

Barbaresco, first among equals

It's time for Piedmont's 'other' great Nebbiolo wine to stop being seen as the perennial bridesmaid to Barolo, says Ian D'Agata. Barbaresco is just as good and (whisper it) in some cases better, especially when it comes to price

WHAT DO YOU think is the best Italian wine of all time? Before you start guessing, let me tell you that it's not a Barolo, a Brunello di Montalcino, an Amarone or a SuperTuscan. Stumped? It's a Barbaresco. Yes, really. Italy's best-ever wine is the now legendary 1971 Santo Stefano Barbaresco

Riserva Speciale made by Bruno Giacosa, widely acknowledged as the country's ultimate expression of power, balance and refinement.

It is not, however, the only testament to the greatness that Barbaresco is capable of. In fact, Barbarescos have never been better, and there is a

Below: Treiso is one of only four communes that can make Barbaresco

Right: Bruno Giacosa's 1971 Santo Stefano Riserva Speciale is legendary



bevy of extremely fine producers to choose from: Angelo Gaja and Bruno Giacosa are the most famous, but wines by Albino Rocca, Bruno Rocca, Ca' del Baio, Cigliuti, Cisa Asinari Marchesi di Gresy, Giuseppe Cortese, Moccagatta, Roagna and Sottimano rank with the world's best. Also, Barbarescos are often the best wines made by well-known Piedmontese powerhouses such as Ceretto and Pio Cesare.

Unfortunately, the high quality of Barbaresco still slips under the radar of most wine lovers. Despite pocketfuls of devout admirers, the wines have always played underdog to nearby Barolo. It's Barolo that has always garnered most of the attention, despite the fact that both wines are made essentially the same way, from the same Nebbiolo grape. The vineyards are just a short drive away from each other, but in completely separate wine-production areas: (you can't make Barbaresco in the Barolo production area and vice-versa), and in a similar patchwork of geologically and

topographically distinct sites beautiful enough to have merited UNESCO recognition in June last year.

The background

Barbaresco became a DOC wine in 1966 and a DOCG in 1980. Generally speaking, Barbarescos are less austere, less tannic and are readier to drink sooner than Barolos. Most Barbarescos can be drunk as early as five years from the vintage. (Barolo, especially when from Monforte or Serralunga, usually requires a few years more to become fully approachable.) But just like Barolo, Barbaresco can age for decades: a well-kept 1961 is a thing of beauty – if you can find one.

The minimal ageing requirement is 26 months for Barbaresco (a minimum of nine in oak) and 50 months for Barbaresco riserva (of which 24 are usually spent in oak). This shorter length of time spent in oak means Barbaresco, especially when young, generally matches better with food than does Barolo. More good news for wine lovers is ➤





Above left: Pier Carlo and Tiziana Cortese with their father Giuseppe Cortese. Above right: along with Bruno Giacosa, Gaja put Barbaresco on the map

that Barbaresco is usually less expensive too – now there's an advantage to being less famous!

Actually, Barbaresco and Barolo have similar aroma and flavour profiles: you'll find it's quite hard to tell them apart in blind tastings. Both are redolent of red roses, violets, sour red cherry, raspberry and sweet spice nuances, but it's the texture and weight of each that differs most. Barbaresco is a wine of unmatched elegance and refinement, while Barolo offers more power and structure. Ultimately, it's really a case of first among equals.

Barbaresco's production area is much smaller than Barolo's. Only four communes are allowed to make Barbaresco (compared to Barolo's 11): Barbaresco, Neive, Treiso and San Rocco Seno

'People now tell me they love Barbaresco more than Barolo. It's not a case of one being better than the other, but 10 years ago I never heard anybody say that' Gaia Gaja

d'Elvio, though locals often refer to the latter as Alba (San Rocco is a part of the town of Alba).

Just like Barolo, Barbaresco lies on the right side of the Tanaro river but the topography differs between the two areas, accounting in part for the softer personality of Barbaresco's wines. Barbaresco has generally softer and gentler sloping hills, with vineyards growing at slightly lower altitudes – 280m-300m above sea level on average (only a portion of Treiso's production zone is higher at up to 500m). And while both Barolo and Barbaresco are characterised by mainly chalky marl soils with patches of sand, limestone and mineral-rich clay, there is a slightly higher proportion of clay in Barbaresco. Furthermore, there are noteworthy differences within the Barbaresco production zone as well, and this shows in the wines.

Barolo: the pros and cons

'Things are starting to change,' says Laura Giordano, president of the Enoteca Regionale del Barbaresco and a well-known local producer. 'The quality level of Barbaresco wines has improved dramatically over the past 10 years, and our producers are starting to travel more, emerging from Barolo's shadow.' Gaia Gaja, one of Angelo Gaja's two talented daughters (younger son Giovanni is also learning the ropes), echoes this view: 'People now tell me they love Barbaresco more than Barolo. It's always a matter of individual taste, not a case of one being better than the other, but the key point is that 10 years ago I never heard anybody say that.'

Martina Minuto of Moccagatta voices an opinion held by many other Barbaresco producers: 'Being much smaller than Barolo, both in terms of >

Barbaresco: know your vintages

2011 Great vintage of rich yet graceful wines; a minority are overripe, but much better than Barolo. Naturally reduced yields due to flowering difficulties.
Drink 2016-2030

2010 Solid wines; less successful than Barolo due to ill-timed rains.
Drink 2015-2025

2009 Difficult for Barbaresco; at best, soft wines of early appeal.
Drink 2015-2024

2008 Classic vintage of high-acid, tannic wines that will age well.
Drink 2015-2035

2007 A warm vintage of softer wines; some are overripe.
Drink 2015-2025

2006 High acid, resolutely tannic wines that need cellaring.
Drink 2015-2040

2005 Fresh and perfumed wines; underrated due to the late season rains that hit Barolo, but less so in Barbaresco.
Drink 2015-2030

2004 Overrated year: good, well-balanced, powerful wines; but many evolving quickly, too ripe

and one-dimensional.
Drink 2015-2020.

2003 Very dry, hot year; wines high in alcohol and super-ripe.
Drink up.

2002 Rain-plagued vintage; lighter bodied wines, but some positive surprises.
Drink up.

2001 Stellar vintage that has it all: balance, charm and power.
Drink 2015-2035.

2000 A hot vintage overrated from the start; some very good wines but not the greatest.
Drink 2015-2020



'We've always been viewed as the poorer, cheaper, less quality-driven cousin, which isn't really fair or true'

Martina Minuto of Moccagatta (above)



hectares (1,984ha for Barolo, 684ha for Barbaresco) and bottle production (12 million bottles/year vs four million/year), and with less history, we've always been viewed as the poorer, cheaper, less quality-driven cousin, which isn't really fair or true.' Angelo Rocca of Albino Rocca once joked to me that 'even the phrasing plays against us: people say Barolo and Barbaresco rather than Barbaresco and Barolo, and so we always follow in tow'.

But in fact, many Barbaresco producers don't consider their vicinity to Barolo a problem. Pier Carlo and Gabriele Cortese of Giuseppe Cortese believe that 'Barolo is one of the world's great wines, but so is Barbaresco. It makes sense to work together to better broadcast the individual differences, but also the high quality of the two wines. There's strength in numbers and Barbaresco is too small to fight this battle alone.' ➤

Barbaresco's best sites

In 2007, Barbaresco's different crus were officially recognised (the so-called *Menzioni Geografiche Aggiuntive* or MeGA), and these 65 hallowed sites are now recognised on labels. It was about time, too, as locals have long known that some sites always deliver better grapes than others – much like in Burgundy, where a patchwork of premiers and grands crus also exists. In fact, one of the most fascinating aspects of Barbaresco is just how different wines can be depending on where the grapes were grown. Just like there's a world of difference between a Musigny and a Corton, the same is true of a Barbaresco from Rio Sordo and one from Montestefano.

The crus of Barbaresco

The majority of this sub-region's best crus are located south of the town of Barbaresco towards the hamlet of Tre Stelle and Treiso. Other quality vineyards lie to the town's north-east, and of these, Montestefano is an exceptional site. Its higher-lying vines have benefited the most from climate change, as

its slightly cooler microclimate guarantees wines of both body and finesse. Generally speaking, the Barbarescos of Barbaresco are the most complete and balanced of all.

Best crus Pajè, Pora, Asili, Martinenga, Montefico, Montestefano, Muncagota, Rabajà, Rio Sordo, Roncaglette and Secondine. This latter site is where Angelo Gaja sources the grapes for his world-renowned Sori San Lorenzo (no longer a Barbaresco because he chooses to include a little Barbera in it; Barbaresco, like Barolo, must be 100% Nebbiolo).

Top producers Albino Rocca, Bruno Giacosa, Bruno Rocca, Ca' del Baio, Cascina Bruciata, Cascina delle Rose, Cascina Luisin, Ceretto, Cisa Asinari Marchesi di Gresy, Giuseppe Cortese, Moccagatta, Produttori di Barbaresco, Roagna.

Need to know The ridge that includes Asili (mainly south/south-east exposure), Rabajà and Martinenga (mainly south/south-west) is the real grand cru of Barbaresco. These three sites, plus Neive's Santo Stefano and Treiso's Pajore (see p24) are the five best vineyards

of the entire Barbaresco DOCG – true grands crus in all but name only. Barbaresco's Pajè, Montestefano and Rio Sordo (see left) are the three best premiers crus.

The crus of Neive

Neive is divided into a lower-lying modern town and a picturesque medieval hamlet. Geology here is complex: moving southwards from Neive, where sites like Cotta and Basarin are found, soils are more sandy (with less limestone and clay) than Barbaresco's, but more northerly sites, where Santo Stefano and Gallina lie, are ➤



Neive

Barbaresco has been dwarfed not just by Barolo but by Gaja and Giacosa. Other wines weren't always up to their high standards, making things even harder' Bruno Nada

Bruno Nada of Fiorenzo Nada adds another twist: 'In some respects, Barbaresco has been dwarfed not just by Barolo but by the sheer presence of two superstars: Gaja and Giacosa. Clearly, it was those two who captured all the attention, not Barbaresco; and of course, they also make Barolo, further muddling things. In truth, the rest of Barbaresco's wines weren't always quite up to their high standards, making things even harder.'

Luisa Rocca of Bruno Rocca puts a positive spin on the matter: 'We're blessed to have not just Gaja and Giacosa in our midst, but also what many consider to be the world's greatest cooperative, the Produttori di Barbaresco. All of this attests to the heights that Barbaresco can achieve.'

Producers are bullish about Barbaresco's prospects. 'Barbaresco is the one Piedmontese denomination that has most benefited from climate change,' says Gaja. 'The wines now have riper flavour profiles without losing their trademark elegance. Over the next 10 years, things will only get better.' ➤



Above: Ceretto's Bricco, Asili vineyard in the Barbaresco cru



Right: Luisa Rocca of Bruno Rocca

Barbaresco's best sites (continued)

richer in clay. Neive is historically also famous for outstanding Dolcetto wines. Generally speaking, the Barbarescos of Neive are the most powerful and structured.

Best crus Albesani, Basarin, Currá, Cottá, Gallina, Santo Stefano, Serraboella.

Top producers Bruno Giacosa, Cantina del Glicine, Castello di Neive, Cigliuti, Piero Busso, Sottimano, Ugo Lequio.

Need to know Santo Stefano may be the single best vineyard of the Barbaresco DOCG - in fact one of the greatest vineyard sites of Italy. Gallina and Serraboella are two outstanding premiers crus: the former gives chunkier, fleshier wines that are hard to resist, while the latter offers greater refinement.

The crus of Treiso

Treiso is one of the few areas in the Langhe where forests still grow tall and temperatures are noticeably cooler, especially at night. The best crus are all located to the north and west of the town. Treiso's generally much cooler microclimate explains the steely, high-acid resolve of many of its wines, but not all of them - this is one of the most

Treiso



common misconceptions made about Italian wines. While much of Treiso is an area of extreme viticulture not all of its vineyards lie at high altitudes (Rombone, for example). Generally speaking, the Barbarescos of Treiso are the most graceful and refined.

Best crus Bernardot, Bricco di Treiso, Pajorè, Rombone, Valgrande.

Top producers Ca' del Bajo, Fiorenzo Nada, Pellissero, Pio Cesare, Rizzi, Sottimano. Many of the grapes for Gaja's Barbarescos come from Treiso.

Need to know The Pajorè cru has always been considered one of the top four or five crus of the Barbaresco DOCG. Rombone, Bricco di Treiso and Bernardot (the last two

situated on one of the steepest spots in all the Langhe) are high-quality sites as well.

The crus of San Rocco Seno d'Elvio

The least known of Barbaresco's communes, the Seno d'Elvio is actually a stream, though locals rightly point out that the Elvio in their town's name refers to a Roman emperor, Elvio Publio Pertinace, who was born there.

Best crus: Meruzzano, Montersino, Rizzi (all these are shared with Treiso) and Rocche Massalupo.

Top producers Adriano Marco e Vittorio, Armando Piazza, Poderi Colla.

Need to know Over the past 10 years, I've been characterising the differences between these wines and the other communes of Barbaresco and though more bottles and vintages will be needed before clear-cut specifics emerge, I believe the wines of San Rocco Seno d'Elvio embody traits that fall somewhere in between those of Treiso and Barbaresco, offering much earlier accessibility but less complexity.

For many producers, the appellation's small size is a blessing: 'Of the four major Italian DOCG wines, Barbaresco has the smallest production: our wines are the rarest – another factor that adds to their mystique,' says Alberto di Gresy of Cisa Asinari Marchesi di Gresy.

He also believes that the recent 2011 vintage will further help Barbaresco's cause: 'It's one of the best vintages in memory. The wines are fuller

bodied than usual, but retain their proverbial grace and charm, so there's never been an easier time to become a Barbaresco lover.'

So in many respects, these are the best of times for Barbaresco. Wine lovers everywhere would do well to fill up their glasses, and their wine cellars, with the best that the region has to offer. There are fewer wines made anywhere in the world that will guarantee as much pleasure. **D**

Ian D'Agata is a DWWA Regional co-Chair for Italy. His book on Barolo and Barbaresco is due out this year

D'Agata's top 20 Barbarescos to try



Bruno Giacosa, Asili 2005 19/20 (96/100)
£90 Armit Wines
Rich and textured, but more austere than Giacosa's Santo Stefano di Neive. Very long, with red cherry fruit, truffle and earthy tones.
Drink 2015-2035 **Alcohol** 13.5%

Angelo Gaja 2004 18.75 (95+)
£100-£120 Fine & Rare, Great Eastern

Fine Wines

Balanced, graceful and long – the hallmark of Gaja's wines – this has a bit more size thanks to a warmer year. The estate makes more famous wines, but I think this Barbaresco is the best. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14%



Cisa Asinari Marchesi di Gresy, Martinenga Camp Gros 2008 18.75 (95+)
£63-£70 Boutinot, Millésima, Woodwinters
Minerals, underbrush and cherries; classically styled with high acidity and firm tannins. Needs time.
Drink 2018-2030 **Alc** 14%

Ceretto, Bricco Asili 1989 18.5 (95)
£121 Fine & Rare

Vibrant and long, with lovely tobacco, red cherry and camphor notes and the tell-tale 1989 creaminess. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 14%

Musso, Pora 2011 18.5 (95)

£30 The Tasting Room
Mesmerisingly poured – red roses, minerals and sour red cherries – and mineral. A winner. **Drink** 2015-30 **Alc** 13.5%



Pio Cesare, Il Bricco 2010 18.5 (95)
£64-£75 Fine & Rare, Mondial, Peake Wines, Planet of the Grapes, Richard Dawes, Uncorked, Wine Reserve
High acidity, steely and almost lean, but amazingly perfumed.
Drink 2018-30 **Alc** 14%

Produttori di Barbaresco, Pajè 2008 18.5 (95)

£30-£39 Astrum, Cavex, Fine & Rare, Four Walls

Wine Co, Millésima, Woodwinters

Delicious rose and red cherry nuances backed up by noteworthy but polished tannins. Pajè doesn't get any better than this. **Drink** 2020-35 **Alc** 14%

Roagna, Asili 2008 18.5 (95)

£90 Armit Wines
Sharply acidic and tannic, but with wonderfully pure red berry and Asili minerality. Still a bruiser – cellar this for another decade. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 14%



Angelo Pastura 2011 18.25 (94)
N/A UK www.angelopastura.com
Very precise red berry and flinty mineral notes, complicated by red roses. Little-known, small but promising producer. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

Cascina Bruciata, Rio Sordo 2006 18.25 (94)

N/A UK www.cascinabruciata.it
High acidity and noteworthy tannins provide support to Rio Sordo's typically soft, rich, ripe red cherry and marzipan characters. **Drink** 2015-2026 **Alc** 14%

Luigi Giordano, Montestefano 2011 18.25 (94)

N/A UK www.luigiordano.it
A high acid spine lifts pretty red cherry and orange peel notes. Very Montestefano – assertive tannins. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 13.5%



Sottimano, Pajore 2006 18.25 (94)
£48 Lea & Sandeman
Linear, very pure aromas and flavours of gunflint and red cherry. Lovely balance and real Pajore breed and power. **Drink** 2018-2030 **Alc** 14%

Nada Fiorenzo, Rombone 1998

18 (93)
£40-£46.86 A&B Vintners, Fine & Rare
Rich and suave, with Rombone's typical balsamic edge and darker fruit notes. Still youthful, and a major success for a vintage of mostly lean wines. **Drink** 2015-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

Castello di Neive, Santo Stefano 2007 17.75 (92)

£38 Fortyfive10
Typical Castello di Neive – lovely balance to the red cherry, violet and marzipan aromas and flavours. **Drink** 2015-2025 **Alc** 14%



Castello di Verduno, Rabaja 2008 17.75 (92)
£26 Lay & Wheeler
Very floral and clean red berries on the nose and palate. Slightly austere with a very saline finish. **Drink** 2018-2028 **Alc** 13.5%

Albino Rocca 2002 17.5 (91)
N/A UK www.albinorocca.com
Soft red fruit and sweet spice nuances – ready to drink. A major success in a poor vintage. **Drink** 2015 **Alc** 13%

Ca' del Baio, Asili 2011 17.5 (91)
£25-£34 Eurowines, Fine & Rare
Underbrush and coffee complement dark red cherry notes. A bit more herbal than usual. **Drink** 2020-2035 **Alc** 14%

Marco e Vittorio Adriano, Sanavaide 2010 17.5 (91)
N/A UK www.adrianovini.it

Great example of San Rocco Seno d'Elvio's lighter frame and irresistible early appeal. 'Sanavaide' is the name in dialect of San Rocco Seno d'Elvio. **Drink** 2018-2026 **Alc** 13.5%

Cecilia Monte 2010 17.25 (90+)
N/A UK +39 0173 67454
Very ripe aromas and flavours of dark cherry, cocoa and balsamic spices. Monte is the wife of Maurizio Garola of Ciau del Tornavento, one of Piedmont's best restaurants. **Drink** 2017-2024 **Alc** 13.9%



Moccagatta 2010 17.25 (90+)
£28 Gerrard Seel
Intense violets and dark berries. Vibrant and fragrant, from a mix of Barbaresco and Treiso grapes. **Drink** 2018-2025 **Alc** 13.5%

For full UK stockist details, see p115