

PICTURE-PERFECT RIZZI

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See the Nebbiolo guide for more articles and tasting notes from the 2012 Nebbiolo Prima, as well as more in-depth tastings at some interesting estates.

There is a tradition of art labels in the Langhe which is decidedly different from the many 'art series' labels one regularly encounters on wine bottles. The latter normally consists of annually changing artworks especially designed for that particular vintage by an ever-changing range of artists. But in the Langhe it is not unusual for front labels to become political pamphlets, like the ones of the late Bartolo Mascarello (his unforgettable 'No Barrique, No Berlusconi' label).

Another extreme example is Enrico Dellapiana's labels (left and below), giving a whole new meaning to the term 'limited edition'. His filigree images, like painted haiku, are truly collector's items and he paints each label individually, with no two the same. It makes each bottle a true collector's item. Curiously, Dellapiana never set out to make them arty. In actual fact they are nothing other than an ad hoc, if beautiful, solution.

Together with his father Ernesto Dellapiana, Enrico runs the Azienda Rizzi located in the Barbaresco cru of the same name, overlapping the communes Treiso and Alba. That this fact can lead to misunderstandings seems almost inevitable and the first thing he does during my visit to the estate is to explain that the Rizzi Barbaresco Rizzi is not a useless doubling up on the label.

Dellapiana's family has produced grapes and wines since the 18th century, but the estate only began bottling in 1974. Initially, Dellapiana didn't have a winemaking background, but studied history instead. He followed this up with post-graduate studies in oenology at the University of Turin. His talent for painting turned out to be an advantage when he started to bottle the estate's Chardonnay (they were one of the first to plant this variety back in 1978) straight from tank and still cloudy, to be consumed with friends only. A Turin-based restaurateur, however, found out about the wine and started to order it by the case, which meant more painting work for Dellapiana.

At Rizzi they follow a distinctly traditional regime, Enrico tells me. Although he ferments in stainless steel, the Barbaresco stays for up to 25 days on the skins, employing the so-called capello sommerso method. It is a technique in which the cap is kept submerged in the wine, as opposed to floating on top of the wine, by a wooden grid that pushes the skins under the surface or by topping up the tank to the very brim and closing it. This enhances extraction, but enhances the wine only when the fruit is absolutely pristine.

As the Dellapianas see themselves as traditionalists, barriques are taboo. 'For me [the smell and taste of] oak is a defect', Enrico tells me. When buying new oak casks he washes them regularly and uses them first to rack Dolcetto and Barbera only, until they no longer impart their wood flavours and smells. He inherited this aversion to new oak from his father, who in turn followed Bartolo Mascarello, considered an arch traditionalist in his time and who hated barriques. According to Dellapiana Senior, it makes all Barbarescos smell like cappuccino. 'And my father never gave a hoot about journalists', Enrico adds, laughing while hitting me on the knee. It is clear that the traditionalists consider journalists as guilty as producers of instigating the use of new French oak. Now that their use is rapidly losing favour, the traditionalists can finally celebrate their 'I told you so' moment, and who can blame them. A clear absence of oak runs as a common thread through all Rizzi Barbarescos, and although they are not shy wines, there is balance, freshness and fine tannin management throughout. The sizable Rizzi estate, some 35 ha in total, is divided into three holdings, or farms, as they themselves call them. The first is the Rizzi cru, with the vineyard Bricco Boito, within which boundaries lies the lieu-dit Vigna Grande del Boito. Two wines come from here: the Barbaresco Rizzi, and the Barbaresco Boito. The second is the Nervo cru, in which they have a vineyard, called Fondetta, which delivers the raw material for the Barbaresco Nervo Fondetta. The third holding is in the famous Pajorè cru, which they consider their finest. Interestingly, the estate never produced a Langhe Nebbiolo. 'I have never thought about that', Enrico confesses. He explains that the Rizzi cru produces enough volume to offer the wine for a fair price so they don't really need to offer a less expensive Langhe Nebbiolo. 'Perhaps we should do it', he ponders. I hope not, as I suspect that this could push up the Barbaresco Rizzi price. In addition to the fine range of Barbaresco, they produce Dolcetto d'Alba, for which the grapes come from both Nervo and Rizzi, and a Barbera d'Alba also from Rizzi. The aforementioned Chardonnay, of which there is also a star-bright 'commercial' version, comes from the Speranza vineyard, also in the Rizzi cru. All these wines, except for the Barbera, are made in stainless steel only, and the range is complemented by a Moscato d'Asti and a late-harvest botrytised Moscato wine called Frimaio, as well as a Metodo Classico made from Chardonnay, Pinot Noir and 15% Nebbiolo.

Before the visit is over, I ask Enrico to show me how he paints the labels. I must confess that initially I couldn't believe that someone would paint a different label for each single bottle, and the hand-painted labels that I saw looked almost like prints to me. To prove they are not, he takes a role of self adhesive labels with only the estate's name printed on them, grabs pencils and brushes, rolls the labels out on the table and starts to paint. To begin with, he explains how he works, but soon he is so absorbed in the artwork, discovering new motifs and themes, it almost seems as if he has forgotten about me.

THE WINES

Rizzi, Extra Brut Metodo Classico 2008 Italy 16.5 Drink 2012-2018

2 g/l RS, 60% Chardonnay, 25% Pinot Noir, 15% Nebbiolo (which cannot be declared on the label). All stainless steel. 36 months on the lees.

Intense straw. Soft apple, white fruits and yeast. Very young (disgorged only last week). Sweet ripe fruit with perfect acidic balance. Assertive lively CO₂. Quite a generous white-fruit finish for an Extra Brut. Appetising. (WS) 12.5%

Rizzi Chardonnay 2011 Langhe 16 Drink 2012-2015

Only stainless steel. Seven months on the fine lees and no malolactic fermentation.

Pale, brilliant straw. Fine, yeasty apple, lemon and pineapple nose. Appetising, fresh ripe white lemony fruit palate. Refreshing and quite long. (WS) 13%

Rizzi, Sterbü 2011 Vino da Tavola 16 Drink 2012-2015

Sterbü is Langhe dialect for torbido, which means cloudy. This is the same Chardonnay as the 2011, only unfiltered.

Dim, pale straw. More reductive and certainly more yeasty than the filtered version and the fruit seems less tropical, more lemony with good extract and expression. (WS) 13%



Rizzi 2010 Dolcetto d'Alba 15.5 Drink 2012-2014

Fermented in stainless steel, seven to eight days of fermentation and maceration. Racked off in stainless steel and bottled, without any time on the fine lees as Dolcetto tends to be very reductive. Violet ruby. Typical Dolcetto with raspberry and violet. Succulent and with fine tannin. So easy to drink. Good length too. Drink while fresh and fruity. (WS) 13%

Rizzi 2011 Dolcetto d'Alba 16 Drink 2013-2015

Cask sample. Intense violet ruby. Very closed, subdued yeasty nose. Great concentration and crunchy tannin. Very good balance. Seems a bit more concentrated than 2011. (WS) 13.5%

Rizzi 2009 Barbera d'Alba 16 Drink 2013-2016

Fermented in stainless steel and cement tank. The wine of this particular vintage also spent a couple of months in a large oak cask, but it is not a given, and depends on whether a cask is available. Mid violet ruby. Subtle nose with fresh red and dark crushed fruit and a fine tannic spur. For drinking now. (WS) 13.5%

Rizzi, Rizzi 2008 Barbaresco 16.5 Drink 2013-2022

15 months in cask and a year in cement. Rizzi is the name of the cru. Pale ruby with watery rim. Ethereal nose of leafy cherry. Elegant succulent fruit with real depth. Tannins still need to integrate. Very long. (WS) 14%

Rizzi, Nervo Fondetta 2008 Barbaresco 17 Drink 2014-2026

From the Cru Nervo and the vineyard/lieu-dit Fondetta. Pale ruby with watery rim. Same fine, elegant marasca cherry and hint of tea leaf, but more concentration and finer but muscular sandy/grainy tannin than the Barbaresco Rizzi. Refreshing and still very young. (WS) 14%

Rizzi, Pajoré 2008 Barbaresco 17.5 Drink 2016-2028

Transparent ruby. Fine intense and sweet. Lovely lightness of touch and mouthfeel and potent, crunchy tannin. Closes up quickly but complex aromatics linger on. For laying down. (WS)

Rizzi, Rizzi 2007 Barbaresco 16.5 Drink 2014-2022

Palish ruby with watery orange tinge. Brooding sweet red fruit, with a touch of oak, it seems. Very fine raspberry. Quite dry, certainly drier than the 2008 version. Same fine raspberry and cherry finish with quite upfront tannin. Wait. (WS) 14%

Rizzi, Nervo Fondetta 2007 Barbaresco 17 Drink 2016-2028

Palish ruby with just the beginning of orange tinge. Balsamic, almost ethereal nose. Concentrated but fine, and with massive tannin. Not to be approached for a couple of years. (WS) 14%

Rizzi, Pajoré 2007 Barbaresco 17 Drink 2016-2026

Palish ruby with orange tinge. Soft spice and really backward. Sweetly concentrated with perfect integrated acidity. Gentle, fine finish with muscular, but not overpowering tannin. Closes up. Needs more time. (WS) 14%

Rizzi, Boito 2007 Barbaresco 17.5 Drink 2016-2026

Until 2007 this was a bottling of a lieu-dit within the Rizzi vineyard. In 2008 it will be called Riserva. Transparent ruby. Intense raspberry and amarena cherry nose. Intense and ripe on the palate too with waves of grainy tannin. Everything is intense about this wine. Very fine, sandy persistent tannin. It would be infanticide to drink this now, but already delicious. (WS) 14%

Rizzi, Nervo Fondetta 2006 Barbaresco 17 Drink 2016-2028

Palish ruby with orange tinge. Subdued, with the merest suggestion of tobacco leaf and raspberry. Very elegant and fine and sweet and at the same time compact. Great balance and concentration, but unwilling to open up on the palate. Impressively tannic. (WS) 14%

Rizzi, Pajoré 2006 Barbaresco 17 Drink 2016-2026

Palish ruby and still very youthful. And youthful it is on the palate too with intense, fine raspberry fruit. Very concentrated with powerful grainy tannin and youthful fruit. Refreshing. Needs more time. (WS) 13.5%

Rizzi, Boito 2006 Barbaresco 17.5+ Drink 2014-2026

Transparent ruby. Compact and closed and no sign of age at all. Very fine cherry and raspberry and a hint of cinnamon bark. Same elegant, fluid style but finer and with waves and waves of grainy tannin. Very fresh and elegant, and can be approached now, but the tannin really needs more time to mellow out. (WS) 13.5%

Rizzi, Boito 2004 Barbaresco 17 Drink 2016-2030

Palish ruby with watery orange tinge. Needs a lot of air. A nose determined by mushroom, tobacco and stony minerality. Needs lots and lots of air. A fine roses and cherry aroma emerges. The Rizzi signature of intense concentration and sweetness and brick-like tannin. Very long and still very youthful on the finish, it is all cherry and raspberry with a big, tannic load. (WS) 13.5%

Rizzi, Frimaio Passito 2006 Vino da Tavola 15.5 Drink 2010-2018

Moscato. The grapes are left on the vines until November. Botrytis came naturally and the grapes were harvested in one go. Light amber. Sweet peach, apricot and Moscato notes. On the palate almost pure apricot compote. Intense sweet and rich, and perhaps needs a little more freshness. 176 g/l RS. (WS)

