
5. Vietti Barolo Brunate 2005
6. Parusso Barolo Mariondino 1990
7. Poggio Antico “Altero” Brunello di Montalcino 2007
8. Fattoria dei Barbi Brunello di Montalcino 2004
9. Altesino Brunello di Montalcino 1993