

The Italian Renaissance

SOME YEARS AGO, in one of these articles, I had the temerity to suggest that Angelo Gaja had a somewhat inflated ego. I have since learnt that this is a grand passion harnessed to surging energy. He reminds me of those other great larger-than-life promoters of wine, Robert Mondavi and Len Evans. And what Piero Antinori does with aristocratic charm for Tuscany, Angelo does with immense vigour for Piedmont, though whether all the other wineries in Barbaresco and Barolo fully appreciate his influence I do not know. Like Bob Mondavi, he is a tireless innovator, trying out new-to-the-region grape varieties while at the same time staying loyal to the classic Nebbiolo.



Tasting Gaja's experimental Sauvignon Blancs reminded me of my first visit to the Napa in 1970. Bob Mondavi showed me his Johannisberg Riesling and, opening a bottle of Schloss Vollrads, asked me to say what the Rhine wine had got that his hadn't. Gaja has the same enquiring mind, with a burning desire to achieve perfection.

One's perception of Sauvignon Blanc is influenced by Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé: pale, aromatic, light, acidic. The same grape, fully ripened in a hotter climate, results in a far higher alcoholic content, less acidity – in short a different style. I remember the shock of tasting 14 per cent Sauvignon Blanc wines at Klein Constantia in the Cape; and Gaja's alcohol content is almost as high.

With the 1991, his winemaker was experimenting with early and later-picked grapes. The latter, picked 12 days after the first crop, was much richer on the nose, softer and blander on the palate. Clearly it will be a nice wine but light years in style from Sancerre. The 1987, at lunch, had the right colour, palish, green tinged; a scented varietal aroma, very minty; with a whiff of tom cats; dry, lightish, good flavour and acidity – but this was the impression after drinking the Chardonnay, curiously served first.

Gaja's Chardonnay is thoroughly well established, his first being the 1984. The 1985 'Gaia & Rey', served in magnum, was drinking beautifully, probably at its peak: a marvellous colour, a highly polished, rich, lime-tinged yellow gold; harmonious, creamy Chardonnay nose with a touch of honey – ripe grapes and bottle age; not too dry, the same ripe grapes and high alcohol content giving it a touch of sweetness on entry, full bodied without a trace of heaviness let alone clumsiness, silky texture, good acidity. A lovely drink by any standards.

Being a relatively recent convert, even the classic Barbarescos and Barolos are a revelation to me. A marvellous range, preceded by some charming Dolcettos and Barberas was laid on (embarrassingly – for my benefit) by Gaja and attended by other major producers including Aldo Conterno and Bruno Giacosa. Tasting over 40 wines in the Cantina Comunale at Costigliole d'Asti before lunch at Guido's (two-star Michelin,

and a magnificent cellar) was hard work. Alas, space here prohibits detailed comments. Seductively, Gastaldi Moriolo's 1989 Dolcetto d'Alba had lovely young berry-like fruit; Coppo's 1985 Barbera d'Asti Pomorosso was very attractive, already palish and fully mature looking; delicate fruit on nose and palate, good length and aftertaste. His 1951 Barbera was more of a curiosity: *very* pale, hardly any red; rather smelly old age; taste like a very old Burgundy, a bit tart.

The Barbarescos, the youngest being Gaja's 1988, were notable for consistency of quality. Gaja's still full of youthful fruit and tannin. The 1985s misleadingly mature looking, Marchesi di Gresy's Camp Gros and Prunotto's Montestefano being drier and more tannic than their appearance and soft fruity noses suggested.

Showing best of all was Giacosa's beautiful 1964 Santo Stefano: palish, very mature, orange tinged; the original varietal aroma now a harmonious bouquet of bottle age and the curious scent of the white truffles which impregnate the countryside. Great length.

The Barolos of course need lots of bottle age, more than most people can afford. Giacosa's 1986 Falletto di Serralunga d'Alba, deceptively mature looking, its nose very forthcoming, rich and soft, yet enormously powerful with great length. The 1985s all showing well, some, like Pio Cesare's, leaner than expected; Fontanafredda's La Delizia well named. No fewer than seven 1982s, and almost all swingingly tannic. On the other hand, the two 1978s were rounded and ready, Ceretto's Bricco Rocche very fragrant; Aldo Conterno's orange-tinged, sweet nosed, with perfect shape and texture.

Sunday lunch at Cacciatori da Cesare, Albaretto della Torre, was a revelation. I have never in my life tasted such wholly original dishes, white truffles in season being liberally dispensed. Alas I am no food writer so I will stick to the wine, but the meal was superb. After the 1985 Chardonnay and 1987 Sauvignon Blanc already referred to, Gaja produced as a mouthwatering prelude to his own 1971 Barbaresco, Bruno Giacosa's 1989 Nebbiolo d'Alba: a lovely cherry red; delicately fragrant nose; dry, fairly light in style despite its 13 per cent alcohol, crisp and fruity. The Barbaresco, the first great wine produced by Angelo and his winemaker Guido Rivella, was statuesque: deep, warm, richly coloured, very mature with a slightly orange tinge; a self-satisfied, harmonious, singed and meaty nose, its true worth and character being in the mouth. Slightly sweet, full bodied, rich, fleshy, velvety with fruit that carried right to the extended finish. Perfection now.

Home drinking An autumnal apéritif or mid-morning drink: Rutherford & Miles Reserve Madeira 'Over Five Years Old'. Pure amber with light apple green rim; sweetish, meaty, caramelly, slightly pungent nose, and flavour to match, with typical but not overdone acidity giving it a tangy dry finish.

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