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Barolo 2012 - a vintage with issues

This is the second of Walter's three tasting reports on this year's Nebbiolo Prima, including almost 130 tasting notes published before anyone else's as far as we know. See this guide to our recent coverage of Barolo and Barbaresco.

Last December when I wrote down my first impressions of the 2012 Barolos I commented on the fact that the wines showed a style that was likened by several producers to Pinot Noir. The Barolos of this peculiar vintage are often described as elegant and supple and with high levels of acidity. As I pointed out at the time, I had cherry-picked producers, knowing that a more thorough assessment would follow this May during Nebbiolo Prima, the annual presentation of the latest vintages of Barolos and Barbarescos to be released.

The 2012 vintage was atypical and producers I asked could not easily think of a comparable one. Although every vintage is unique, the Langhe, where Barolo and Barbaresco are situated, has been confronted by increasingly uneven weather patterns over the past 15 years. What was atypical in 2012 was that it was a hot year, yet the resulting wines are unusually light bodied for Barolo and with high acidity levels. The heat that built up gradually peaked in August at more than 40 °C, which in some cases caused the vines to shut down. Just in time, at the end of that month, rain fell, lowering temperatures drastically and triggering ripening that had been brought to a halt due to hydric stress caused by the heat. In several cases, however, the lost time was not made up by delaying the harvest.



The common characteristics of the 2012 Barolos are modest levels of alcohol, and medium rather than full body. There is plenty of acidity, which gives most of the wines a lift and freshness that is perhaps reminiscent of Pinot Noir, but at times it also resulted in rather tart, austere wines that will certainly need time to become more harmonious. In several cases it was clear that producers had tried to push for ripeness of fruit to compensate for the period in which the vines had shut down. Their effort has led to a certain jamminess, although this is lifted by plenty of acidity. Producers may have been forced into this 'push' for ripeness, which was mainly achieved by delaying harvest as much as possible, in order to get ripe tannins. Yet, surprisingly, very few wines displayed harsh, green tannins, although several display signs of singed fruit. These wines are for mid- rather than long-term ageing, whereas solid raw material designed for prolonged ageing is rather rare in this vintage.

While the 2012 weather pattern may have been challenging for many growers, some seem to have had difficulty in the cellar as well. I found leathery and mousy notes indicating *brettanomyces* on the nose of too many wines, something that I haven't noticed for quite a few years. Presumably this was because of the ambient yeast, which have become pretty much the norm here, and too little SO₂ added at the beginning to prevent brett, although winemaking skills are at such a high level here nowadays that this seems a little surprising.

Another problem I noticed while tasting the wines was the occurrence of premoxy, or premature oxidation. This may have been because the oak-ageing period was too long for these rather light wines. Although all wines shown at Nebbiolo Prima are, in theory, already bottled, the condition of some of them led to think that there might have been some samples in the mix. In each isolated case where I thought there might be a problem, I asked for a second sample, not often leading to a better result.

Among the 2012s it was the single-vineyard wines that generally fared best, perhaps because this category has now become the most important by far for any estate - except for the tiny minority such as Bartolo Mascarello and Giuseppe Rinaldi who have for years been admired for their multi-vineyard blends. The most basic bottlings of Barolo are known in the region as *tradizionale* (the locals scorning the expression 'entry level') and I have the distinct impression that such blends have been used to absorb the fruit that didn't wholly make the grade for the top wine. Personally I would invest in the more expensive single-vineyard wines while I would want to drink most of the Barolo *tradizionale* now, depending on the price as well as the individual producer, and if the tannins allow. In several cases the fruit is so light that it makes you wonder whether it will survive the ageing needed to soften the tannins.



With regard to the individual communes or villages, which the set-up of the Nebbiolo Prima tasting suggests are irrelevant, some did better than others. Perhaps surprisingly Verduno, long considered the 'lightest' of all, but swiftly becoming everybody's darling, showed well, with wines that pair freshness with elegance and staying power.

The most famous cru of the region, Cannubi in the village of Barolo, is convincing in 2012 because of its regular high quality in this vintage. Neighbouring Novello shows particularly well too, while La Morra, the largest commune and with many different elevations and expositions, proved to be the usual mixed bag. The most regular of its crus proved to be Brunate, while Rocche dell'Annunziata was less consistent. I found many good wines in Monforte d'Alba, while Serralunga d'Alba confirmed its status as one of the most consistent communes of them all. Wines in Castiglione were irregular, but all the top producers turned out very good wines.

The overall picture of the 2012 vintage, however, is one of irregularity. Coming on the heels of the equally hot, but much bigger and richer wines of 2011, it may seem rather slim, but overall this vintage supplies plenty of mid-term drinking pleasure.

The most important impression I took away from tasting the Barolos from a vintage that was particularly testing throughout Italy, however, is that Barolo's status as perhaps the greatest red wine produced in Italy is confirmed.

The 271 tasting notes are grouped by commune and then by cru within each commune, the crus listed alphabetically. Within each subgroup, the wines are listed alphabetically by producer (sur)name.



Montalbera, Levoluzione 2012 Barolo

16+

La Morra. Lustrous mid ruby with a narrow orange rim. Closed nose with herbal hints. Youthful cherry, and with brooding compactness that bodes well for the future. (WS)

Producer	Montalbera
Vintage	2012
Appellation	Barolo
Region	Piemonte
Country	Italy
Score	16+
Colour	Red
When to drink	2018 - 2030
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Reviewer	Walter Speller