

## 1996 Piedmont: A retrospective

In an exclusive tasting, Michaela Morris looks back at 1996 Barolo and Barbaresco, offering a fresh perspective on Piedmont's modern winemaking revolution...



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Vineyards in Piedmont Credit: Megan Mallen / Flickr / Wikipedia [creative commons]

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The growing season in 1996 was unpredictable and proved quite challenging. The summer months were cool and cloudy, with their fair share of rain. But in Piedmont, it is September that really counts and the weather suddenly became warm,

dry and breezy. Apart from a heavy two-day downpour later that month, ideal conditions continued through until harvest, which lasted well into October.

Complex and powerfully structured, the wines have taken years to come around. I remember sampling a number of them soon after their release and thought I had hit a brick wall. They were unrelentingly backward with searing acidity and arduous tannins.

## The tasting

Almost 20 years later, I had the opportunity to check in on this storied vintage at a retrospective tasting in Vancouver, Canada in early February. It was organised by Peter Rae at International Cellars, a local importer responsible for bringing in some of the top names from Piedmont, and Vancouver-raised Ray Signorello, proprietor of Signorello Estate in Napa Valley.

Most of the wines hailed from Signorello's private collection amassed directly from the wineries on his travels. The remainder (Paolo Scavino, E Pira & Figli, Ceretto, Domenico Clerico and Gaja) were contributed by attending collectors who purchased bottles upon release.

The event was held at Lupo Restaurant – a staple for Italian cuisine in Vancouver since opening its doors in 1994. (This is where my own Italian wine education began when I started waiting tables there in 1996, coincidentally.) We tasted through the 13 wines on their own, before enjoying them with a Piemontese-inspired dinner.

## Winemaking philosophy

While the tasting was not designed to be a comparison of modern versus traditional wines, it is impossible to speak of the 1996 vintage without considering distinct winemaking philosophies of that period. This was the zenith of Piedmont's modern revolution, epitomised by the 'Barolo Boys'.

It is symbolised by the renunciation of large, old Slavonian oak casks (the traditional ageing vessel of choice in Piedmont) and the espousal of small French oak barriques, often new. However, proponents also adopted non-traditional techniques such as rotary fermentations and short maceration times of mere days.

The goal was to craft wines with greater international and immediate appeal. The most extreme examples have since been criticised – not just for winemaking obscuring grape and place but also for a poor ability to age.

The wines tasted fell predominately into the modern camp and included bona fide 'Barolo Boys' – producers like Luciano Sandrone, Paolo Scavino and Domenico Clerico. More traditional examples were represented by Brovia, Bruno Giacosa and Aldo Conterno. However, even the latter estate was using rotary fermenters and doing macerations as brief as one week in the mid-1990s.

## The verdict

Overall, the wines have aged well, especially those in magnum. The stamina of the vintage was evident. And rather than one style ageing better than the other, in this tasting it depended on each individual producer.

However, the most generously oaked wines made themselves known. The wood is still apparent, especially in the chunky nature of the tannins, even after 24 years. These wines in particular I would drink now while they still have the fruit to balance. The top wines of the vintage will continue to age.

In terms of personal preferences, Ceretto's Brunate was among my favourites for its sheer, undemanding drinking pleasure. I was also charmed by Luciano Sandrone's Le Vigne, the most gorgeously textured and perfumed wine on the table.

The two most impressive wines were Gaja's Sperss and Giacosa's Falletto di Serralunga. Essentially opposite in personality, the former bolted out of the glass, almost stubborn in its power; while the latter snuck up gradually. The tasting also included two Barbarescos and I was pleased to see Albino Rocca's Vigneto Loreto hanging on gracefully.

## Added perspective

The event was held just days after I had returned from Italy for Nebbiolo Prima, which included a showing of the highly acclaimed 2016 Barolo. These new wines fresh on my palate provided great perspective. Since the late 1990s, winemakers in the Langhe continued adapting their practices and the pendulum has swung the other way. Most have reduced or abandoned new oak, some have returned to or incorporated large vessels, and long macerations have made a comeback.

'I was in full experimental mode,' recalls E Pira & Figli's Chiara Boschis of the 1996 vintage. At the time, she was using 100% new barriques but has now reduced that to a maximum of 30% along with introducing larger casks of 2,000 litres.

Today the lines between modern and traditional are blurred. Rather than two definitive sides, it is a continuum. These wines from 1996 therefore offer a snapshot of bygone, but very important, era that was significant in the Langhe's evolution.

## 1996 Piedmont: The wines



### Bruno Giacosa, Falletto di Serralunga d'Alba Riserva

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Crafted from choice parcels of old vines on the highest, south-facing area of the Falletto cru, this is designated as a riserva (indicated by the red label) in the very best vintages only. Maceration lasts 2-3 weeks and the wine matures in large untoasted French oak casks. Extremely...

Points 98

### Gaja, Sperss, Langhe, Piedmont, Italy, 1996

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Acquired in 1988, Gaja's Sperss vineyard straddles the Marenca and Rivette MEGA (Menzioni

Geografiche Aggiuntive or cru) of Serralunga d'Alba. 1996 is the first year it was bottled as a Langhe Nebbiolo as it includes a small percentage of Barbera. Tasted from magnum, this...

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## Sandrone, Le Vigne, Barolo, Piedmont, Italy, 1996

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This brings together fruit from Sandrone's vineyards in Conterni and Ceretta in Montforte d'Alba, Vignane in Barolo and Merli in Novello. Each plot is vinified separately and aged in 500-litre French oak barrels before the selection for the final blend. Well-defined aromas of mint,...

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## Ceretto, Bricco Rocche Brunate, Barolo, Piedmont, 1996

Ceretto owns 5,5ha on the La Morra side of Brunate. It was vinified separately for the first time in 1978. During the 1990s, oenologist Marcello Ceretto chose to age it in 300-litre lightly toasted French oak barriques, about 50% new. It is a fine example of a harmoniously aged Barolo...

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