

## WINE

# Rewards for the patient

Jane Faulkner is charmed by a youthful Italian variety with a rebellious streak.

**H**ALFWAY through a tasting of about 340 highly tannic and mouth-puckering acidic young nebbiolo, it dawns on me. I am completely mad. For this Piedmontese variety needs time; a quiet place to age before it will truly reveal its extraordinary complexity, nuances and depth. As it turns out, those youthful wines become a perfect counterpoint to a series of events featuring aged examples.

Every May in Alba, the heart of Piedmont, a week-long blind tasting of the latest vintages takes place. It's known as Nebbiolo Prima — as in "nebbiolo first" — because it is the region's most important variety producing one of the world's greatest red wines. This year's tasting featured barolo 2008 and riserva 2006; barbaresco 2009 plus its riserva 2007; and roero 2009 with its riserva 2008. The roero wines were the weakest bracket. They often lack the depth and drive the other two have in abundance. Now, only foolish professionals (mostly wine writers) get a gig to this tasting, as it offers a snapshot of the vintages — an appreciation of each commune's, or sub-region's, style and a guesstimate of how they will age. Each morning is dedicated to those young, disjointed, rebellious, brooding, and often very beautiful, astonishing wines.

However, for tyros, nebbiolo is by no means an easy grape to understand, or even enjoy, at first glug. In



## Reportedly poor years can turn into beautiful wines.

its youth, it can be unforgiving and that makes it difficult for anyone to appreciate its allure. Enzo Brezza agrees. "But it is important to understand our wine made from nebbiolo grapes, and to do that you need to appreciate the soils of each area where it grows, how it grows, the vineyards, and you can taste those differences [between the communes]," says Brezza, also the president of Albeisa, an organisation that, with the local wine consortium, is responsible for Nebbiolo Prima.

Another leading producer, Aldo Vaira, says: "Nebbiolo Prima is about

tasting the current vintage. I would prefer if everyone tried our '01. That's looking like a barolo."

In other words, nebbiolo starts to become quite expressive and unfurl around the seven-year mark. "When people don't know nebbiolo and they first try it, they are thinking of cabernet or shiraz. But it has its own special character. It's a unique wine," says fourth-generation winemaker Franco Massolino, of the famed Massolino based in Serralunga d'Alba, a region known for its powerfully structured barolo.

At a retrospective tasting to look at the difficult 2002 vintage, one that was devastated by hail and rain, plus the 2001, which was regarded as a great one, Massolino explains first that nebbiolo is highly sensitive to its growing conditions and even the slightest variation in soil makes a difference.

Of his three top crus, the Parafada, Margheria and Vigna Rionda vineyards are within spitting distance of one another, yet each is markedly different. The latter is the most structured, taking strength from the iron oxide and sea sediment soils; Parafada has limestone and produces a powerful wine with distinct tannins; and the Margheria has a touch more sand, so it's the most elegant. In both vintages, the Margheria was the standout, producing a floral, deep wine with silky tannins in 2002; a powerful,

structured and incredibly fragrant 2001 with years ahead of it.

What became increasingly obvious from the many tastings of older wines was how reportedly poor years can turn into beautiful wines a decade or more later.

The region is a series of hills, where the south and south-westerly slopes are the most revered and suited for nebbiolo. Just over the hill from Serralunga at Castiglione Falletto is Vietti, which is in a class of its own for many reasons aside from the fact it produces outstanding wine. There are 11 communes in Barolo and Vietti has vineyards in all — it's the only Piedmontese producer to be in such a position, although not all are created equal.

Winemaker Luca Currado knows this because his father Alfredo knew it. He had an understanding of each area's terrain and was one of the first to recognise the importance of crus — single vineyards in Barolo.

For Currado, it is about having a patchwork of disparate vineyards to work with because some show their strengths better depending on the vintage. "If you don't understand the land, the vineyards, the soils where your vines grow, then you can't understand barolo," Currado says.

I'm constantly astonished by Vietti's young wines. They're defined, approachable and delicious. However, tasting those with decent bottle age — over 10 years — puts them into

another stratosphere. They become seductive, graceful, more complex and ethereal as the acidity and tannins align in perfect balance. That's the key to the finest nebbiolo.

Barolo and barbaresco are terroir-driven wines but it does come down to discovering those producers obsessive about caring for their vineyards with all the attention to detail and fine-tuning along the way. The same winemakers are determined to preserve their heritage and own sense of history. It's a common thread in all great wines.

Barolo and barbaresco generally costs between \$100 to \$500. Outlets include Prince Wine Store, City Wine Shop, Boccaccio Cellars, Europa Cellars and King & Godfree.

## Prima picks

FROM the Nebbiolo Prima blind tastings, these are my top picks of producers available in Australia:

- Vietti
- Marchesi di Gresy
- E. Pira & Figli Chiara Boschis
- Massolino
- Poderi Colla
- Bartolo Mascarello
- Luigi Pira
- Cavallotto
- G.D. Vajra
- Mauro Molino



Luca Currado (below), the winemaker at the Vietti family vineyard (above), says understanding the land is the key to good production.

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