



Written by
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Barbaresco 2014 - a vintage surprise



Walter has a unique inside track on the latest releases from Barbaresco, a total of 140 2014s and 2012 Riservas.

The 2014 is Italy's bad rap vintage due to an unusual cool and very wet growing season. All hopes seemed to be dashed when an initially warm late summer was affected by yet more rain. Already by early summer of 2014, months before anyone had tasted the wines, word was that Italy had a disastrous vintage on its hands. Producers were infuriated by this precocious condemnation of a vintage no one had tasted. At the time more than one producer told me he would not send any samples to journalists he felt were guilty of 2014 'vintage-icide'.

Then came the actual moment of tasting the results of 2014 during Italy's endless carousel of new-vintage releases. Of Italy's top wine regions, Chianti Classico was the first to show the wines, in February 2016, quickly followed by Rosso di Montalcino in May of that year. Overall

these wines turned out to be surprisingly good in spite of 2014's bad reputation.

But many producers are still nervous about how the market will react to their efforts, especially those of Barolo who release their 2014s next year. They will closely watch the fortunes of the just-released 2014 Barbarescos, because their reception will give an indication of what they can expect. Luckily for them, as well as us, 2014 has turned out to be quite a good vintage in Barbaresco.

A firm indication of this is the Produttori del Barbaresco's decision to produce all their single crus, something they did not do in 2012. 'This was the first time I can remember that the weather in Barolo and Barbaresco was very different', Aldo Vacca, Produttori del Barbaresco's director, told me last April. 'Normally there are only small differences caused by an earlier harvest here compared with that in Barolo.'

'Also here it rained a lot at the beginning of the growing cycle', Vacca explained. Flowering was delayed by a week compared with what is considered normal and fruit set was less regular, significantly reducing the potential yield. 'At first it looked like there would be 20% lower yield, but because less green harvest was needed [later in the growing cycle] it turned out to be only around 10%'.

But in its final stages, the 2014 vintage in Barbaresco turned out to be the complete opposite of its neighbour. Just as in Barolo, the rains persisted in Barbaresco until the beginning of August, when, finally, dry and warm weather set in. While Barolo faced more rain in August and September, Barbaresco did not see any between 7 August and the end of September. 'In Barbaresco the wines are lighter due to a very cool and rainy start', Vacca told me, 'but we were able to harvest very late, from 10 October until 20 October, almost like in the 1960s, and due to the fact that it was warm during the days and cool during the nights we obtained fine aromatics and elegant wines. It reminds me a little of the wines before climate change.' Overall, Vacca believes that 2014 is not far off in quality from the generally much more garlanded 2013.



At Albino Rocca, whose team is pictured above, they had more than their fair share of sleepless nights during the 2014 season. Daniela, Paola and Monica Rocca together with winemaker Carlo Castellengo explained that their insomnia was caused by alternating rain and heat during May. With June and July came less rain, but the problem was low temperatures and overcast skies, reducing luminosity, which slowed down the growing cycle. But also they confirm that overall Barbaresco saw much less rain in July than Barolo and was spared from hail. 'From 15 August it was all good summer weather until the end of September and we brought in grapes with a balance we have rarely seen before.'

Gabriele Occhetti, winemaker at Giuseppe Cortese, decided not to make a Riserva in 2014 because he feared that the quality of the normal Barbaresco would suffer because of the selection this would have meant. Occhetti told me that in 2014 yields were down by a whopping 25%, not only because they did a lot of green harvesting, but also because of the cold weather and the lack of sunshine until mid August. 'The real summer started only after mid August, but with Nebbiolo you can wait', Occhetti explained. 'We harvested very late, around mid October. In general, we prefer a cold to a warm vintage.' Their fine 2014 Rabajà eloquently proves this point.

Newcomer Davide Carniel from Sassi San Cristoforo echoes Occhetti's opinion that 2014 perhaps did not deliver the material for making Riservas. He seems content with the vintage, although for this tiny estate (production is less than 7,000 bottles a year) it did come at great cost with Nebbiolo's yields reduced by 30%. Carniel told me he is used to doing several green harvests, but in 2014 bunch thinning was more severe than normal. He also reported that the region had lots of problems with downy mildew as well as the *grape moth*. These pests puncture the grape skins, allowing acetobacter to attack the grape, causing vinegary whiffs in the vineyard. This insect pest, called *tignola* in Italian, caused a 50% drop in yield of the early-ripening Dolcetto, which was the hardest hit.

An even greater loss of yield was reported by Andrea Sottimano, who told me that they harvested only half of their normal production in 2014. Sottimano is known for its scrupulously strict quality approach, and it was clear from Andrea's explanation that he would rather have cut off his right arm than accept a lowering of quality of fruit in 2014. He was visibly pleased with his 2014 vintage. 'It is great because it is very elegant with fine tannins.' He surprised me when he told me that his 2014s are lower in acidity than his 2013s, something that does not mirror my experiences with this embryonic vintage.



At the end of February, I had a unique chance to taste the 2014 Barbarescos in the town's medieval tower, which, under the energetic guidance of then mayor Alberto Bianco, has been

changed into a viewing platform overlooking all of the Langhe and far beyond as well as a tasting room. The picture below shows the vertiginous morning view from the tower. It was Bianco together with Dave Fletcher, Ceretto's winemaker, who were the driving force behind setting up this en primeur tasting for me, which, they told me afterwards, had never been requested by anyone before.



This - for me - surprising fact shows that Barbaresco is more often than not seen as an extension of Barolo, a kind of 'lightweight' neighbour that is readily and erroneously referred to as a 'more feminine' expression of Nebbiolo. Apart from the fact that I find sexism in wine descriptions hard to digest, I also never believed it. This is why I asked Bianco to set up the tasting in the first place; I wanted to taste Barbaresco in isolation without the direct comparison with Barolo that is unavoidable in the annual en primeur Nebbiolo Prima tasting. I expect that with the 2014 vintage many will see Barbaresco with completely new eyes, especially when next year's Barolos are released.

Although the 2014 vintage did not seem cut out to make any really memorable wines, my impressions from this Barbaresco tasting are quite the opposite. I found plenty of fresh, complex and wonderfully transparent expressions of Nebbiolo that you will want to drink again and again. That, by the way, is a real option as compared with Barolo - prices are still reasonable and at times surprisingly cheap. Rather than buying the best Langhe Nebbiolo, I would rather trade up a little and get my hands on Barbaresco.

Although many wines are light and supple, but not lacking in complexity or firm tannic structure (this is Nebbiolo after all), they are hardly ever green or hard. While it was certainly not easy to get right, most producers have interpreted the vintage correctly and the wines are a true reflection of that. The ones that disregarded this and tried to push for ripeness took a big risk and only in the rarest of cases did it result in more concentration.

What did pose a real challenge during the tasting was the fact that quite a few wines were cask samples, and sometimes so out of condition that it was impossible not to reject them. This is clearly not a vintage that should stay too long in oak because the fruits of the 2014 vintage are a little too delicate to withstand long cask ageing. Still, 2014 Barbaresco is overall more impressive than 2014 wines from anywhere else in Italy except, perhaps, Etna.

It is not just luck for Barbaresco in 2014 compared with the rest of Italy. It also involved skills quickly acquired after the very hot 2003, a game changer and considered the undeniable sign of climate change: a very severe selection in the vineyard and the financial means to be able to sacrifice volume in pursuit of quality. I found the 2014 Barbarescos overall hugely original. So

original, in fact, it should be considered on its own, without comparison to anything else. You call it light? I call it elegant, and definitely not a lighter version of anything else.

Albino Rocca, Angelo 2014 Barbaresco Tasted blind. Barbaresco. Concentrated ruby with orange tinges. Balsamic, lifted cherry nose with a hint of cardamom skin. Tightly wound fruit with mouth-filling, powdery tannins and iron notes on the finish. Elegant and with plenty of racy acidity. (WS) 14.5% Drink 2017-2028

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Albino Rocca, Ovello 2014 Barbaresco Tasted blind. Barbaresco. Mid ruby with orange tinges. Cherry and strawberry fruit that seems a little pushed for ripeness. Hint of liquorice with bittersweet tannins on the finish and lifted strawberry fruit. (WS) 14.5% Drink 2017-2024

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- Albino Rocca, Ronchi 2014 Barbaresco Tasted blind. Barbaresco. Deep ruby with orange tinges. A little subdued and possibly reduced with brooding, sweet strawberry fruit. Plenty of youthful fruit on the palate and elegant medium weight only. Zesty, sweet strawberry finish with lots of coating tannins indicating that further ageing is needed. (WS) 14.5% Drink 2018-2026

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- Albino Rocca, Montersino 2014 Barbaresco Tasted blind. Treiso. Maturing mid ruby with orange tinges. Chalky and subdued nose and succulent, elegant palate with fine grippy tannins. Really youthful and with a beautiful, lithe built. (WS) 14% Drink 2017-2024

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