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Producer profile

Pio Cesare

Refusing to be pigeonholed as either traditionalist or modernist, this historic Piedmontese winery is a staunch believer in blended wines, yet was one of the first to buy its own vineyards. Kerin O’Keefe pays a visit

THE PIO CESARE winery is full of the unexpected: from its ancient cellars supported by 2,000-year-old walls snaking their way beneath the bustling city of Alba, to the firm’s dichard defence of its classic Barolo and Barbaresco over its single-vineyard wines.

And don’t expect to find someone actually named Pio Cesare at the winery. The founder of what is one of Piedmont’s oldest, most prestigious Barolo and Barbaresco houses — whose name was actually Cesare Pio — would be 150 years old were he alive today. His legacy has been passed down through subsequent generations of Pios and Cesares, and today, his maternal great-grandson, Pio Boffa, is in charge of the iconic winery, assisted by his nephew Cesare Benvenuto.

Founded in 1881, just as Barolo’s reputation was being forged as the ‘The King of Wines, the Wine of Kings’, Pio Cesare stands today as the last of the seminal Barolo wineries actually based in Alba, where once all the major Barolo houses stood and where for generations most of the wine was produced. The winery continues to make its complex, ageworthy wines in an ancient cellar. Completely modernised 10 years ago, the original cellar’s labyrinth of fortified Roman walls, dating back to 50 BC, wind 12m under the busy city while its dark, vaulted tunnels house both new barriques and large casks of French oaks.

The cellar holds a wealth of old bottles, showing that Pio Cesare was already bottling at least some of its own wines early in the last century (most wineries sold their Barolos and Barbarescos only in demijohns and small barrels until the late 1950s and 60s). By the time Cesare’s son Giuseppe Pio took over in 1919, the firm was already exporting to Switzerland and Belgium. Pio carried on in his father’s footsteps, exporting his Barolo to France and the rest of Europe, but after his only daughter married an engineer and moved away, he decided it was time to sell.

Bold moves
The engineer in question was Giuseppe Boffa — Pio Boffa’s father. Boffa recalls how his father made his grandfather change his mind. ‘When he married my mother, my father realised that the family winery shouldn’t be sold, so he gave up his engineering career to work at the firm. He trained under my grandfather and later took over.’ Thanks to his entrepreneurial spirit, Giuseppe Boffa brought the winery into the modern age by buying vineyards — the same ones that for years had supplied grapes for the Pio Cesare wines. Boffa bought Il Bricco in Barbaresco in 1964 followed by the Ornato vineyard in Barolo’s Serralunga village in 1970, famous for its structured, ageworthy wines.

Pio Cesare at a glance

Vineyard area
67 hectares between Barolo and Barbaresco.
25% grapes for Barolo production sourced from trusted growers

Production
450,000 bottles total:
60,000 bottles of Barolo; 10,000 bottles of Ornato Barolo; 25,000 bottles of Barbaresco;
5,000 bottles of Il Bricco Barbaresco;
350,000 bottles of other wines made from Nebbiolo, Dolcetto, Barbera and Gavi

Top: while Pio Cesare’s classic Barolo (and Barbaresco) are blends from different vineyards, the family brought the winery into the modern age by buying its own vineyards such as Ornato (right), and becoming grower-producers.
While it might not seem extraordinary today, buying vineyards was a bold move in 1960s Barolo. 'Barolo owes its fame to the fact that for years the production chain was strictly separated: there were the growers, and there were the producers, who bought the grapes then vinified and sold the wine,' explains Boffa. 'Today many people assume that a winery that buys grapes makes lesser-quality wine than one that vinifies its own fruit, but this isn't always true, especially when it comes to Barolo. In fact, when Barolo quality took off in the early 1960s it was because Barolo producers didn't own vineyards so were free to carefully choose grapes. “Top producers like my great-grandfather and grandfather chose the best grapes from the most desirable vineyards: from Serralunga to give the wine structure and longevity; La Morra for elegance and fragrance; Castiglione for bouquet; and Monforte for colour. Then they blended them together, just as we still do today for our classic Barolo. Blending Nebbiolo from different villages creates naturally balanced wines,” insists Boffa.

‘In my great-grandfather’s time, producers also selected the growers they wanted to work with—and the grower-buyer relationship lasted for life.’ Boffa still buys some Nebbiolo for his classic Barolo from the same families his great-grandfather bought from. But by the mid-1960s, Barolo’s age-old system began to break down as many growers became producers in their own right. The firm realised years before many of its peers that owning vineyards would be essential to maintaining quality. ‘We eventually bought vineyards from which we already sourced grapes—we would not settle for less,' says Boffa, who joined his father in 1972.

Changing with the times

Boffa is surprisingly protective of his traditional Barbarescos and Barolos: ‘These wines made Pio Cesare famous and are still our calling card. They have been for five generations. Blended Barolos and Barbarescos are the true expression of Nebbiolo in their respective territories and denominations.’ Despite Boffa’s deference to the firm’s storied wines, in 1985 Pio Cesare released a single-vineyard Barolo from Ornato, followed by Il Bricco in Barbaresco in 1990, both of which quickly garnered critical acclaim. ‘The Ornato came about as a response to the single-vineyard Barolos that started appearing in the late 1960s and 1970s. A number of these hailed from previously unknown vineyards, dubbed with proprietary or fantasy names by the owner of the vineyard. Ornato, on the other hand, is the historic name of our vineyard, and was already well known for its superior grapes back in my great-grandfather’s day; the same is true for il Bricco in Barbaresco.’ Boffa is quick to note that ‘single-vineyard bottlings aren’t necessarily better than Barolos and Barbarescos blended from different vineyards. They’re just different interpretations.’ The wines are, though, the more expensive of the range.

Boffa is adamant he is neither a modernist nor a traditionalist: ‘when the modernists reigned, I was seen as a traditionalist, now that traditionalists have made a comeback, I’m labelled a modernist,’ he laughs. ‘Until the late 1970s and 80s, the technology and knowledge we have today wasn’t available. It would be ridiculous not to take advantage of better winemaking skills and methods merely in the name of tradition,’ he insists.

Although he’s very attached to many aspects of tradition, Boffa admits that this loyalty makes the future more challenging. ‘In this part of Piedmont, we often feel the weight of tradition. For decades, we've been making singular wines from native grapes that only we have, so rather than invent new wines from other varieties we have to focus on creating the best Barolos, Barbarescos and Barberas possible, no matter what the vintage is like. Consistently buying vineyards in top areas remains key.’ Last October he bought another 2ha in Barbaresco.

### Pio Cesare: a timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Cesare Pio founds the Pio Cesare winery and establishes the cellar in Alba</td>
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<td>1919</td>
<td>Pio’s son Giuseppe takes over the firm and begins exporting to France</td>
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<td>1942</td>
<td>Giuseppe Pio (above) is joined in the winery by his son-in-law, Giuseppe Boffa</td>
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<td>1964</td>
<td>Boffa acquires the firm’s first vineyards in Barbaresco, turning Pio Cesare into a grower-producer</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>The firm acquires the Ornato vineyard in Barolo’s Serralunga</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Pio Boffa joins his father in the winery</td>
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Boffa believes that while great Barolo and Barbaresco have to hold up to lengthy ageing, they should also be approachable upon release. ‘If you buy my Barolo and have to wait 10 years to drink it, then you should also be able to wait 10 years to pay me,’ he states. Despite improvements that have softened the harsher, more austere Barolos of yore, Boffa stresses that while Barolo can be updated, it should never be completely restyled. ‘Barolo has a dignity that few wines possess, and it should never be made according to market whims.’ He’s not about to let changing consumer preferences dictate his wine style, and one hopes that neither will any of the future Pios and Cesares.

Kerin O’Keefe is a wine writer and author of Brunello di Montalcino (2012, University of California Press).

O’Keefe’s top six from Pio Cesare

Gavi 2010 ★★★★ 16 pts/20
£16.95 stockist details below
Pretty floral and spicy nose. Crisp, creamy palate of green apple and lime with lovely texture and weight. Drink: 2012. Alcohol: 12.5%

Barolo 2007 ★★★★★ 19
£46.30 stockist details below

Barbaresco 2007 ★★★★ 18
£46.30 stockist details below

Il Bricco, Barbaresco 2007 ★★★★ 17
£71 stockist details below
Loaded with dark fruit, spice, espresso and seamlessly integrated oak. This is a powerful, robust wine with bracing tannins that need time to tame. Drink: 2015–2025. Alc: 14.5%

Ornato, Barolo 2007 ★★★★★ 16.5
£71 stockist details below
Concentrated, ripe black fruit and mocha with evident oak sensations. Round and opulent with muscular tannins that need time to tame. Underneath the oak lurks a superb Barolo. Drink: 2015–2027. Alc: 14.5%

Nebbiolo 2008 ★★★★★ 16.5
£25.80 stockist details below

All wines are widely available via UK agent Maisons Marques & Domaines. For details, see p97