

Vietti's Vivacious Wines – by John Foy, Dec 2016

Elena Currado at Charlie Bird.

Once the European harvest was finished last fall, Elena Currado presented her family's newest wines at Charlie Bird, an eclectic Manhattan restaurant that, along with elegant wine glasses, takes its décor inspiration from the downtown scene featuring street art, music design and boomboxes.

Elena's winemaker husband, Luca, is the fifth generation of Piedmont's Vietti winery in Barolo's medieval village, Castiglione Falletto. In 1988, after graduating from the Enological School of Alba, Luca returned to Vietti for the harvest. Internships at California's Simi and Opus One wineries and Chateau Mouton-Rothschild followed in 1990 and 1991 along with post-graduate studies at the universities of Bordeaux and Dijon. Returning to Vietti in 1992, he re-joined his father, Alfredo, as co-winemaker in what is considered to be Piedmont's worst vintage of that decade. Having survived the rains and diluted grapes of that year, Luca assumed full responsibility for the daily operations of Vietti in 1994.

My first visit to Vietti was in the 1980s when I met Alfredo, who was making superb Barolos and Barberas, and Arneis, a white wine I knew nothing about until that moment. Beside Alfredo was his gracious wife, Luciana Vietti, whose fluency in English made them an inseparable couple during my visits and their many trips to America. Alfredo Currado and Luciana Vietti at Vietti in April 2008 (photo Dr. Jeffrey Miller)

From creating the first single-vineyard Barolo in 1961 to rescuing and restoring the nearly extinct Arneis white wine grape, to creating artist-inspired wine labels in the 1970s, Alfredo was a luminary in the Barolo appellation.

In Manhattan last fall, Elena began the presentation with the 2015 Roero Arneis. I recall the first time I inhaled the floral fragrance of this wine and tasted its citrus and honeydew melon flavor. I remembered its clean, fresh character. That's the style you'll find in the 2015 bottle. It's not showy and it's not big. It's refreshing, which is why, about two decades ago, I introduced Vietti's Arneis to my sister who resides in hot and humid Florida. It's been her house white wine ever since. 88 points. Retail is about \$19. As the server placed two wine glasses in front of me, Elena said, "Italy is not a country, it is a set of diverse regions with diverse people making diverse wines and cooking and eating diverse cuisines." The evidence supporting that observation came in a bottle of the 2015 Vietti Freisa Vivace.

Freisa is a historical grape of the Langhe area in Piedmont. It is related to nebbiolo, the sole grape of Barolo and Barbaresco wines, but its tannic structure and noticeable acidity reduces its appeal to winemakers.

In the 1980s, Alfredo experimented with making a lightly sparkling red wine from Freisa grown in vineyards around Monferrato, a village famed for its Barbera wine. Using freisa for a light sparkling wine dates to the 1800s; a percentage of unfermented ripe grape must is frozen, then blended with the fermented freisa and bottled. Like Champagne, a second fermentation begins in the bottle producing a light (vivace means lively) sparkling red wine.

Like a flower opening slowly in the morning sunlight, Vietti's 2015 Freisa Vivace transformed itself during the hour it was in my glass. It began with a tart, bitter cherry aroma and flavor, with just a hint of sparkle. Then after 30 minutes, the cherry character grew softer and a dry, clayish backbone appeared, which blended nicely with Charlie Bird's dry-aged beef carpaccio. I let the remainder of the wine sit in my glass until the one-hour mark when it morphed into a still pinot noir-like Premier Cru Beaune. This transformation made me think about its name: Freisa, a slight variation from the French fraise, meaning strawberry.

Could this grape, unique to one area of one region of Italy, actually have its name from French? It's possible: In 1805, Napoleon Bonaparte was crowned the King of Italy in the nearby Cathedral of Milan, placing northern Italy under French rule.

I suspended that thought as I wrote 89 points. Retail is approximately \$29.

"The 2011 was a very charming vintage," Elena said as the 2011 Vietti Barbera d'Asti La Crena was poured into my glass. "It was warmer than 2010 and rounder and more open than the 2012."

Elena Currado presenting the 2011 Barbera d'Asti La Crena

I have to confess that charming is not a word I applied to some barberas since the late 1990s. I never found jammy wines charming; nor have I liked the slick taste of vanilla from an excess of French oak barrel aging. But that was the cutting-edge style in Barbera back then. Some producers have dialed it back, and others made it part of their repertoire. I thought it was a reaction to New World wines and wine critics who awarded that style. Putting my viewpoints aside, I slowly picked up my glass of the 2011 Barbera d'Asti La Crena and concentrated intensely.

At the outset, the cherry hue was a positive signal for the wine. The red plum and violet aromas were pleasing, and red-fruit flavors with a dry, mineral finish balanced the wine. But with time, the aromas moved towards black olive, black raisin and smoke—markers of French oak barrel aging—concentrated black licorice, black olive and red-fruit flavors rolled across my palate. The winemaking was skillful, the style modern, the alcohol 15 percent. **89 points.** Retail is a very reasonable \$40.

One of the best wine values in America is the **2013 Vietti Nebbiolo Perbacco**. It's made from grapes of all of Vietti's Barolo vineyards. After the third year of aging, Luca decides which barrels of wine will not be bottled as Barolo. They are declassified and become Perbacco; it is analogous to Bordeaux chateaux creating a second-label wine.

The translucent red-colored 2013 Vietti Nebbiolo Perbacco delivers an enticing red fruit and white-pepper aroma. The tasty, ready-to-drink cranberry and bitter-cherry fruit flavors are supported by mild tannins and minerality. This is the red wine for winter stews and summer's grilled steaks. And you'll get to enjoy it twice: at the checkout counter and the table. **88 points.** Prices range from a remarkable value at \$20 to a still worthwhile \$30.

"I don't say blending is a better way to make barolo over a cru (single-vineyard), I say you can blend for a certain kind of complexity," Elena said as the **2012 Vietti Barolo Castiglione** was poured. The kind of complexity that her husband Luca created is one that could be a model in a blending class at his alma mater.

The first impression of the 2012 Vietti Barolo Castiglione is of mild cedar and sandalwood from the 26 months aging in Slovenian oak casks, followed by a cloud of cherry and strawberry-like aromas. Its medium body is clothed in ripe, black cherry and pomegranate fruit flavors, which spontaneously trigger the brain's pleasure circuit. The soft tannins and delicious fruit will tempt you to drink this embryonic wine soon after purchase: I encourage you to age it for another year or two as Vietti's Barolos have an upward trajectory that seems to be timeless. **91 points.** It pays to do some shopping as prices have a wide range from a good-value \$42 to a not-so-advantageous \$69.

Cru in Italian wine dialect means a single-vineyard wine, and is used most often in Piedmont. One could argue there is a very good reason for that usage; similar to Burgundy, Barolo and Barbaresco vineyards yield wines with distinct personalities.

Owners of a prime parcel of the Lazzarito vineyard, Alfredo created the first Vietti Barolo Lazzarito in 1967. According to Luca, the history of Lazzarito can be traced to the 1600s when there was a hospital located in the vineyard.

The **2012 Vietti Barolo Lazzarito's** translucent red color is as appealing as the white pepper, red fruit and stony aromas. Its medium body is filled with savory, upfront, tart cherry and cranberry flavors with a streak of pomegranate running underneath. Great balance and length is provided by the integrated tannins and the mineral backbone extracted from the vineyards chalky, sandy soil. **94 points.** A very wide price range from \$129 to \$180.

As the **2012 Vietti Barolo Ravera** was poured into my glass, Elena asked somewhat rhetorically, "If you have a great vineyard with great exposure and soil, why shouldn't you make a cru?"

The billowing black cherry and blackberry perfume was the first in a series of sensations affirming this cru, which Luca spent a decade working on before creating it in 2010. Next came the elegant, textured tart cherry and pomegranate fruit flavors tannin-wrapped and limestone-finished. Forty-five minutes aeration in the glass revealed a rich, black-cherry flavor and round tannins that left a long, pleasing finish and a message that the 2012 Vietti Ravera belongs in the cellar of every Barolo collector. **95 points.** As this wine also has a very wide price range of \$145 to \$195, it pays to shop.

It is worth noting Vietti's dedication to quality: Elena said that two-thirds of the 2012 Ravera Cru was assigned to the 2012 Castiglione wine. A less quality-driven winemaker and winery would have bottled that portion under the much higher-priced Cru label.

I have collected Vietti's wines for decades and been constantly rewarded by the structure, complex fruit flavors and their authenticity. The Barolos and Barbaresco Masseria cru are among the very best in each appellation.

Earlier this year, the Currado family sold the estate to American entrepreneur Kyle Krause. Luca, Elena and the other family members will continue at Vietti for the foreseeable future. That's good news for us.