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WINES OF THE TIMES

For Barolos, the Thrill Is Back

By ERIC ASIMOV

LET'S get this out of the way immediately: Barolo is not an inexpensive wine. I acknowledge that. But put that aside for a moment for these very good reasons: Barolo is a great wine, it can be a profound wine, and it is a wine that I love.

Like all great wines, Barolo appeals both to the head and to the heart. Its complexity and depth reward contemplation, while its sensual aromas and flavors seduce and enthrall. For me, Barolo is right up there with Burgundy in possessing this thrilling combination of intellectual and soulful attraction, although my cabernet-loving friends scoff that I simply haven't drunk enough great Bordeaux. I'm sure they are right.

In the late 1980s through the '90s, Barolo lovers got used to good vintages. The vintages from 1996 to 2001 in particular were excellent, and I would even add the forgotten 1995 vintage to that streak. But in 2002 hail destroyed much of the crop, and in 2003 unrelenting heat and drought contributed to unusual, anomalous wines. By all accounts, though, 2004 was a superb return to form.

To see for ourselves, the wine panel recently sampled 25 Barolos from the 2004 vintage. We decided to limit ourselves to bottles under \$100, which means we omitted many of the pantheon producers, like Bartolo Mascarello, Bruno Giacosa, Giacomo Conterno, Paolo Scavino, Luciano Sandrone and quite a few others.

Still, even at Barolo's lower tier, it was clear to us that 2004 is indeed a fine year. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Chris Cannon, an owner of Alto in midtown Manhattan and Convivio in Tudor City, and Fred Dexheimer, the wine director of the BLT restaurant group.

What makes 2004 distinctive? To me, it is the fact that many of the wines are approachable right now — much earlier than is typical for tannic, high-acid Barolos — without sacrificing elegance or



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structure. In a classic, austere vintage like 1996 or 2001, Barolos can take years to come around. Many '96s are still not ready to drink. Riper years like 1997 and 2000 are accessible earlier but sacrifice some of the precision and focus of the more austere years. In this sense, the '04 vintage performs a rare balancing act.

Nonetheless, by accessible I don't mean, "Drink it now!" I'm simply saying many of these wines will not overwhelm your mouth with ferocious tannins. It is possible to enjoy them today. But they will be far better and more rewarding if you can put them aside for five years or longer.

The nebbiolo grape, of course, is famous for its impenetrable tannins. For this reason, among others, some young Barolo producers in the 1960s and '70s began to change their methods, hoping to make the wines more enjoyable at an earlier age. They

quicker the fermentation time, diminished the time the juice would macerate with the skins and began to age the wine in small barrels of new French oak, rather than the big barrels of old oak that were traditional.

For much of the '80s and '90s,

A vintage that
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rewards patience.

Barolo and its neighboring partner in nebbiolo, Barbaresco, were defined by conflict between the so-called modernists and the traditionalists.

But in the last five years, there has been movement to the center, with many producers moderating previously rigid stands. We found far fewer Barolos than we ex-

pected marked by the overbearing flavors of new oak or by inky black colors, rather than the more natural ruby. If these wines were more accessible earlier, it was not so much a result of winemaking techniques as a sign of the vintage.

Indeed, we found even the wines of producers long associated with the modernist movement to offer the aromas and flavors more typical of classic Barolos.

The Pajana from Domenico Clerico, for example, and the Elio Altare, our No. 4 and No. 5 wines, were lovely, balanced bottles. The robust Clerico did have a touch of detectable oak, but it was not over the top, nor did the fruitiness of the Altare overwhelm the floral and licorice flavors.

Still, we preferred more traditional expressions, like the Massolino Vigna Margheria, our No. 1 wine, rich and powerful yet graceful and already complex. Incidentally, while Massolino's methods of vinification are traditional, one could argue that the Vigna Margheria, made from a single vineyard, is a modern manifestation because Barolo is traditionally a blend from several sites. But we won't get caught up in that.

Our No. 2 bottle, the Einaudi Costa Grimaldi, was complete yet approachable, typical of these 2004s in that it will give pleasure now but reward patience. I especially liked the No. 3 Brovia, with its earthy tar, mineral and cherry flavors. It, too, was surprisingly accessible.

We all admired the consistency of the wines, but Chris, perhaps, was a little less taken with the vintage than the rest of us. "People overstate the quality of the vintage," he said. "It's very good, but not '96, '99 or '01."

Stylistically, he's right about that, as these wines do seem more open at this stage in their development. Who knows, we may be drinking these while we continue to wait for the '96s.

All right, now let me return to the subject on everybody's mind, money. Yes, these are not inexpensive wines. Barolo lovers know that, yet are willing to sacrifice. Obviously these are not everyday wines — but for special occasions they are good values, certainly compared with other wines in the same price range.

And, honestly, so many good Barolo producers are out there, including quite a few that we didn't have in our tasting.

Roagna is one of my favorites and always a great value, as are Anselma, Azelia, Cavallotto, Ratti, Francesco Rinaldi, Giuseppe Rinaldi, Vietti — I could go on and on.

And then there's the best nebbiolo value of all, Produttori del Barbaresco, but that's another story entirely.

PAIRINGS



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Back around the time the earth rooled, there was a restaurant, Giordano's, on West 39th Street near the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel. Craig Claiborne gave it three stars in his 1968 "New York Times Guide to Dining Out in New York."

Among the specialties was sautéed beef tenderloin, unusual because its sauce depended on white wine, not red. When I asked the chef about it, he said it was lighter that way.

I had not made it in many years but as we tasted the 2004 Barolos and everyone's appetite was whetted for pasta with a beef ragù and truffles, I thought of it. I decided to try it with venison and porcini to serve with fresh pasta. You'll need some last-minute stove work before you can put it on the table and pour that Barolo.

FLORENCE FABRICANT

PASTA WITH VENISON AND PORCINI

Time: 30 minutes plus 30 minutes' resting

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| <p>1 venison tenderloin, 8 to 9 ounces, in 1-inch cubes</p> <p>3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil</p> <p>Salt and black pepper</p> <p>6 sprigs fresh thyme</p> <p>1 ounce dried porcini</p> <p>½ cup dry white wine</p> <p>2 teaspoons purple Brive mustard, or Dijon mustard</p> <p>¼ cup minced shallots</p> <p>1 tablespoon unsalted butter, or half unsalted, half black truffle butter</p> <p>6 ounces fresh fettuccine or pappardelle.</p> | <p>½ teaspoon pepper and leaves from 4 sprigs thyme. Mix well and set aside. Place porcini in a bowl, add ¾ cup warm water and set aside. Wait 30 minutes.</p> <p>2. In a bowl, mix wine and mustard together. Place a fine strainer over bowl and place porcini in it. Press out as much liquid as possible. Mix mushroom liquid with wine mixture. Dry porcini on paper towel and chop.</p> <p>3. Heat remaining oil in a 12-inch skillet. Add shallots and chopped porcini and sauté over medium heat until tender and lightly browned, about 3 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Remove from pan. Bring a pot of</p> | <p>salted water to a boil for pasta.</p> <p>4. Heat ½ tablespoon unsalted butter in skillet on medium-high, add venison and quickly sear on all sides. Remove from pan. Return shallots and porcini to pan and add reserved liquid. Simmer until somewhat reduced. Stir in remaining butter or truffle butter. Remove from heat.</p> <p>5. Boil pasta about 4 minutes, drain and add to skillet. Simmer contents of skillet briefly, tossing ingredients together, until heated through. Check seasoning. Add venison, toss again and serve garnished with thyme sprigs.</p> <p>Yield: 2 servings.</p> |
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1. Place venison in a bowl, add 2 tablespoons oil, ¼ teaspoon salt,