


barolo tasting

Producers of Barolo are inevitably placed in one of two camps; either as traditionalists or modernists. However, our tasting of 23 Barolos shows that the line between these two camps – and styles of wine – is becoming increasingly blurred. Indeed, in this feature Michael Garner goes so far as to suggest that 'the differences between traditional and modern are more imaginary than real these days' and Nick Belfrage MW also concludes that 'perhaps everyone is headed towards the middle'. This is not really surprising, though, when one considers that the ultimate objective of both camps is simply to remain true to the Nebbiolo grape and enable it to express its unique aromatics and flavours.

This tasting displayed a variety of styles and flavours of Barolo: some wines were indeed in the middle, insofar as many on the panel were divided as to whether the wine was actually traditional or modern in style. Conversely, there were also wines represented whose styles were decidedly in one camp or the other. Gaja Sperss 1998, for example, was unanimously (and correctly) proclaimed to be modern – not forgetting that this was a blind tasting. New oak, soft tannins, vanilla, coffee and huge fruit concentration were all found in the very modern styles. The traditional examples were generally more elegant, with firm acidity and more ethereal, mineral fruit flavours, such as the Poderi Aldo Conterno Colonnello Barolo 1998.

However, one must consider the role of winemaking when discussing these two different camps of Barolo. There would appear to be old-fashioned, traditional, modern and ultra-modern winemaking techniques employed in making Barolo (although the first technique is largely no longer in existence, certainly not among the producers of the wines that we are looking at here). Old-fashioned winemaking, as opposed to traditional winemaking, resulted in the styles of Barolo of yesteryear – styles that are criticised today for unacceptably high levels of volatile acidity, oxidation, little fruit and aggressive tannins. Traditional winemaking simply means a longer maceration and a longer time in oak (usually large and old) than their modern counterparts.

Modern winemakers generally prefer a shorter maceration, malolactic fermentation and new, smaller oak barriques to make their wines more approachable and suitable for earlier drinking by softening the tannins and preserving the fruit. The intention is *not* to mask the Nebbiolo character with oak – although there will inevitably be Barolo producers who do indeed want to make wine in a more international or ultra-modern style with huge fruit concentration and extraction.

So moderate modern and traditional producers of Barolo do tread a common ground: both aiming on producing balanced, clean and individual wines true to the Nebbiolo grape. It is the winemakers on either side of this middle ground that produce caricatures of the traditional and modern styles – either old-fashioned, oxidised wines or flashy ultra-modern ones that groan under the weight of new oak – that cloud the picture. 

SAMANTHA CAPORN is tastings co-ordinator for Wine International.

The overall picture

96% of wines tasted scored over 80 points

Of those 22 wines:

18% were awarded gold

45% were awarded silver

32% were awarded bronze

5% were awarded seal of approval

These results are based on the International Wine Challenge medal system where:

Gold = 95–100 points

Silver = 90–94 points

Bronze = 85–89 points

Seal of approval = 80–84 points

• In this tasting, a **red** score means a modern-style Barolo; a **gray** score means a wine made in the traditional style.

GOLD

95 Gaja Sperss 1998 Langhe

'Ripe fruit – a sweet, big weight of fruit with a rose petal character. Nice balance, length and a good mid-weight; rounded with a sweet length.' *DS*
'Complex and long, but less typical.' *NB*
'Intense woodland fruit aromas with developing notes of tobacco and spice with an almost exotic fruit note. Rich, ripe and intense with excellent concentration of sweet fruit flavours. Very fine.' *MG* Drink 2004–2012

£80.50 @ JAR

95 Poderi Aldo Conterno Colonnello Barolo 1998

'A classic Barolo nose – some rose, some tar, some spice – but not strong. Firm acidity, tannins and underlying fruit. Very classic with hidden depth and a great length.' *NB*
'Developed colour with an open, sweet and spicy palate. Finely textured and elegantly balanced with nice ripe tannins and an open, spicy finish.' *PM*
'Roses, sweet oak and red, lightly stewed plums on the nose. Softly fruited palate, very elegant with a fabulous mouthfeel and a good length.' *ML* Drink 2006–2012

£48.95 @ BEN, BBR, V&C

95 Roberto Voerzio La Morra Brunate Barolo 1999

'Deep and youthful with an exotic nose of black fruits, sandalwood and leather. Well-structured with lots of ripe black-fruit flavours as well as strong chocolate and spice notes. Will develop.' *MG*
'Deep colour with lots of cherry and berry ripe fruit on the nose. Concentrated and tannic with good acidity and fruit balance. Well-made modern wine.' *NB* Drink 2006–2012

£95 @ SWG

95 E Pira Chiara Boschis Cannubi Barolo 1998

'Well-expressed classic aroma of rose petal and spice with firm acidity, tannin structure and good fruit.' *NB*
'Pure church incense with sweet fruit beneath. The seamless texture, great finesse and aromatic sploy character develop to a fine finish.' *PM*
'A warm spicy nose with bags of red-skinned fruit flavours and earthy toasty notes. Full and round with plenty of ripe and spicy fruits. Intense and long.' *MG* Drink 2005–2012

£39 @ SWG

SILVER

93 Clerico Percristina Barolo 1998

'A burst of dried fruit – figs and prunes – on the nose along with black-berry fruit. A modern style, but very well made; it hasn't sacrificed typicity. There is an excellent tannin/acid balance and a load of fruit. Long and exciting.' *NB*
'Black fruits, molasses, cinnamon and cloves on the nose and palate. Full and intense with a big macho structure. Very impressive concentration – still needs a lot of time.' *MG* Drink 2005–2014

£47 @ J&B

93 Bruno Giacosa Falletto di Serralunga d'Alba Barolo 1997

'Sweet, complex, powerful fruit with a floral fragrance and hints of tar. Sweet and ripe with a nice balance, complexity and length.' *DS*
'A sweet, slightly stewed fruit character with a floral overtone. Seductive, silky texture on the palate with attractive oak flavours. Warm and ripe with a liquorice finish.' *PM* Drink 2003–2012

£60 @ JAR

93 Elio Grasso Gavarini Vigna Chiniera Barolo 1997

'A floral and mineral nose with lots of sweet fruit on the palate which is nicely balanced. A good wine made in a traditional style but edging to modern.' *NB*
'This lighter-style Barolo has some overt rose aromatics with a darjeeling tea and dried-fig character. Integrated tannins and a good length. Complex.' *ML* Drink 2003–2012

£31 @ MG (by the case only)

92 Poderi Aldo Conterno Cicala Barolo 1998

'Ethereal rose-petal and spice nose. Firm but has a good acid/tannin balance and plenty of fruit. A well-made wine.' *NB*
'An attractive nose. Clean, integrated, with a depth of sweet fruit with a fine navy centre supporting growing breadth on the palate. Nicely focused and supple – an attractive Barolo to drink and contemplate.' *DS* Drink 2005–2014

£48.95 @ RDS

91 Poderi Colla Dardi Le Rose Bussia Barolo 1997

'A Party-rich aroma with some mineral elements. Balanced acidity, ripe tannins and plenty of fruit. A traditional style, very well made.' *NB*
'A very big, fruity, rose-petal fragrance with tar flavours. Very powerful start with a nice depth of fruit and a good length with some youth on the finish.' *DS* Drink 2003–2010

£25 @ CDC, DBY, WTS

91 Mascarello Monprivato Barolo 1998

'Subtle floral mineral notes on the nose with very smooth tannins and good, firm acidity. This is a wine of great elegance that needs time.' *NB*
'Very pale colour with fruits and flowers on the nose and palate with a leafy edge. The palate is quite full, with sweet, ripe fruit flavours and a good subtle finish.' *MG* Drink 2003–2012

£39.99 @ BBR, LAY, WTA

90 Andrea Oberto Vigneto Albarella Barolo 1998

'Floral, cherry nose with notes of mint and spice. Round and full with a meaty edge, broad and perfumed with a good long finish.' *MG*
'New oak dominates the nose with a bright floral character underneath. The palate is ripe with an almost berry-fruit character and a silky texture.' *PM*
'Liquorice nose with a glossy palate – lots of oak, fruit and structure. Well-made and seductive, with coffee oak on the finish.' *SC* Drink 2005–2011

£35+ @ LSD, V&C

90 Ciabot Berton Barolo 1998
 'Aromatic and elegantly spicy. A finely textured, attractive, savoury and elegant wine with a good finish.' *PM*
 'Full and luscious nose with fine floral and spicy notes and a hint of gameyness. A lovely structure with fine concentration of ripe fruits layered with smoke and spice.' *MG Drink 2004-2012*
 Tel: +39 0173 50217

90 Pio Cesare Pio Barolo 1998
 'An open, complex liquorice and cinnamon nose. Fairly austere but powerful, with intense orange peel, aniseed and clove flavours. Very long with integrated tannins.' *PM*
 'Big, round and full with massive tannins, intense cordial fruit flavours and smoky, spicy tones. Will develop well.' *MG Drink 2005-2012*
 £36 @ VHS, WIM

90 Conterno Fantino Vigna del Gris Barolo 1998
 'A deep colour with plums and berries on the nose, rich, chunky, modern-style fruit and firm tannins.' *NB*
 'Fat and sweet with power and depth of fruit and a good meaty mid-character. Sweet, flowery fruit with some complexity with lots of fruit at the back.' *DS Drink 2004-2012*
 £42 @ SWG

BRONZE

89 Germano Ettore Cerretta Barolo 1999
 'Big oak, extracted, dense, young wine. Needs more time to reveal its charm.' *ML*
 'Closed as yet with hints of nutmeg and toasted oak. Concentrated ripe fruit on the palate with good intensity and a tannic frame. Will develop.' *MG Drink 2005-2012*
 £34.99 @ RES

89 Bartolo Mascarello Barolo 1998
 'Open, developed, sweet and tarry with jammy fruit in the background. Quite an elegant style.' *PM*
 'Slightly stewed on the nose with violets and cherry fruit. The palate is well structured with good tannins and balancing acidity.' *SC Drink 2003-2010*
 Tel: +39 0173 56125

89 Seghesio Vigneto La Villa Barolo 1998
 'Ripe, sweet and smoky with a touch of mushrooms. The palate is quite big and full, with rich smoky fruit flavours, a reas-onable structure and some length.' *MG*
 'Sweet, tarry, exotic spice aromas with a nicely textured, ripe, open palate.' *PM Drink 2003-2009*
 Tel: +39 0173 78108

88 Sandrone Le Vigne Barolo 1998
 'Reductive at first, opening to sweet fruits and aniseed with notes of mint and sage. Beautifully balanced with impressive length and intensity.' *MG*
 'Some reduction on the nose with low acidity and unusually smooth tannins, modern style.' *NB Drink 2004-2009*
 £86.40 @ WTR



88 Giacomo Borgogno Barolo Riserva 1995
 'Rose petal fragrance with some maturity on the nose. Very scented and powerful with good weight and depth and a mature nutty finish.' *DS*
 'Sweet nose of tar and floral notes with firm acidity and tannins with good fruit on top. A traditional style that is good but not great.' *NB Drink 2003-2005*
 £21.75 @ PIM

88 Pio Clerico Ornato Barolo 1998
 'Pepper, spice and red soft fruits on the nose with some more mineral, savoury elements in the background with a peppery red-fruit finish.' *ML*
 'Smoky and minty with ripe fruit and a round, almost silky mouthfeel with good length and intensity.' *MG Drink 2004-2010*
 £50 @ VHS, WIM

88 Giuseppe Rinaldi Cannubi San Lorenzo-Ravera Barolo 1998
 'A ripe feel with a tar and roses fragrance and a sweet mid-palate. Quite light and slightly closed at the moment.' *DS*
 'Cherry-dominated fruit with sweet red plums and oak spice. High acidity on the palate with ripe dried fruits. Needs time.' *ML Drink 2006-2014*
 Tel: +39 0173 56156

SEAL OF APPROVAL

84 Brezza Barolo 1998
 'A lack of liveliness on the nose, but a very correct Barolo palate with acidity and tannins in place.' *NB*
 'Full and ripe with a good, unobtrusive structure and a long finish with sweet vegetal notes.' *MG Drink 2003-2008*
 £15.75 @ YOB

Who were the tasters?

Nicolas Belfrage MW is an Italian-wine specialist and author and Samantha Caporn is *Wine International's* tastings co-ordinator. Michael Garner works for Italian specialist Alivini Co Ltd, Mark Lane is an international Wine Challenge super juror and Paul Merritt also works for Alivini Co Ltd. Dalbir Singh is a wine importer and Derek Smedley MW is a wine consultant.

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