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Barolo, Barbaresco & More: A Look at the 2020 Vintage



By MONICA LERNER © Apr 04, 2024



This report of nearly 300 reviews contains wines that are hitting the market now or will be coming soon. It also includes notes for about 90 unsolicited samples that I did not have time to publish last year.

You will find 2020 & 2019 Barolo, 2021 Barbaresco and scattered Langhe Nebbiolo, Barbera d'Alba, Dolcetto d'Alba and Freisa, primarily from 2021 and 2022. Any important producers among those I normally review that are missing here will be included in a "Part Two" article to be published soon. I am already tasting wines for that follow-up report.

However, this introductory article takes a closer look at 2020 Barolo specifically.

Overall, the vintage delivers accessible wines that are generally on the leaner side of the mid-weight Nebbiolo spectrum. The aromas are bright and fruit-forward, more mature as opposed to underripe, with pretty brightness, balanced acidity and elegant chalky tannins for the most part. In terms of aging potential, the 2020 vintage does not have the concentration of 2019 or the power of 2016, and I have shortened the average drinking windows by a few years in most cases.

These Barolos should drink beautifully over the next 10 years for sure, but they also offer plenty of enjoyment if consumed on the younger side with fine food. The 2020 Barolos are quintessential restaurant wines, as opposed to cellar favorites.



A springtime view of Castiglione Falletto

The growing season did pose a few challenges for vintners. It started early thanks to a warm spring. Ripening stalled when cooler temperatures hit in June and ultimately picked up speed toward the end. What was expected to be a long growing season, something that deeply enhances the aromatic and textural complexity of Nebbiolo, ended up losing those gains before harvest.

“The 2020 vintage, kept in check by the COVID-2019 pandemic, proved unpredictable,” says Chiara Boschis of E. Pira e Figli - Chiara Boschis in Barolo. “An early start to spring meant that the growing cycle started 15 days early, but that head start was lost because of thunderstorms in June and rains in September. Our advantage faded, and ripening times were brought back to those of an average vintage.”

Marco and Tiziana Parusso of Parusso in Monforte d'Alba say that winter in 2020 saw moderate temperatures but little snow.

"Phenolic ripening got off to a quick start in March and April thanks to warm temperatures, but it slowed down in May and June due to the many rain days," says Matteo Ascheri of Ascheri.

"We saw intense hail in June concentrated in Verduno and in La Morra," says Fabio Alessandria of Comm. G.B. Burlotto, who did not make his Barolo Acclivi in 2020. That wine is a blend of fruit from Neirane, Rocche dell'Olmo and Boscato (that were hit by hail) and Monvigliero (that went unscathed). Any fruit harvested from the damaged areas went to his Langhe Nebbiolo and Barolo instead.

Virna and Ivana Borgogno of Virna said, "After a warm winter, we had a good amount of rain in May and June, and those water reserves lasted throughout the summer. The 2020 vintage was regular, but it does underline a change in the climate that we need to address, with warm winters and very hot and dry summers. The 2022 and 2023 vintages are proof of these changes. Lessons learned in the vineyard include leaving more leaves on the vines, using manure-based fertilizers, using cover crops and breaking up the soils with tractors to allow greater penetration of water."

The debate over whether or not to irrigate vineyards in the Langhe has become very animated in recent years. Water reserves built up in winter must last through the summer, especially in the hottest years. This is key to obtaining complete ripening and healthy fruit. But with record drought, viable water sources (lakes, reservoirs and wells) are drying up. This was a major challenge seen in 2022 and 2023, two vintages that set off collective panic over water.

"The 2020 vintage teaches us how important the winter months are in shaping a vintage," says Luca Pasquero Elia of Paitin in Neive, Barbaresco.



The village of Barolo

Mariacristina Oddero of Oddero in La Morra remembers 2020 for the intense luminosity of certain summer days, in which sunshine singed some leaves and berries.

Matteo Sardagna Einaudi of Poderi Luigi Einaudi farms in Villero, Bussia, Cannubi, Monvigliero and Terlo. He said, "The Nebbiolo harvest saw good conditions. Nighttime temperatures were not excessive and brought a rapid accumulation of polyphenols that were already reaching good values by mid-September."

Franco Denari manager at Vietti in Castiglione Falletto added, "The vintage saw consistent water moisture and good climatic conditions without extreme weather events. We had a medium-late harvest with complete tannic ripeness, and this allowed us to do longer macerations."

Matteo Molino of Mauro Molino in La Morra says his harvest started on September 9th and ended October 8th.

Oscar Arrivabene (winemaker) and Giuliana Viberti (owner) at Domenico Clerico said, “2020 was the year that convinced us that we were ready to convert to organics. It was definitely a difficult year that tested our team. We never lacked water, but we had issues linked to humidity, like attacks of downy mildew that forced us to be extra scrupulous in the vineyards. We were ready to deal with the problems, and we brought in healthy fruit.”

Before I sign off, there is some bad news from Piedmont but also some good news. I'll start with the bad.

The Bad News

Piedmont has lost too many of its greatest winemakers in recent years. That loss is made more painful by the death of Enrico Scavino, 82, on February 25, 2024.

Enrico Scavino, of the celebrated Paolo Scavino winery, was among an elite group of winemakers who would later become known as the “Barolo Boys.” This tight-knit group of visionaries raised the bar on quality by incorporating techniques from outside the Langhe (such as the use of barrique and rotofermenters). They traveled far and wide across the great wine regions of the world, and the information they brought back home would contribute to the rise of Barolo as one of the world's most coveted wines.

The interpretation that Scavino gave to Nebbiolo prized elegance, brightness and harmony. The Paolo Scavino Barolo Cannubi was among the wines to cement the greatness of this prized cru. All of the MGA wines made today—Bricco Ambrogio, Monvigliero, Ravera, Prapò, Rocche dell'Annunziata and the newly added Rocche di Castiglione—are fermented in stainless steel and aged in oak botte for about two years.

Based in Castiglione Falletto, the estate was founded in 1921 by Lorenzo Scavino and then split between two heirs in 1943. Paolo Scavino, Enrico's father, would create the current winery. Together, father and son would adopt a single-vineyard philosophy, starting with Bricc del Fiasc (first produced in 1978). That wine comes from a 2.5-hectare site in Castiglione Falletto at 270 meters above sea level with typical Sant'Agata marl and Diano d'Alba sandstone soils.

Enrico Scavino is survived by his daughters, Enrica and Elisa, who manage the winery today. They represent the fourth generation of the Scavino family to make wine.



Sunset over Cannubi

The region suffered another painful loss with the death of Michele Chiarlo, 88, on November 18, 2023. He founded the winery that bears his name in 1956, after earning his degree in enology in Alba. His first Barolo was made in 1958.

His staunch belief in the potential of Barolo, Barbaresco, Barbera and Moscato d'Asti in overseas markets made him a true visionary for the region. He was a leading figure in the creation of the Nizza denomination for Barbera.

It would also lead him to invest in wine tourism, something he did with creativity and passion throughout his life. His Palas Cerequio Barolo Cru Resort, which opened in 2011, offers accommodation in the middle of one of Barolo's most prized vineyards, giving wine lovers the opportunity to eat, sleep and experience wine country. This model is reproduced throughout the region today, but Michele Chiarlo was among the first to understand the synergies between wine, food and lodging as a means of promoting Barolo.

Michele Chiarlo was an important voice in the creation of the single-vineyard philosophy that results in the MGA classifications today. He acquired some of the best plots in Cannubi and Cerequio. The estate counts 270 acres of vines, and the winery is located in Calamandrana in Asti.

His sons, Alberto and Stefano, manage the estate today.



New vineyard growth in Barolo

Piedmont has lost many of its greatest winemakers in the past decade, including Pio Boffa of Pio Cesare, Domenico Clerico, Giuseppe Rinaldi, Renato Vacca, Bruno Giacosa, Aldo Conterno and Luciano Sandrone. A new generation is stepping up to fill these shoes.

The Good News

It did feel rather quiet in Barolo this past year, as Elena Penna and Luca Currado Vietti stepped back from their management roles at Vietti at the end of 2023. The celebrated estate in Castiglione Falletto was sold to American businessman Kyle Krause in 2016.

This formidable couple is author to some of the best wines made in the appellation. Luca oversaw 35 vintages at Vietti, including the excellent 2020s reviewed in this report. Elena (sales and marketing) and Luca (winemaker) are some of the most impassioned communicators for the general promotion of Barolo and the Langhe territory. They are also incredibly nice people.



The power couple: Elena Penna and Luca Currado Vietti

That's why I was so happy to learn that we have them back as Barolo producers. Their newest project, Cascina Penna-Currado, was announced earlier this year. The couple quietly purchased the landmark 2,400-square-meter Cascina Lazzarito in Serralunga d'Alba in 2018. This beautiful building was built in 1554 and was owned by the local Falletto family, followed by the Opera Pia religious charity.

Joining the couple in this new adventure are their children Giulia, 22, and Michele, 24.

"We are going back to being growers," says Elena Penna. "It feels like good karma putting the pieces together for this new adventure."

Cascina Penna-Currado made wine in 2023, including Barolo that will be released in 2027. The production will include two MGA-specific wines, although the names of the cru sites have not been made public yet. In addition to Nebbiolo, they are working with Barbera, Dolcetto and white wine from Timorasso-Derthona. The Elena Spirits company founded by Elena Penna that makes gin and vermouth is also part of the greater family portfolio.

The upcoming Barolo is a blend of fruit from San Lorenzo di Verduno (for freshness and spice), Perno (an up-and-coming site) and a piece of San Giovanni (between Monforte d'Alba and Barolo). These are all leased vineyards.

The goal is to reach no more than 75,000 bottles per year to keep things manageable and smaller in scale. The project currently counts 13 hectares of leased vineyards (with 25-year rental contracts). Of those, five hectares are Barolo.



MONICA LARNER

Monica Lerner reviews the wines of Italy, Greece and South Africa. Born in Los Angeles, she has lived in Rome on and off since age 11 and has written several books about her adopted home. Her family makes wine in California. She has written about wine for more than 20 years, starting off as the Italy reviewer for *Wine Enthusiast* in 2003 and moving over to *The Wine Advocate* in 2013 in the same