At first glance, things appear remarkably unchanged at Bruno Giacosa's winery during my recent visit. It is almost as if the daunting challenges that the legendary Barolo and Barbaresco producer has faced over the past five years had never happened. Giacosa, one of Langhe's trailblazing winemakers and an undisputed expert on the area's top sites, showed off the latest vintages and discussed the past, present and future of this iconic estate alongside daughter Bruna and winemaker Dante Scaglione.

Giacosa, now 82, began his illustrious career at the age of 14, when he started working for his father's grape-buying and winemaking estate. The young Giacosa soon gained renown for what many describe as his golden palate, and he went on to create Barolos and Barbarescos of extraordinary complexity from renowned vineyards, while discovering lesser-known sites that he would later make famous. Today, Giacosa's acclaimed bottlings read like a wish list for wine connoisseurs, and include some of the most hallowed names in Piedmont, such as Falletto and Le Rocche del Falletto in Barolo, and Asili and Santo Stefano in Barbaresco. His red-label Riserva bottlings – made only in the best years – are among the most sought after wines in the world.

Giacosa was one of the first Italian winemakers to fully understand the importance of Langhe's vineyards and, in 1967, he began bottling the famous hillside vineyard yields separately. Thanks to decades of experience as one of Langhe's foremost grape buyers and winemakers, Giacosa decided years ahead of time which properties he wanted to own. The main object of his desire? Falletto. Located in the venerable village of Serralunga, perhaps the most prestigious of all the Barolo villages, Falletto has perfect southwest exposure that allows the grapes to mature slowly but fully, while its calcareous soil adds complexity and structure: "I'd been buying grapes from Falletto since 1967 and had always wanted to buy it," says Giacosa. "In 1982, I finally realised my dream." In 1996, he went on to acquire a parcel of land on the top of the notable Asili hillside in Barbaresco. Today he admits that this is the vineyard closest to his heart: "No other vineyard in Langhe yields a bouquet as elegant, or possesses such finesse and balance as Asili," says the veteran, who attributes the vineyard's performance to its sandy, almost silty soil, full southern exposure and high altitude.

Difficult times

More recently, however, Bruno Giacosa and his eponymously named estate have faced and overcome obstacles that would have likely beaten most other producers. The troubles all stem back to Giacosa's devastating stroke, in 2006, which kept him away from the cellars for an extended period while he recovered. His absence generated a series of rumours regarding the future of the estate, which reached fever pitch in 2009 when Giacosa declassified the 2006 vintage – widely considered by other local winemakers as an outstanding year. Thankfully for Barolo and Barbaresco lovers, the naysayers and sceptics were proved wrong and Giacosa continues to produce some of the most coveted wines coming out of Italy.
Giacosa has made his way back to work, where, despite the lingering effects of his stroke, he again spends mornings tasting and reviewing the wines during their various stages of evolution. But during his long convalescence, all eyes had turned to the then-in-house winemaker, Scaglione, who had been working closely by Giacosa’s side since 1992 – the first assistant he ever hired. By 2008, Scaglione was feeling the effects of the immense pressure placed on him. Giacosa, with his daughter Bruna, realised that it was time to part ways. ‘We never doubted Dante’s extraordinary winemaking capabilities at his passion for our wines but, without Bruno’s constant presence, we lost the ability to communicate with each other,’ explains Bruna.

**Differences & reconciliation**

For his part, Scaglione agrees that things didn’t run as smoothly as they could have in the aftermath of Giacosa’s stroke. ‘I worked alongside Bruno for 16 years and, while I carried out major responsibilities, I was always very deferential to Bruno. I had what can only be described as a real “Italian employee” attitude, and I wasn’t comfortable when I suddenly found myself in charge.’ After the Giacosas reluctantly let Scaglione go in March 2008, they hired local oenologist Giorgio Lavagna, then winemaker at the large Batasiolo winery, to replace him. Just three years later, the Giacosa backedtracked.

In May of this year, they dismissed Lavagna and asked Scaglione to return to the estate, much to the joy of Giacosa’s long-time fans. ‘Giorgio is a very good winemaker,’ says Bruna. ‘I was overjoyed,’ says Scaglione. ‘I always felt that my relationship and my work with Bruno Giacosa wasn’t over, so I said yes immediately.’

Boyed by a new level of confidence, thanks to his recent experience as an outside mentor guiding a select group of estates – an activity he evidently plans on continuing with – Scaglione was more than ready to pick up where he left off. Happily, he jumped at the opportunity. ‘I was overjoyed,’ says Scaglione. ‘I always felt that my relationship and my work with Bruno Giacosa wasn’t over, so I said yes immediately.’

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Courtin controversy

In 2009, Giacosa created uproar by announcing that he would not be bottling his 2006 Barolos and Barbarescos. Despite the ensuing outcry, Giacosa has not backed down and stands by his decision not to release his coveted wines that year, and to sell them off in bulk instead. ‘The 2006 growing season was unbalanced, and this is reflected in the wines. Although it wasn’t at the level of the dismal 1992s or 2002s, which I also did not bottle, I don’t consider 2006 to be an exceptional vintage,’ states Giacosa. He concedes that 2006 could have yielded good wines at best, but adds that “good” is simply not good enough!

‘There were so many factors affecting 2006. Added together, I think my father preferred to forget 2006, and decided not to bottle it’ Bruna Giacosa

‘Bruno and Dante taught me that the greatest wines have the least intervention from their makers. And this is the most difficult road to follow as a winemaker, because you need perfect grapes from the best vineyards, and loads of patience,’ says Versio. To which Giacosa flashes one of his rare smiles.

Above: Bruno Giacosa’s daughter Bruna is taking an increasingly high profile role at the estate, and oversaw the firing and re-hiring of winemaker Dante Scaglione.

**Wine of the Week**

**Bruno Giacosa**

**Barbaresco 2009**

Drink:

12.5% Alc:

HHHHH

£27.78 Armit, Harvey Nichols, Kerin O’Keefe is a freelance wine writer based in Italy and the author of a forthcoming book on Brunello di Montalcino (University of California Press)

Kerin O’Keefe was the Clay McLachlan was the Clay McLachlan was the Decanter Wine Writers’ Awards

Winemaker Award at the 2009 International Wine Writers’ Awards. 2011 for his portrait photographs in Decanter

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