

SERRALUNGA

Mellowing with age

Held in high esteem, Serralunga Barolos have at the same time earned a reputation as fierce and tannic beasts. Yet today's wines are more approachable than ever, finds Stephen Brook



IT'S NO COINCIDENCE that some of the most celebrated winemakers in Piedmont – such as Angelo Gaja, Bruno Giacosa and Giacomo Conterno – own vineyards in Serralunga, even though their wineries are based elsewhere. Seen by consumers as the most formidable of wines because of their intense tannic structure, Serralunga Barolos are regarded with awe by insiders.

Conventional wisdom has it that, of all the villages within the Barolo zone, Serralunga d'Alba produces the most tannic and backward wines. Frequently the conventional wisdom is correct, but not always. In my own experience, Serralunga wines, especially when young, could be very difficult to taste, in contrast, say, to the softer and more approachable wines from the La Morra district to the northwest.

In recent years, however, I have ceased to dread the flights of Serralunga wines in blind tastings of Barolo. Vintages such as 2009 and 2010 have produced wines with surprising accessibility. The wines remain structured and powerful, and yet they seem to make less of a tannic assault on the palate than would have been the case 15 or 20 years ago. Winemaking styles as well as terroir play a part, of course. There are occasional, ferocious, extracted La Morra wines, as well as supple, accessible wines from Serralunga.

A mix of terroir

The vineyards lie along a ridge to the north of the town of Monforte. At the northern end, at relatively low altitude, lie the extensive vineyards belonging to Fontanafredda. The road continues south to the hamlet of Baudana; to the east lie the celebrated sites of Cerretta and Prapò. Further south is the renowned Lazzarito vineyard, and then the village of Serralunga itself, its asymmetrical castle lordling it over the landscape. To the west lie distinguished crus such as Vigna Rionda, Briccolina and Ornato, and at the most southerly point are the crus of Cascina Francia and Arione.

The commune is far from uniform in its terroir and exposition. East-facing sites tend to give wines with higher acidity and, sometimes, more aggressive tannins. Those facing west give power and velvety tannins. Yet, as so often in Barolo, such generalisations can be dangerous: other factors such as altitude, clonal selection and vine age can affect the character of a wine, as well as exposition. High sites tend to be less humid than those lower down, and this can aid the maturation process.

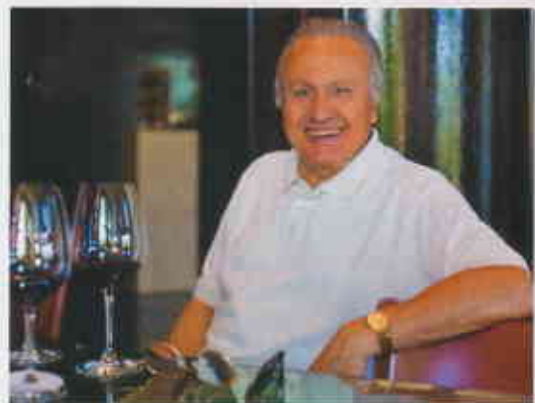
Serralunga differs from the other communes in the size of its crus, which tend to be much smaller. This may partly explain why the vineyards have always been prized by Barolo producers. There are many excellent estates within the zone – Fontanafredda, Luigi Pira, Schiavenza, Massolino

'Now that we have warmer vintages, the tannins have become rounder' **Enrico Rivetto**



Serralunga at a glance

Area under vine
450ha; 345ha are for Barolo (Barolo DOCG: 1,771ha), 770 growers
Maximum yield
56hl/ha
Typical flavours red fruits, roses, violets, tar, leather, tobacco



Top: Vietti is among the producers to own part of the famed Lazzarito vineyard, shown here at harvest time. Above: the sole Barolo that Angelo Gaja produces uses fruit from just south of the village of Serralunga

and Rivetto, to name just a few – and outsiders consider themselves fortunate to own parcels here. Gigi Rosso is proud of the wine it makes from Arione, Vietti makes wine from Lazzarito, Giacomo Conterno from Cascina Francia, and Bruno Giacosa from Falletto. Pio Cesare's top Barolo is usually made from Ornato, and Angelo Gaja's single excursion into Barolo is his Sperss, his name for the parcel he owns within Rivette and Marenca.

The geological explanation for the coherent character of so many Serralunga wines is not mysterious. In the cellars of producers such as Enrico Rivetto, the soil has been exposed. What's clearly visible is the subsoil: a very compact layer of clay known as marl; bands of limestone and mineral elements run through the marl, which is supple enough to allow vine roots to descend. Above the marl is a layer of topsoil that varies in thickness from 70cm to 2m. In the north of the commune, there is less clay and the wines don't always have the structure of those around the village itself. ➤

Decanter's next event – the Accademia del Barolo Tasting takes place on 3 November 2014, between 6pm and 8pm, giving you the chance to meet twelve premium Barolo producers. There will be more than 70 wines to taste in the elegant setting of Chandos House. Tickets are £25 – book yours today, visit decanter.com/events

'It's the soil that gives the wines their structure, acidity and tannins. Even Barbera grown here can resemble Barolo in its structure' **Giampaolo Pira**



Above: Giampaolo Pira (left) examines the marl-based soils with his brother, Romolo



Above top: the vineyards of Serralunga benefit from being located along a ridge

Above: bands of limestone run through the compact layer of marl that makes up the subsoil of Serralunga

Vintage guide

2011 Excellent Barbaresco, so the as-yet unreleased Barolos promise to be rich and fruity. Drink from 2017

2010 Copious yields, so green-harvesting essential. Excellent quality and staying power. From 2017

2009 A very hot summer and an early harvest gave rich, opulent, hedonistic wines. From 2015

2008 Tricky growing season, saved by a fine September. Perfumed, classic wines. From 2017

2007 Rich, succulent wines; relatively forward. Drink 2014-2022

2006 Austere wines with hefty tannins, but the best are superb. Drink from 2015

2005 October rains ended harvest. Fresh, sturdy wines with acidity. Drink 2014-2020



Photograph: Herbert Lehmann/Cephas. Map: Maggie Nelson

Veronica Santero, winemaker at Palladino, explains that although rainfall tends to run off the steep slopes, winter snow, which is quite common, allows moisture to sink into the marl, which, even in the summer, can be damp and springy to the touch. These reserves of water allow the older vines to withstand even the most torrid of summers.

Rivetto is trying to maximise this water retention by planting green cover between the rows of his vineyards. Santero doesn't doubt that the soil structure is what gives the wines longevity, which is why Palladino releases its wines at least a year after most other producers, to soften those tannins.

Giampaolo Pira of Luigi Pira agrees. 'It's the soil that gives the wines their structure, acidity and tannins. Even Barbera grown here can resemble Barolo in its structure.'

The dynamic Rivetto points out that Serralunga has long had a high reputation. 'There were only a few wineries 50 years ago, so growers would sell their grapes to brokers. If you came from La Morra, the brokers would quiz you about the location of your vineyards. But if you were from Serralunga, they paid a high price without any interrogation. That's because the vineyards of La Morra are far less consistent than those of Serralunga.'

He doesn't believe that Serralunga Barolos are more aggressive in their tannins. 'On the contrary, I believe they have the most noble tannins of all the Barolo zones – it's just that they are vertical tannins and need time to spread and refine. In the past the vines could have vegetal aromas when young, but now that we have much warmer vintages that is no longer the case, and the tannins too have become rounder in profile.

'Remember too that Serralunga growers are very traditional,' Rivetto says. 'Many of the Barolo producers, such as Elio Altare, who spent time in France in the early 1980s, came from La Morra. The generation growing up there at that time were curious about barriques and new vinification techniques and barrique-ageing. Here the growers tended to be much older and more conservative. >

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Until about 30 years ago, most Serralunga growers sold their grapes to Fontanafredda, in the same way that growers in the village of Barolo itself sold their fruit to that commune's most significant producer, Marchesi di Barolo.

'So Fontanafredda produced most of the wine from here and thus dictated the style that the new wineries here would follow. The Fontanafredda wines in the 1980s were very tannic, and that was seen as the norm for Serralunga fruit. Our typicity doesn't only derive from terroir and climate, but also from the cultural traditions of the locality.'

Although finesse isn't the first word that springs to mind when describing the wines of Serralunga, there is no doubt that the wines have gained in refinement over the last 20 years. There may still be some brawny monsters around, but most Barolos from here, while still robust, are balanced and complex. They can still offer an assault on the palate when young, but they are worth getting to know. And with knowledge comes growing admiration. **D**

Stephen Brook has been a contributing editor to Decanter since 1996



Photograph: Bon Appetit/Alamy

Above: Fontanafredda used to buy most of the Serralunga fruit



Left: Enrico Rivetto believes that cultural traditions play a role in today's styles, as well as terroir and climate

Brook's selection of Barolos from Serralunga



Brovia, Ca' mia 2010 18.5/20 (95/100)
£48 **Justerini & Brooks, Raeburn**
Raspberry coulis and mint nose. Succulent cherry fruit, very concentrated with massive but not tough tannins. A mighty wine with good acidity, considerable finesse and excellent length. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14%

Massolino, Vigna Rionda Riserva 2008 18.5 (95)

£68-£96 99 **Liberty Wines, WoodWinters**
Elegant red fruits on the nose. A massive but not extracted wine, compact and powerful, with splendid fruit and immense concentration. Impeccably balanced and very long. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14%

Bruno Giacosa, Falletto 2008 18 (93)
£130-£212.46 **Armit Wines, Harvey Nichols, Hedonism, Justerini & Brooks, Vini Italiani**
Reticent but stylish red fruits nose. Very concentrated, with firm tannins but no evident extraction, showing ample grip and good acidity. Long spicy finish. **Drink** 2015-2028, **Alc** 14.5%

Palladino, Parafada 2007 18 (93)
£41.99, **The Winery**
Parafada always delivers elegant wines, and this has a perfumed red fruits and cranberry nose. Concentrated and fleshy, but with sweet fruit and persistent tannins. Good length **Drink** 2014-2020 **Alc** 14.5%



Pio Cesare, Ornato 2008 18 (93)
£65-£75.25 **Chelsea Vintners, Divine Fine Wines, Fine & Rare, Jeroboams**
Spicy, stylish, red fruits nose. Svelte and concentrated, not too tannic, lively and well balanced, with integrated oak and fine length. **Drink** 2014-2022 **Alc** 14%

Rivetto, Leon Riserva 2006 18 (93)
£70 **Ellis of Richmond**
Meaty nose with underlying raspberry fruit. Rich and velvety, with firm but integrated tannins and acidity, taut and spicy, elegant and persistent. Harmonious and long. **Drink** 2015-2030 **Alc** 14.5%



Gaja, Sperss 2008 17.5 (91)
£134.46, **Justerini & Brooks, WoodWinters**
Discreet raspberry aromas. Fresh and sleek, with restrained tannins and no rough edges. Good acidity gives the palate length and finesse. **Drink** 2014-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

Giovanni Rosso, La Serra 2010 17.5 (91)
£47.40 **Richard Dawes Fine Wines**
Dense tarry nose, with raspberry and sour cherry aromas. Full-bodied and concentrated, with firm ripe tannins. Solid but spicy, with good length. **Drink** 2017-2027 **Alc** 14.5%



Vietti, Lazzarito 2010 17.5 (91)
£128.60 **Bibendum**
Rich, upfront, raspberry and cherry nose. Suave and rounded, this is a big, juicy style with ripe supporting tannins. Long, driven finish. **Drink** 2016-2026 **Alc** 14.5%

Ettore Germano 2010 17 (90)
£27.50 **Astrum Wine Cellars, Planet of the Grapes, WoodWinters**
Spicy, cherry-scented nose. Moderate intensity and body. Firm, ripe tannins and good acidity. Long. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 14.5%

Fontanafredda, Serralunga d'Alba 2009 17 (90)
£31-£42.99 **Carruthers & Kent, Great Western Wine, Selfridges, Sura Wine, Winedirect**
Bright, lively cherry nose. Supple, spicy and concentrated, showing unusual finesse. Firm tannins. Robust. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 14%

Luigi Pira, Serralunga 2010 17 (90)
£24-£31.20 **Goedhuis, James Nicholson**
Spicy, sour cherry and raspberry nose. Rich and full-bodied. Sleek texture, ripe tannins, fine balance. Long. **Drink** 2016-2025 **Alc** 14.5%

Paolo Manzone 2010 16.5 (88)
£21.99 **Adnams**
Muted nose but fresh and concentrated on the palate, with lively acidity and surprising accessibility. **Drink** 2014-2022 **Alc** 14%

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