

**GAJA BARBARESCO
OVER FOUR DECADES**
by Kerin O'Keefe

Angelo Gaja, one of Italy's most charismatic and successful winemakers, is credited not only with drawing Barbaresco out of obscurity but with triggering the quality revolution that pulled the country's wine scene out of the doldrums. Yet while aficionados and pundits automatically associate Gaja with Italy's modern winemaking movement and sleek single-vineyard bottlings, the great aging potential of his wines should also be remembered. Tasting through four decades of Gaja's Barbaresco at an informal private tasting held for this author by Angelo and his daughter Gaia on January 12, 2007, at their

cellars in Barbaresco was a chance to experience Italy's quality metamorphosis at first hand. Changes and improvements in viticulture and vinification were subtle but unmistakable, while Gaja's hallmark elegance was evident in every bottling, like a family resemblance.

Founded in 1859, the house of Gaja is the oldest winery in the denomination. Angelo's father had already done a lot to raise the bar, including buying many of Barbaresco's best vineyards, before Angelo, the fourth generation, took the reins in 1961, at only 21.

The tasting began with the Barbaresco of that same vintage, made then, as today, with Nebbiolo from 14 of the estate's vineyards. Angelo's first vintage was a

stellar year, but the young winemaker's debut proved problematic because the extreme heat resulted in an exasperatingly long fermentation. Thankfully, only a tiny amount had been bottled before he realized that the fermentation had been incomplete, and he left the rest in wood for very long aging before bottling. Still dissatisfied, he initially refused to release the wine but decades later discovered that it had aged majestically into a quintessential Barbaresco.

Gaja has always been at the cutting edge, and many of his innovations that seemed outrageous were soon copied throughout Italy. One of the pioneers of single-vineyard bottlings, Gaja's seductive Sorì wines first appeared in 1970 with the 1967 vintage, and prices soared. After nearly ten years of experimenting, Gaja released his first barrique-aged Barbaresco in 1978, the same year that he planted Cabernet Sauvignon in the sacred heart of Nebbiolo country. He was also among the first, back in the 1960s, to advocate replanting at higher densities and pruning short to lower yields.

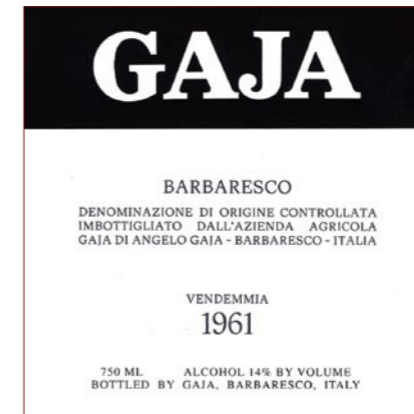
Since 1978, the winery has replanted in rows running up and down the slope, not only to facilitate tractors but also to allow sun exposure on both sides of the rows in his south-facing vineyards. Replanting has been gradual, and the average age of the vines is now between 30 and 40 years old. Although Gaja has employed temperature-controlled fermentation since 1982, he previously resorted to more artisanal methods. These included bussing in blocks of ice from Alba's slaughterhouse amid the skyrocketing temperatures in 1971, then pumping the must through a hose that had been laid between them. Although this certainly raised eyebrows at the time, the tactic worked, since the wine still shows very well today.

While Gaja's fans applaud his world-class wines, cynics often claim that his modern winemaking methods have changed the *tipicità* of his Nebbiolo. Yet these same critics often fail to note that Gaja persists with more traditional techniques whenever he thinks them

worthwhile. He is among the few top producers in Italy who still resist selected yeasts for the alcoholic fermentation, except in very difficult years when, as a last resort, he will add a small amount of nutrients to feed the native yeasts. Gaja's use of barriques has also come under fire by advocates of traditional Nebbiolo. But it should be pointed out that all his Nebbiolo wines are aged one year in barriques of various ages and one year in giant, perfectly maintained Slavonian casks that are, on average, 100 years old, so the new-wood sensations are minimal.

Starting with the 1996 vintage, Gaja pulled his single-vineyard Barbarescos (Sorì San Lorenzo, Sorì Tildin, and Costa Russi) out of the Barbaresco DOCG and into the less prestigious Langhe Nebbiolo DOC. This sent shock waves rippling throughout the wine world, amid speculation that he wanted to blend his beloved crus with less traditional grape varieties—strictly prohibited under the DOCG. Many quickly bemoaned the demise of Barbaresco. "I know what journalists and others in the industry have said and continue to say," acknowledges Gaja. "But my decision was actually to support Barbaresco. My family has always made Barbaresco, but as the single-vineyard bottlings grew in prestige, our flagship wine was suddenly referred to as basic, or *normale*, and was considered inferior to the crus, which I never intended. My family has been making wine and striving for excellence for more than 150 years, and I don't want anything we make to be considered 'regular.' So now I have only one Barbaresco."

Because it is the firm's historical wine, the following tasting focuses on Barbaresco but also includes four vintages of Sorì San Lorenzo for comparative purposes. All the bottles were opened up at 8:30am and the tasting ran from 10am until 3pm, to allow the wines to be retasted after evolving in the glass. It should be noted that while extraordinary in their own right, the single-vineyard bottlings, whether as DOCG or DOC, had very little effect on the quality of the Barbaresco, which overall has aged magnificently.



The tasting

Barbaresco 1961

A great vintage marked by extreme heat. Garnet with brick edges. Concentrated aromas of *goudron* or tar, and dried rose petals with a hint of tea. Still very much alive, with surprisingly fresh acidity and ultra-smooth tannins, balanced by shockingly pronounced cherry flavors for its age. Hours later, aromas and flavors of tea, mint, and licorice with a hint of vanilla. A heroic Barbaresco of power and grace. Gaja initially kept this off the market because the vintage's intense heat caused the wine to undergo an excruciatingly long fermentation. The tiny amount originally bottled underwent a second fermentation, forcing him to extend barrel aging for the rest before bottling. After decades in the cellar, Gaja discovered that it had aged majestically. **19**

Barbaresco 1964

Another stellar vintage for the Langhe. Luminous but deep garnet, with only slight orange on the rim. Dazzling bouquet of violets, rose petals, and a hint of sandalwood. Wild-cherry flavors and a still-firm acidity are balanced by velvety tannins. Astonishingly complex but youthful for its age, this is the only Barbaresco in the lineup to include grapes from the San Lorenzo vineyard acquired that same year, since from 1967 this has been bottled separately.

Simply gorgeous expression of Nebbiolo and full of personality. **19.5**

Barbaresco 1971

Another very hot year. Spicy nose loaded with ripe, almost stewed fruit, with whiffs of black pepper and tea. Well balanced with rather firm acidity but evolved tannins. Port-like texture and sweetness. Flavors of cherries preserved in spirits. Returning later, notes of truffle and thyme had emerged. Not as youthful as the previous two, but still in wonderful condition. **17.5**

Barbaresco 1978

The first Barbaresco to be aged one year in barrique as well as one year in large cask. According to Gaja, this wine was very closed for the first 15 years. Dark but bright garnet color. Leather, tea, and tobacco aromas, with a hint of animal and smoke. Ripe plum flavors, more power than finesse, with lower acidity than the previous wine and still-bracing tannins. **16**

Barbaresco 1982

An outstanding vintage, and the first year of temperature-controlled fermentation, which perhaps explains the darker, richer garnet color. Tantalizing nose, with Nebbiolo's hallmark violets, ripe berries, cherries, truffles, and spice. Impeccably balanced and youthful, with fresh cherry flavors and a long tobacco finish. **18.5**

Sorì San Lorenzo 1982

Darker ruby-garnet color than its stablemate. Complex, stunning bouquet of rich fruit, tea, and spice. Lush, mouth-filling berry and mineral flavors. Firm tannins; vibrant acidity; a full, round structure; and long, mineral close. This will be going strong for decades yet. **19**

Barbaresco 1985

Closed at first, but this opened beautifully after a few hours in the glass to reveal ripe plum, berry, and licorice



Angelo Gaja with a bottle of his Barbaresco

Photography © Owen Franken / Corbis



Barbaresco and its surrounding vineyards

on the nose, with mouthwatering black cherry on the palate and well-integrated oak. Opulent, with firm acidity and bracing tannins. **17.5**

Barbaresco 1988

Very dark color. Initial wood and vegetal aromas give way to spicy black pepper

and truffle after some hours in the glass. Lush plum flavors, still dominated by oak. More international in style. **16**

Sorì San Lorenzo 1988

Wonderfully spicy nose of white and black pepper and cinnamon. Very concentrated plum flavors, but elegant,

not jammy. Big, round structure and long, spicy finish with a hint of oak. **17**

Barbaresco 1989

Heady aromas of violet and rose petals, cinnamon, leather, and truffle. Lovely concentration, with fresh acidity and a firm tannic backbone. Long, wild-cherry

Photography © Owen Franken / Corbis

finish and tobacco close. A keeper that will continue to age gracefully for decades. Classic Nebbiolo. Superb. **19**

Barbaresco 1990

Luminous ruby red. A complex bouquet of dried cherries, violets, and licorice, with a hint of truffle and, later, graphite

as the wine continued to evolve. Elegant structure, with fresh acidity and smooth tannins perfectly balanced. Ripe cherry and strawberry flavors, with a long, licorice and mineral close. Another hallmark Barbaresco. Just gorgeous. **19.5**

Barbaresco 1996

Deep, dark ruby. At first austere, with a wood-dominated nose that soon dissipated once the wine began to open up in the glass after a few hours. Then, very ripe fruit and leather, and later still, graphite. Round and full-bodied, with rich black-berry flavors, a hint of vanilla, and a long, tannic finish. Still very youthful and rather aggressive for the moment. **17.5**

Barbaresco 1997

Hailed as one of the best years of the last century, 1997, with its hot conditions, resulted in wines of greater immediacy and ripeness than those from 1996, though both were officially rated as five-star vintages. Dark-ruby hue and ripe black fruit on the nose, with whiffs of licorice, tobacco, and truffles. Rich berry and truffle flavors, with hints of tea and figs. Long finish balanced by mouthwatering acidity and compact tannins. A real stunner that will age wonderfully for many years. **19**

Sorì San Lorenzo 1997

Since the 1996 vintage, Sorì San Lorenzo has been reclassified as Langhe Nebbiolo DOC and has had 5% Barbera added to the Nebbiolo. Dark-ruby color. Concentrated and mouthwatering black-fruit flavors, with a long licorice and tobacco finish. Full-bodied, with a biting, tannic close. Great breeding and race, but still a *bambino* that needs time. **18.5**

Barbaresco 1998

Overshadowed by the '97 and '99 vintages, which were hailed for their forwardness, '98 has never been fully appreciated. Gaja's '98 is a classic late bloomer and proved to be one of the

best of the tasting for the younger set. At first austere, but stunning floral aromas soon developed. Classic berry, licorice, and tobacco palate. Impeccably balanced, with vibrant acidity and bracing tannic backbone. Very young, with a long life ahead. **19**

Barbaresco 1999

More international in style, with initial oak and burned aromas that soon vanish. Exuberant chocolate and coffee aromas dominate the nose. Lavish fruit palate with well-integrated oak and vanilla. Teeth-coating tannins and a long, spicy close. Needs time to evolve. **16**

Barbaresco 2000

Deep dark-ruby color. Lush dark fruit and toasty fragrance, with a hint of vanilla and oak. Rich and ripe black-cherry and plum flavors are very concentrated but not jammy. Bold tannins and a long toasty finish. **17**

Barbaresco 2001

Alluring perfume of violets and roses, with layers of strawberries and truffle. Bright and succulent black-cherry and strawberry flavors, with bracing tannins that need time to soften. Incredibly long and elegant finish of spices and minerals. **19**

Barbaresco 2003

One of the hottest and driest vintages ever recorded. Fruit-forward aromas of ripe berries and plum, with hints of rose. Juicy raspberry flavors and floral sensations with the warmth of alcohol on the palate. Remarkable freshness for the vintage, balanced by firm tannins. The long cherry finish has telltale Gaja finesse. **18**

Sorì San Lorenzo 2003

Ripe raspberry scents laced with tobacco and spice. Mouth-filling cherry and berry flavors are forward but surprisingly fresh for the vintage. Tannic and muscular, but already very approachable. **17.5** ■

CHÂTEAU ANGÉLUS 1953-2005 by Serena Sutcliffe MW

I can never escape (nor would I wish to) the image of the Millet Angelus bell tolling over the fields when I broach a bottle of its namesake wine. There is something eternal about the picture it presents—like wine itself. Ironically, it is probably Millet's least characteristic painting, but it is ingrained in the memory and brings to mind the bells from three churches that, in the past, one could hear ringing simultaneously in the vineyard of Château Angéhus.

Time has moved on, but the owning family at Angéhus has been there for seven generations, so there is some excuse for nostalgia. The mood at the property, however, is always forward-looking, and it has been at the forefront of "modern" St-Emilion for 20 years. Hubert de Boüard de Laforest, a veritable dynamo firing on all cylinders, has propelled Angéhus into the limelight, and he has been accompanied on this vertiginous route upward by his cousin by marriage, Jean-Bernard Grenié. The material for this transformation was there—23.4 hectares (57.8 acres) of vineyard, one of the most important estates on the St-Emilion *côtes*, on the lower slopes of the *côtes* area, to the west of St-Emilion and facing south.

When Hubert de Boüard appeared on the scene (this should be taken in context, since his family has been in St-Emilion since 1782), there was all to play for. He had always been passionate about wine and studied at Bordeaux's Faculté d'Oenologie under Emile Peynaud. During weekends, he worked in the vines of l'Île de Patiras (opposite Pauillac) and at Château Thieuley with Francis Courselle; he is sufficiently honest to say that it was not just "work experience," but also to pay for his first bottles of Haut-Brion, Palmer, and Pichon Lalande. Somehow, between 1980 and 1988, he also managed to go to Burgundy more than a dozen times, since he so admired certain vinification practices there, particularly the use of lees in the *élevage* of great red wines and the advantages to be gained by putting wines into barrel as soon as possible after the alcoholic fermentation. Hubert waxes lyrical on the subject of lees—he calls them

marvelous natural allies of wine because they are antioxidants, allowing one to work with lower doses of SO₂, leading to better fruit preservation and silkier tannins. Then he moves on to putting the wine into barrel early (thus the malolactic fermentation in barrel), which, he considers, gives better, more balanced integration between wood and wine, avoiding a dominant oak quality.

Hubert will always, however, come back to the vineyard. He was born among the vines (metaphorically, of course), and he has the reactions of a vigneron, with the common sense that this entails. His main priorities are—and this seems a pretty sensible mantra to me—the following basic precepts:

- adapting pruning to allow better spacing for the grapes;
- organic, and not chemical, fertilization;
- careful management of grass covering to create natural competition and restrict the vines' natural vigor;
- an increase of leaf surface to improve grape ripeness;
- use of prophylactic methods to avoid chemical treatments, via leaf removal at key times, suitable pruning, removal of unnecessary buds, and elimination of *contre coeurs*; and
- parcel selection in order to pick grapes at optimum maturity.

For the past ten years he has been working on soil life, realizing that a plant is automatically more resistant when it finds its balance in the right soil. Protected soil is perhaps hundreds of times richer in microorganisms than soil that has been treated with herbicide or that is too compacted. The aim is natural low cropping, avoiding green-harvesting, with an ideal average yield of 35–40 hectoliters per hectare.

The first vintage that Hubert regards as his own is 1985, aged entirely in oak (the 1982 was half-aged in barrel), while the first vintage entirely fermented in stainless steel was 1989. In 2004, at the château, we looked at all 20 vintages that Hubert had made by then, from the newly born 2004 back to the 1985. Then, in September 2006,

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a lucky group of us was hosted by Bipin Desai, the Los Angeles wine collector (and nuclear physicist) at Paris's classic, three-star restaurant Taillevent, where we tasted 21 varied vintages over a superb meal, in the company of Hubert and Corinne de Boüard and Jean-Bernard Grenié.

The tasting

Flight 1: 1992, 1993, 1994, 2002, 2005

We kicked off with the 2005, in all its 58% Merlot/42% Cabernet Franc glory (Hubert is a great fan of the latter variety, appreciating its scent and freshness). Without a doubt, this is fabulous wine, still very vanillin but oh so spicy. Then we had four modest vintages over cèpes and snails. Hubert always says that he established that he could make wine in those difficult years in the early '90s! The 1992 has lots of Merlot, with its plummy fruit, but it is not surprisingly a mite vegetal, while the 1993 has real charm and some middle opulence—prunes soaked in eau de vie. As often, I prefer it to the 1994, which is very pretty and full of herbs and spices but finishes a little dry. The 2002—56% Cabernet Franc/44% Merlot—is lovely and crisp, super-mocha, and so frank and true—and, incidentally, a bargain.

Flight 2: 1970, 1986, 1988, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2004

Roast bass and girolles accompanied a bevy of vastly different vintages, which we tackled in Bipin's idiosyncratic order, obedient to the end! The 1970 was in magnum and made with no barrel aging at all by Hubert's father and uncle; it is tired now but still has some herby charm. Then came the 1986. It is rich and dense, prune liqueur, Cabernet Franc in style, but now beginning to dry. The 1988 tasted very well indeed—less rustic than the previous time I had it, with a glorious nose of pepper and cassis, really luscious and a real mouthful, complex and multidimensional, with a touch of mint. The 1995, 55% Merlot/45% Cabernet Franc harvested late, is a great vintage at Angéhus, with lovely Merlot picked with perfect timing—it is so



The Angelus (1857-59), by Jean-François Millet

opulent, so chocolate and luscious and absolutely delicious. I have it just ahead of the very good 1996, 55% Cabernet Franc (which was excellent this year)/45% Merlot, and so spicy, incisive, and succulent, getting richer all the time and with coffee at the end. In 1999, the harvest was halved by localized hail—the wine has a nose of violets and English lawns, with a lovely *iodé*/tobacco taste that is enticing, finishing on a note of cassis berries. This flight ended with the 2001, 60% Merlot/40% Cabernet Franc, with its bouquet of enormous class, great chocolate taste, and glorious attack and breed, and the just-bottled 2004, with the same varietal composition and with layers of fruit and velvet—an amazing wine that has kept the "top of the class" appeal that it had from the en primeur tasting.

Flight 3: 1953, 1966, 1989, 1990, 1998, 2000, 2003

We moved, fairly swiftly, on to *canard de*

Challans and the next flight, which spanned 50 years, beginning with a scented and intriguing 1953, with its nose of figs and tangy/sweet finish—a wine of another epoch. Then came the 1966, with its almost "maritime" bouquet and lovely salty, spicy taste (a real feature of many 1966s, I find), now melting in the mouth. The 1989 is stupendous, full of the scent of the Mediterranean rather than the Atlantic (remember that heat!), utterly beguiling, chocolaty, and spicy. Inevitably this was compared to the almost overripe 1990—very suave, very prune; so beautiful now, but I think the 1989 will last longer.

The 1998 is terrific wine—not as complex as the 2000, but with an explosion of raspberry fruit and a delicious licorice taste, showing great finesse with the volume. For the new millennium, Angéhus 2000 excelled itself, with a 50% Merlot/50% Cabernet Franc gem of great structure, depth, and tannin, plus incredible sweet

dimension—an utterly complete wine. This was followed by the exotic 2003: 58% Cabernet Franc/42% Merlot and with a very limited production of 25hl/ha. No wonder that it was all *crème brûlée* and figs, spices and orange zest—a succulent one-off.

Flight 4: 1997

Wisely, the delectable, easy-drinking, floral 1997 was then served with the St-Nectaire, and we were left to ponder.

It is clear that Angéhus's elevation to Premier Grand Cru Classé status in 1996 was more than deserved, and one is only thankful that human dedication can achieve so much. Hubert de Boüard considers that it takes a quarter-century to achieve the exact style of a property, through understanding its terroir, its grape varieties, and its vintages. After this tasting, all would aver that he has cracked it.