



A measured, informative, and very readable tour of Barolandia

Kerin O'Keefe *Barolo and Barbaresco: The King and Queen of Italian Wine*

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It may be argued (and is by me and numerous others) that the greatest and most fascinating wine of Italy is Barolo, from a smallish, surprisingly compact growing zone south and west of the wealthy town of Alba in the Langhe Hills of Piemonte; closely

followed by the even smaller Barbaresco, north and east of Alba. In view of which, it is perhaps surprising how few books exist on these two zones, certainly in the English language. It is to redress this situation that Kerin O'Keefe has taken up her pen (or put fingers to keyboard).

O'Keefe is a Bostonian wine journalist and author (published books include *Franco Biondi Santi: The Gentleman of Brunello* and *Brunello di Montalcino*) residing in Lugano, Switzerland (and therefore within easy driving-distance of Alba) with her husband, Paolo Tenti. She is responsible for numerous articles in magazines like this one and *Decanter* and is presently working for the American publication *Wine Enthusiast* as well. A number of her articles have been on the subject of Barolo and/or Barbaresco, and she has spent years

tasting the stuff (a happy fate, you might think; but that would be to underestimate the palate-coating, tannin-accumulating effect of Nebbiolo, which can turn the prospect of a 100+ lineup of individually excellent Barolo samples into a living nightmare). So, she is eminently qualified for the authorship of such a tome.

Personal journey

O'Keefe starts with a preface in which she speaks of her attraction to, preparation for, and writing of this book—her personal journey through Barolandia, you might say. The book proper begins with an introduction consisting of that mix of information and personal opinion with which she means to continue. Statistics, always

Above: The Castello dei Marchesi Falletti in Barolo, one of the region's most spectacular landmarks.

Photography by Paolo Tenti

necessary, usually dry, are deftly integrated into a narrative on the development of the Barolo/Barbaresco market over the past two or three decades—for example, “A look at annual bottle numbers shows that overall production of Barolo more than doubled between 1996 and 2013” (for the actual figures, get the book), while Barbaresco did something similar. This plants the seed of a boom-and-bust situation characteristic of the Barolo market historically and recently that will, in later chapters, bear fruit in the form of more detailed discussion—as, in a different way, the subjective statement “I do not hate barriques per se” (translation: “I do not hate barriques except when they invade the wine with their aromas of vanilla and toast”) plants a seed for ulterior discussion.

There comes a point in every serious book on specific wine zones when the author has to tackle potentially weighty issues such as vineyard and winery practices, grapes and clones, diseases and other problems, weather, history, politics, legalities, and so on, and one can do this at the beginning, at the end, or spread throughout. O'Keefe wisely elects to take on the generalities in the early chapters (Part One), leaving more detailed information to the sections on villages and specific producers of Barolo (Part Two) and Barbaresco (Part Three) that make up the major part of the book. It is the easier option for the interest value of the history of Barolo/Barbaresco and the sometimes surprising information that the author has come up with in the course of her evidently painstaking research.

In Part One, titled “The Place, the Grape, the History, and the Wine,” O'Keefe gives us a brief but detailed and enlightening geological history of the Langhe, with some remarks on the climate and political background thrown in. She then regales us with an analysis of the grape variety that stands 100 percent behind DOCG Barolo/Barbaresco, the “temperamental, not to say neurotic” Nebbiolo (mentioned, she informs us, under the name Nubiolo by the lord of the castle of Rivoli as early as 1266): its subvarieties, its clones, and its peculiarities, of which there is generous supply. She makes a special point of the site sensitivity of the variety and the difficulties arising from the inordinate

distance between individual buds, and the consequent effect on planting density. Shrewdly, she keeps the remarks on diseases relevant to Nebbiolo to a minimum.

Next up in Part One is a chapter called “The King of Wines, the Wine of Kings,” which turns out to be a potted history of Barolo (the wine) and its connection, in the depths of the 19th century, with statesmen such as Camillo Benso of Cavour and nobility like Marchese Carlo Tancredi Falletti of Barolo (the town) and his wife Giulia Falletti. It was she, O'Keefe tells us, who introduced the wine—before it was so denominated and when it was probably still somewhat sweet—to King Carlo Alberto of Savoy, which is how it got its royal epithet. The chapter continues with a fascinating section on the role of share-cropping and that of Napoleon and the Jewish money-lenders in dividing the land into lots of small Burgundy-like parcels as distinct from the large farms that continued to prevail in places like Tuscany.

There is a gripping chapter on “The Barolo Wars,” wherein O'Keefe gives us a blow-by-blow account of the various controversies, during the last two decades of the 20th century and the first of the new millennium, surrounding maceration method and duration, cleanliness and good practice in the cantina, wood size and type—basically, what is sometimes referred to as the struggle for the soul of Barolo, between the “modernists” and the “traditionalists”—terms that O'Keefe denigrates as “now ridiculously outdated” but that she nonetheless uses *faute de mieux*. Certainly, as indicated above, if modernist means heavily extractive and smelling of new toasty oak, then O'Keefe is on the side of the traditionalists, although to be sure, there is a lot of overlap and individual variation on a theme between the two extremes.

Subzonal marking

O'Keefe now embarks on a theme of great significance for the future of Barolo/Barbaresco, namely subzones, unofficially known as cru, officially referred to by the unwieldy title of *menzioni geografiche aggiuntive* (“additional geographic mentions”—it's as bad in English as it is in Italian). The

subject is complex, and mercifully there is not space here to descend into its various convolutions, so once again the only advice I can give is, get the book. O'Keefe presents the arguments clearly and cogently and reasonably briefly, and this chapter is essential reading for anyone taking an interest in Barolo/Barbaresco going forward.

Most of the rest of the book (Parts Two and Three) is devoted to an analysis of the various communes wholly or partially making up the Barolo/Barbaresco DOCG zones, and to the principal producers within the communes, with tasting notes on wines going back, in some cases, for decades and recommendations as to when to drink. Inevitably, given the large pool of growers from which to pick, given the finite nature of the book and the fact that Kerin is not one to skip lightly over a producer once selected, there are inclusions (such as Villadoria) and omissions (such as Roberto Voerzio) one may not agree with, but to be fair most of the obvious ones are included.

But with regard to selection, let's give the word to O'Keefe, in a statement made after the book's publication:

“There's a tendency when writing about Barolo and Barbaresco to always profile the same small group of select producers—many of which are iconic and fantastic while others are overrated in my opinion—and stop there without bothering to discover the plethora of small, fantastic wineries that are hand-crafting superb, terroir-driven wines. This is a shame because these undiscovered gems in both denominations are the backbone of the Langhe. While some have boutique price tags, many of these under-the-radar producers are making great wine without the hefty price tag of the most famous names, a crucial factor as demand and prices continue to climb for both Barolo and Barbaresco.”

The book finishes with a useful vintage guide up to and including the mythic year 2010; the legalities affecting Barolo and Barbaresco; a list of geographic mentions, with the most important in bold; a glossary; and a bibliography—all very useful for reference. Indeed, it's a very useful tome to have to hand: measured, informative and very readable. I thoroughly recommend it.



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