



Italy, Piedmont: 2014 Barolo, 2015 Barbaresco & More (New Releases)

featuring Virna Borgogno
reviewed by Monica Larner

June 2018

"Who would have thought?" is the refrain that returns with some frequency. I started my investigation into 2014 Barolo expecting disappointment. What I discovered instead is a collection of delightfully dignified and graceful wines—at times fragile—that absolutely do justice to our expectations of fine Nebbiolo. I would not classify 2014 among the great vintages, because that would be exaggerating its merits. The delicious memories of the superior 2013 and 2010 releases are still so vivid on the palate. However, I am happy to report that 2014 offers a flurry of wonderful surprises, some of which may well sweep you off your feet.

The 2014 vintage is for those who are hopelessly in love with Nebbiolo—not Barolo per se, but Nebbiolo.

The 2014 growing season was a nail biter. The Barolo region was hit by three devastating hailstorms that thundered down a well-traveled corridor of bad weather right over some of the most celebrated vineyard crus from Cannubi in Barolo to Bricco Boschis in Castiglione Falletto. Much of the spring and summer saw reoccurring afternoon rains that made tending to the soggy vines and working the muddy vineyards with tractors nearly impossible. The summer sunshine could barely penetrate all that gloom and gray, thus creating the ideal conditions for fungal disease. Thankfully, warming sunbeams and rain-free days arrived in the nick of time to accelerate late-harvest Nebbiolo during its last stage of ripeness.

Everyone in the region was caught holding their breaths. One vintner, Giuseppe Vajra of the G.D. Vajra winery, described it best. "The 2014 vintage in Barolo reminds me of one of those

mornings when, no fault of your own, you are about to miss your flight,” he said with exasperation. “You down your morning espresso, you run the red lights, you push your way through security and you are last at the boarding gate. But you make it. The other passengers look at you with dread, but you do make the flight.”

A Farmer's Vintage

How did vintners turn those proverbial lemons into Barolo? Precision farming and fruit selection (in an already low-yield vintage) are the answers. “In 2014 we harvested by berry, not by cluster,” said Giacomo Conterno of Poderi Aldo Conterno in Monforte d’Alba. Some of his vineyard sites in Bussia were down to one-third of normal production. “We saw botrytis and had to cut each cluster in half to allow the remaining berries to ripen. When you go to the butcher, you ask to have the bad pieces of meat and the fat removed so that you are left with the fillet. That’s what we did in the vineyards.”

Silvia Altare of Elio Altare in La Morra lost up to 60% of her Barolo production in 2014. She is releasing 4,500 bottles of 2014 Barolo compared to 12,000 bottles in a normal year. Hail damage in Cannubi means that a mere 1,200 bottles of the 2014 Barolo Cannubi were produced. “A year like this forces you to do all the hard work in the vineyards. It’s a farmer’s vintage,” she said. After that lesson learned, Silvia Altare is now using anti-hail netting to protect her fruit, as are many others.

Giuliana Clerico of Domenico Clerico in Monforte d’Alba said her estate suffered three hailstorms. Each storm required a separate cleanup of the vineyards. “We had to use helicopters for some of the spraying because the steep sites were too wet and slippery for the tractors,” she said. “This was one of the most expensive vintages I remember.”

Alfio Cavallotto of the Cavallotto winery in Castiglione Falletto did not make his Barolo Bricco Boschis in 2014. “We were badly hit by hail, and fruit was down 30%. After the hail, we could not defend ourselves in time against downy mildew because we do not use chemicals in our farming. In the end, we lost 60% of our grapes.”

Maria Teresa Mascarello of Bartolo Mascarello in Barolo said the 2014 vintage represented a fierce battle with nature. “We lost 40% of our production. Insects ate some of the flowers at the beginning of the growing season, and we suffered through two hailstorms.”

Chiara Boschis of E Pira-Chiara Boschis in Barolo told me that she suffered a 50% reduction in production, much of which she attributes to the risks and vulnerabilities associated with organic farming. “Despite the difficulties, I still wanted to make the single-vineyard wines Cannubi, Mosconi and Via Nuova. I believe the differences between each wine are more distinct in 2014.”

During my travels and tastings in Barolo, I came to agree with this interesting point raised by Chiara Boschis. Some producers referred to 2014 as a “didactic vintage,” or what we might call an educational or textbook vintage. Each cru stands out with greater independence due to the transparency and fragility that is inherent to 2014. Just look at the wines of Poderi Aldo Conterno: the Barolo Bussia, Barolo Bussia Cicala, Barolo Bussia Colonnello and Barolo Bussia Romirasco wines are easier to identify by their distinct territory-driven characteristics. Maceration times were increased generously in 2014 to protect the delicate nature of the fruit. Giacomo Conterno said, “There is greater clarity between the crus because there is so little volume of each in terms of yields. The beauty of 2014 is that you get to understand why the producer decided to make these cru wines in the first place.”

Roberto Conterno of the Giacomo Conterno winery in Monforte d’Alba sent shock waves through Barolo when he declared he would indeed produce his iconic Barolo Riserva Monfortino in 2014. Not only did he unapologetically forge forward with this plan, he claims it could well be his best Monfortino ever. Over in Barbaresco, Produttori del Barbaresco decided to make all nine of its single-vineyard expressions in 2014. This comes despite the fact that Produttori del Barbaresco had 30% less fruit in 2014, General Manager Aldo Vacca tells me. “Barbaresco had less damage and much less rain in 2014 compared to Barolo,” he stated.

The first producer I tasted with for this report was Gianluca Grasso of the Elio Grasso winery in Monforte d’Alba. Gianluca and his family took a very different approach in 2014. They decided not to make the single-vineyard Casa Maté and Gavarini Chiniera wines in 2014 and instead blended the fruit to make an “annata” Barolo released at a lower price point. “I had to be honest with myself,” Gianluca said. “I was not completely happy with the grapes, and it didn’t make sense for us to make grand cru wines.” Marco Parusso in Monforte d’Alba also skipped over his cru selections and instead blended the fruit to make the Barolo 44 Annata Blue Label, a wine only produced three times—in 2002, 2005 and now in 2014.

Honestly, I would have expected more producers to skip over their cru wines in 2014. I saw this at my first visit with Gianluca Grasso and was surprised to learn that few others took this courageous and risky decision. As my tasting travels continued through the Langhe, my appreciation grew for those who did make their precious single-vineyard wines, especially with such scarce quantities. Either way, producers were faced with impossible decisions in 2014.

My general assessment of the vintage is very good. As I noted above, this vintage appeals to those who adore the Nebbiolo grape in its purest form rather than the powerful and distinctive wine we know as Barolo, with all its bells and whistles. These are naked wines. They are not dressed up. There is a distinct purity and clarity to the vintage that, at times, can result in shy or reticent expressions. At other times, they are romantically fleeting and ethereal. The 2014

vintage will not be remembered for dense or concentrated fruit, so the mouthfeel can often appear less intense, shorter and less forceful. Many producers compensated for this weakness by extending skin macerations for increased color and flavor. Others opted for more time in barrel to build up extra muscle mass that way. Yet the vintage remains subtle and elegant nonetheless. Generally speaking, the wines are accessible in the short and medium term. This makes them well suited to restaurant consumption. However, more than a few gems should last the test of time. If you like cool-vintage Barolo as opposed to warm-vintage Barolo, you will love 2014. The only problem I see is the difficulty of finding the few bottles out there.

Luca Currado of the Vietti winery in Castiglione Falletto said 2014 is a “bell-bottom vintage.” It reminds him of the 1970s when Barolo was made according to old-school criteria that prizes finesse and grace over power and brawn. “This is the most Burgundian vintage to come out of Barolo in a long while,” he said.

The 2015 Vintage

The 2015 vintage marks a return to heat. The wines I tasted in Barbaresco show dense concentration, thick fruit flavors and diminished color intensity (Nebbiolo tends to lose color in the hot years). I also picked up some jammy notes in both Barbaresco and in some of the 2015 Barolo barrel samples I tasted. This may be one of those vintages in which sugar and phenolic ripeness are not always ideally matched. The tannins can appear more astringent or gristly as a result. It is a vintage better suited to medium-term drinking as opposed to long cellar aging.

“July was very hot with temperatures hitting 40 degrees Celsius,” said Gaia Gaja of the Gaja winery in Barbaresco. “Thankfully, we got diurnal shifts in August to help build the texture and the structure of the wines.” She said 2015 reminds her of 2005.

Bruna Giacosa of the Bruno Giacosa winery in Neive is also reminded of 2005 and noted, “September was very hot, and we harvested early. What you get is an explosion of flavor and evident notes of dark fruit.”

Gianluca Grasso described 2015 as the perfect year for Barbera, and indeed, readers should seek out these wines. Barbera d’Alba and Barbera d’Asti are well served by the extra density and softness that comes in a vintage like this.

Looking Forward to 2016, 2017 and 2018

“It was impossible to make bad wine in 2016,” said Luca Currado. This vintage is shaping up to be a classic year for Nebbiolo (less so for Barbera). The 2016 season was cool and long, with important temperature shifts to build structure and flavor intensity. That sudden accelerated summer heat that hit the Langhe in 2015 never materialized in 2016. Moderate temperatures

stayed the entire course of the growing cycle. There was hail damage in 2016, and some wineries suffered production loss as a result. Marta Rinaldi of the Giuseppe Rinaldi winery in Barolo said she lost up to 20% of her Brunate fruit in 2016 because of violent hail and strong winds at the end of July.

I am thrilled by some of the 2016 Langhe Nebbiolo and Nebbiolo d'Alba wines that are on the market now. You'll find those wines in this report and will notice that they consistently score a point or two above average. Enrico Scavino of the Paolo Scavino winery in Castiglione Falletto proudly said his 2016 Langhe Nebbiolo is the best he has ever made. Alfio Cavallotto moved much of his fruit up from Langhe Nebbiolo to Barolo status because he is so pleased with its potential. We can look forward to some very special wines when the 2016 Barbaresco and Barolo releases hit the market.

The 2017 vintage was notoriously hot and dry, forcing some vintners, like Gianluca Grasso, into extreme vineyard management mode. "I was like a Carabinieri policeman when it came to the canopy. I was ever-vigilant over every leaf that could provide much-needed shade for the fruit." Many producers, such as G.D. Vajra and Cavallotto, expressed deep satisfaction with Dolcetto. Other varieties, including Nebbiolo, faced very stressful conditions in 2017.

The jury is out on 2018. So far, the spring season has seen a lot of rain and gloom. Growers were very nervous during my last visit in June because maintaining vineyard health in humid and hot conditions was a growing concern. On the upside, there are plenty of water reserves to spur vigor if conditions get hot and dry this summer. Indeed, the Alps are a brilliant white and heavy with snow as we nudge closer to the hottest months. As always, vintners remain cautiously optimistic.

To conclude, I will borrow the insightful words of Bruno Rocca of the eponymous winery in Barbaresco: "You can give the same piece of meat to many different chefs, but a good cook will always grill a better steak than a bad cook."

2014 Virna Barolo Cannubi Boschis

The 2014 Barolo Cannubi Boschis is a wine of depth and substance. This Barolo achieves a very pretty level of density and power for what is a cooler vintage. Red rose aromas rise to the top but are quickly followed by more substantial tones of blackberry and ripe cherry. This is a mid-weight effort that is enhanced by finely tuned layers of spice and crushed stone. The wine needs a bit of time to open and put on volume, but once it does it sails forth with pride and purpose. **(93 points)**

2014 Virna Barolo Sarmassa

I am very happy with these new releases from Virna. The 2014 Barolo Sarmassa builds intensity as the wine opens in the glass. It brings on dark fruit, grilled herb and spice—much of which seems to also come from the oak aging. The wine is aged in both tonneaux (both new and used) and botte grande for one year. Sarmassa delivers a contemporary interpretation of Barolo, but there is enough structure and textural richness to pull it all together with seamless integrity and power. Bottle production is very small—only 2,500 units were made. **(92 points)**

2014 Virna Barolo del Comune del Barolo

The 2014 Barolo del Comune del Barolo opens to smoky and savory notes that lift first from the bouquet to reveal dark fruit, black cherry and plum. There is a point of sweetness on the close that helps to add density and momentum to the mid-weight palate. Drying mineral notes put those sweet notes back onto equal footing and balance. **(91 points)**

