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 avidoscons and punters 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 cellar 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 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 leasing many of Barbaresco’s best vineyards, before Angelo, the fourth generation, took the reins in 1976, at only 24.

The tasting began with the Barbaresco of that same vintage, made then, as today, from Nebbiolo from 14 of the estate’s single-vineyard bottlings, Gaja’s seductive Barbaresco, but as the single-vineyard bottlings grew in prestige, our average age of the vines is now between 30 and 40 years old. Although Gaja released his first barrique-aged Barbaresco in 1982, 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 1976, the winery has replanted in rows, turning up and down the slope, not only to facilitate tractors but also to allow sun exposure on both sides of the rows in high-sun-facing vineyards. Replanting has been gradual, and the average age of the vines is now between 30 and 40 years old. Although Gaja employs temperature-controlled fermentation since 1982, he is presently resorting to more artisanal methods. These include pushing in blocks of ice from Alba’s slaughterhouse amid the skyrocketing temperatures in July, 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 fans applaud his world-class wines, cynics often claim that his modern winemaking methods have changed the tipico 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 new perfectly maintained Slavonian casks that are, on average, 100 years old, in the new-wood sensations are minimal.

Starting with the 1976 vintage, Gaja pulled his single-vineyard Barbaresco (Sori San Lorenzo, Sori 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 dismissed 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, this flagship wine was suddenly referred to as basic, or mundane, and was considered inferior to the crus, which we are proud of. My fame and fortune were built on producing Barbaresco, not making a纪念碑, nor a Barbaresco of power and grace. Gaja initially kept this off the market because the vintage’s intense heat caused 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.

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 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 harmonious Barbaresco with power and grace. Gaja initially kept this off the market because the vintage’s intense heat caused 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.

Barbaresco 1964

Another stellar vintage for the Langhe. Darker ruby-garnet color than its stablemate. Complex, stunning bouquet of rich fruit, 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.

Barbaresco 1976

An outstanding vintage, and the first year of temperature-controlled fermentation, which roasts express the darker, richer garnet color. Tartanizing 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.

Sori San Lorenzo 1982

Darker ruby-garnet color than its stablemate, which perhaps expresses the darker, richer garnet color. Tartanizing 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.

Barbaresco 1985

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

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 harmonious Barbaresco with power and grace. Gaja initially kept this off the market because the vintage’s intense heat caused 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.

Barbaresco 1964

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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.

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Barbaresco 1985

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

Simply gorgeous expression of Nebbiolo and full of personality.
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

Sori 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 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

Sori San Lorenzo 1997

Since the 1996 vintage, Sori 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 1999

More international in style, with initial oak and burned aromas that soon vanish. Exuberant chocolate and coffee aromas dominate the nose. Lush 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 the tale tale Gaja finesse. 18

Sori 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
I can never escape the fact that I wish to see the image of the Millet Angélus label flying over the fields when I reach a bottle of its namesake wine. There is something eternal about the subject presented—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 Angélus.

Time has moved on, but the owning family at Angélus 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 Lфрset, a veritable dynamo firing on all cylinders, has propelled Angélus into the foreground. He is sufficiently honest to say that it was not just "work experience," but also to pay for his first "lifestyle," 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 crop 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 cources; and
- pared 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 perhaps hundreds of times richer in microorganisms than soil that has been used to treat with herbicide or that is too compacted. The aim is natural low-lying cover growing, avoiding gross harvesting, with an ideal average yield of 35–40 hectolitres 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 1985. In 2003, at the château, we looked at all 20 vintages that Hubert had made by then, from the newly born 2003 back to the 1985. Then, in September 2006, 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, Balensi, where we tasted 21 varied vintages over a sumptuous meal, in the company of Hubert and Corinne de Boüard and Jean-Bernard Grenié.

The tasting


We kicked off with the 2005, in all its 53% Merlot, 45% Cabernet Frane, glory! Hubert is a great fan of this vintage, appreciating its scent and freshness. Without a doubt, this is fabulous wine, still very young, but oh so spicy. Then we had four modest vintages over 1995 and snails. Hubert always says that he established that he could make wine in those difficult years in the early '90s. The 1993 has lots of Merlot, with its plummy fruit, but it is not surprisingly a mite vegetal, while the 1995 has real charm and some middle paleness—gummers soaked in a vin de. As often, I prefer it to the 1994, which is very pretty, and full of herbs and spices but finishes a little dry. The 2004—58% Cabernet Frane, 55% Merlot—is juicy and crisp, super-mocha, and so frank and true—and incidentally, a bargain.


The 1970 has a really greenish, mousy feel to it. The 1986 was the first bottle of Haut-Brisson, Palmer and Péchon Lalande. Somehow, between 1980 and 2001, there—23.4 hectares (57.8 acres) of vines, one of the most important estates on the St-Emilion oves, on the lower slopes of the slopes area, to the west of St-Emilion and facing south.

When Hubert de Boüard appeared on the scene, he should be to put in context, since his family has been in St-Emilion since 1782 (he has been accompanied on this vertiginous road by his cousin by marriage, Jean-Bernard Grenié. The material for this transformation was there—23.5 hectares (57.8 acres) of vineyard, one of the most important estates on the St-Emilion oves, on the lower slopes of the slopes area, to the west of St-Emilion and facing south.

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The 1953, 58% Cabernet Frane/42% Merlot, 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.