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BAROLO: I AM NOT READY. WAIT!

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PUBLISHED ON: 4/30/2016



If you are a lover of traditional wine, an aged Barolo is on your short list of wines to experience in your lifetime, on par with Grand Cru Burgundy, top growth Bordeaux and old-school Napa Valley (It's all about Heitz). So what is the problem with this sleeping giant of northern Italy? Well, Barolo can intimidate upon release; it is a beast on the loose. And this can pose a problem. An experienced Barolo drinker understands that the wine is best enjoyed after some aging, but how does one impress on an earnest, casual drinker that Barolo will be great in a few years, so he/she should wait? In the current age of fast consumerism, order-now-and-get-tomorrow and binge Netflix show-watching, can consumers be expected to wait and spend more for a certain wine in a sea of alternatives?

Barolo is located in the southern part of Piedmont in the north of Italy. Piedmont is the second largest of Italy's 20 regions and borders with France, Switzerland and the Italian regions of Lombardy, Liguria, Aosta Valley and Emilia Romagna. Like most of central and southern Piedmont, the climate in Barolo is continental and influenced by the Tanaro River. The eastern part of Barolo, which includes Serralunga d'Alba, Castiglione Falletto and Monforte d'Alba, have soils higher in sand, limestone, iron, phosphorus, and potassium, which render very powerful and austere wines. The western

part, Barolo and La Morra, have soils higher in clay, manganese, and magnesium oxide, which contribute to more delicate wines, with perfumed aromas and velvety textures. La Morra is the most planted district and produces nearly a third of all wine labeled Barolo.

Barolo, made exclusively with the Nebbiolo grape, evolved to become 'the wine of kings and king of wines,' a favorite of the Italian aristocrats and a wine embraced with accolades by collectors and connoisseurs the world over, but it was not always that way. Barolo was once a little rustic, sweet wine that grew up and dried up. The story as to who fermented Barolo dry is up for a sober discussion. One account has a French enologist, Louis Oudart, saving the day some time circa middle of the 19th century. However, new research by Kerin O'Keefe introduces a different hero into this fascinating tale. O'Keefe puts Paolo Francesco Staglieno at the center of the story and not the Frenchman. Staglieno is credited with fermenting Nebbiolo dry and made the early version of what we now know as Barolo. The wines were an immediate hit and his dry-fermenting process famed 'methodo Staglieno.'

There are many heroes in Barolo's history: Staglieno's making the first dry Barolo; Camillo Benso, Conte di Cavour, patronage of said winemaker; Giulia Falletti, Marchesa di Barolo, earliest property owner in Barolo and a wine entrepreneur, championing the wine; and King Alberto and son Vittorio Emanuele (future King of unified Italy in 1861) and their Fontanafredda estate popularizing and maintaining Barolo production. But what about Nebbiolo, the noble grape in this Barolo wine? All these historical figures collaborated in making and then distributing and promoting the young, dry Barolo - but Nebbiolo could be the star in this northern Italian story. Nebbiolo, the finicky red grape that demands much precision, first to bud but last to ripen. Its origin is unknown, but it has been in Piedmont for seven centuries, early writing references dating back to 1250. It is remarkable that 80 percent of this rigorous variety's world plantings are in Piedmont but that only amounts to 9 percent of total production in the region. There are very few places in the world producing Nebbiolo, the number of successful efforts is even less. The big revelation, and it needs to be mentioned with every opportunity, [Palmina in Santa Barbara](#), their wines, both white and reds (but especially the reds), are Californian wines but speak Italian with a Piedmontese accent.



Vietti's Tre Vigne vineyard home to Castiglione Tinella

For most of the 20th century, Barolo remained a local wine and production was limited by the primitive conditions in most cellars and the harsh times facing Italy coming out of two world wars. Barolo started to make noise again in the late 1970s as a few winemakers, inspired by their French counterparts in Burgundy, sought ways to improve their grape-growing and winemaking practices and make wine production financially rewarding. The critically-acclaimed wines of that period were the fruity, barrique-aged wines - a custom different from the large Slovenian vessels, 'botti,' preferred by previous generations of Barolo producers. Led by [Gaja](#), a producer of Nebbiolo in Barbaresco, the oak assault on Nebbiolo in Barolo began and soon after, the period coined "the Barolo Wars." By the end of the 1980s and until this day, two versions of Barolo were being made, two types of Nebbiolo producers: one that preferred fast fermentations and quick macerations followed by aging in flavor-imparting barrique or new oak barrels and another that preferred long fermentations, long macerations and older, neutral oak. The former practice of

winemaking modifies the wine and makes it approachable and accessible upon release; the latter, and the one practiced by previous generations in Barolo, is less invasive but produces powerful, tannic wines that are best enjoyed after considerable aging time.

These days, producers appear to be somewhat in the middle between old and new traditions and there is more focus on vineyard management than ever before.

Barolo did not receive commercial approval and media backing until the 1990s, when most of the examples receiving much admiration were the ones that drifted from traditional ways. In fact, great versions of traditional Barolo were unpopular and confusing to many wine experts and great vintages from the late 1980s were unfairly dismissed early on. Still, this commercial success elevated Barolo production to new heights and from the mid 1990s to 2013, it doubled. Producers and new farmers-turned-producers still fight over land and find ways, sometimes at the expense of other crops or varieties, to cultivate more Nebbiolo.

So where does Barolo stand today? Well, most actually lays, collecting dust in private cellars and storing facilities. Since the mid-1990s and well into the the first decade of the 21th century, the region has been blessed with numerous great vintages, but the wines still need time. This stubborn wine will not wait for you, but rather demand that you wait.

Barolo is terribly misunderstood, a wine with a lot of history but rather recent commercial success - and while some may think it is too expensive and too long to wait to really enjoy, the experience of an aged Barolo, 12+ years, can be a singular and memorable experience, one difficult to match and worth the wait. Barolo has not lost its charm; it is a wine with a rich history, a wine that transforms itself and speaks of a specific place.

Producers to try: Giacomo Borgogno, Giuseppe Mascarello, Giuseppe Rinaldi, Giacomo Conterno, Bruno Giacosa, Cappellano, Brovia, Oddero, and Vietti.

Further Reading: [Barolo and Barbaresco: The King and Queen of Italian Wine.](#)

Grape Collective talks to Vietti winemaker Luca Currado.

The Vietti winery can trace its roots to the 19th century. It was at the beginning of 20th century that Vietti offered its own wines in a bottle. The winery is based in the village of Castiglione Falletto, in the heart of Piedmont. As well as being famous for single vineyard bottlings of Barolo, it helped make the native Piedmont varietal Arneis popular. In 1990, Luca Currado joined the family business as winemaker after working at California's

Opus One and Bordeaux's Mouton-Rothschild amongst other wineries. Grape Collective talks to Vietti winemaker Luca Currado.

Christopher Barnes: Luca, tell us about Piedmont, what is the history of the region?

Luca Currado: Piedmont is one of the oldest wine regions in Italy. It's very fascinating and very incredible, the history of viticulture in our land. The first traces of viticulture go back to Roman times, about 75 years after Christ. Basically they found there are traces of shipping wine from Alba. Alba is the major city of the Barolo region in Langhe. It was Alba Pompeia, so a Roman city. There was this Roman general called Plinio il Grande which means Plinio the Great, or the Tall. He was, of course, a short guy but with a big ego as was the case with many Roman generals. He shipped the "wine of the fog," as it was called, from Alba to Roma.

Why the wine of the fog? Because Piedmont means "the foot of the mountain." This region is 180 degrees surrounded by the mountains, the Alps. The highest mountains are between Piedmont and France, and Piedmont and Switzerland. These mountains, they do a lot for us. They collect a lot of snow for the winter time. They protect us in the summertime from the heat but also, in the fall, they collect a lot of fog. When we harvest the Nebbiolo, it's on the hillside with all these beautiful rolling hills with all these Medieval castles on top.

In late September, early October, when the Nebbiolo grapes are ripening, we start to see this fog that grows from the bottom of the hill from the flat going up to the top of the hill. We wake up in the morning and see just the castle outside of this ocean of fog. It's really scenic.

Why the wine of the fog? Because fog in Italian is "nebbia." Our most important grape variety is Nebbiolo because it's the variety that's ripe when the fog rises up the hill. I think it's a fascinating story because it really tells us that it's one of the most ancient varieties of Italy.

The Romans found the grape in Puglia, the heel of the boot of Italy, when they arrived in Italy from Greece. The Romans were very interested in doing something with this grape, this fruit. They made the first wine. At the time, it was similar to a vermouth. It was not the wine as it is today because they didn't know how to preserve and fortify it. They were adding herbs to cover the defects of the wine.

Then the Romans brought the vines with them when they conquered Italy, France, Spain, Germany, and England. They used to plant the vines before they would plant the tent because they wanted to make their wine for their happiness. Many of the important wine regions of Europe belonged to the

Romans at the time, like Burgundy and Champagne. They transported the grapes to France, Spain and England also.

I have friends that have a winery in England and they told me the history of the first planting and it goes back to the Roman times. Alsace, and in Champagne, all the caves and the winery are used to store Champagne. They were Roman caves. The Romans built them to extract the stones to use for building.

In Piedmont, the Barolo region is one of these areas where the vines from Roman times found the perfect microclimate conditions and thrive there even today.



The Scarrone vineyard home to Castiglione Falletto

Barolo is the most famous region in Italy. It's the region that people talk about when they talk about the top wine regions in the world. How did that happen, how did Barolo become the standard barrier of Italian wine?

My friend in Montalcino will be not very happy about that, but-

But Montalcino, but Montalcino is a fairly recent-

No, absolutely, absolutely, no, you're right, I'm kidding. Absolutely, the history, first of all because it's a very old history but in Italy there are other regions sold as the Barolo region. One very important thing to understand is that Italy is one country, and it's a very old country, from the Roman times,

Rinascimento. But it's one country and has seen only one flag since about 160 years ago when the king of Savoy, the king of Italy, conquered all of Italy.

Before it was seven different countries with seven different cultures, different languages, food and wine. This is the reason that the biodiversity of the wine in Italy is extraordinary. In terms of cuisine, we cannot talk about Italian cuisine because it's a concept that doesn't really exist because what we eat in Piedmont is very different than what they eat in Tuscany, what they eat in Naples. Piedmont was a Savoy kingdom, Torino was the capital and the king of the Savoy. The Savoy in the old times was not only Piedmont, the Liguria,

the Riviera in Sardinia in Corsica, but it was also French Savoy, up to part of the Côtes du Rhône and Côte d'Azur.

The Savoy family were very ambitious people. They always tried to compete with who was making the best food, making the best wine. This is why the culture of quality in Piedmont, the history of quality in Piedmont, was very strong. This is the reason, for example, even the Piedmontese cuisine is considered one of the most refined Italian cuisines, because it's kind of a mix between the simplicity, in the good way, of the Italian cuisine and the complexity of the French cuisine.

Ingredients are always fresh and seasonal, Italian cuisine is mixed with the creativity of the French cuisine. The king of Savoy was a huge promoter of our food and wine. Many say Barolo is the wine of kings, and that Barbaresco is the wine of queens.

You can say this is because Barolo is more masculine and Barbaresco is more elegant, but I think one of the explanations for this and this goes back to the love the king of Savoy had for our wine, is that he was giving as birthday gifts in the 1800s to all the kings of Europe one barrel of Barolo and one barrel of Barbaresco to all the queens of Europe. This is one of many stories.

One of the reasons that Barolo became so popular is not only because the history of quality is very deep, but also because it's a kind of wine that showcases the Nebbiolo grape variety. Just as Pinot Noir is one of the pickiest in terms of terroir, land and weather, there are very few regions where Nebbiolo grows very well. Pinot Noir is planted in many parts of the world but the real Pinot Noir is not made in many parts. It becomes so good and so special in just a few areas of the world.

It's crazy but for me, for example, one of the best Nebbiolos that I had in my life was from Australia.



Really?

From the Adelaide Hills, because down there the sun conditions are incredible. Nebbiolo and Pinot Noir are two varieties that many people consider sister varieties. I don't know if they are long, distant relatives, this I don't know, but for sure they have many similarities. Think about the color, the elegance, the finesse of the color. Barbera, Cabernet, Merlot are much more deep and rich in color. Some characteristic of the region, these rolling hills where there are some corners of these hills that we call Grand Cru or vineyards as in Burgundy, where the quality that these small parcels give to the wine is fantastic and is why vineyards that are known for over a hundred years are so special.

So, Luca, what is the difference between traditional and modern winemaking in Piedmont?

It's different interpretation of the vinification. Modern producers make fermentation and maceration very very very short, 3-4 days sometimes. They press the grapes sweet and do not wait to extract tannin from the grape and then finish the fermentation and aging in French oak barrels and therefore get tannins from the oak. Traditional producers extend the maceration 30, 40, 50 days on the skins and the tannins from the grape get together and are polymerized. Then they age the wine in neutral large cask, oak cask.