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Barolo and Barbaresco vs. Burgundy

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Jun 7, 2011

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If you've been following this space during the past couple of weeks, you've seen my assertion that Barolo and Barbaresco have decisively surpassed red Burgundy in value at prices between \$35 and \$55. Top renditions of Red Burgundy retain their place near the very pinnacle of the world wine pyramid, but skyrocketing prices have taken most of the truly excellent examples of the breed into price ranges above \$70. As this has been happening over the course of the past decade, Barolo and Barbaresco have enjoyed a series of outstanding vintages without historical precedent, yet prices have remained remarkably stable. The upshot is simple and clear: If you want to buy genuinely great, aromatically complex, medium-bodied wine for \$35 to \$55, you can either exhaust yourself looking for the few red Burgundies that fit this description, or avail yourself of the dozens of amazing Barolos and Barbaescos available in this price range.

My friend Michael Apstein took issue with this observation in the WRO blog on June 8, and if you haven't seen his contentions, I'd advise you to read his blog before picking up my reply at this point. You can get to his blog by clicking on "More WRO Wine Blog..." at the bottom of the blog space, and you'll easily find your way to his posting, which also includes the posting of mine that started the exchange.

It is hardly surprising that Apstein has tried to mount a defense for his beloved Burgundies, and if there's anyone I know who loves red Burgundy even more than I do, it would be Michael. But love is famously blind, and love (or denial or inattention) has apparently blinded Apstein to the chasm that now separates Barolo and Barbaresco from Burgundy in terms of quality-to-price ratio. The chasm is real and it is widening before our eyes, and I've got evidence as well as arguments to prove it.

Apstein's points are easy to summarize and, in my view, easy to counter:

Barolo and Barbaresco can't be enjoyed while young, unlike red Burgundy. This is partly valid, but essentially misleading and largely inconsequential as a practical matter. It is true that many bottlings of Barolo or Barbaresco will reach their apogee a little later than a red Burgundy from the same calendar year. However, the significance of this is undercut by five distinct facts:

- 1) Barolo is released two years later than Burgundy, and Barbaresco (which is generally softer and more accessible than Barolo) one year later than Burgundy. Most wines from all three categories ship in springtime, and the current releases are 2009 for Burgundy, 2008 for Barbaresco, and 2007 for Barolo.
- 2) It is true that Barolo and Barbaresco need time to hit their apogee, but they need much less time than they did 20 years ago. This is partly a function of recent warming of the climate in the area around Alba, which has now ripened the fruit more fully and consistently during the past 15 years than in any comparable 15-year span in history. Viticulture and winemaking have also changed in important ways recently, with crop thinning now helping to assure physiologically ripe fruit that is much better able to counterbalance Nebbiolo's assertive acidity and tannins. Barolo and Barbaresco have changed dramatically since the early 1990s, and among the most dramatic changes is the fact that the wines are much easier to enjoy much earlier than in past decades.

3) Barolo and Barbaresco are not alone in needing time to hit their apogee, and indeed red Burgundy also needs time to unwind and integrate. It is fundamentally different from New World Pinot Noirs in this respect, and though Apstein is well aware of this and treats his own wines accordingly, he doesn't address this fact—perhaps because it cuts against his thesis. New World Pinots from places like Oregon, California or New Zealand can *benefit* from ageing but don't necessarily *need* it. By contrast, most red Burgundies really *need* it, and this is true even of simple Bourgogne rouge in most cases.

This is not a knock on Burgundy at all. On the contrary, it is the lighter weight, more prominent acidity, and greater restraint in terms of fruitiness that continue to distinguish Burgundy as the world's best Pinot. However, the nature of the beast is this: Lacking the chunky, sweet fruit of New World Pinots, Burgundy can't show its superiority until its acidity and tannin have softened and its oak has subsided with time. This is demonstrably true, and among the many demonstrations that I could provide is the fact that extended cellaring is precisely what Dr. Apstein prescribes for the Burgundies he buys for himself. Ask anyone who is fortunate enough to have enjoyed his hospitality, as I have.

4) Any difference in ageing requirements between Barolo, Barbaresco and Burgundy is a difference of *degree* rather than a difference *in kind*, and any differential is often negated or even reversed by their staggered release dates. Moreover, the accessibility of Barolo and Barbaresco can easily be enhanced by decanting the wines or pairing them with foods containing a bit of dietary fat, which buffers their acidity and tannin.

5) However, if you are especially sensitive to these structural elements in Nebbiolo-based wines, all you need to do is buy older bottles, which is a simple and surprisingly affordable solution. As cases in point, here is a list of Barolos and Barbarescos from top producers and excellent vintages that are currently available from *just one retailer* based near me in Washington, D.C., all of which were scored at 90 points or more by major wine publications (WA = *The Wine Advocate*; WS = *The Wine Spectator*; WE = *The Wine Enthusiast*; ST = Stephen Tanzer):

Bongiovanni, Barolo Pernanno 1999, \$50, 90 Points (WA)
 Corino, Barolo Arborina 1998, \$50, 92 Points (WA)
 Corino, Barolo Arborina 2001, \$52, 92 Points (WS); 91 (WA)
 Corino, Barolo Giachini 2000, \$50, 92 Points (WS); 91 (WA)
 Corino, Barolo Vigneto Rocche 2000, \$50, 93 Points (WS)
 Silvio Grasso, Barolo Pian Vigne 1998, \$43, 91 Points (WA); 90 (WS)
 Marcarini, Barolo La Serra 2000, \$50, 93 Points (WS)
 Marcarini, Barolo La Serra 2001, \$45, 91 Points (WS)
 Molino, Barolo 1997, \$37, 90 Points (WS)
 Molino, Barolo Conca 1998, \$55, 91 Points (WS)
 Molino, Barolo Gancia 1998, \$48, 90 Points (WA)
 Molino, Barolo Gancia 2000, \$45, 91 Points (WS); 90 WA
 Oddero, Barolo 2001, \$46, 90 Points (WS)
 Luigi Pira, Barolo Margheria 1998, \$48, 94 Points (WA)
 Luigi Pira, Barolo Margheria 2000, \$49, 91 Points (WA); 91 (WS)
 Rocca, Albino, Barbaresco Loreto 2001, \$47, 91 Points (WA)
 Seghesio, A. & R., Barolo La Villa 2004, \$53, 95 Points (WS); 92 (WA)
 Veglio, Barolo Arborina 1998, \$50, 92 Points (WA); 90 (ST)
 Veglio, Barolo Arborina 2000, \$46, 93 Points (WS); 90 (WA); 90 (ST)
 Veglio, Barolo Casteletto 1998, \$49, 93 Points (WA); 92 (ST); 91 (WS)
 Veglio, Barolo Casteletto 2000, \$46, 92 Points (WS); 91 (ST); 90 (WA)
 Veglio, Barolo Gattera 1997, \$45, 92 Points (WS)
 Veglio, Barolo Gattera 1998, \$45, 92 (WS); 91 (WA); 90 (ST)

If you were to buy Burgundies of comparable complexity and readiness, you'd need to get them from the 2000 or 2002 vintages. I'd invite you to cruise some retail websites to see what \$35 to \$55 will get you these days in the red Burgundy category. You'll see that the same number of dollars gets you something like *twice* the quality from Barolo and Barbaresco, and nobody who isn't engaged in special pleading could reach any other conclusion.

Apstein goes on to contend that, "***There are just no low-end Barolo or Barbaresco. They are high-end appellations. There are no wines from those two appellations that can compare to regional or village Burgundies.***" This is, again, about half correct, but almost entirely beside the point. It is true that Piedmont makes few bottlings comparable to regional wines like \$20 Bourgogne rouge. There's not much shame in that, however, since the vast majority of those wines are mediocre in quality. Even the best exceptions to that rule are almost universally regarded not as excellent wines but as pleasant surprises or admirable over-achievers.

Of course, my "few" wines isn't quite the same as Apstein's "no" wines. As it happens, a couple of days before Apstein sent in his blog making this point, I had purchased some Montaribaldi Barbaresco Palazzina 2007 (from a retailer in Oregon) for the whopping price of \$22.20. I bought it because both the 2007 and 2008 wines from Montaribaldi showed beautifully in the "Nebbiolo Prima" blind tastings in which I participated during the past two years. But you don't need to take my word for it, as Monica Lerner of *The Wine Enthusiast* (whom I barely know but whose palate I've come to admire after seeing her ratings and notes) scored this wine at 93 points. For 22 bucks, Herr Doktor Apstein. Shall we see what you can get from Burgundy for 22 bucks to face off with this supposedly non-existent wine?

I could cite some other examples, as there's actually a reasonable number of Barolos and Barbarescos available below \$30 these days. However, this would follow Apstein into the weeds and away from my initial contention, which had solely to do with premium wines priced between \$35 and \$55. This is exactly where most village-level Côte d'Or Burgundies are priced these days (and where most 3rd tier appellations and Côte Chalonnaise wines are rapidly heading). So, let's stick to the subject at hand and say this: Apstein is correct that some of these 3rd and 4th tier Burgundies can be quite good in the best vintages. However, almost none of them would strike anybody as an outstanding or profound wine, whereas *dozens* of Barolos and Barbarescos that have attained that level every single year from 1996 to 2007, with the single exception of 2002.

In the crucial price range at issue here, the average is *much* higher from Barolo and Barbaresco, and the peaks are much higher also. This is an easy point to substantiate, and once again I can provide plenty of specifics from--once again--*just one retailer*, located in New Jersey in this instance:

Luigi Pira Barolo Marencà 2006, \$49, 96 Points (WS); 94 (WE); 93 (WA)
Luigi Pira Barolo Margheria 2006, \$39, 94 Points (WS); 92 (WA)
Giovanni Manzone Barolo Bricat 2006, \$38, 94 Points (WA); 90 (WS)
Aldo Riccardo Seghesio Barolo La Villa 2004, \$44, 95 Points (WS); 92 (WA)
Elvio Cogno Barolo Cascino Nuovo 2006 \$34, 94 Points (WE); 92 (WA); 92 (WS)
~~Sottimano Barbaresco Cotta 2007, \$43, 95 Points (WA); 93 (WE)~~
Sottimano Barbaresco Pajoré 2007, \$43, 95 Points (WA); 92 (WS)
Francesco Rinaldi & Figli Barolo Le Brunate 2006, \$49, 95 Points (WA); 91 (WE)
Parusso Barolo Le Coste Mosconi 2006, \$54, 95 Points (WA); 92 (WE)

Of course, points aren't everything, but they aren't nothing either--especially as in a case like this, where multiple publications of some repute are all on the same page. So, I'd invite anyone who thinks that Apstein might be correct to do this: Have a look around the web and see how many red Burgundies you can find for less than \$55 that score 96 - 94 points in major publications.

Can you find as many in the entire USA as I found *in one store in New Jersey*?

Believing (rightly or wrongly) that I've made a decisive argument, let me close with a word on the point of all this, as I see it: Those who love ultra-complex, medium-weight wines that work with the widest array of foods should take note of two simultaneous developments that call past allegiances into question. Red Burgundy remains a wine category of unique character and potentially extraordinary quality, but swelling worldwide demand has conspired with a severely limited growing area to hike prices beyond the rational reach of most consumers. As this was happening, Barolo and Barbaresco have enjoyed the most extraordinary streak of great vintages in their history, yet prices have held steady, enabling opportunistic consumers to acquire truly great wines for prices that yield merely good wines from other quarters.

Many consumers may miss these opportunities because they believe that Barolo and Barbaresco can't be enjoyed relatively soon after purchase, or that older bottles must be prohibitively expensive. Both of those notions are mistaken, and those who turn their attention to the amazing wines now on the market from Piedmont will likely look back on this time period as a sort of Golden Age. Having suffered for years while listening to geezers recount their ingenious purchases of Bordeaux from 1982 or 1961 for small fractions of what those wines are now known to be worth, I've taken a hammer to my piggy bank to seize a comparable chance to buy greatness for the price of goodness. And I'd strongly advise you to consider doing the same.

I'll be back next month with scores of reviews of remarkable new releases from Barolo's 2007 vintage as well as Barbarescos from 2008.