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Vietti: Barolo Riserva Villero – A Complete Retrospective 1982-2004

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Vietti is one of Piedmont's historic estates. Luciana Vietti and her late husband Alfredo Currado were among the first producers to bottle a single-vineyard Barolo (the Rocche in 1961), focus on estate-owned vineyards and build a significant market presence outside of Italy. Today the winery is run by their son Luca, who oversees winemaking, and son-in-law Mario Cordero, who runs the business.

Vietti's Barolo Riserva Villero is the estate's rarest wine. It has been made just eight times between the inaugural 1982 and 2004, in keeping with the original spirit of Riservas that were once only bottled in truly exceptional years, rather than most years, as has become the norm in many cellars. There was no Riserva made in either 1999 or 2000. The 2003, which I tasted several times from cask, was easily worthy of the estate's top label. In all of those years – and naturally lesser vintages as well – the juice was blended into the estate's entry-level Barolo Castiglione, which may very well be the single most compelling value in Barolo today. Vietti has commissioned artist labels for each vintage of the Riserva, another choice what was quite forward thinking thirty years ago.

As good as the Villero Riserva can be, in my opinion Vietti's top wine remains the Barolo Rocche. That may change in the future. My feeling – and I have been drinking Vietti for over 20 years – is that the wines were always good, and sometimes great, as witnessed by the 1989 Barolo Rocche, which remains one of the most sublime wines I have ever had the privilege of drinking. But the estate's reputation as an uncontested superstar in the Barolo landscape only dates back to about 2001 or so, when the wines began the ascension to the stratosphere that has defined the winery's modern history.

Villero is a relatively large vineyard whose boundaries have expanded over the years. Vietti works two parcels in Villero; the first is owned directly, the second is farmed by Vietti through a long-term purchase structure that is common in the Langhe. Vietti replanted this plot in 1979. Winemaking comfortably bridges traditional and modern styles. The early Villeros saw malolactic fermentation in steel and then at least three years of aging in large casks. In the early 1990s Luca Currado began experimenting with malolactic fermentation in French oak as a means to stabilize color, a big preoccupation among winemakers in the Langhe during that time. The first Vietti wine that saw malo in French oak was the 1992 Barbera d'Alba Scarrone Vigna Vecchia. The first Villero Riserva to be vinified in this fashion was the 1996. Aging is and has always been done in cask. Today the malos are usually finished by February. The wines are then moved into cask, where they remain until they are prepared for bottling.

I have had mixed experiences with the **1982 Barolo Riserva Villero**, but this bottle is beautiful. It still shows good intensity of color for a wine of its age. Sweet tobacco, herbs, licorice and dried cherries are some of the nuances that emerge in the glass. The 1982 needs quite a bit of air to find its focus. Though at peak, well-stored bottles still have a few years of fine drinking in them. According to Luca Currado, the high degree of bottle variation in 1982 is mostly attributable to faulty corks and a generally more rustic approach to winemaking.

The 1982 is the only Villero that was made from three parcels. During this era, Vietti also sourced fruit from a vineyard owned by the Fenocchio family. The 1980s were a time of

transition in Piedmont as the trend to work with estate-grown fruit accelerated. Vietti lost leases in several other high profile vineyards, including Rabaja and Pian Romualdo, but compensated by consolidating their holdings elsewhere. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2014.

The **1985 Barolo Riserva Villero** is a classic. It captures the essence of the vintage and vineyard beautifully. Still dense and rich, the 1985 flows with layers of dark fruit, tobacco, herbs and plums. There is gorgeous richness in the glass, not to mention considerable inner perfume and sweetness. Smoke, licorice and tar are woven into the exceptionally pure finish. Simply put, the 1985 is stunning. I would prefer to enjoy this over the next few years, while it is a peak of expressiveness. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2017.

The **1989 Barolo Riserva Villero** is a bit of an anomaly as only one of the estate's two plots was used. The purest and silkiest of tannins frame the fruit beautifully from start to finish. This, too, oozes with class and personality in its expressive aromatics and well-delineated fruit. As wonderful as the 1989 is, it is a touch light for the year and probably not destined for an eternal life in the cellar. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2015.

The **1990 Barolo Riserva Villero** is one of the slightly underwhelming wines in this tasting. Quite surprisingly, it is more advanced than the 1985. The fruit is dark, rich and powerful, but also over-ripe. Early oxidative notes have crept in, suggesting the wine needs to be drunk sooner rather than later. This is an example of the inconsistency that defined some of the estate's earlier wines. The 1990 Barolo Rocche is still a stunner, even today, but the Riserva falls short of that level. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2014.

The estate's **1996 Barolo Riserva Villero** is outstanding. Layers of dark fruit, sweet spices, menthol and crushed rocks saturate the palate as this powerful, brooding wine shows off its pedigree. This intense Barolo makes a compelling case for the glories of the 1996 harvest. Flowers, minerals and a host of other dark, balsamic aromas and flavors add complexity on the brooding, dense finish. This is a phenomenal wine from Vietti. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2021.

The **1997 Barolo Riserva Villero** is at the early part of its drinking window. It shows drop-dead gorgeous intensity and marvelous inner perfume, all supported by plenty of tannic heft. This is pure Villero and pure 1997, both at their very best. The fruit builds with considerable momentum to the glorious finish. The 1997 is another wine in which only one of the two Villero parcels was vinified. Anticipated maturity: 2011-2021.

The **2001 Barolo Riserva Villero** is the first of the truly great vintages for this wine. Layers of sweet, expressive fruit emerge from this exquisite, deep Barolo. Stylistically the 2001 is quite similar to the 1989 in its inner sweetness, but it has more depth and sheer textural richness. Firm yet beautifully integrated tannins frame the polished finish. This is a magnificent Barolo from Vietti. Anticipated maturity: 2016-2031.

All of the elements that make the 2001 so attractive reappear in the **2004 Barolo Riserva Villero**, only with even more expressiveness and character. The 2004 is a showstopper loaded with class and pedigree. Seemingly endless waves of explosive fruit stain the palate in this radiant, harmonious Barolo. Everything is simply in the right place, and there is just so much going on in the glass, in all directions. This is another dazzling effort from Vietti. Anticipated maturity: 2019-2034.

—Antonio Galloni

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