

Tom's Wine Line

Not Ready for Prime Time - Yet

July 26, 2010 by Tom Maresca

This is my long-promised post on 2006 Barolo, and here is the gist of it: If you want to enjoy this potentially great vintage, plan to live a long, long time. Right now it's almost as mean as the proverbial junkyard dog, but behind its off-putting tannins and deeply veiled fruit, it has the stuff to become one of the great vintages. It reminds me of some of the legendarily tough wines of the past – 1961 Bordeaux, 1978 Barolo – a few of which are only reaching their peak now.

Tom Maresca



Foreground, Cagno Barolo vineyards; background, classic Barolo skyline

You can see why I was in no great hurry to post this news: This wine is going to be around for a long time. In addition to its being structured for very long life, it is also competing for shelf space with a lot of attractive predecessors: 2001 and 2004 are top-flight vintages, both of which are still on store shelves, as is the lesser but still pleasing 2005. And coming down the pike is 2007, which early on is giving every sign of resembling 2005: friendly, easy drinking, and easily good for ten years or so.

With all that competition, I doubt 2006 Barolo is going to be walking off the shelves. But if you love good, old-fashioned Barolo – deep Nebbiolo fruit and character wrapped in the kind of tough (not green, just tough) tannins that may take five or more years to become drinkable, but then get better and better for maybe more than a single human life span – if that's your pleasure, this is your vintage. Buy some, and bury it as deep in your cellar as you can. Try to forget about it for a decade, then look in and see how the kids are doing: you'll probably get some lovely surprises.

Tasting the 2006 vintage at Nebbiolo Prima was brutal work, one of the toughest tastings I've ever experienced, in both its physical and intellectual demands. One young Barolo like that is hard enough – but one after another of them for several hours leaves the mouth coated with tannin and makes it almost impossible to taste fruit even when it's showing well. This absolutely necessitated tasting the wines again in different circumstances – with some food, or in a vertical, or as part of an individual producer's whole line of wines – anything that would give some relief from those punishing tannins and allow me to come to grips with other aspects of the wine.

In those other circumstances, I was invariably very impressed with what 2006 Barolo has to offer. And for that reason, by the way, I apologize to those producers whose wines I didn't get to retaste and whom I have almost certainly underestimated because of it. With the limited time I had in Alba, I couldn't manage to taste everything again, outside the formal procedure. I will do my best over what remains of my lifetime to correct those omissions.

I did at least get to visit three excellent producers – Elvio Cogno, Giacomo Fenocchio, and Massolino – and they didn't disappoint. Far from it, in fact: They made me realize just how good a vintage 2006 could be.

Cogno: a family firm, working 11 hectares in the commune of Novello. The winery sits atop Bricco Ravera, an esteemed cru of Barolo. All wines are lightly contemporized traditional styles – i.e., most see a small amount of new oak, which does nothing to interfere with the classic fruit flavors. Top wines are the Barolos: Vigna Elena, vinified entirely from the rosé clone of Nebbiolo; Ravera, from lampia and michet clones; Bricco Pernice, entirely from lampia clones; Cascina Nuova, from their youngest vines, and designed to be easier and earlier drinking than its more austere elder siblings.



Valter Fissore, winemaker at Cogno.

Cogno also produces top-flight Barbera and Dolcetto d'Alba, plus a distinguished Langhe Rosso called Montegrilli, blended half and half of Nebbiolo and Barbera. And if your palate should need freshening, Cogno also has been working to revive a very localized white grape called Nascetta (probably descended from Vermentino) with which they make an intriguing white wine they call Anas-Cetta.

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