

## TASTING WINE



TEXT HUON HOOKE

# Botte People

A deep respect for the large oak barrels of Piedmont that allow wine to mature without giving it an oaky flavour ensures the terroir of Barolo will continue to sing at Vietti.

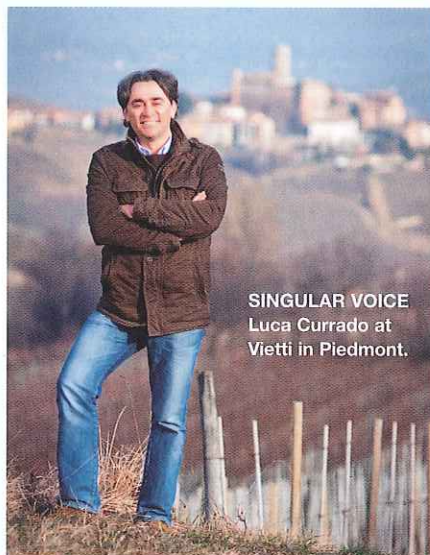
Luca Currado, winemaker at Vietti, remembers the day in the mid-1990s when a group of Barolo producers ceremoniously burned a botte, a traditional Piedmontese large oak barrel. It was their way of saying the barrique is king, and the botte is yesterday's barrel.

A botte is anything from 1000 to 10,000 litres. Most wineries in Barolo keep them for decades as they are expensive to buy, and if looked after properly, they can be used for generations. The botti (plural) are used as inert containers; they allow the wine to mature as the pores in the staves are slightly air-permeable, but they don't give the wine any oak flavour or aroma. They are the traditional maturation vessel of Barolo.

The cremation party at Annunziata, on the slope of the steep hill of La Morra, worried the traditionalists, like Vietti, because it symbolised the trend away from botti and towards barriques, aping the style of Bordeaux. Barriques are criticised because they can result in wines that don't taste like Barolo, or even like nebbiolo, instead making wine which is 'international'.

Now, less than 20 years later, the boot is firmly on the other foot. Almost all Barolo producers are keen to emphasise how many botti they have in their cellars. Although many still persist with barriques, others have changed their minds and gone back to botti, in an effort to make more typical Barolos. It's a trend that can be observed the world over: winemakers have suddenly realised that unless they make distinctive, hopefully unique wines, or at least wines typical of their region, they aren't in the race.

Currado was happily relating the news that his cooper, Gamba, had more orders for botti than ever before. Traditionalists, like Currado, who never threw out their botti, must be privately thinking, "We told you so!"



SINGULAR VOICE  
Luca Currado at  
Vietti in Piedmont.

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At Vietti, Currado does use barriques, but they're old barriques which no longer impart oak flavour, and he uses them only for a short time, the first few months of the ageing, so that he can stir the lees. It's impossible to stir the lees if the wine is in botti. They are too big. He sees batonnage as a vital part of the maturation process.

Vietti is the oldest family-owned winery in Barolo that has never changed hands. Currado's father, Alfredo, married a Vietti (Luciana), and was the winemaker before him. Vietti owns land in more Barolo 'grand crus' than any other winery – 15 of the 20 most famous sites. It bottles up to four single-cru wines in a given vintage, from the Rocche, Lazzarito, Villero and Brunate vineyards. Vietti's regular Barolo, branded Castiglione, is a blended wine, drawn from grapes grown in Castiglione Falletto, Barolo,

Monforte d'Alba and Novello. Originally, all Barolo used to be made this way, as a blend.

Vietti also make a Langhe Nebbiolo, branded Perbacco. It is unusual in that it's all drawn from vineyards entitled to the Barolo appellation: Currado simply chooses to de-classify any wine that doesn't have what he considers the right structure for Barolo.

To Currado, terroir is paramount. "As time goes on, I care more and more for the terroir," he says. "It is the soul of the land. It's what fascinates me and keeps me doing my job."

"I don't want Vietti style, I want vineyard style. Too often, the screaming ego of the winemaker gets in the way of the vineyard's voice. If you put your ego in front of the wine, you are not allowing the next generation to continue."

This is why Vietti are so focused on single-cru bottlings, but each wine must express the character of that cru. "If the Serralunga is too round, too easy, that's not the terroir of Serralunga. If you don't like the character of Serralunga, drink La Morra!"

Tasting the 2007 Vietti crus, it seemed to me the Rocche had beautifully focused rose-like intensity; the Brunate had a rich, meaty density and red-fruit sweetness; the Lazzarito was more animal, gutsy and spicy; while the Castiglione was an elegant and nicely rounded synthesis of all these characteristics, with raspberry dominating. And Villero Riserva, although a 2004 vintage and three years older, was all about earthy, mineral, leather, cigarbox and charcuterie complexities, with endless palate length.

Thanks to botti, their differences have been faithfully captured for our enjoyment. **I**