

Barbaresco 2008 and riserva 2006

More than an understudy to Barolo, these powerful, elegant wines are stars in their own right, says Kerin O’Keefe – especially now that vineyard areas better highlight terroir

BARBARESCO, LONG SEEN as Barolo’s junior partner, has stepped out of the long shadow cast by its far larger, more famous neighbour by turning out structured wines that balance finesse and power. Like Barolo, Barbaresco is made with 100% Nebbiolo and can be produced in two versions – normale and riserva. While the normale must age for at least two years before release, riserva must age for four, and even though both versions are obliged to spend a minimum of nine months in wood, most producers barrel age their normales and riservas for considerably longer, often 18 and 30 months respectively.

While a number of Barbaresco producers continue to age their wines in barriques (which, when new, can strangle Nebbiolo’s subtle nuances with invasive oak and impart bitter wood tannins to wines that are already naturally tannic), the latest vintages demonstrate more restraint across the board (although at the 2008 vintage debut in Alba last May many tasters commented on the number of heavily oaked wines from Neive). Many Barbaresco producers now use seasoned barriques, while others have switched over entirely to the traditional Slavonian casks, or *botti*, with an increasing number of estates preferring a combination of the two barrels. Taking into account individual winemaking styles, a quintessential Barbaresco should boast Nebbiolo’s hallmark floral, wild cherry, mineral and earthy sensations, with a full-bodied yet elegant structure. Riservas, on the other hand, should have more depth, complexity and ageworthy structure, cellaring well for 20 years or more in outstanding vintages.

Vintage variation

Barbaresco’s growing zone, on the opposite side of the city of Alba from Barolo, spans the villages of Barbaresco, Neive and Treiso, and a sliver of Alba’s hamlet of San Rocco Seno d’Elvio. Generally speaking, the wine’s namesake village yields structured but graceful wines, Neive the most tannic and powerful, and Treiso the most elegant. Barbaresco producers appreciate the crucial role individual vineyards play in great Nebbiolo and, after years of careful evaluation, have officially delimited all their vineyard areas. Starting with the 2007 vintage, producers can only add one of 65 authorised geographic mentions to their labels.

The 2008 Barbarescos aptly demonstrate the region’s status as a maker of world-class wines. Although much of 2008 was marred by cool, damp conditions, late-ripening Nebbiolo benefited from warm, dry weather between mid-August and early October. Most of the 2008s are lovely, if not overly complex, with higher acidity levels than the preceding three vintages, balanced by succulent fruit. Most will benefit from a few more years in bottle.

The 2006 riservas are from a lauded vintage that, at the outset, promised classic wines of impressive complexity and longevity. While some have lived up to expectations, there have been reports of others being unbalanced and more evolved than anticipated. A mixed bag if you will, so if you have any in the cellar, best to start tasting a bottle every now and again to judge cellaring time.

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Barbaresco: The facts

Grape 100% Nebbiolo
Under vine 685ha
Villages Barbaresco, Neive, Treiso and a bit of Alba
Ageing For normale wines: 26 months before release, including at least nine months in wood; For riservas, 50 months before release, including at least nine months in wood
Annual production 4.24m bottles

Barbaresco: know your vintages

2010 Uneven weather prolonged the growing season, but in the end yielded good quality fruit. Not as rich and ripe as previous vintages. Promise classic wines that will need time.

2009 Very hot, dry summer yielded grapes with high sugar. Look to be structured, tannic wines high in alcohol, but may not have enough acidity for long cellaring.

2008 Cold, wet spring then a warm, dry ripening season. Classic vintage with good fruit, firm structure and lovely aromas that need time to develop. Drink: 2013–2025.

2007 Round, ripe and warm with succulent fruit, although less than ideal acidity for lengthy ageing. Drink: 2012–2017.

2006 Tight, tannic and complex. The best wines come from top producers with well-known vineyards. Drink: 2013–2026.

2005 Elegant and approachable, but rain and cool temperatures compromised ageworthy structure and complexity. Drink: 2012–2015.

2004 Superb, classic vintage of structure and approachability. Drink: 2012–2024.