

Wine Notes: Piedmont producers share vat of knowledge

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Oregonian Italian winemakers (from left to right): Achille Boroli, Anselmo, Alberto di Gresy and Luca Currado agree that Portland is an important market for their wines, in part because it has weather similar to that of Italy's Piedmont region.

If there's a Portland zeitgeist manual somewhere, it's got to include a page (I'd say somewhere after "cycling" but maybe before "knitting") on our predilection for Italian wines. And that love is most evident in our tendency to zealously collect the great reds of Piedmont: Barolo and Barbaresco. From Wizer's Oswego Foods to Liner & Elsen, you can find Stumptowners far and wide salivating over bottles from La Spinetta, Angelo Gaja and the like.

When a group of Italian vintners came through town recently to pour for the trade, I snagged three of Piedmont's most interesting producers to ask them some questions about their craft as part of my ongoing quest to discover what makes their wines so appealing to us.

If you're new to Barolo and Barbaresco, you should know that both are made from nebbiolo. When grown in vineyards near their respective villages, in the hillsides overlooking the town of Alba, this grape makes a soul-moving red, redolent of tobacco, licorice, dried leaves and sweet chocolate.

The following three are producers you should know. And even if you are already an aficionado, you'll enjoy reading about what makes these guys tick.

Their responses have been edited for length and clarity. The pity is, you can't hear their glorious Italian accents.

The boundary-pushing classic: Luca Currado, Vietti

It may be a historic family producer of Barolo, but Vietti has always rocked the boat. For example: Beginning in 1970, a group of artist friends of the Currado-Vietti family began painting original works, often depicting animals, inspired by each wine. The precursors to the now-ubiquitous "critter labels," these images shocked a wine market accustomed to labels printed with nothing more than standard black script. Today, Vietti's labels continue to be among the most beautiful in the world. And the wines? To die for.

Your father, Alfredo Currado, married your mother, Luciana Vietti, in 1957 and became the winemaker for Vietti. Then, in 1961, he was the first in Barolo to release single-vineyard bottlings. How did that come about?

You really have to go back two generations. In 1870, there were two Vietti brothers. The eldest, my great-grandfather, became an engineer in Torino, then like many Italians at that time, he left Italy and spent 35 years in America, in Boston. Then in early 1910, his brother in Italy who was managing the family vineyard passed away. So my family came back from America to work in the vineyard and take care of the family business. Now, my great-grandfather had traveled overseas and was much more open-minded. He understood the meaning of the word terroir and the importance of biodiversity. So he began cherry-picking the best grand cru (or the most prestigious) vineyards in the Barolo region. This was very unusual at that time. Now -- thanks to my great-grandfather -- of the 20 grand crus of the region, we own parts of 15. So in 1961, my father said, "We have all these great vineyards; why don't we start to vinify them all separately and see, really, what they show?"

And in 1967, your father was the first to start bottling the flavorful traditional white grape of Barolo, arneis, on its own as a dry table wine.

Yes. In the mid '60s, my father and mother were looking to make a white wine. They felt that if a variety had been planted in our region since Roman times, it must be there for a reason. But arneis was being made in a sweet style, almost like moscato, or blended with leftover pints of nebbiolo after harvest to make a simple rosé. It was called "il vin de la suocera" (the wine for the mother-in-law). I am sorry, but it was not really a very good wine. There were just a few vines, here and there, in the middle of the nebbiolo vineyards. My father wanted to make a wine with a little less residual sugar, like a fine German riesling. He collected the grapes from 55 different growers; some only picked just one basket, because the variety had almost disappeared. Then, by an error, the fermentation went totally dry. My father was very disappointed. He left it in the tank all winter, on the lees. And then in the springtime, the wine journalist Veronelli came to the winery to taste the new vintages. He said, "What is that? ... Oh, let me try!" My father said, "No, no, it is a bad experiment." But then he took a carafe and said, "OK, let's try an aperitif before lunch." And the wine was fantastic! He planted the very first vineyard in 1968; all the growers took cuttings from our vineyards, then the university selected clones from our vineyards, and

now today it is one of the most popular foreign varieties.

(Note: The Ponzi family here in Oregon are longtime friends of the Currado family; so for a fun side-by-side tasting, try the 2011 Vietti Roero Arneis alongside the 2011 Ponzi Willamette Valley Arneis; \$23 and \$25, respectively; E&R Wine Shop, Pastaworks NW (City Market), Zupan's Burnside and Lake Grove.)

You are considered to be a Barolo producer in the traditional style. Knowing all that you know about winemaking, why do you use old-fashioned techniques in the cellar?

For us, the vineyard has always been more important than who is making the wine. I think it would be arrogant, egocentric, even stupid to impose your ego, your own modern style, on a historical vineyard -- like Lazzarito, Brunate, Rocche or Villero -- that has been known for 300 or 400 years to make a great wine. When I worked my first harvest in '88, I was a young winemaker. I had studied in France and California; I used a lot of scientific analysis to understand the wine. And then, as time passed, I realized this is all (hogwash). For sure, some analysis is important, but only a very small amount. Wine is made, for me, with your eyes, your nose, your tongue, your stomach. You need to feel it.

How long should we age great Barolo?

When you drink young Barolo, it is like driving a sport motorcycle, like a Ducati. You feel that engine on your legs; it's very powerful. So I drink my wines within the first three years, or I wait 10 years or more. Because in the middle, traditional Barolo or Barbaresco is like a teenager: It doesn't know where to go. It is not mature.

The aristocrat: Alberto di Grésy, Tenute Cisa Asinari dei Marchesi di Grésy

Italy may have abolished hereditary titles in 1948, but Alberto di Grésy still has an elegant and polished demeanor befitting a marquis (marchesi). And yet he is a man of the modern era. In 1973, di Grésy brought an end to an old feudal-style tradition when he stopped leasing his land to the sharecroppers farming grapes, peaches and hazelnuts on his properties and converted his land entirely to grape growing. Of his four estates, Di Grésy's 29.5-acre Martinenga is the jewel in the crown, considered to be the finest single vineyard in Barbaresco.

What is the story behind your world-famous vineyard, Martinenga? I have heard it referred to as "God's Vineyard."

The god was Mars, god of war, or "Martis" in Latin. "Villa Martis" was a meeting place almost 2,000 years ago, for worshipping Mars, whose name meant "powerful and aggressive." There was a forest of oak there before there were vines.

And today Martinenga is considered the greatest single vineyard for Barbaresco.

Yes. But the first modern production, in the 16th and 17th centuries, was of a sweet wine. French soldiers came and stayed for two or three months in the valley behind Barbaresco and their general asked for casks of wine. When he tasted the wine, it was sweet. He spit it out: "This is not wine!" He had an oenologist in his army, so this oenologist started to make dry wine from Barolo and Barbaresco in the

1750s, something like that. So, despite the history of our vineyard, the wine we have today is only 250 years old.

How would you describe the differences between Barbaresco and Barolo?

We assume that Barbaresco and Barolo should be similar, but they are not the same thing. Barbaresco is more simple. You can (pair) it with more foods than Barolo. Barolo needs -- because it is so aristocratic, so military, so very monolithic -- it needs game or red meat. (But you can also serve it with ragu.) Barbaresco has less power; it is more soft than Barolo. Barolo is not the king; Barbaresco is not the queen. They are more like two brothers, who are similar, but not the same.

The up-and-comer: Achille Boroli, Boroli

Silvano and Elena Boroli were major stakeholders in their family firm, De Agostini Group, until the 1990s, when the holding company began moving its investments from maps and publishing into legal gambling. The Borolis decided to divest and go back to the land, opening a winery in their native Piedmont in 1997. In the U.S., a 15-year-old winery is practically an institution, but by Old World standards, it's a baby. Fortunately, the Borolis put their son, Achille, in charge of the operation in 2000, and since then, this newcomer label has enjoyed critical acclaim.

Here in the U.S., we have a saying for wineries owned by wealthy business tycoons: We call them "vanity labels." Given your family background, was it difficult to be taken seriously as a wine producer when you started?

Yes, absolutely. For the first 10 years, most of the producers and the people who lived there considered us the stranieri, the outsiders. They have changed their opinion of us because we work hard every day, as they do. We know this is a long-term investment. And we have created new businesses for the winery. Our restaurant, (Locanda del Pilone), was the oldest Michelin-starred restaurant in Alba. And we run an inn. So we work a lot for the region. And I think we are accepted by the other producers because we work a lot.

Which foods pair best with Barolo?

Everything is perfect with Barolo. I love to drink Barolo alone, at the beginning, or at the end of the meal. I love it with cheese, with lamb, with veal. I drink Barolo with just pasta pomodoro. Or with salmon. Truffles are perfect with nebbiolo.

Everyone I've spoken with today has told me that Portland is a key market for their wines. Why do you think this is?

Because in the past there was a lot of immigration from northern Italy to this part of the U.S. Also, the weather and your food are similar to ours. And here you have a lot of wineries; it is a land of great wine. You grow pinot noir, which is very similar to nebbiolo. Because it is very elegant, a wine you can keep a long time in the cellar. The French call nebbiolo "the pinot noir of Italy."

Nebbiolos to know

These wines are all available in the Portland market through Galaxy Wine Co.

For Nebbiolo newcomers

2009 Vietti "Perbacco" Langhe Nebbiolo (\$26.25): Woodsy, rich, leathery and spicy, this is a more affordable taste of what the nebbiolo grape is capable of. Find it at Fred Meyer Hollywood West, New Seasons Markets, Pastaworks Hawthorne, Whole Foods Market Pearl District .

2010 Marchesi di Grésy "Martinenga" Langhe Nebbiolo (\$21): Bright, lively and enticing, this is a screaming deal. Find it at Fred Meyer Hawthorne and Hollywood West, Pastaworks NW (City Market), Whole Foods Market Fremont, Zupan's Lake Grove.

2007 Boroli Barolo (\$42): Even after five years and with its color fading to rust, this wine is a wild ride. It's so active, with lip-smacking acidity and notes of dried cranberries, that you'll need to get up and stretch after sipping it. Stay the course. Or, cellar it for five more years. Find it at Fred Meyer Burlingame and Hollywood West, Wizer's Markets.

For seasoned collectors

2008 Vietti "Castiglione" Barolo (\$50): Classic and haunting, with notes of dried crushed rose petals, this is the sort of wine that makes me cry -- of happiness. Find it at Food Front Cooperative Grocery Hillsdale, Fred Meyer Northwest Best.

2007 Marchesi di Grésy "Martinenga" Barbaresco (\$52.50): Leathery, spicy and somehow ancient, this wine is redolent of licorice and old castle walls. In a very good way. Find it at Bale's Cedar Mill Thriftway Marketplace, Mt. Tabor Fine Wine.

2004 Boroli "Villero" Barolo (\$67.50): With bright berry notes, vibrant spices and racy acidity, this is a wine of great promise that will continue to excite for years to come. Find it at E&R Wine Shop, Strohecker's.

http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2012/05/piedmont_producers_share_vat_o.html