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### Barbarescos That Are Good Now, but Just Wait a Bit

By ERIC ASIMOV

LET'S face it, if you haven't gotten your Thanksgiving plans together by now, then you must be the sort of last-minute organizational genius who needs no help. So let's look past the holiday to the future, to something much more fun to contemplate. May I suggest Barbaresco, the 2005 vintage?

Barbaresco is the Piedmont twin of Barolo, but whether identical or fraternal is a question for debate. Like Barolo, Barbaresco is made solely of the nebbiolo grape, grown ideally on hillside vineyards in northwestern Italy, where the sun can burn through the shrouds of fog.

Good versions of both Barbaresco and Barolo are beautifully aromatic of red fruits, flowers, licorice and tar. They tend to be electric in acidity, and can be fiercely tannic. With aging, they develop complex flavors of truffles and earth. The best offer a mind-bending combination of intensity, finesse and grace. They are among my absolute favorite wines.

So where do Barbaresco and Barolo diverge? Well, the Barbaresco zone has only about a third of the vineyards as in Barolo, so much less of it is made. And, legally speaking, Barolo must be aged for three years, two in barrels, before it can be released, while Barbaresco is required to be aged for only two years, one in barrels. This can lead Barbaresco to be slightly less tannic and a little more approachable at a younger age.

Indeed, in the way of romance-language cultures, Barolo is often portrayed as "masculine" to Barbaresco's "feminine." Practically speaking, though, this formulation is fairly pointless. Set out a glass of Barolo and a glass of Barbaresco, and I'd wager most people, even experts, couldn't tell the difference.

More important to determining the personalities of the wines are the individual styles of the producers, the particular terroirs within each region and the vintage characteristics.

The 2005 vintage, for example, is widely available right now. It is a fine vintage in its own right, yet it has been overshadowed by the almost universally praised 2004 vintage. Hence, good values are out there.



The wine panel recently had the pleasure of tasting through 20 bottles of the 2005 Barbaresco. We limited ourselves to bottles priced under \$100, which means we did not taste wines from some of the greatest producers, like Bruno Giacosa and Angelo Gaja. Nonetheless, we found an ample number of bottles to recommend, particularly in the area around \$50.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Levi Dalton, the head sommelier at Alto, and Laura Maniec, who next year will open CorkBuzz Wine Studio, a wine education and consulting service.

We all agreed that among the bottles we tasted were many lovely wines. If anything seemed to define the vintage, given our small sample, it was a sense of balance and harmony. This was not a year for broadly powerful wines. Instead, many seemed rather linear, yet focused and well defined.

Though they are five years old now, the 2005 wines are young in nebbiolo terms. Despite the fact that they are featured on restaurant wine lists already, these bottles require aging. I personally wouldn't choose to drink any of them for another five years. Judging them now is tricky, as some go through reticent periods in which the aromas, which might have been ethereal a few months ago, now seem muted. Nonetheless, the prime characteristics of these wines were evident.

"They're not entirely unenjoyable at the moment," Laura said. "They remind me of why I love nebbiolo."

One thing was clear: the stark stylistic differences of the 1990s that separated the traditionalists from the modernists have come a long way toward the middle. Or, to put it another way, many of the so-called modernists, who strove to make softer, more approachable wines, partly through the use of small barrels of new oak, have pulled back from the excesses of the past. Oak is still evident, but with far less of the powerful vanilla veneer that used to mar the beauty of the nebbiolo grape.

Our No. 1 bottle, the Vincenziana from Silvio Giamello, was clearly an old-school wine. Its pale red color, rimmed with orange at the edge, was a giveaway, as was the delicate, nuanced fragrance of flowers, tar and minerals. On the palate, its structure was evident, yet so was its delicacy. That combination is the soul of great nebbiolo. By the way, at \$45, the Giamello was also our best value.

By contrast, our No. 2 wine, the Fausoni from Sottimano, was clearly of Barbaresco's modern wing. It's a darker, denser wine than the Giamello, and the use of new oak was obvious, though not offensive. It seemed to sweeten the fruit a bit, but the flavors were nonetheless pure nebbiolo.



Our No. 8 wine, the Valeirano from La Spinetta, offered a different modern expression. This was clearly a balanced, harmonious wine, but it just as clearly gave pride of place to power over delicacy, emphasizing spicy oak flavors and a thick texture that reminded Laura of sforzato, a wine produced in the Valtellina zone of Piedmont using dried nebbiolo grapes, somewhat akin to Amarone. I don't question the quality of this wine, but it was not my style.

More to my taste was our No. 3 wine, the Paitin Sori' Paitin, an elegant wine with clear, pure aromas and flavors, **and our No. 5 wine, the Rizzi Fondetta, which had pleasingly deep flavors that lingered in the mouth.**

For years, the Produttori del Barbaresco, a leading cooperative producer, has been a favorite of mine both for the quality of its wines and the great value they offer. In addition to its straightforward Barbaresco, the co-op produces nine single-vineyard riservas, which must be aged for four years before release and which offer an exceptional introduction to the various terroirs of Barbaresco.

Three of the riservas made our top 10: the gentle, accessible Ovello; the graceful Rabajà; and the tight, tannic Montestefano. At this point in their development, each seemed to show direct, forthright flavors, perhaps lacking a bit in complexity. Give them 10 years, though, and, if experience is any judge, they will be absolutely delicious.

## **Tasting Report**

### **BEST VALUE**

Silvio Giamello, \$45, \*\*\*

Barbaresco Vincenziana 2005

Fragrant with flowers, minerals and tar, delicate yet structured, lively and fresh. Needs some aging. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

Sottimano, \$53, \*\*\*

Barbaresco Fausoni 2005

Dense, rich and slightly sweet; clearly a modern approach yet pure and balanced. (Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)



Paitin, \$42, \*\*\*

Barbaresco Sori' Paitin 2005

Clear, balanced and elegant with aromas of red fruit and flowers. (The Roanoke Valley Wine Company, Salem, Va.)

Produttori del Barbaresco, \$59, \*\* 1/2

Barbaresco Ovello Riserva 2005

Silky, floral and pleasing but straightforward. (Vias Imports, New York)

**Rizzi, \$50, \*\* 1/2**

**Barbaresco Fondetta 2005**

**Pure, lingering aromas and flavors of red fruit, minerals and earth.** (Opici Imports, Glen Rock, N.J.)

Romano Marengo, \$75, \*\* 1/2

Barbaresco Ca' Romè 2005

Well structured yet elegant, with aromas of flowers and red fruit. (Empson U.S.A., Alexandria)

Albino Rocca, \$53, \*\* 1/2

Barbaresco 2005

Reticent now but a lot under the surface; would benefit from aging. (Marc de Grazia Selection/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

La Spinetta, \$85, \*\*

Barbaresco Valeirano 2005

Spicy, oaky and somewhat thick in texture yet harmonious. (Michael Skurnik Wines)

Produttori del Barbaresco, \$60, \*\*

Rabajà Riserva 2005

Aromas of ripe red and black fruit; sweet and fresh but simple now. (Vias Imports)

Produttori del Barbaresco, \$54, \*\*

Montestefano Riserva 2005

Reticent aromas, very tannic, attenuated flavors of red fruit and minerals. (Vias Imports)