

# WINE, TAR AND ROSES



Only in Italy would the local constabulary have such refined palates, case in point; the top brass Carabinieri sampling at the 2007 Barolo Auctions.

## CURTIS MARSH CONFESSES HE CANNOT GET ENOUGH NEBBIOLO, INDEED MORE THAN JUST A PASSING PHASE, IT IS BECOMING AN OBSESSION.

It is not often that I have a preoccupation for a single variety; after all, I do purport to have a 'wandering palate'. I was for a period last year, fixated with Sangiovese or Chianti Classico to be more precise, having been to Tuscany twice in three months and totally besotted in the idyllic countryside and indigenous produce. Although I remain an advocate, this infatuation has diminished somewhat with the passage of time.

However my current Nebbiolo fetish, whilst stimulated by an October, 2007 trip to d'Alba, Piedmont, awash in Barolo, Barbaresco and white truffles, would appear to be indelible and I simply can't get enough of the stuff.

Admittedly, I am a late bloomer with Nebbiolo, having found the wines in general, disagreeably tannic and too rustic (feral) for my then, obviously more delicate and sweeter inclined palate. Perhaps the wines were not what they are today either (see C&WA article below, "The Metamorphosis of Piedmont: The Rapidly-Evolving Expression of Nebbiolo"), moreover, my palate has evolved, or maybe even matured?

There is a point to emphasise here, that our palates and tastes do change or evolve over time, perhaps in the same way wine goes through its own evolution with bottle age, we too start off feisty and mellow with time! There are also ones circumstances to consider, having noticed a definite change in my own tastes and preferences for wine since moving to Asia (over 7 years ago) now exposed to a far wider panorama of wines. Discovery and being exposed to new wines is fundamental to this life-long edification and enjoyment.

What intrigues me most about Nebbiolo is its exceptional complexity and individual personality, with the caveat that it is the secondary characteristics that come with bottle age that are the most absorbing. Young Nebbiolo, specifically Barbaresco and Barolo, this limited parameter based on having seen nothing convincing of the variety outside of Piedmont, is somewhat unyielding and even the most modern of the so-called modernist producers still require at least 5 to 10 years to lose their youthful, primary characters and become harmonious and requisitely provocative.

That is not to say consuming a young, perhaps newly released wine (Nebbiolo) is not enjoyable or more importantly edifying, as it can be equally meaningful to have an impression of a wine in its youth to appreciate the metaphysical contingencies and to be able to reflect on the wine ten years down the track, assuming the onboard computer can retain such detail. My wife is particularly disgruntled that my recall or database only exists for wine!

There are distinctive elements that are a thread in mature Nebbiolo, the combination a mesmerising potion both to the olfactory and taste senses. Tar and Roses is a description that I have borrowed from a winemaking friend and Nebbiolo aficionado, although I don't think he actually coined it, but it aptly defines the prominent odorous components amongst the mosaic of scents, a hedonistic mixture of liquorice and the scents of red roses. In a tactile sense, I liken this to biting in to a Rose's Chocolate with the flavours of bitter dark chocolate blending with the gooey red berry filing.

Another distinct nuance is cedar forest, with the combination of the resinous pine bark and foliage or needles permeating through the wine, both in perfume and flavour. In its youth this can be a spirited menthol-like character but with age it takes on the complexities of the forest along with forest floor autumnal, earthy, mushroom nuances that are incredibly alluring to wine enthusiasts. Augmenting these complexities is an idiosyncratic aged balsamic vinegar characteristic, a piercing sourness and nuance that is perceived both in the aroma and on the palate, and whilst an acquired taste, works fabulously in this instance.

Then there is the colour, or more specifically the lack of it, often seemingly limpid and alarmingly tawny in appearance. Take no notice of colour with Nebbiolo, like Pinot Noir; the depth of colour invariably bears no resemblance to volume of flavour or unbridled power of the wine.

Tannin is a prominent element of Nebbiolo, tannins that never go away, regardless of bottle age, Nebbiolo tannins are defiant to the end and present throughout the entire wine, lingering in the farewell. These are hopefully the good tannins, fine and integrated with a chewiness and savoury, wood-bark qualities of the finest black Chinese Tea, giving the wine an agreeable firmness and lasting backbone. An iron fist in a velvet glove! In the words of Angelo Gaja, "To enjoy Nebbiolo you have to like tannins, and it must be taken with food."

Needless to say, I attend every Nebbiolo tasting and dinner I possibly can and along with visits to wineries in Piedmont, below are notes on the standout wines of late. If I could also point out the 2004 Barbaresco and Barolo wines are now coming on to the market, an excellent vintage with a consensus amongst those in the know and seen as one of the most promising vintages of the decade.

#### Gaja - Barbaresco

The energetic Angelo Gaja was in Singapore recently and in good form, both his wines and his captivating oratory. I visited Gaja winery in October last year where his daughter Gaia now winemaker, actually she is in complete control of everything, took us through cellars and a range of wines. I have also included notes from a 2006 dinner that Angelo hosted at the Kee Club in Hong Kong.

#### GAJA BARBARESCO 2004 (TASTED AT THE WINERY)

Initially tight nose, opens up with air to reveal black cherry and raspberry building in fragrance and concentration with rose petal on a background of dark chocolate and balsamic with balsa-wood nuances. The palate entry typical of young Barbaresco, mouth puckering tannins, tea leaves, fireside charcoals, with concentrated, piercingly tart raspberry fruit, very focused, beautifully elegant once you are past the tannins, the perfume of the wines bouquet transposed verbatim and accelerated across the palate by exhilarating acidity, nervy with excellent cut, then back come the tannins and earthy qualities on the finish with walnut and black Chinese tea.

Deceptively approachable yet certainly does not lack for power. Gaia Gaja portrays it as an elegant, high-cropping vintage but the conditions were very good, indeed an extraordinary long vintage finishing in November with perfect phenolic ripeness and particularly smooth tannins.



#### GAJA CONTESSA LANGHE NEBBIOLO 2001 (TASTED AT WINERY)

Perfume of raspberry, red currant and rose petal and tea leaf, charcoal background with coffee grinds and hint of dark chocolate suggesting a higher oak regime. Super-concentrated palate entry with tart raspberry fruit and vivacious acidity imparting an incredible length that carries the raspberry flavours on forever amongst powdery tannins. A lot of tension in this wine, focused on tangy, savoury elements, the perfect balance here between power and elegance, extremely classy.

#### GAJA BARBARESCO 1995 (TASTED AT LUNCH - RAFFLES SINGAPORE, JUNE 2008)

Scents of cedar forest and pine needles, strong aged balsamic notes, walnuts, antique woods, muscatel and dried fig, breaths out to reveal more fruit, black cherry Grappa-like perfume, dark chocolate and liquorice, rare roast pigeon and gamey-venison pungency. Tawny, barky palate entry with dried walnut and piercing balsamic sourness, accentuated by high-pitched tangy raspberry and tamarillo pith: turbo-charged by the cobalt acidity carrying the concentrated fruit all the way through the palate. Considerable tannins kick in with a black Oolong tea earthiness, bringing a savouriness to the wine - breathing over an hour the wine becomes markedly sweeter in fruit and the tannins less grippy, the mid-palate becoming silky smooth, fleshy with a sweet-sour interplay and looking more like Grand Cru Burgundy. Angelo Gaja commented the early 90s vintages were all very difficult - 1995 the first vintage of the changing viticulture conditions associated with global warming.

Following wines served at the Kee Club dinner, June, 2006

#### GAJA BARBARESCO 2001

Nose is not unlike the 1997, sweet perfume of red rose's violets, kirsch spirit, with some intriguing musky hints and liquorice, almost molasses-like. Zingy and tangy palate with racy acidity (like the 1996) with good mid-palate lushness and layers of sweetness, then twisting around to sour plums and dark cherry, wrapped in chocolate; finishes long with mouth-drying tannins. By all accounts, one of the best Barbarescos he has made.

#### GAJA BARBARESCO 1998

Quite different again, earthy, a little herbal, roses, violets, dried woods, some saddle leather, quite dense and almost port like; earthy with lots of tar and liquorice, quite chocolaty; finishes with black cherry, mouth-puckering tannins and tangy, racy acidity - bigger, more brawny wine.

#### GAJA BARBARESCO 1997

Noticeably more generous and sweeter in perfume, in keeping with the hot and dry vintage, indeed almost Burgundian on the nose, leaping from the glass with blueberry and a more stewed, concentrated kirsch-like nuance. Lush palate with layers of sweet fruit; ducks guts, roasted pigeon, clay earthy flavours, and less of liquorice elements, but still has loads of tannin - incredibly seductive wine.

#### GAJA BARBARESCO 1996

Classic red rose perfume among a grappa-like concentration of deep blueberry, blackcurrant and violets; coffee grinds, charred meats, liquorice, dark bitter chocolate, baky burnt-wood and pipe tobacco. The palate is intense with piercing tangy fruit, sour cherries, becoming earthy, with cedar and dried wood flavours; has amazing length with cold steely acidity and mouth-coating powdery tannins - still looking youthful.

#### GAJA BARBARESCO 1989 (MAGNUM)

Classic tar and roses, has developed complex secondary aromas of truffle, tobacco, and Chinese black tea, some interesting salty parmesan characters. Palate is very earthy, wet clay, still has plenty dark cherry fruit with strong acid backbone, tannins becoming integrated - the best drink of the night and will continue to age for some time yet.

Gaja wines are available in Hong Kong through Remy ([www.remy.com.hk](http://www.remy.com.hk), Tel: 2845 5995). Also at Rare and Fine Wines, L6 Bank of East Asia Building, Central ([kkwong@rarefinewines.com.hk](mailto:kkwong@rarefinewines.com.hk), Tel: 2522 9797). In Singapore through Cellarmaster Wines ([www.cellarmasterwines.com](http://www.cellarmasterwines.com) Tel: 6766 5185).

#### LUCIANO SANDRONE - BAROLO

The following wines were present by Barbara Sandrone, daughter of Luciano Sandrone at a DWC dinner held at Dr NK Yong's residence, with the wines available through Dr Yong;

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Luciano Sandrone is one of the leading producers in Barolo and whilst he is traditionalist in the vineyard, is generally associated with the modernists using French oak tonneaux for ageing his Barolos with his single cru Barolo Cannubi Boschis arguably the quintessence of the modern style of Barolo. [www.sandroneluciano.com](http://www.sandroneluciano.com)

#### SANDRONE NEBBIOLO D'ALBA VALMAGGIORE 2005

Rose scented with a whiff of menthol and lavender fields, raspberry and red currant, developing to an almost pinot noir like sweet perfume, lots of iron in the background, black earth with just a hint of liquorice. Intense palate entry, wonderful attack of concentrated raspberry, accelerated by exhilarating acidity, incredibly fine and integrated palate for Nebbiolo, super fine powdery tannins - amazing length wonderfully elegant wine but not losing any of the intensity of the variety. One of the most impressive d'Alba designated wines I have had, purchase several cases, if you can find it!



Barbara Sandrone pointed out the pains they went to purchasing this vineyard back in 1989, having to negotiate with from 28 families, but determined to own outright this bowl-shaped vineyard that had a reputation for superior grapes due to higher altitude and sun variance.

#### SANDRONE BAROLO LE VIGNE 2003

Rose and violets perfume, liquorice with subtle menthol and lavender notes, hints of wild thyme. The fruit perfume is still very primary raspberry sherbet-like although there are some nice tobacco-cigar nuances. Silky, elegant palate with tightly bound raspberry, cherry fruit although powdery, mouth-puckering, teeth coating tannins overwhelm the wine, but they fine and integrated, just needs time.

# VERGNE

( Fraz. di BAROLO )

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#### SANDRONE BAROLO CANNUBI BOSCHIS 2003

Strong perfume of dried rose petal and violets, then a wave of intensely rich Christmas-cake-like-fruit, raisins, dried plums and figs, cloves spiciness amongst, liquorice and balsamic notes, and pronounced cigar room (new cigars and tobacco). Crunchy and intense palate entry, turbo charged pomegranate and raspberry fruit followed by a rush of the tangy piquancy of balsamic amongst strong clove and black tea flavours. Overall, a lean and racy wine with invigorating yet super fine green tea flavoured tannins with persistent tangy pomegranate, red currant flavours – needs at least another 10 years cellaring.

#### SANDRONE BAROLO LE VIGNE 2000

Candied sweeter nose that is quite closed by comparison to the 03, yet some secondary nuances appearing with underlying hints of dried herbs, thyme and oregano, salty, parmesan, antique woods – cedar and dried mushroom. Lean palate entry, taught fruit, really tart yet precise, lasered on to the palate with pomegranate and raspberry. Big hit of spice and heat along with black tea, mouth-drying tannins, rosemary oil and a touch of pleasant bitterness – seems a lighter framed wine than the slightly more rustic style of 03. Very elegant and I would say in a sleep phase, needs a few more years to evolve.

#### TENUTE CISA ASINARI SEI MARCHESE DI GRESY - BARBARESCO

This property was one of my highlights of my October, 2007 trip through Piedmont, and I one the great sleepers of the Barbaresco region. I intend to do a comprehensive article on Marchesi di Grésy in the near future, however wanted to highlight the three outstanding wines below which are available now in Singapore through Enoplus, contact Elina Chong.

Tel: 6396 6682 Email: [enoplus@singnet.com.sg](mailto:enoplus@singnet.com.sg)

In brief, Marchesi di Gresy have three estates situated in the Langhe and in the Monferrato zones, with an established reputation for producing some of the finest wines in the Piedmont region. The Martinenga estate in the Langhe near Alba grows primarily Nebbiolo, with ideal southern exposure and blue marl soils, is considered to be one of the greatest single vineyards dedicated to the production of Barbaresco DOCG. Their Barbarescos can be deceptively elegant, camouflaging their power, but do need time to evolve. [www.marchesidigresy.com](http://www.marchesidigresy.com)

#### MARCHESI DI GRESY BARBARESCO MARTINENGA 2004

Intoxicating perfume of winter cedar forest, grappa-like maraschino cherry and aniseed, rose petal, develops intriguing salty-cheesy nuances, like Parmesan cheese, also some exotic Indian spices – cooked fennel seeds, BBQ meats and fireside charcoals with hints of liquorice and subtle background of leather and cigar box. Sour, tangy piercing palate entry, spicy and invigorating, saturates the palate with pomegranate and red currant piquancy, builds in weight in the middle palate with a flirting sweetness but quickly oscillates back to savoury and tangy.

There are black olive and baked earthy complexities amongst powdery black tea tannins with a bitter almond, savoury twist. A wine of considerable vitality and crunchy acidity, indelible tangy fruit with great length, should develop secondary complexities within 3 to 5 years and peak around ten years.

#### MARCHESI DI GRESY BARBARESCO CAMP GROS MARTINENGA 1999

Smokey and tarry, dense, steamed pudding fruit, dried figs, ripe prunes and dates, rich pipe tobacco and cigar, aniseed, dried rosemary and pine needles amongst antique timbers, hedonistic and clearly a very ripe vintage. Monumental palate entry, rich and prune like concentration, bark and dried timbers, a huge surge of mouth puckering tannin, crunchy sour acidity carrying piercing raspberry and sour cherry, red currant fruits. An awesome, brooding powerhouse that needs a lot more time and can see this ageing at least 20 years. The grapes come from a small part of the Martinenga vineyard near Rabajà that offers the very best in terms of terrain, exposure and micro climate and only produced in the best vintages.

#### MARCHESI DI GRESY BARBARESCO GAIUN MARTINENGA 2000

Alluring nose akin to aged burgundy, autumnal forest floor, morels – wild mushrooms, mingled with tobacco, aniseed, sweet maraschino cherry, washed rind cheese, hints of liquorice and cedar forest. Racy and elegant palate entry, earthy and briary, incredibly complex and savoury with interesting straw-hay characters, builds in intensity with invigorating acidity and black Chinese tea tannins, spicy and tangy, with a bitternut-roasted almond twist amongst lingering tangy sour plum fruit.

Also from a select part of the Martinenga vineyard near Asili, produced only in the best vintages and aged in French oak barriques.

CHEERS,  
CURTIS MARSH – THE WANDERING PALATE