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In Piedmont, Seasons of Truffles and Barolo

By ERIC PFANNER

ALBA, ITALY — This city in the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy takes gastronomy very seriously.

Michelin-starred restaurants lurk around every street corner. The Slow Food movement, which champions the use of local produce and time-honored cooking techniques, has its headquarters in the nearby town of Bra. The aroma of toasted hazelnuts and chocolate, from a Ferrero Rocher plant on the edge of Alba, hangs over the region.

The interest in food grows especially intense in the fall, harvest season for the Alba white truffle. For a few weeks in October and November, these pungent-smelling tubers, unearthed from the forests around Alba by wizened hunters with specially trained dogs, are sold in a market in the old city center. There, the truffles are prodded, sniffed and haggled over before changing hands at breathtaking prices.

The fall is also the season of Barolo, the great wine produced in hillside vineyards from a cluster of villages southwest of Alba: La Morra, Castiglione Falletto, Serralunga d'Alba, Monforte d'Alba and Barolo itself. As truffle season arrives, so do the autumn mists that are said to have given the late-harvested Barolo grape variety, nebbiolo, its name. ("Nebbia" means fog in Italian.)

Like food, wine arouses passions here. For more than two decades, the so-called Barolo wars raged, pitting traditional producers of the wine against modernizing winemakers in what each side saw as a struggle for the soul of Barolo. Fortunately, a cease-fire finally seems to be taking hold.

What was there to fight over? Barolo is one of the most complex, aromatic and delicious red wines in the world. At its best, it has the delicate fruit of Burgundy, the age-worthiness of Bordeaux and a broad register of flavors, from cherries to dried flowers to eucalyptus to Darjeeling tea, that is entirely its own.

Yet Barolo is also one of the hardest wines to handle, for winemakers and consumers alike.

Traditionally, Barolos were made in a way that emphasized the tannins, the astringent, mouth-puckering substances that give serious red wines their structure, but that also make them difficult to enjoy before they have spent many years in a cellar. The problem with some old-school Barolos was that by the time the tannins softened, the fruit and the color had faded, robbing the drinker of any pleasure.

"People talk about all these great old Barolos from the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s," said Fabio Fantino, the winemaker

at the Conterno Fantino estate, which was founded by his father and a partner. “But in any of those decades there are only two or three vintages that you can still drink. We have only one life to drink wine.”

To try to make their wines more approachable, the so-called modernists imported new methods from France. They shortened the period of maceration, in which the skins from crushed grapes soak in the juice, as well as the fermentation. They encouraged the wines to undergo a second fermentation, which converts harsh malic acid to gentler lactic acid. And they started aging their wines in small oak barrels, known as *barriques*, bucking the local tradition that favored giant casks.

These and other changes produced wines that are softer, rounder and deeper in flavor and color. But some winemakers overdid things, producing wines that were virtually indistinguishable from other plush, oaky reds, like California *cabernet sauvignon*. A number of winemakers added grapes like cabernet or *merlot* to their *nebbiolo*; under Italian wine regulations, this cost them the right to call the resulting wines Barolo.

The new style impressed some wine critics, but didn't always fare well with consumers. Barolo is a food wine, rather than one made for easy drinking, but traditional producers say modern methods sometimes compromised its ability to accompany fine cuisine.

“Restaurants tell me that when you have one bottle of traditional Barolo on the table, and one bottle of modern, the traditional bottle is empty first,” said Paola Rinaldi, who runs Francesco Rinaldi & Figli, a producer that stuck with older methods as others veered off in new directions. “Fifteen years ago it was harder to sell these wines, but at the moment, people are looking for something that is distinctive and different.”

She added, with a note of triumph, that many producers who embraced modern techniques are now backtracking a bit — for example, trading in their *barriques* for larger barrels, which impart less oak influence on the wine as it ages. At the same time, Ms. Rinaldi's wines seem to reflect a bit of modernity in their richness and approachability — at least those of the newly released 2007 vintage, which produced unusually ripe *nebbiolo* grapes.

Indeed, across the region, a convergence of styles seems to be under way, which is good news for anyone who loves Barolo. A majority of the wines tasted on an autumn visit to the region defied easy categorization. They were full of fruit and energy, yet elegant and refined, with only subtle oak influences. Are these wines traditional or modern? Does it matter?

Some of my favorite producers of the wine, like Vietti in Castiglione Falletto, have long employed methods that blend the best of old and new. Vietti, for example, puts some of its Barolos into *barriques* for a few months, where the malolactic fermentation takes place, then transfers them into larger casks to age.

Chiara Boschis, who was considered a modernist when she took over the E. Pira & Figli winery in Barolo a little more than two decades ago, said labels like traditional and modern were never entirely accurate.

“A lot of people just didn't understand these things,” she said. “They were calling us modernists. No! We were just a

group of friends who wanted to make the best wine in the world.”

At the time, Ms. Boschis was one of only a handful of female vintners in Barolo. Some of the locals viewed her with suspicion, especially when she introduced progressive winemaking techniques like “green harvesting” — clipping unripe bunches from the vines early in the growing season in order to concentrate flavors in the remaining grapes.

“People were saying to my father, ‘What happened? Did she hit her head on the wall?’ ” said Ms. Boschis. “He was doing the calculations and saying, ‘This is how much money you are losing.’ The grapes that I cut off — I felt like I had to eat them off the floor.”

These days, Ms. Boschis is content to leave the discarded grapes where they fall. Her wines attract critical acclaim, and commensurate prices. Barolo is not cheap. (We’ll be looking at some less expensive alternatives from Piedmont in my next column, in two weeks.)

While producers like Ms. Boschis say the Barolo Wars are passé, the question of traditional versus modern production has not been resolved everywhere. One such place is the home of Virna Borgogno.

Ms. Borgogno is a proudly traditionalist winemaker, but she is married to a modern-style producer, Giovanni Abrigo, who makes Barbaresco, Barolo’s main rival for fame in Piedmont.

Ms. Borgogno’s winery, called Virna, and her husband’s estate, named Orlando Abrigo, share the same cellars.

“We taste together, we discuss the problems of vinification,” Ms. Borgogno said. “But the choice of style remains our own.”